

Speech for the celebration of the publication
of The Proverbial World of Pieter Bruegel

At the Embassy of Belgium in Tokyo, March 17, 1992

Dr. Yoko Mori
Professor of Meiji University



The honorable Ambassador of Belgium, Madame Nothomb, members of diplomatic core, ladies and gentlemen,

This evening is one of the most memorable and unforgettable times of my life. For the occasion of the publication of my new book, The Proverbial World of Pieter Bruegel (Pieter Bruegel, Spreekwoorden en Volksleven), Ambassador Baron Nothomb has so generously invited my friends, journalist friends, colleagues of Meiji University and my family, here to the Belgian Embassy. I don't know how to express my sincere thanks to You, Ambassador. Today, March 17th is Saint Patrick's Day which is your Christian patron day. It is a great honor for me to celebrate with you on such a meaningful day.

Your Excellency suggested that I speak in Japanese to my audience this evening; therefore, I ask the foreign guests to read my summarized English paper while I am speaking now in Japanese.

As I think back on 25 years of my academic life, I realize that I am greatly indebted not only to the many scholars of my country, but also to Belgian, Dutch, German and American scholars who have assisted me in my study of the works of Pieter Bruegel. Above of all, I need to thank Father Grootaers who has been my language teacher of old Dutch for 20 years, for I have always been involved in reading written material that relates to Bruegel's time, especially the 16th century Dutch texts written in dialect.

Fortunately I received a scholarship from the Belgian government in 1976 to aid in these studies. During and since my stay in Brussels, I have been collecting pictorial reference sources which date from around the time of Bruegel. My present book contains about 600 illustrations of proverbs from that collection. I also discuss and compare Dutch proverbs with the equivalent or similar proverbs in German, French and English, quoting

Bruegel's contemporary writers. None of the previous scholars of Bruegel has attempted to reconstruct the proverbial world of Bruegel's time paying attention to both the written and pictorial materials. There are, for example, religious poems of Anna Bijns, preaching proverb poems of Jesuit Father Jan David, dramas of Rethorians, chronicles of a Ghent historian, Marcus van Vaernewijck as well as visual materials, depicting proverbs of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. Through my research I came to the conclusion that the 16th century could be named as the Golden Age of Proverbs, because of many publications of books collecting and editing proverbs and the numerous proverbs in church stalls and on woodcuts, engravings as well as etchings which appeared at the same time. There was growing interest in proverbs by both humanists and common folk. Thus, Bruegel's painting "Netherlandish Proverbs" in Berlin which I discussed at large in my book, could be placed as the highlight of the Golden Age of Proverbs of the Renaissance.

My present book was published on January 20th of this year, and fortunately we are already preparing for a second edition. My other two books, The Complete Paintings of Bruegel published in 1988 and The Children's Games of Pieter Bruegel published in 1989, are both in their 6th editions. Those happy results are definitely due to the great interest Japanese have acquired in the art of Bruegel these recent years. Certainly two important exhibitions of Bruegel, respectively, "The Complete Engravings of Bruegel" in 1989 and "Bruegel and the Netherlandish Landscape Painting" in 1990 stimulated the interest of Japanese lovers of his art as well as increased the numbers of those who have become more acquainted with Bruegel's art. They often plan museum trips to Europe to view Bruegel's paintings in Brussels, Vienna, Munich, Berlin, Paris, Madrid etc. Thus it is interesting to analyze why Japanese people love Bruegel so much. In my opinion, the Japanese appreciation of the feeling of nature, especially the love of seasonal change in the landscapes which, in Bruegel's paintings, correspond to his concept of macrocosmic nature painted in very detailed and