

Excerpted from Kathleen Krull, *Lives of the Artists: Masterpieces, Messes, and What the Neighbors Thought*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1995, 20 – 23.

The Uninvited Guest

Peter Bruegel

Born in the Netherlands, 1525?

Died in Brussels, Belgium, 1569

Outstanding Flemish painter of the sixteenth century, most famous for landscapes and images of peasant life

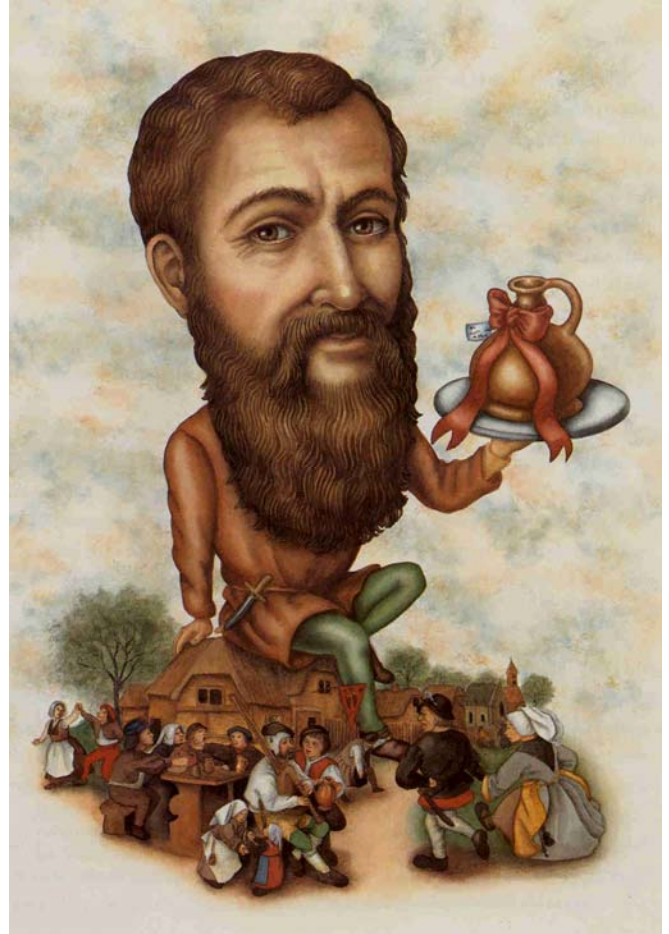
DOZENS OF BOOKS have been written about Peter Bruegel, but in his own lifetime he was just one of the 360 painters in the Guild of St. Luke in Antwerp. At least three villages claim to be his birthplace.

The guild, into which he was admitted at about age twenty-five, was a brotherhood in which he spent several years working as an apprentice. He lived with the head of the guild, Peter Coeck van Aelst, Peter's wife, Mayken Verhulst—a well-known painter of miniatures who may have been a major influence on Bruegel—and their baby daughter, Mayken. After he became a master in the guild, Bruegel was free to train his own apprentices, choose his subjects, sign his own name, and accept commissions.

Almost unknown to the public, Bruegel was highly regarded among his few friends as a thoughtful, proper, and unusually silent man. He may have belonged to a discussion group called House of Love, which promoted tolerance during a time of religious persecution; other friends were geographers and printers. Their nickname for him was Peter the Droll, because his pictures made them laugh. Though he was quiet, he was fond of practical jokes, such as pretending to be a ghost and making creepy sounds.

Some of Bruegel's wealthy patrons became personal friends, relationships rare for the time. One merchant, Hans Franckert, was a daily companion. He and Bruegel, two city men, would disguise themselves in peasant clothes and venture out to nearby villages to attend weddings and fairs as uninvited guests. Bruegel would study the rural people's looks and behavior, making quick sketches he called *naer het leven* (from the life). He and his friend tried to fit in by bringing gifts, eating and dancing, and, if questioned, claiming to be from either the bride's or groom's family.

Bruegel was engaged to a servant girl in Antwerp who had one habit he didn't like—lying. They made an agreement that every time she told a lie, he would make a notch on a stick. If the notches reached the top of the stick, the wedding was off. He used the longest stick he could find, but it wasn't long before he married someone else: Mayken Coeck van Aelst, now twenty, whom he had carried in his arms when she was a baby. They lived in a three-story brick house on a cobblestone street until Bruegel died of unknown cause a few years later at about age forty-four. On his



deathbed he asked his wife to burn drawings that might get her in trouble with religious authorities who found his tolerant ideas dangerous.

More than two dozen artists descended from Bruegel, starting with his own two sons, who were taught by their grandmother. Peter the Younger became known as Hell Brueghel (the brothers changed the spelling of their name) for painting so many demons, while Jan was known as Velvet Brueghel because of the rich fabrics he portrayed in his art. Jan later commissioned a painting by his friend Peter Paul Rubens to decorate his father's tomb.

But no one thought the facts of Peter Bruegel the Elder's life were worth recording until thirty years after he died, and by then one-third to one-half of all his works had been lost forever.

ARTWORKS

One reason Bruegel concentrated on peasants, besides his compassion for poor people, was that they were the people most affected by seasonal changes. His love of the seasons led to a series of works known as *Seasons*. Completed for one of his wealthy patrons (to decorate a room in his new mansion), it includes *Hunters in the Snow* (right), considered one of the greatest landscape paintings in history. The patron later fell on hard times and had to turn the series over to the city of Antwerp.



In Bruegel's time works of art were meant to be studied, like a book. For example, at least eighty real pastimes of the era have been identified in his *Children's Games* (left), which shows hundreds of village children playing leapfrog, hide-and-seek, marbles, and many other games.

The Artist and the Connoisseur may be Bruegel's only self-portrait; it shows an uncomfortable artist confronting a smug patron who has financial power over him. Many art historians believe the drawing reveals a case of advanced arthritis in Bruegel's gnarled hands.

This assignment continues with "Pieter Bruegel the Elder," Gardner's, 804-806.

