ART AND OCCUPATION

Pieter Bruegel

Tower of Babel 1563

Radiant mid-summer light bathes a massive tower, which reaches up to heaven through the clouds. In the left foreground, a corpulent master builder (Antwerp’s nouveaux riches) presents a group of cowering, exhausted stonemasons (the subjugated citizens of Antwerp) to a larger than life king (the tyrant Nimrod alias Phillip II of Spain) and his entourage. The masons have left their chisels and a wooden mallet on a sandstone block, which is engraved ‘BRUEGEL FE MCCCCCLXIII’ (‘Made by Bruegel 1563’) [1]. The left side of the tower appears complete but the right side is still under construction. The edifice, which sits on an irregular mass of rock (Church of Rome), has a circular structure like the Coliseum (alias St Peter’s) and a honeycomb interior like a beehive. This construction site is teeming with human activity depicted in marvelously accurate detail. Every kind of building work is represented and we can follow the path of raw materials from their arrival at the port to their final incorporation into the structure of the building. Each trade (stonemasons, carpenters, plasterers, bricklayers, mortar mixers, tinsmiths) has its own separate ‘on-site’ facility and Bruegel, ever the humorist, shows the workers’ gardens and their laundry hanging out to dry! Two labourers in a man-powered crane are straining to turn a giant tread-wheel so as to lift an enormous block of stone (Klein has estimated that the two men could lift a 1-tonne slab 50 feet in 2.5 min) [2]. All the tradesmen seem highly industrious and orderly like bees in a hive (versus) but on closer inspection their work is uncoordinated and never likely to succeed—a clear reference to Noah’s
descendants, who after the flood built a great tower as protection from a second flood and to glorify themselves (God punished their hubris with a confusion of tongues and the resulting chaos in communication rendered the building work incapable of being finished) [3].

The Tower was Bruegel's last major work before he headed south to Brussels, safety and marriage. We do not know whether it was commissioned but it appeared in the inventory of the wealthy Antwerp merchant Niclaes Jongelink in 1566 [4]. It is a highly inventive and deeply thoughtful composition with a rhetorical narrative about personal and public morality and a social commentary on financial, religious and political issues of the day [5]. Using a series of complex and elaborate images from the well-known biblical story (versus) Bruegel creates a subtle yet powerful indictment of the Church of Rome, the occupying Spanish regime of Phillip II [6] and Antwerp’s avaricious, aspiring business community [7]. He casts the tower’s shadow literally and metaphorically over the city's cathedral, bourse (stock exchange) and port—a comment on their vulnerability. In the painting, storm clouds are gathering—a portent of things to come (4 years later Phillip II sent his troops into Antwerp) [8]. Bruegel was perhaps too close to the principal players in Antwerp society or too frightened for his own safety to address issues 'head on' and so he chose to express his concerns indirectly through allegory and rhetoric.

These were turbulent times in Antwerp, which had experienced a massive inflow of religious refugees and foreign merchants attracted respectively by the promise of tolerance and wealth. Bruegel had witnessed the city’s flamboyant development with its new town hall and Bourse and the rise and fall of its great entrepreneurs like Gilbert van Schoonbeke [9]. Now with his own imminent departure, Bruegel seems to be reflecting on his contemporaries’ failure to achieve their political and religious freedom.

Bruegel was born in 1525 at Breda in the Duchy of Brabant (now part of Holland) and moved to Antwerp (c.1542) to become an apprentice to the artist and publisher Peter Coecke van Aelst (whose daughter he later married). He was admitted to the Painters’ Guild of St Lukes in 1551 and like many northern artists visited Rome (1552–54). He appears to have brought little of the Italian Renaissance back with him although his journey through the Alps may have inspired his landscape style [10]. He spent the next 10 years working in Antwerp before moving to Brussels in 1563 where he continued to paint until his death in 1569. About 45 authenticated paintings of Pieter Bruegel the Elder survive, of which one-third are in Vienna’s Kunsthistorisches Museum [8].

Bruegel's imaginary Renaissance building site although realistic does not highlight the risks to that trade but to the financial sector, which ultimately proved catastrophic for 16th-century Antwerp and little better for 21st-century London, New York, Reykjavik and the rest of the capital obsessed world [11]. Jeff Skilling’s final speech in Lucy Prebble’s recent play Enron might have been written for Bruegel’s Netherlandish morality tale: ‘All humanity is here. There’s Greed, there’s Fear, Joy, Faith, Hope … And the greatest of these … is Money’ [12].

Mike McKiernan
e-mail: art@som.org

References