Functions of Drawings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder

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In his monograph on the drawings of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, published posthumously in 1996, Hans Mielke reduced Bruegel's drawn oeuvre – including some ‘Treue Kopien’ (‘faithful copies’) – to sixty-seven numbers.¹ Six additional drawings were considered ‘Problematische Werke’ (‘problematic works’).² He also included a list of ‘Zu Unerhört Pieter Bruegel zugeschriebene Werke’ (‘works wrongly attributed to Pieter Bruegel’), mostly landscape drawings and sheets previously considered studies from nature. A watermark datable to the early 17th century cast the first doubt on this group. He was able to attribute many of these works to Roelant Savery. Prior to Mielke, Frans van Leeuwen and Joaneath Spicer had (independently from each other) come to the conclusion that the so-called ‘naer het leven’ (‘from life’) drawings – traditionally seen as figure studies taken from life – were not by Bruegel and could be attributed to Roelant Savery.³

Only a few drawings have been newly attributed or reattributed since the publication of Mielke’s book. In his 2007 catalogue raisonné of Bruegel’s work, Manfred Sellink retained sixty-three drawings.⁴ Notable new attributions have been a sketch with pilgrims in a landscape (in Rotterdam) attributed by Martin Royalt-Kisch, and, more recently, an early landscape drawing (in a private American collection) convincingly attributed by Sellink.⁵ Apart from Sellink’s valuable article announcing this new discovery and dealing with the problem of the dating of the landscape drawings, there are no new discoveries or publications that significantly challenge the image of Bruegel as a draughtsman as introduced by Mielke.

Not only has the sheer number of drawings deemed authentic been drastically reduced, there has also been a significant reduction in the typological variety of the corpus. Figure studies ‘from life’ are almost completely absent following the exclusion of the ‘naer het leven’ drawings. Highly stylised drawings such as The Gooseherd and The Bagpipe Player (of which various copies also exist) are almost certainly drawn from memory – or ‘uyt den Gheest’ (‘from the mind’) as Van Mander describes this way of drawing⁶ – and it is not entirely clear how they functioned in the creative process.⁷ The figure of the gooseherd was used in a tondo composition representing a proverb, of which several versions – none of which is an original by Bruegel – exist. Whether the original sheet or one of the copies was the direct source for Bruegel himself, or for one of his followers, remains unclear. The sheet with Four Standing Men in Conversation (in the Louvre) is perhaps the last example of what figure sketches from life by Bruegel might have looked like, but it is impossible to be sure as there is simply so little material available for comparison purposes or for reconstructing Bruegel’s working methods.⁸ While Van Mander asserts that Bruegel had drawn abundantly from nature during his travels across the Alps to Italy, only a few
sheets are considered, with some hesitation, by Mielke as drawings from nature; the Abbey in a Southern Valley, the View of the Ripa Grande in Rome and the Valley with a River on blue-tinted paper. And in these cases it is also likely that Bruegel executed large parts of the very refined and detailed drawings in his studio, working from sketches made on the spot.10

Except for the Landscape with a Deep Valley and the Landscape with the Journey to Emmaus, which are preparatory studies for prints, and the View of Reggio di Calabria in Rotterdam – which is clearly a preparatory studio drawing for a detail in the print Naval Battle in the Strait of Messina – not a single landscape drawing can be related to any of Bruegel's prints or paintings.11 The function of this large group of drawings is not entirely clear. Some have a very finished appearance and are carefully dated and signed. Some could have been intended as independent works of art. Others are more freely drawn and seem to have been executed very swiftly. Can they be seen as drawings made for daily practice and the sheer pleasure of drawing? The possibility that some of them relate to lost or never completed works should not be excluded, however. Several landscape drawings might not have found their way into print.12 A gouache of a tree by Bruegel, which is mentioned in the inventory of Giulio Clovio, calls to mind several drawings from the Italian years, most notably those of the so-called 'Lugt group'.13

Several types of drawings that we would expect to find in the oeuvre of such a versatile and prolific artist as Bruegel are largely or completely missing. There are, for instance, no figure studies made from life. Also, as mentioned above, the landscape drawings relating to his Italian journey are most likely products of the studio, based on sketches from nature that have not been preserved. It is quite clear that the Rivierscape near Baarode in Berlin and the River Landscape with a Village in Paris were not drawn directly from a barge in the middle of a river.14 Both sheets were probably put together at a later point in the studio.15

In comparison with the Rivierscape with Boats and a Fisherwoman on the Bank in the Louvre or the City at an Estuary (on the back of the Prague Landscape with Bears) they have a far more finished appearance.16 The question of whether these two latter sketches are made from life or drawn from memory has to remain open.

Composition studies for paintings are completely lacking. The highly finished print designs form the largest group among Bruegel's known drawings. In all probability they must be seen as an end point of a long creative process on paper; we must assume that a large number of detail studies and composition sketches preceded the complex and carefully worked out print designs. As discussed above, the View of Reggio, and possibly also the Ripa Grande, can be seen as stages in this process. The sheet with The Hare Hunt in Paris possibly gives us an idea of how supposed composition sketches might have looked. As Bruegel was himself responsible for the etching, he never turned the sketch into a finished preparatory drawing.17 In conclusion, we can state that almost all the 'functional' drawings by Bruegel – sketches, studies from nature, composition studies and so on – have been lost. There are only sparse indications of their character, leaving, unfortunately, ample space for speculation. As a result, Bruegel's working methods must also remain rather obscure.

Furthermore, the materials and techniques used in the corpus are also very limited. It must be said that systematic research is largely lacking, and the literature regularly gives incomplete, erroneous or even contradictory information in this regard. The vast majority of drawings are in pen and iron-gall ink, regularly in different hues of brown and sometimes with parts in carbon ink. In some cases, the brush has been used for hatching as well.18 A few drawings are made on blue or blue-tinted paper. A single drawing on blue paper in brown ink has washes and highlights in white.19 This sheet and the Sailing Boats in the Storm before a City are visibly underdrawn in black chalk,20 while The Calumny of Apelles in London is also washed in brown and grey.21 Several of Bruegel's drawings are clearly touched up with washes or highlights by later hands, hampering a correct assessment of their original appearance.22

The only type of drawing of which a representative number has been preserved, and of which the function is very clear, are the preparatory drawings for prints. The advantage of this group as a case for art-technological and art-historical research is that the authenticity of the vast majority of the sheets has never been doubted. They can be placed in chronological order as most of them are dated, or an approximate date can be deduced from the resulting prints. Recent research by Eva Michel has also shown that many probably share the same provenance. The surviving drawings for the Vices series, for instance, seem to have been in the collection of Rudolf II in Prague and moved later to Vienna. It was only during Napoleon's occupation of Vienna that they were taken to Paris and subsequently dispersed to European and American collections.23

A more thorough art-technical analysis of the materials and techniques used by Bruegel and his imitators and copyists is, in our view, the only way to gain further insight into his work and working methods. The next essay in this volume will explore the possibilities through analyses and imaging of four drawings.
Mielke 1996. For a more detailed overview of the attribution history and dating, see: Royalt-Kisch 2001; Selink 2003, specifically pp. 291-94.
11. Nadine Orenstein has suggested that the sheet with the Ropa Grande might be an unused study for a print for the Large Landscapes series. In this case its function would have been similar to the View of Reggio in Rotterdam. See: Exh. Cat. Rotterdam – New York 2001, cat. no. 8. As Manfred Selink has rightfully pointed out, this would suggest that Bruegel put together this composition based on lost sketch material after his return to Antwerp, probably around 1555. See: Selink 2013, p. 303.
13. See for example note 10.
16. Pieter Bruegel, Riverscape with Boats and a Fisherman on the Bank, 1556, pen and brown ink, 153 x 238 mm, Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts graphiques, inv. no. 19757. See: Mielke 1996, no. 29. Pieter Bruegel, City at an Elevation, c. 1554 (9), pen in brown ink, 273 x 410 mm, Prague, Národní Galerie, inv. no. K 4493 (verso). See: Mielke 1996, no. 22 verso.
18. For instance, in The Hart Hunt (see note 17).
20. Pieter Bruegel, Sailing Boats in a Storm before a City, c. 1562-63, pen and brown ink, traces of black chalk, 202 x 299 mm, London, Courtauld Institute of Arts, Seirin Collection, inv. no. 11. See Mielke 1996, no. 52.
22. For instance, the View of Reggio in Rotterdam (see note 11), the Abbey in a Southern Valley in Berlin (see note 9), and The Calvary of Apelles in London (see note 21).