

## = The Blind Leading the Blind =

The Blind Leading the Blind , Blind , or The Parable of the Blind ( Dutch : De parabel der blinden ) is a painting by the Flemish renaissance artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder , completed in 1568 . Executed in distemper on linen canvas , it measures 86 cm x 154 cm ( 34 in x 61 in ) . It depicts the Biblical parable of the blind leading the blind from the Gospel of Matthew 15 : 14 , and is held in the collection of the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples , Italy .

The painting reflects Bruegel 's mastery of observation . Each figure has a different eye affliction , including corneal leukoma , atrophy of globe and removed eyes . The men hold their heads aloft to make better use of their other senses . The diagonal composition reinforces the off @-@ kilter motion of the six figures falling in progression . It is considered a masterwork for its accurate detail and composition . Copies include a larger version by Bruegel 's son Pieter Brueghel the Younger , and the work has inspired literature such as poetry by Charles Baudelaire and William Carlos Williams , and a novel by Gert Hofmann .

It was painted the year before Bruegel 's death , and has a bitter , sorrowful tone . This may be related to the establishment of the Council of Troubles in 1567 by the government of the Spanish Netherlands . The council ordered mass arrests and executions to enforce Spanish rule and suppress Protestantism . The placement of Sint @-@ Anna Church of the village Sint @-@ Anna @-@ Pede has led to both pro- and anti @-@ Catholic interpretations , though it is not clear that the painting was meant as a political statement .

## = = Description = =

The painting depicts a procession of six blind , disfigured men . They pass along a path bordered by a river on one side and a village with a church on the other . The leader of the group has fallen on his back into a ditch and , because they are all linked by their staffs , seems about to drag his companions down with him . A cowherd stands in the background .

Bruegel based the work on the Biblical parable of the blind leading the blind from Matthew 15 : 14 , in which Christ refers to the Pharisees . According to art critic Margaret Sullivan , Bruegel 's audience was likely as familiar with classical literature as with the Bible . Erasmus had published his Adagia two years before Bruegel 's painting , and it contained the quotation " Caecus caeco dux " ( " the blind leader of the blind " ) by Roman poet Horace . Bruegel expands the two blind men in the parable to six ; they are well dressed , rather than wearing the peasant clothing that typifies his late work . The first blind man 's face is not visible ; the second twists his head as he falls , perhaps to avoid landing face @-@ first . The shinguard @-@ clad third man , on his toes with knees bent and face to the sky , shares a staff with the second , by which he is being pulled down . The others have yet to stumble , but the same fate seems implied .

The faces and bodies of the blind men , and background detail including the church , are rendered in exceptionally fine detail . The backward @-@ falling posture of the guide demonstrates Bruegel 's mastery of foreshortening . Bruegel 's settings tend to be fictional , but that of The Blind Leading the Blind has been identified as the village Sint @-@ Anna @-@ Pede , and the church as Sint @-@ Anna Church .

## = = = Style = = =

One of four surviving Bruegel paintings in distemper , the work is a tüchlein , a type of light painting that uses tempera made from pigment mixed with water @-@ soluble glue . This medium was widely used in painting and manuscript illumination before the advent of oil paint . It is not known from whom Bruegel learnt its use , but amongst those speculated are his mother @-@ in @-@ law , illuminator Mayken Verhulst ; his teacher Pieter Coecke van Aelst ; and painter and illuminator Giulio Clovio , with whom he resided in Italy and whom he helped paint miniatures in distemper . Due to the high perishability of linen cloth and the solubility of hide glue , tüchleins do not preserve well and are difficult to restore . The Blind Leading the Blind is in good condition and has suffered no more

than some erosion , such as of a herdsman and some fowl in the middle ground . The grain of the linen canvas is visible beneath the delicate brushstrokes . The work is signed and dated BRVEGEL.M.D.LX.VIII. The painting measures 86 cm × 154 cm ( 34 in × 61 in ) , the largest of 1568 .

The austere tone is achieved through pigments in a colour scheme of mostly greys , greens , brownish @-@ reds , and blacks . The diagonal movement of the bodies creates a dramatic tension in the foreground which is divided diagonally from the landscape background . The flat country features are distinctly Flemish , unlike in most of Bruegel 's landscapes , in which he introduced foreign elements such as mountain ranges even into local scenery .

In contrast to earlier depictions of the blind as beneficiaries of divine gifts , Bruegel 's men are stumbling and decrepit , and portrayed without sympathy . The eyeless figure would have been interpreted as a man who had suffered punishment for wrongdoing or fighting .

Bruegel painted with the empirical objectivity of the Renaissance . In earlier paintings the blind were typically depicted with eyes closed . Here , Bruegel gives each man a different ocular affliction , all painted with a realism that allowed identification of their conditions by later experts , though there is still some diagnostic disagreement . French anatomical pathologist Jean @-@ Martin Charcot and anatomical artist Paul Richer published an early account , *Les difformes et les malades dans l 'art* ( " The deformed and sick in art " , 1889 ) , and French pathologist Tony @-@ Michel Torrilhon followed with more research on Bruegel 's figures in 1957 . The first man 's eyes are not visible ; the second has had his eyes removed , along with the eyelids : the third suffers from corneal leukoma ; the fourth atrophy of the globe ; the fifth is either blind with no light perception , or photophobic ; and the sixth has pemphigus , or bullous pemphigoid . Charcot and Richer noted Bruegel 's accuracy in portraying the blind men facing not forward but with their faces raised in the air , as they would have had to rely on their senses of smell and hearing .

= = Background = =

Sixteenth @-@ century Europe was undergoing many societal changes : the Protestant Reformation and its rejection of public religious imagery ; Renaissance humanism and its emphasis on empiricism at the expense of religious faith ; and the growth of the middle class amidst the rise of mercantilism . It was a time of rapid advances in learning and knowledge , and a move towards the empirical sciences ? the age of the heliocentric theory of Copernicus and of Gutenberg 's printing presses . The cartography of Ortelius influenced the painting of landscapes , and the advances Vesalius brought to the study of anatomy via the direct observation of dissected bodies , motivated artists to pay greater attention to the accuracy of the anatomy in their works .

Art was now traded in open markets ; artists sought to distinguish themselves with subjects different from traditional noble , mythological , and Biblical ones , and developed new , realistic techniques based on empirical observation . Classical literature provided precedents for dealing with " low " subjects in art . Genre art and its depiction of ordinary people and everyday life emerged against this background .

Pieter Bruegel the Elder began his career illustrating landscapes and fantastic scenes in a dense style that earned him a reputation as artistic heir to Hieronymus Bosch . He soon came to follow the example of another master : Pieter Aertsen , who had made a name for himself in the 1550s depicting everyday scenes in a highly realistic style , such as the detailed array of meat products that dominate his large *Butcher 's Stall* of 1551 . Bruegel 's subjects became more quotidian and his style observational . He achieved fame for detailed , accurate and realistic portrayals of peasants , with whom his paintings were popular . He painted on linen canvas and oak panel and avoided scenes of magnificence and portraits of nobility or royalty . The peasants Bruegel at first depicted were featureless and undifferentiated ; as his work matured , their physiognomy became markedly more detailed and expressive .

In 1563 , Bruegel and his teacher Pieter Coecke van Aelst 's daughter Mayken were married , and moved to Brussels , the seat of government in the Spanish Netherlands ( 1556 ? 1714 ) . In 1567 the governor of the Netherlands , the Duke of Alba , established the Council of Troubles ( popularly

called the " Blood Council " ) to suppress non Catholic religions and enforce Spanish rule , leading to mass arrests and executions . Whether Bruegel had Calvinist sympathies or intended a political message in The Blind is not clear , but the evidence indicates he likely held views critical of the Catholic Church . A bitter , sorrowful tone characterizes his last works , such as The Blind and The Magpie on the Gallows .

In ancient Greece the blind were depicted as having received gifts from the gods , and blind singers were held in high regard . In mediaeval Europe , the blind were depicted as the subjects of miracles such as Bartimaeus in the healing the blind near Jericho in Mark 10 : 46 ? 52 . With the Reformation , painted depictions of saints and miracles fell out of favour in Protestant areas . In Catholic thought , charitable works of mercy such as giving alms to the blind and poor were good works which , together with faith , helped the salvation of the doer ; but the Protestant doctrine of sola fide rejected the efficacy of works in salvation , which depended on faith alone ( and the complication of God 's predestined will for each individual ) . The status of charity for the poor and infirm diminished , and beggars saw their circumstances deteriorate . In popular literature of the time , the blind were depicted as rogues or targets of pranks . The parable of the blind leading the blind also appears as one of the illustrated proverbs in Bruegel 's Netherlandish Proverbs ( 1559 ) .

= = Analysis = =

Charles Bouleau wrote of the tension in Bruegel 's compositional rhythms . The picture is divided into nine equal parts divided by a set of parallel oblique lines . These are divided by another network of lines at constant angles to the first . The composition invites the reader to follow the action rather than dwell on the individual figures . The blind men resemble each other in dress and facial features , and they appear as if they succeed one another in a single movement culminating in a fall , beginning on the left with " rambling , then hesitation , alarm , stumbling , and finally falling " . The succession of heads follows a curve , and the further the succession , the greater the space between heads , suggesting increasing speed . The steep roofs of the background houses contribute to the composition 's feeling of motion .

Art historian Gustav Glück noted incongruities in that the beggars are well dressed and carry staves and full purses . Academics Kenneth C. Lindsay and Bernard Huppé suggest Bruegel may have implied that the blind men represent false priests who ignored Christ 's admonitions not to carry gold , purses , or staves ; the leader carries a hurdy gurdy , a musical instrument associated with beggars in Bruegel 's time ; this perhaps implies a false minstrel , one who sings praises not for God .

The church in the background , identified as the Sint Anna Church , at Dilbeek in modern Belgium , has sparked much commentary . One view holds that the church is evidence of the painting 's moralistic intent ? that while the first two blind men stumble and are beyond redemption , the other four are behind the church and thus may be saved . Another interpretation has it that the church , with a withered tree placed before it , is an anti Catholic symbol , and that those who follow it will fall following a blind leader as do the men in the ditch . Others deny any symbolism in the church , noting that churches frequently appear in Bruegel 's village scenes as they were a common part of the village landscape . Medical researcher Zeynel A. Karcioğlu suggests the church represents indifference to the plight of the handicapped .

In contrast to the posed , static figures typical of paintings of the period , Bruegel suggests the trajectory of time and space through the accelerated movement of the figures . Critics Charcot and Richer wrote that the concept of visualizing movement was not formulated until the 17th century , and that Bruegel prefigures motion pictures and Duchamp 's *Nude Descending a Staircase* , No. 2 . Karcioğlu sees the painting as anticipating the 19th century chronophotography of Étienne Jules Marey . Dutch film director Joris Ivens stated , " If Bruegel were alive today he would be a film director . "

= = Legacy = =

The Blind Leading the Blind has been considered one of the great masterpieces of painting . Bruegel 's is the earliest surviving painting whose subject is the parable of the blind leading the blind , though there are earlier engravings from the Low Countries known that Bruegel was likely aware of , including one attributed to Bosch , and another by Cornelis Massijs . Bruegel 's paintings have enjoyed worldwide popularity and have been the subjects of scholarly works in disciplines even outside the arts , such as medicine .

Bruegel 's depictions of beggars in paintings such as The Blind Leading the Blind left a strong influence on those who followed him , such as David Vinckboons . Hieronymus Wierix incorporated a copy of The Blind Leading the Blind into the series Twelve Flemish Proverbs . A forgery attributed to Jacob Savery called The Blind appeared c . 1600 bearing a false inscription dating it 1562 . Bruegel 's son Pieter Brueghel the Younger painted a larger copy in c . 1616 with extra details , including a flock of sheep , that hangs in the Louvre ; this copy was in the collection of Ferdinando Gonzaga , Duke of Mantua , patron of Italian Baroque painter Domenico Fetti , who may have been influenced by the painting when he executed his own version of the parable around 1621 ? 22 .

Paintings inspired by Bruegel 's ' ' The Blind Leading the Blind ' '

The painting has been the subject of poetry , including works by the Germans Josef Weinheber and Walter Bauer , and Frenchman Charles Baudelaire 's " The Blind " . American William Carlos Williams wrote a series of poems on Bruegel 's paintings ; his " Parable of the Blind " focuses on the meaning of the The Blind 's composition ? a word that appears three times in the poems eight tercets . The figures stumble diagonally downward , and ?

... one

follows the other stick in

hand triumphant to disaster

Bruegel 's painting served as a model for Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck 's one @-@ act The Blind . West German writer Gert Hofmann 's 1985 novel The Parable of the Blind features Bruegel and the six blind men : to accomplish a realistic portrayal , Bruegel repeatedly has the men cross a bridge and fall into a creek in midwinter until their expressions achieve the desolation Bruegel believes represents the human condition . A 1987 historical novel Bruegel , or the Workshop of Dreams by Claude @-@ Henri Rocquet has Bruegel painting the blind out of fear of losing his own eyesight .

= = Provenance = =

The Blind Leading the Blind and The Misanthrope were discovered in the collection of the Count Giovanni Battista Masi of Parma in 1612 , when Ranuccio I Farnese , Duke of Parma confiscated Masi 's property for his part in a conspiracy against the House of Farnese . How the painting arrived in Italy is uncertain , though it is known that Masi 's father Cosimo returned from the Netherlands in 1595 with a number of Netherlandish paintings . The Farnese art collection came to be one of the largest of the Renaissance era , divided amongst the Farnese residences in Parma and Rome .

In the 18th century , Charles III of Spain inherited the collection from his mother , Elisabeth Farnese , heiress of the Duchy of Parma in north Italy , who became Queen consort of Spain . As a younger son , Charles had been made Duke of Parma , then boldly seized the Kingdom of Naples , becoming Charles VII of Naples , before inheriting the Spanish throne . Charles housed the collection in what is now the National Museum of Capodimonte in Naples . The painting hangs in the Capodimonte with The Misanthrope , as part of the Farnese collection .

= = = Books = = =

= = = Journals = = =

= = = Other media = = =

