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*Cities and Towns.*

**What leads us away from community, the Church, and the common good? Bruegel engages viewers by his image's powerful relevance to their individual lives—a purpose for art that is rooted in his Renaissance humanism.**

# Blinded

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Though Pieter Bruegel was so well-known for painting landscapes and peasant life that his contemporaries called him “Peasant Bruegel,” he was a highly educated townsman and astute observer of social reality. He may have been an Anabaptist. Only minimal records survive regarding his life—even the year and city of his birth are debated—but we know that he became a master in the Guild of St. Luke (the painters’ guild) in Antwerp between October 1551 and October 1552. Among the early influences on his style were the Flemish painters Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, and Hieronymous Bosch. Though he traveled throughout Italy from 1551-1554—a common practice for artists working north of the Alps—his style remained distinctively Northern Renaissance.<sup>†</sup>

Bruegel painted *The Blind Leading the Blind* after he had settled in the cosmopolitan city of Brussels in 1563. This work combines his mature understanding of composition and acute observation of human behavior. Because the image is based on Jesus’ warning to his disciples about following certain hypocritical teachers—“And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit” (Matthew 15:14; cf. the parable in Luke 6:39-42)—many interpreters agree the figures represent not a physical disability, but the spiritual blindness of humankind. Notice that the church steeple in the background is prominently placed between the leader and his “followers”; it has been suggested that our spiritual blindness has an ecclesiastical basis.

Yet details of the figures and composition point to another reading. Bruegel had great sympathy for rural people, like the figures in this painting. Even when he traveled to major artistic cites like Rome, Naples, and Munich, the artist always sought out the peasant. Instead of returning north after visiting Rome, for example, he continued south to visit the town of Calabria and then Messina and Palermo on the island of Sicily. In *The Blind Leading the Blind*, the peasants are being led away from the village and the church. Perhaps the artist is warning us of the peer pressure that can lead us away from the community, the common good, and faithfulness to God. If this was a warning for village peasants, it was even more relevant for city dwellers, like the artist and his intended viewers.

## NOTE

<sup>†</sup> Alexander Wied, “Pieter Bruegel I [the Elder],” Grove Art Online (Oxford University Press, 2006), ([www.groveart.com](http://www.groveart.com), accessed 4 June 2006).