



Man with the Moneybag and Flatterers

Pieter Brueghel the Younger
(Brussels 1564/65 – 1637/38 Antwerp)

ca. 1592

oil on panel

16.7 x 16.9 cm

signed in dark paint, lower right: “.P.
BRVEGHEL.”

PB-101



How to cite

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This delightfully amusing painting, previously unpublished, depicts an old Flemish proverb that wealthy men will always have flatterers: “Because so much money creeps into my sack, the whole world climbs into my hole.”^[1] This saying recalls modern day descriptions of flatterers as “brownnosers” or “ass-kissers,” terms that no doubt descend from the vivid pictorial tradition of illustrations such as this. Here, Pieter Brueghel the Younger depicts a disproportionately large man holding a sack of coins that pours out from under his arm. Nude from the waist down, he squats near a tree as though defecating. In the foreground, a number of smaller figures crawl behind him and enter into the cavernous opening of his rear end. With irony and wit, Brueghel indicates that not even the spiritually elevated are spared from this universal tendency to “brownnose,” as a man from a religious order, probably a Franciscan to judge from his brown cloak and hood, eagerly crawls into the man’s hole.

This painting is in excellent condition, with only a few retouchings from prior restorations.^[2] Quickly executed in loose, wet paint, the translucency of the multiple paint layers allows one to appreciate the artist’s assured handling. The contours and folds of fabrics in highlighted areas of the man’s red shirt and in the dress of the crawling figures are slightly raised because of the paint’s impasto. As is characteristic of Pieter Brueghel the Younger’s manner of painting, the artist sketched the composition directly on the ground and faithfully followed his preparatory drawing in the final composition (**fig 1**).^[3]

A closely related but unsigned version, which includes an inscription of the proverb on its original frame as well as the painting’s date, 1592, differs in quality as well as in compositional details (**fig 2**).^[4] For example, it lacks the branches that extend above the main figure in the Leiden Collection painting, and has a simplified landscape at the right. The rudimentary forms of the crawling foreground figures and the unconvincing three-dimensionality of the central figure suggest that this work was painted in Pieter Brueghel the Younger’s workshop and not by the master.^[5]

Pieter Brueghel the Younger based his composition on a print by Johannes Wierix (1549–ca. 1620), *Man with the Moneybag and Flatterers* (**fig 3**), which belongs to a print series, *Twelve Proverbs*.^[6] The engraving has two inscriptions, one in Dutch that circles the image and another in French which appears on the squatting man’s lower back. Together, they elaborate on the dual nature of flattery. The Dutch text addresses the great advantage of rich men who use their wealth to get ahead yet lose sight of their own inclination to “crawl into the hole.” The French text speaks of the desire to “enter the hole” of the rich person who is willing to give.^[7]

Despite the close correlation between the Leiden Collection painting and Wierix’s print, Brueghel did make subtle adjustments to his composition. Instead of depicting

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Infrared photograph of PB-101 showing a detail of the underdrawing (photo: Annette Rupprecht)



Fig 2. Pieter Brueghel the Younger, *A Proverb: He who holds the sack of gold will always have flatterers*, oil on panel, 18.2 cm diameter, whereabouts unknown (formerly, sale, Sotheby’s, London, 12 July 2001, no. 118)



Fig 3. Johannes Wierix, *Man with the Moneybag and His Flatterers*, 1568, engraving, 17.8 cm diameter, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

the man's left hand distributing coins, he eliminated the hand and depicted the coins as streaming out of the moneybag. He also altered the shape of the bottom of the moneybag, and added a house and tree to the distant landscape.

The designs for Wierix's engraved series *Twelve Proverbs* have sometimes been incorrectly attributed to Pieter Brueghel the Younger's father, Pieter Bruegel the Elder (ca. 1525–69), since the latter's *Twelve Flemish Proverbs* in the Museum Mayer van den Bergh in Antwerp are closely related in concept.^[8] Nevertheless, Wierix's proverbs belong to a different pictorial tradition.^[9] As is evident in Pieter Brueghel the Younger's paintings, Wierix's print of the flatterer was very popular. It is also seen in a print by Jan Theodor de Bry (1528–96) executed late in the sixteenth century (**fig 4**).^[10] Such examples, and the different series of proverbs that survive from the period, underscore the popularity of a genre that humorously mocks human behavior.



Fig 4. Jan Theodor de Bry, after Johannes Wierix, *Man with the Money Bag and His Flatterers*, engraving, 10.7 x 8.4 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

- Dominique Surh, 2017; revised 2022

Endnotes

1. “Om dat door mynen sack veel gelts comt geslopen daer om worde ick van al de weerelt int gat ghecropen.” The proverb is derived from text that survives on the frame of the only other known version of this composition: “Om dat door mynen sack veel gelts comt geslopen daer om worde ick van al de weerelt int gat ghecropen 1592” (Because a lot of money creeps into my money bag, the whole world climbs into my hole 1592). Trans. Ilona van Tuinen. See also note 4, this entry.
2. The painting was last cleaned by Nancy Krieg in 2009.
3. Christina Currie and Dominique Allart, *The Brueg(h)el Phenomenon: Paintings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Pieter Brueghel the Younger, with a Special Focus on Technique and Copying Practice*, 3 vols. (Brussels, 2012). Currie and Allart’s study of the painting technique of Pieter Brueghel the Younger has shed light on how the artist went about making numerous copies of the same composition, frequently working on the basis of graphic designs and often creating his paintings from drawings or prints. An underdrawing was found at 780 nm; see Annette Rupprecht, “Technical notes of *A Proverb: He who holds the sack of gold will always have flatterers* by Pieter Brueghel the Younger, PB-101” unpublished report dated January 2013, curatorial files, The Leiden Collection, New York.
4. This version is larger in diameter than the present painting by 2 centimeters and its current whereabouts are unknown. The provenance stretches back to 1934, and the work most recently appeared at auction in 2001. For its historical assessment, see Gustav Glück, *Brueghels Gemälde* (Vienna, 1932), fig. 98; Georges Marlier, *Pierre Brueghel Le Jeune*, posthumously edited and annotated by Jacqueline Folie (Brussels, 1969), 150, no. 7; and Klaus Ertz, *Pieter Brueghel der Jüngere, die Gemälde mit kritischem Oeuvrekatalog*, 2 vols. (Luca, 2000), 113–14, ft. 58, F 69, 199.
5. Christina Currie and Dominique Allart, *The Brueg(h)el Phenomenon: Paintings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Pieter Brueghel the Younger, with a Special Focus on Technique and Copying Practice*, 3 vols. (Brussels, 2012).
6. The engraving has been previously attributed to Hieronymus Wierix, see Friedrich Wilhelm Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts*, ca. 1450–1700, vol. 3, *Boekhorst–Brueghel* (Amsterdam, 1955), no. 169.
7. Around the outside of the print the Flemish inscription reads: “Die ghelt te gheuen heft onder hooghe en slechte, / En dat hij wat milt laet van sijnen schat, druijpen, Hy crijcht Offitien en comt t’synen rechte, / Want elck en weet niet hoe hem sal in t’gat cruijpen” (He who has money to give among high and low, / And that he liberally lets drop from his treasure, He receives offices and comes into his rights, / Because not everyone is aware that he too shall crawl into the hole). On the lower back of the squatting man, two lines read in French: “On ne sait comme entrer on veut, / Au trou de cil qui donner peut” (One does not know how one wants to enter / The hole of he who can give). René van Bastelaer, *The Prints of Peter Bruegel the Elder: Catalogue Raisonné* (San Francisco, 1992), 288, no. 169.

8. The illustration shows a man holding a large piece of fabric fluttering in the air, while the inscription describes the flatterer as a person who changes direction depending on the wind. “Een placebo ben ick ende also gesint / dat ick de huyck alom hanch naeden wint” (A flatterer am I and so inclined / as the wind blows so blow I). Manfred Sellink, *Bruegel: The Complete Paintings, Drawings and Prints* (New York, 2007), 123.
9. See discussion in David Freedberg, *The Prints of Pieter Bruegel the Elder* (Tokyo, 1989), 171, no. 66; Manfred Sellink, *Bruegel: The Complete Paintings, Drawings and Prints* (New York, 2007), 124.
10. The underlying inscription on this print reads: “Tu caligas inflare meas, ego cudere nummos” (You inflate my britches, I strike coins); see René van Bastelaer, *The Prints of Peter Bruegel the Elder: Catalogue Raisonné* (San Francisco, 1992), 229, no. 170.

Provenance

- (Sale, Piasa, Drouot Richelieu, Paris, 17 December 2008, no. 37 [Salomon Lilian B. V., Amsterdam]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2009.

Exhibition History

- Ithaca, Cornell University, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, “An Eye for Detail: Dutch Painting from the Leiden Collection,” 20 September 2014–21 June 2015 [lent by the present owner].

References

- Kapust, Daniel J. *Flattery and the History of Political Thought: That Glib and Oily Art*. Cambridge, 2018, cover illustration.

Versions

Related Prints

1. Johannes Wierix (1549–ca. 1620), “The Man with the Moneybag and His Flatterers,” 1568, engraving, 17.8 cm diameter, National Gallery, Stuttgart, Print Collection, inv. no. A 17425.

2. Jan Theodor de Bry (1528–96), after Johannes Wierix, “The Man with the Moneybag and His Flatterers,” engraving, 10.7 x 8.4 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection, inv. no. 1964.8.410. Published in Jan Theodor de Bry, *Emblemata Secularia* [Oppenheim, 1611]).

Versions & Copies

1. Circle of Pieter Brueghel the Younger, *A Proverb: “He who holds the sack of gold will always have flatterers,”* oil on panel, oval, 18.2 cm diameter, current whereabouts unknown; formerly sale, Sotheby’s, London, 12 July 2001, no. 118.

Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of circular, horizontally grained oak, is unthinned and uncradled and has a continuous round bevel along the panel circumference.^[1] Hand-marbled paper adhered to the entire panel reverse makes it impossible to determine whether there are import stamps, panel maker’s marks, or tool marks. No lead wax seal is visible in the X-radiograph or under the paper in raking light, there are no wooden shims, and the panel has not been previously prepared for dendrochronology.

A light-colored, thinly and evenly applied ground is topped by paint applied in successive thin layers of transparent glazing, light over dark, with virtually no brushmarkings. The contours and folds of the central figure’s vermillion shirt, the coins spilling from the sack, the miniature figures crawling along the foreground, and the foliage along the upper left of the composition are visible and slightly raised. The paint and ground do not spill over onto the thickness of the panel edges, but form a jagged edge along the entire outer panel circumference.

A detailed, freely drawn line underdrawing is visible through the paint layer along the central figure’s face and along the folds where the figure’s stomach meets his upper thigh. Additional areas of underdrawing are visible through the figure’s vermillion shirt and the miniature figures crawling along the foreground in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers.^[2]

The painting has been signed in dark paint along the foreground in the lower right.

The painting underwent minor conservation treatment in 2009.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on visual examination only.
2. An infrared composite using an InGaS camera, which reaches further into the infrared spectrum, could provide additional details.

