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# Honig, Elizabeth Alice. Pieter Bruegel and the Idea of Human Nature

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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**Honig, Elizabeth Alice.**

***Pieter Bruegel and the Idea of Human Nature.***

London: Reaktion Books, 2019. Pp. 269 + 68 ill. ISBN 978-1-7891-4076-7 (hardcover) £15.95.

In this elegantly written and illustrated book, Elizabeth Alice Honig explores the discursive nature of Pieter Bruegel's art. Published to mark the 450th anniversary of the artist's death, the book offers an encyclopaedic investigation of the myriad human conditions Bruegel masterfully captured in his oeuvre and the cultural and social concerns to which they spoke. Forgoing traditional art historical organizing devices, such as chronology or medium, Honig organizes her book in six chapters that address different facets of human nature, as explored by Bruegel. The result is a thorough work of scholarship that argues that Bruegel conceived of his works as pieces to provoke and promote contemplation and discussion—whether that be with oneself or between others—about the idea of human nature.

The first chapter outlines how Bruegel's works engaged with both learned and popular understandings of human behaviours and characteristics. Here, Honig draws connections between humanist writings, folk culture, and Bruegel's images to demonstrate how the artist's works incorporated ideas about human experiences and emotions that would have been recognizable to diverse social groups. Honig argues that this synthesis of knowledge bases is what ultimately allowed Bruegel to produce art that could evoke fundamental questions about humanity from merchants and theologians alike. The second chapter examines Bruegel's meditation on humankind and the natural world. Honig presents a close focus study of Bruegel's *Cycle of the Months or Seasons of the Year*, a set of paintings commissioned by the wealthy merchant Nicolaes Jonghelinck for his suburban villa. Honig indicates, as many scholars have before, that the paintings were hung in Jonghelinck's dining room as conversation pieces. However, she offers readers deeper insights into this familiar observation by explaining how the details of Bruegel's paintings would have served to compel viewers to reckon with their place in the universe. Adorning the room's walls, the paintings placed Jonghelinck and his guests in the centre of the natural world. Yet, a close look at a work such as *The Hunters in the Snow* (1565) makes it immediately clear that Bruegel aimed to communicate the precarity of humankind's relationship with nature through his work: two skaters in the painting's middle ground are at risk

of falling through a hole that has opened in the ice, reminding viewers of their subordination to the power of the natural world.

Honig investigates Bruegel's ideas on human ambitions and the chaos of war in chapters 3 and 4, respectively. Chapter 3 locates contemporary philosophical understandings of and reservations about human aspirations in some of Bruegel's works, such as the *Fall of Icarus* (ca. 1560) and *Tower of Babel* (1563). Honig suggests that these paintings could have stimulated meaningful conversations about humanity because they offered commentaries on the order of the universe and the challenges posed to it by human desires to rival and surpass divine creation. In chapter 4, Honig reflects on Bruegel's ability to visualize threads of classical and contemporary discourses on the morality and politics of violence and war. She surveys Bruegel's most chaotic works, demonstrating how he employed individualized portraits of agony, anger, and torment, as in *Massacre of the Innocents* (1565–67), to capture the harshness of life that was a reality in times of violent conflict.

Chapter 5 addresses the ways in which Bruegel visualized human physicality, identity, and relations. Honig prefaces her visual analysis by describing the contemporary cultural and social significance of physiognomics—the practice of determining a person's character or personality from their physical appearance. She writes that Bruegel would have been aware of the prominence of physiognomics, particularly within courtly and elite circles, and his paintings likely functioned as objects to think through. By contemplating the various bodies and visages in works such as *Battle between Carnival and Lent* (1559) or *Head of a Peasant Woman* (ca. 1568) audiences could sharpen their face-reading skills and enhance their physiognomic knowledge. In the final chapter, Honig builds upon Bruegel's conceptions of the human body and social engagement by exploring literary and visual presentations of kermis culture. Contemporary texts and prints often portrayed the kermis as uncivilized revelry, and the caption at the bottom of Bruegel's *Kermis at Hoboken* (1559) echoes this characterization. Yet Honig argues that this work does not accurately reflect Bruegel's understanding of and engagement with the kermis. Noting that the caption was added to the print by a publisher, Honig posits that Bruegel's vignettes of comedy and humour are not mechanisms of ridicule but representations of basic human experiences that are shared by all.

At the centre of Honig's book is a reminder of the importance of looking carefully at Bruegel's work. She emphasizes the artist's unique ability to weave

human emotions, values, and reactions together to create visual statements about humanity, society, and their underlying foundations. An enjoyable read, Honig's book encourages us not only to reflect on the many conversations that Bruegel's art could have engendered, but also to use his work to explore our own ways of understanding human nature.

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**James, Carolyn.**

***A Renaissance Marriage: The Political and Personal Alliance of Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga, 1490–1519.***

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 224. ISBN 978-0-1996-8121-1 (hardcover) \$80.00.

Isabella d'Este is usually portrayed as a paragon of noble Renaissance womanhood and female patronage. Since Alessandro Luzio's scholarship a century ago, studies of early sixteenth-century Mantua have often emphasized her statesmanship, at the expense of her husband, Marquis Francesco Gonzaga. In a study of their marriage, Sarah Cockram challenged this view, showing how they shared power relatively equally (*Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga: Power Sharing at the Italian Renaissance Court*, Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2013). Carolyn James's new monograph seeks to take this further, drawing new conclusions about their intimate relationship and about how the balance of power shifted between the couple over almost three decades of marriage. Like Cockram, she draws on the more than three thousand extant letters between Francesco and Isabella, as well as those of family and courtiers. Despite often being dictated, and with formal epistolary conventions, James discerns changes in sentiment between the two, from the protestations of love in the early days to the mutual appreciation, worry, and finally frustration of later years.

James has written extensively on Renaissance noblewomen, including Isabella and her mother, Eleanor of Aragon, recently focusing on women's correspondence and female roles in male domains. Her gendered approach now concentrates on Isabella d'Este as an example of a successful regent during