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The Brueghel Dynasty Comes to Milan's Palazzo Reale in Landmark Exhibition

On until January 31, the exhibition traces five generations of painters who helped transform European art. expand its subjects and build an international brand

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Lucy Gordan



Pieter Brueghel the Younger's "The People's Census at Bethlehem" on loan from Antwerp's Royal Museum of Fine Arts. Courtesy of the Palazzo Reale

On until January 31 at *Palazzo Reale* on the *Piazza del Duomo* is “I BRUEGHEL: The Origins of Painting Genres in Europe,” the first major exhibition in Milan dedicated to one of the most influential artistic dynasties in Europe. Active from c. 1550–1700, at least 10 direct family members across five generations worked as professional painters. On display here are only works by Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1525–1569), the founding master and patriarch, his two sons, Pieter Brueghel the Younger (1564–1638) and Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568–1625), and Jan’s son Jan Brueghel the Younger (1601–78).

Here, some 80 artworks—paintings, drawings, and prints—are displayed in chronological order of each Brueghel, followed by those artists they each influenced. On loan from many continental European museums, especially Antwerp’s Royal Museum of Fine Arts and Phoebe Foundation, Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum, the Royal Library of Belgium, Madrid’s Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Bassano del Grappa’s *Museo Civico*, and the *Uffizi*, as well as from private collections, they illustrate that painting was no longer an exclusively Italian phenomenon, but rather a network of creative centers, some still in Italy, but others in Flanders and Holland.



Gestisci consenso

Pieter Brueghel the Elder's “Wedding Dance” on loan from Antwerp’s Royal Museum of Fine Arts. Courtesy of the Palazzo Reale.

The exhibition’s five sections are “Pieter the Elder and Pieter the Younger. The Birth of a Brand”; “The Brueghel Aftermath,” about painters they influenced; “Proverbs and Figures of Speech,” which concentrates on a painting by Pieter the Younger of some 100 miniature scenes illustrating contemporary local proverbs; “The Re-Elaborations of Pieter the Elder’s Style and Genres”; and “Jan Brueghel the Elder, a Genius Between Italy and Europe.” They all aim to explain how the three older Brueghels left religious subject matter, portraits, and large canvases to other artists and played a fundamental role in the birth of new pictorial subject matter: snowy and marine landscapes, still lifes, scenes of daily peasant life, warfare, historical events, allegories, mythological stories, and animals. Thus, they were no longer limited to religious and noble patrons. Instead, beginning with the sons, their market increasingly opened, especially in Holland, to a

much larger cultured urban “bourgeois” audience, thereby developing a revolutionary international “Brueghel brand.” Thus, it’s no coincidence that the Brueghels produced mostly medium- and small-format paintings, suitable for private and

home use, instead of for churches and large palaces.



Pieter Bruegel the Younger's "Proverbs", on loan from the Stadsmuseum in Lier, Liechtenstein. Courtesy of the Palazzo Reale

We know very little about Pieter the Elder's life except that he was born in Holland and traveled frequently, especially to Italy. Nicknamed "Pieter de Grappige" ("Peter the Funny One") and "Peasant Peter" by his contemporaries for his witty and satirical humor, he invented a panoramic style of painting where tiny human figures are set against massive, sweeping views of nature: mountains and the sky inspired by his travels in 1552 and 1554 across the Alps to Italy: Rome, Reggio Calabria, Messina, Naples, and Venice. Yet, despite his imposing influence, only about 40 of his artworks survive today; four are displayed here.

Pieter the Younger was the continuator of his father's work. He reproduced and refined his father's models in numerous variations, thus consolidating the "Brueghel brand." He also acquired his own stylistic autonomy, which earned him the nickname "Brueghel of the Underworld" because his favorite subjects were fires and Hell.



Jan Brueghel the Elder's "Orpheus with a Harp Playing to Pluto and Persephone, on loan from the Galleria Colonna in Rome. Courtesy of the Palazzo Reale

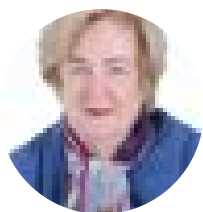
Instead, his refined cosmopolitan younger brother Jan, nicknamed "Velvet Brueghel" for his splendid depictions of fabrics and "Flower Brueghel" for his magnificent, detailed floral still lifes often painted on copper, collaborated closely with Rubens and traveled extensively throughout Europe, particularly to Prague and Italy: Venice, Naples, and Rome. Here he met the avid art collector Cardinal Federico Borromeo (1564–1631), who became his lifelong friend and patron, collecting over time 29 of Jan's paintings. So, not surprisingly, when Borromeo became the Archbishop of Milan in June 1595, for a year Jan became a member of his household at *Palazzo Vercelli* and thus the only Brueghel to visit Milan.

In July 1618, Borromeo donated his magnificent art collection, including Jan's paintings, to the then newly established *Pinacoteca Ambrosiana*, where they have remained ever since, so it's well worth a visit too. Of Jan's 13 paintings on display at *Palazzo Reale*, only one, "Flowers in a Vase," is on loan from there; the others come from Madrid, Dresden, Antwerp, Liechtenstein, Milan's Brera, and Rome.

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Italian Hours

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