

Pieter van der Heyden's *Autumn* (1570) and  
Corresponding Works from the Four Winds Series

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Today I will be speaking on Pieter van der Heyden's engraving, *Autumn*, from 1570. This print is part of a series on the four seasons. The engraving of *Autumn* in the Mint Museum differs from other prints depicting peasant life in the sixteenth-century Netherlands. I will be suggesting symbolic inferences within these scene presented in *Autumn* and the other three prints. The symbols in each piece point towards the same theme, but differ in their representations. It becomes clear that the symbols in question stand in not only for the cycle of seasons represented, but also acts as a reminder of mortality to all humanity.

In the sixteenth-century Netherlands, the craft of printmaking flourished. One of the most notable publishers of the time was Hieronymus Cock, owner of "At the Four Winds" print shop in Antwerp.<sup>1</sup> Artists, often painters, working at the Four Winds print shop were paired with skilled engravers, with whom they would share their sketches and drawings, from which the engravers would base their prints. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, a Netherlandish painter, was the preeminent artist who worked for Hieronymus Cock. While with At the Four Winds print shop, Bruegel was paired with engraver Pieter van der Heyden. Bruegel and van der

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Riggs and Larry Silver, *Graven Images* (Chicago: Mary and Lee Block Gallery, Northwestern University, 1993), 17.

Heyden worked specifically on the creation of both secular and religious engravings. The pair worked together until Bruegel's death in 1569.<sup>2</sup>

*Autumn*, the image you see here, is one of four prints in a series of the seasons by Pieter van der Heyden between 1565 and 1570. The first two, *Spring* from 1565, and *Summer* from 1568, were engravings created in collaboration with Bruegel.<sup>3</sup> The final two prints in the series, *Autumn* and *Winter*, both from 1570, were based on drawings by Hans Bol. Bol's drawings were essential for the completion of the series after Bruegel's death in 1569. Bol was a great imitator of Bruegel, who had likely studied drawings and paintings by Bruegel as a means to perfect his technique. After Bruegel's death, Bol became the main landscape designer for At the Four Winds Publishing.<sup>4</sup> The influence of Bruegel on Bol is quite evident, especially in the landscapes which we will see in this series.

Before I continue, I want to give you some history on the representation of labor. Previous to the sixteenth-century, the representation of peasant labor was most commonly done in calendar pages of illuminated manuscripts. In these representations peasants were depicted in a way that made them integral aspects of their surrounding landscapes.<sup>5</sup> These images were typically created for aristocratic, upper class patrons, because of the amount of time, skill, and therefore money

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<sup>2</sup> Larry Silver, *Peasant Scenes and Landscapes: The Rise of Pictorial Genres in the Antwerp Art Market*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Silver, 188. (see note 2)

<sup>4</sup> Silver, 167, 188. (see note 2)

<sup>5</sup> Silver, 123. (see note 2)

necessary for the creation of such intricate images.<sup>6</sup> **(SLIDE)** *The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry* (*Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*) a book of hours by the Limbourg Brothers, created from 1411-1416, are great illustrative examples of such images. These scenes depict similar attributes of the seasons as do those by van der Heyden, in terms of what the artist chose to represent, as well as possible symbolic meanings within the work. The first two images are of April and June, followed by October and February.

Themes of harvest and of labor were integral aspects of art, not only in the sixteenth century, but also centuries which came before, and would proceed after. In the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in particular, harvest scenes dominated representations of country life.<sup>7</sup> It has been argued that these specific themes were products of sixteenth-century Calvinist or Protestant work ethic.<sup>8</sup> For Calvinists in particular, there were religious implications enforcing beliefs about hard work and work ethic, such as work as proof of faith, and insurance of salvation for eternity.<sup>9</sup> However, images of work ethic were capable of serving people other than just Protestants. Even given the strength of religion to compel ones work ethic, there were social undertones which strongly influenced the artists as well.

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<sup>6</sup> Silver, 123. (see note 2)

<sup>7</sup> Liana Vardi, "Imagining the Harvest in Early Modern Europe." *The American Historical Review* 101, no. 5 (December 1996), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2170176>, 1359-1360.

<sup>8</sup> Ilja M. Veldman, "Images of Labor and Diligence in Sixteenth-Century Netherlandish Prints: The Work Ethic Rooted in Civic Morality or Protestantism?" *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 21, no. 4, (1992), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3780788>, 228.

<sup>9</sup> Veldman, 228. (see note 8)

As of the sixteenth-century, Netherlandish society, along with the majority of European society, had been living within a three tier class system. This system situated peasants as the lowest social class, a position held by the majority of society. Though placed in the lowest seat of society, the peasants' importance to the social order was acknowledged. Many artistic depictions celebrated the daily lives of peasants, showing them immersed in field work in their independent communities, as we will see in this series.<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, a German theologian, deemed peasants the "salt of the earth," as though the earth was an integral aspect of their bodies.<sup>11</sup> The maintenance of order rested upon the shoulders of the peasants, as became apparent through peasant revolts. Their hard labor and harvesting assured stability for the upper classes ways of life, providing everyday essentials through their work.<sup>12</sup> **(SLIDE)**

Keep in mind, as we look at these images, we need to attempt to understand them as they would have been in the sixteenth-century. Many symbols or allegories which appear hidden or non-existent to the contemporary eye were generally recognized by people in sixteenth-century Netherlandish society, effecting how the image was intended to be read.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Vardi, 1357. (see note 7)

<sup>11</sup> Christa Grössinger, *Humor and Folly In Secular and Profane Prints of Northern Europe, 1430-1540*. (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2002), 89.

<sup>12</sup> Veldman, 235. (see note 8)

<sup>13</sup> Hessel Miedema, "Realism and Comic Mode: The Peasant." *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 9, no. 4 (1977), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3780555>, 206.

At first glance, this scene is clearly one of preparation. In *Autumn*, the people represented are performing a number of tasks; slaughtering livestock (particularly hogs), making wine, harvesting and bringing in grain, and chopping wood. The trees are barren, every last leaf has fallen. In the sky, birds have formed v-formations, making their way in the southward migration. The Latin phrase on the bottom right of the image states, “fruit bearing autumn gives heavy berries for the wine.”<sup>14</sup> **(SLIDE)** Within van der Heyden’s *Autumn*, there are clear allusions to the lives of and beliefs about peasants of the time. Peasants maintained low and usually subservient role in sixteenth-century Netherlandish society. In art, peasants were often depicted as bent over their tools, hard at work, sometimes squatting, depending on the task. When viewed in these poses, peasants were generally perceived as submissive, given their vulnerable stance.<sup>15</sup> When representing peasant labor, specifically harvest, it was very difficult to portray the entirety of the event taking place. It became necessary for the artist to reduce the scene, namely numbers of people, amount of land portrayed, etc. To compensate, the artist would implement a variety of symbols which help to fully represent the theme and actions at hand. **(SLIDE)**

This next image is of the engraving, *Spring*. It depicts the empty earth in anticipation of the new year’s crop. The foreground is occupied by peasants

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<sup>14</sup> My appreciation to Dr. Dale Grote, Assistant Professor of Greek and Latin in the UNC Charlotte Department of Languages and Cultural Studies, for the translation of the text in the bottom of each image.

<sup>15</sup> Vardi, 1361. (see note 7)

working to produce well manicured garden. Directly to the back right of the image, peasants are working on an arch, one that will presumably create stability for grape vines. Later in the year, if the crop prospers, these grapes will be made into wine. To the left of the arch lies a fenced area and what seems to be a barn where the livestock is kept. Beyond this pasture, there is a solitary man standing in the field, most likely preparing the land for crops, though it is unsure. **(SLIDE)** The back left corner contains a scene of relaxation, occurring in the midst of all the work being done. Some of the people in this area are sitting in pairs, while others reside too far in the background for their actions to be discernable. These people are accompanied by a man playing a large stringed instrument, possibly a cello, and a man filling a drink, presumably a servant. The extent of service and entertainment suggests that these individuals are not part of the peasant class, but instead are of higher social rank. In the sky above this scene of leisure, a flock of birds return from their winter migration, at the same time ships are making their way on the sea. The Latin phrase on the bottom of the image states, “in spring, golden Venus delights in flowering wreaths.” **(SLIDE)**

The depiction of summer acts continues on themes also seen within the engraving of *Spring*. The situation of the scene seems to be opposite the view given in the engraving of *Spring*. The structure in the middle of the image could very likely be the barn in which livestock was previously being kept, with further

continuation of landscape details which had been previously omitted. The phrase in the bottom portion of this image suggests both the heat and the action taking place, “fiery summer brings crops to the fields.” In the engraving of spring we had seen an image of a solitary man in the fields presumably working, and now we see a multitude of peasants working to reap the crop which he most likely had sown. The grain already harvested is carried back to the farm as others continue their ceaseless toil in the fields, breaking only to quench their thirst. One aspect that differs from the other four images is the way the dominant figure in the foreground enters our space, crossing over the wording at the bottom of the image, as does his scythe. The images of labor continue through the entire engraving, into the back right, as well as on the hill in the back left. Interestingly, just above the barn and the church lies what appears to be a sermon occurring on the hill near where a cross has been erected. **(SLIDE)**

I am going to return to the image of *Autumn*, for a moment, to highlight a few aspects which would have seemed trivial before viewing the previous two images in the series. In this image of autumn, we return to the barn where livestock presumably had been kept. Now, however, instead of lively animals, we see those that have been taken to slaughter in preparation for winter, with no detail spared. Remnants of summer’s harvest remains through the depiction of a man leaning out of a window, holding an armful of wheat. *Spring* is also referenced, through the

harvesting of grapes and the making of wine. For the second time in the series an anonymous figure appears, holding what may or may not be a scythe. His actions directly mimic that of the peasant in the foreground wielding an axe about to slaughter the animal in front of him. **(SLIDE)**

Lastly we have the engraving, *Winter*. This image differs distinctly from the previous three, especially in reference to mood. The engraving appears to concentrate more on merrymaking, rather than work, as the previous three images had. The phrase for this image states, “the power of the winter binds the flowing waves with ice.” This statement suggests the restriction of movement, not only of the water, but of all action in this unforgiving season. Within *Winter* only a small scene of labor occurs, which is situated towards the middle of the image on the left side. Otherwise, we see scenes of couples, groups of people, and individuals, frolicking on the now frozen river. Some people beckon for others to join them, some are still lacing their skates, preparing to take part in the fun. Larry Silver observes the intermingling of classes while taking part in winter activities in this specific print, equalizing this activity, allowing all to participate.<sup>16</sup> The hard working peasants no longer have strenuous field work, and the upper classes continue their enjoyment of leisurely activities. A tavern scene appears towards the middle on the right side of the image, emphasizing just how rowdy peasants are

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<sup>16</sup> Silver, 167. (see note 2)

capable of getting. The idea of winter as a time of relaxation and enjoyment for peasants is only fitting, as it is mutually the time of nature's annual rest.<sup>17</sup> (SLIDE)

One theme persists through all four images by Pieter van der Heyden, which is the passage of time. Some representations of the seasons offer personifications of each quarter, characterized by an array of season specific imagery.<sup>18</sup> Others view the representation of the progression of the seasons as closely related to the ages of humanity. The seasons themselves are often representative of the stages of human life, birth connected to spring, summer to maturity, decline to autumn, and death to winter.<sup>19</sup> Representations of the ages of humanity are generally divided into between three and twelve images, though individual panels representing this transition throughout age do exist.<sup>20</sup> In this case the series is clearly divided into four. Generally, these conceptions of the passage of time contain underlying meanings, such as the transience of life, and the all consuming nature of death.<sup>21</sup>

In relation to *Autumn* and the other prints in the series by van der Heyden, little has been written on the possible symbolic implications of the quartet. It has become apparent to me that some contents of the engravings could function as *momento mori*, meaning reminder of death, which fits in very well with the

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<sup>17</sup> Matilde Battistini, *Symbols and Allegories in Art*. (Los Angeles: Getty Publishers, 2002), 42

<sup>18</sup> James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979), 129-130.

<sup>19</sup> Battistini, 32. (see note 17)

<sup>20</sup> Hall, 9. (see note 18)

<sup>21</sup> Hall, 9. (see note 18)

concept of progression of time. Many aspects within the series suggest this possibility. **(SLIDE)**

In *Summer*, the image of the scythe plays a dominant role. The use of the scythe in the act of reaping is a deeply rooted symbol of death, and has been viewed as such since the Middle Ages.<sup>22</sup> An image of death as produced in 1489 by an unknown artist depicts death with a scythe, his instrument of choice. Death is represented outdoors, as peasants in both van der Heyden's series and the *Very Rich Hours* by the Limbourg Brothers had been. The image of the man with his scythe who is crossing over the text is a particularly great allusion to the mortality of all humanity. Through entering the viewer's space, he reminds all who see him of their relationship with death, through his scythe. The act of reaping clearly perpetuates itself as a symbol of death. The action carried out with the scythe is the removal of a living thing from its life source, therefore killing it, which could be a suggestion of human mortality. **(SLIDE)**

In *Autumn*, only two subjects are not hard at work, which are the two children in the bottom right corner. While standing there, one child blows a bubble as the other watches. The depiction of a child blowing bubbles is associated with transience, alluding to the transitory nature of earthly life.<sup>23</sup> An image done by an anonymous artist, after Hendrik Goltzius, clearly depicts the transitory nature of

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<sup>22</sup> Vardi, 1361. (see note 7)

<sup>23</sup> Veldman, 230. (see note 8)

bubbles. The bubbles are depicted alongside other signifiers acting as *momento mori*, such as the skull and rising smoke. **(SLIDE)** Also in the image, a solitary man wields what is presumably a scythe in the background. Through his actions, he could easily be acting as a *momento mori* himself. **(SLIDE)**

The implications of *Winter* are more forthright than *Summer* and *Autumn*. Winter itself was already associated with death. The winter climate does not allow for flourishing crops, nor does the extreme chill fare well for animals or humans alike. In the bottom corner of the engraving lies the depiction of a man who has fallen into the icy water, and we the viewers are unsure whether he lives or perishes. The skaters on the river, and those about to join into the fun, disregard this man. It is unsure whether they do not see him, or choose to ignore him. It seems as though the skaters do not see the man, as one would not see the approach of death. A couple skating on the ice makes their way directly towards the man, somehow managing to overlook him. Only gazing at one another, they do not see the breaking ice, or the perilous situation ahead of them. Only one man appears to notice the victim, but decides to keep his distance, making me question if he truly saw him at all. **(SLIDE)**

*Spring*, unlike the previous three prints, only seems to suggest death through the work of planting, as well as through the depiction of the active livestock. These images create the allusion to the forthcoming of both slaughter and harvest. Spring

is more representative of vanitas, or vanity, meaning emptiness, which is closely associated with *momento mori*.<sup>24</sup> Vanitas acts as a reminder of the emptiness of earthly possessions due to their insignificance upon death, and inability to help you in the afterlife.<sup>25</sup> As I discussed before, in the background of this engraving there is a small scene of leisure. As everyone around the people in the scene works, they sit around listening to music, a couple takes a boat ride down the river, others eat, etc, partaking in an excess of earthly enjoyments. In the sky above this scene flies a flock of birds that appears to be a reference to Job chapter 5, verse 7, “man is born to work and the bird to fly.”<sup>26</sup> This small detail could in fact be criticism of the over indulgent leisure of the upper class in contrast to the peasants hard at work, not only planting necessary crops, but working on the creation of a manicured garden for the other citizens’ enjoyment. A garden which will no doubt provide beauty that will fade as quickly as it flourished, moving on a quick journey towards death.

Many aspects which came together, provided important clues to the understanding of the inherent themes in the series by Pieter van der Heyden, as influenced by both Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Hans Bol. The symbolism within the etching presents numerous possibilities for the understanding of the image itself. However, it seems most apparent that through peasant imagery, van der

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<sup>24</sup> Hall, 291. (see note 18)

<sup>25</sup> Hall, 291. (see note 18)

<sup>26</sup> Veldman, 230. (see note 8)

Heyden is presenting a warning, a *momento mori*, for all viewers. The theme of transition of the seasons paired with the ages of humanity presents the idea of impending death for all who view *Autumn*, and the other engravings in the series. Through understanding of seasonal traits, peasant imagery, and season specific symbolism, Pieter van der Heyden is clearly painting, rather engraving a picture for the viewers of their own mortality.

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