



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Hunters in the Snow* (*Winter*), 1565. 117 x 162 cms (46 x 63¾ inches). Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Public Domain.

UNFREEZING TIME

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Pieter Bruegel was only about forty when he died, but he had already established himself as a leading innovator in Dutch art. Instead of adopting the traditional genres of portraiture or religious imagery, he introduced large landscapes and lively scenes celebrating everyday peasant life. Of all his many prints, drawings and paintings, the wooden panel now known as *Hunters in the Snow* is among the most famous. Like his other deceptively straightforward pictures, it incorporates subtle reminders of God's power and human fallibility. This eye-catching wintry image has become a top favourite for secular Christmas cards – but ironically, it is laced with omens of foreboding rather than promises of renewal.

Hunters in the Snow belongs to a set of six paintings that were commissioned by a wealthy banker to portray the annual rotation of the seasons; five of them still exist, including

this one that ended up in Vienna after being acquired by Rudolf II, the Holy Roman Emperor. In Flanders, each season lasted for two months rather than three, and this picture of January and February is the last in the cycle. Bruegel has contrived his perspective so that viewers feel as if they are looking out from a balcony suspended over the slope at the top left, with the distant mountain range on the right as the finishing point of the entire series.

This particular year – 1565 – was exceptionally cold. Temperatures had recently been falling annually, and nobody knew what the future might hold: might this be a sign of God's displeasure? For agricultural communities, such shifts in weather patterns could spell catastrophe. Over the entire northern hemisphere, people were dying from frostbite and starvation as the crops failed. In Bruegel's painting, even the wheel of the water mill on the bottom right has been frozen into immobility, while the large lake has become an ice rink, where children are skating and playing games resembling ice-hockey and curling.

Bruegel has depicted the aftermath of a failed expedition. Three hunters are trudging despondently back to the village, while behind them, their dogs seem equally downcast – even their ears are drooping; in a typically wry aside, Bruegel has shown the last one in the pack squatting on its haunches to relieve itself. Hungry families are waiting at home for fresh supplies of food, but the only catch seems to be a scrawny fox hanging from the spear over one man's shoulder; further emphasising their failure, ahead of them in the snow lie the pawprints of a rabbit or hare that has eluded its pursuers and escaped across the side of the hill.

Bruegel has created a geographical panorama that it is also a temporal vista. Overhead, black crows perch on the bare tree branches, while a magpie flies across the scene, its blackness accentuated against the stark white of the snow. Both members of the intelligent corvid family, these birds were often associated with death and evil. In the far distance, to the left of the church steeple, several men with ladders are trying to subdue a fire that is threatening to destroy a family's home. On the left, children and adults are preparing to singe the hairs of a slaughtered pig as part of a traditional seasonal ritual; above their heads the inn sign proclaims 'This is the Golden Deer' and shows Christ appearing to St Hubert, the patron saint of hunters. But it swings crookedly on one hinge, hinting that these villagers have paid insufficient attention to their religious obligations.

The landscape appears deceptively natural, but it is an artificial construct. Centuries of human irrigation and agriculture have left a permanent imprint, while it amalgamates different views Bruegel encountered on his travels, including displaced mountains that have probably been imported from Italy. Bruegel was a meticulous observer, an educated man whose art relied on his profound understanding of contemporary ideas about science and nature. According to contemporary theories of optics, extremes of brightness distorted human perception, and Bruegel has abandoned his usual bright palette to indicate how colours are suppressed by the glare of the snow. The leaden sky, grey-green ice and subtly varied hues of white all convey an impression of deep cold and clear, crisp air. The figures in the

foreground are rendered in far more detail than those in the distance, while the dark shadows beneath the skaters start not at their feet, but a short distance away.

This painting has been reinterpreted by meteorologists to provide evidence of climate fluctuations over time. The Little Ice Age lasted for several centuries – starting in either the 14th or the 16th century, depending on which expert you consult – and Bruegel painted *Hunters in the Snow* at an exceptionally low point, known technically as the Grundewald Fluctuation, that had started five years earlier. Average global temperatures dropped by as much as 2°C, but the effects were strongest in northwest Europe, where the winters were unusually harsh and long. The weather fluctuated unpredictably, and the summer periods were often either wetter or hotter than usual, leading to prolonged famines.

But as the skating children in Bruegel's picture suggest, even at its most severe the Little Ice Age could have positive outcomes, most famously the dense wood that may have contributed to the superior tone of violins made by Antonio Stradivari. More locally, this period corresponded to the Dutch Golden Age, when trade, science, culture and colonial expansion boomed. It seems that Dutch entrepreneurs were taking advantage of the altered conditions to sail further south, to exploit the rising prices of crops, to invent new technological devices. Bruegel depicted a time of disastrous cold – but then as now, a shift in climate also created fresh opportunities.

Main Sources and Further Reading

'Hunters in the Snow' Bruegel – Iconic Flemish Genre Painting (artincontext.org)

Wilfred Seipel (ed), *Pieter Bruegel the Elder at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna* (Milan: Skira, 1998), pp. 84–113.

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