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OUTLINE

Ritual in art. The Peasant Wedding by Bruegel, his contemporaries and followers and its public

The peasant wedding is one of many new iconographical themes that were introduced in sixteenth century Netherlandish. It appeared in large and costly prints and on panel paintings, made for the wealthy and powerful inhabitants of important commercial towns in the Southern Netherlands like Bruges, Malines and, especially in the sixteenth century, Antwerp.

Until now no explanation has been sought for the appearance of the specific iconographical theme of the peasant wedding. The peasant wedding has been looked upon as part of a larger theme, the peasant feast, that includes annual festivals like May Day, Carnival, St. Martin and the fair of the patron saint of a town or parish, the kermis. The peasant feast is supposed to function as a so called *exemplum contrarium* in which boorish, wrong behaviour was held up as a negative mirror to the viewers. These viewers would immediately have recognized how they themselves as respectable citizens should behave. While laughing or smiling at the peasants and their gross manners, their own social superiority was supposedly confirmed. In more recent research it was pointed out that the ones that bought this kind of pictures felt a nostalgic longing for a way of merrymaking unacceptable for themselves. These are the current interpretations of the theme of the peasant feast and thereby of the peasant wedding without however taking into account the specific subject matter and its meanings. An explanation of the appearance of the theme of the peasant feast has been sought in the resistance that was growing in the sixteenth century against so called popular festivals.

In view of the importance of ritual in society however, the comical or even satirical country setting of the peasant wedding is problematic. One may ask why the wedding, which is part of the marriage ritual, was depicted as a peasant affair although at the time weddings were celebrated in more or less the same way by everybody. This study aims at answering

this question by focusing on the iconography of the *Peasant Weddings* and using anthropological insights regarding ritual especially marriage ritual.

Although the subject matter of this study is an iconographical theme is, the approach is not a traditional iconographical or iconological one. This study is characterized by a more social scientific approach of art-historical research. Art is a social phenomenon, a 'social fact' and is determined by the ideas and values of the society where it originates. Its form, content and function are meaningful aspects, its aesthetics included. The focus in this study lies on establishing the way the public 'read' the *Peasant Weddings* by taking form, content and function and their correlation into account. Since the function of the *Peasant Weddings* stayed more or less the same, attention is mainly on the relation between form and content of these pictures. Not only does the theme of the peasant wedding include various subject matter, but the compositions also differ in type, period and style. For this reason the material was ordered by what is called here, image-type, i.e. the combination of one composition (form) with the same iconography (content). In that way the many-sidedness of the material and the chronological development could be shown.

In the art historical literature not only little attention has been paid to the specific meaning of the depicted wedding ritual, but also hardly any account is taken of this diversity of subjects within the theme of the peasant wedding. With hardly any exception the same paintings are mentioned: the *Peasant Wedding Meal* and the *Peasant Wedding Dance with Gifts for the Bride*, both by Bruegel. However many other artists than Bruegel have created compositions of peasant weddings and also of new subjects than the meal and the dance. The wedding procession, the wedding feast with the bestowing of gifts to the bride and dancing, the wedding meal and the putting to bed of the bride, these are the most current subjects depicted.

The first part, *Art*, presents the paintings, prints and drawings and their stylistic and iconographical development. Special attention is paid to the artists and their public. Who were the painters and printmakers, where did they work, who were their buyers? Were the *Peasant Weddings* made for the market or were they commissioned? Subsequently a sketch is

made of the contemporary ideas about art in particular about the peasant genre which was a stylistic category as well. These contemporary notions are used in the third part, *Ritual in art*, for the iconographical analysis of the images.

In the second part, *Ritual*, the anthropological points of view with relation to ritual that were used are outlined. Of central importance is the notion that in rituals important ideas and values are expressed and constituted, that are part of an encompassing cosmological order. By performing a ritual, in this case a marriage ritual, the social order is confirmed of which marriage as an institution is a component part. Social relations are transformed and embedded into the cosmological order. These transformations are examined by looking at ritual from an exchange point of view, for which Marcel Mauss laid the foundation in his *Essai sur le don* (1923-'24).

Since the way in which the marriage ritual was performed resulted from the influence of the ideas of the Church about marriage, this historical development is sketched to provide the necessary information for the analysis of the sixteenth-century marriage ritual. This analysis throws a new light on the sixteenth-century marriage ritual as well as on the contemporary discussions and conflicts concerning marriage, that form an important background to the theme of the peasant wedding. As was already known the secular model of marriage with its focus on the exchanges between families and other groups bringing about the marriage clashed with marriage as a sacrament that focused on as an act of two individuals of their own free will before God. In the ritual the marriage sacrament had become the sacred moment instead of the consummation. The analysis made clear that the changes in the ritual meant more than a conflict, that eventually was solved for Protestants as well as Catholics in favour of the marriage exchanges (i.e. the influence of the families on the choice of a spouse). A shift of fundamental importance had taken place in the ritual by which the marriage exchanges were subordinated to the sacramental value of marriage. This subordination was made clear by the stand that was taken by the church concerning the recognition of so called clandestine engagements as valid marriages, a hot issue in the sixteenth century. The shift in the ritual was an indication of a shift in the way of thinking about marriage,

which would lead eventually to our present-day, western notions of marriage based on romantic love, the foundation of which is to be found in the Roman free marriage and in Christian ideas about the relation of the individual with God. In the sixteenth century however parents and children saw themselves faced with dilemma when choosing a spouse.

The third part, *Ritual in art*, the paintings, prints and drawings are analysed. Three chapters are devoted successively to some German prints, an early Netherlandish painting, the *Weeping Bride*, and some satirical watercolour paintings by the so called 'Verbeeck Groep' from Malines. These are followed by four chapters in which the material is ordered according to the chronological progression of the wedding ritual: the wedding procession, the wedding feast with the bestowing of gifts to the bride and dancing, the wedding meal and putting the bride to bed. A last chapter is devoted to an important, recurring motive, the visit of the landlord, sometimes escorted by his wife and family. In every chapter attention is first paid to the way the different subjects are depicted in order to establish the relation between form and content, then the pictures are compared to the actual performance of the wedding ritual in so far as this could be retrieved in an attempt to "look with the eyes of the contemporary viewers". The last five chapters conclude with an overview of the different interpretations that the pictures offered to their public always taking into account the way a subject is depicted and the frame of reference formed by the images that were part of the daily surroundings of the public.

The peasant behaviour in general that was depicted could evoke laughter and amusement mingled with disdain and even nostalgic feelings. The *Peasant Weddings* show however only a specific part of the marriage ritual, namely the wedding and more specifically, the non-religious part of the wedding. Precisely this part evoked the dilemma's resulting from the fundamental changes that had taken place in the ideas concerning marriage and which, of course, were reflected in the marriage ritual. It is precisely the ambiguity of the peasant genre, that offered a perfect setting in which to present the dilemma's. The *Peasant Weddings* heralded a good-bye to old traditions, that however still took a long time to disappear.