Artifacts of domestic life
Bruegel’s paintings in the Flemish home

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On February 21, 1565, Nicolaes Jongelinck pledged his art collection to the city of Antwerp to help a colleague pay a debt owed to the city. According to the inventory taken on that date, Jongelinck—a wealthy Antwerp merchant—owned paintings by contemporary artists such as Frans Floris (1519/20-1570) and Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c.1525-1569), and displayed them at Ter Beke, his suburban home. Jongelinck decorated his rooms with cycles on the Labors of Hercules and the Seven Liberal Arts—both by Floris—along with scenes of the Judgement of Paris, the three cardinal virtues, and Bruegel’s paintings of the Labors of the Months, also known as the Seasons series (figs. 1 through 5).

Iain Buchanan has noted that the Seasons constitute Bruegel’s ‘only surviving—though incomplete—cycle of paintings’. There is, in fact, another extant series of paintings by Bruegel—his circa 1558 Twelve proverbs—consisting of twelve small, painted plates now in the Museum Mayer van den Bergh in Antwerp (fig. 6). These plates decorated the home of Nicolaes Cornelis Cheeus, an Antwerp merchant whose belongings were inventoried shortly after his death in 1621.

Both the large-scale Seasons panels and the small Twelve proverbs plates were made for domestic display, yet their locations and functions within the Antwerp house have never been fully investigated. Attempts to do so are made more difficult by the nature of the two inventories under discussion, which uncharacteristically fail to list their collected paintings and objects according to room. In this study, I will propose locations for the Seasons and Twelve proverbs in, respectively, the dining room and kitchen of the Antwerp house. Their differing formats—one a set of large panels, the other small plates—reflect both the pragmatic and ideological functions of the rooms in which they were displayed.

Buchanan has suggested Ter Beke’s dining room as a possible location for the Seasons series, based on their subject matter which relates to the production and consumption of food. Using the 1572 inventory for Jean Noirot, who hung several Bruegel paintings in his dining room, Vincenzo Campi’s (c.1530/5-1591) 1580-81 cycle for Hans Fugger’s dining room (still in situ), and the paintings described in the dining room of Erasmus’ ‘Godly Feast’. I will expand upon Buchanan’s suggestion that the Seasons hung in Jongelinck’s dining room. I will make a similar case for the original location of Bruegel’s Twelve proverbs—along with virtually all painted dishes from the second half of the sixteenth century—in the kitchen, using inventory listings, seventeenth-century genre paintings of domestic interiors, and other

detail
Pieter Bruegel, Twelve proverbs, c. 1558, oil on wood plates mounted on panel, 74.5 x 98.4 cm, each plate diameter 21 cm. Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp (photo: © IRPA-KIK, Brussel).