

Meet the Masters

April Program

Pieter Bruegel "Children's Games"

About the Artist:

Artwork Overview:

See following sheets.

Topics for Discussion:

1. Do you think this painting was painted recently or a long time ago?
2. Why? Find clues to tell us when this scene was painted?
3. Does this look like a schoolyard?
4. Can you name some of the games the children are playing?
5. Did the artist use warm colors (reds, yellows, and oranges) or cool colors (blues, greens and purples)?
6. Would you like to join those children in their games?
7. Do children still play the same kinds of games today?

Hands- on Art Activity: Folded Paper Playground

Discuss the slides and other types of equipment found at a playground. The children will use the paper strips to make their own imaginary playground.

Materials: 8 ½" x 11" assorted colored paper cut in ¼"- 1" wide strips
8 ½" x 11" stiff paper or cardboard for a base - Tagboard
Glue (white glue or glue sticks)

Directions:

1. Give each child a base and about 8 strips of paper of various colors and widths.
2. To build the playground the paper strips will be folded about ¼" from the ends.
3. The folded and glued ends will then be placed on the base to form rounded shapes and overlapping ribbon forms.
4. The paper can also be folded to make various shapes that can be glued onto the playground.
5. Pass out more paper strips as needed.

Urban Environments

Pieter Bruegel, *Children's Games*



Pieter Bruegel (pee-ter broi-gull), Flemish, ca. 1525-1569, *Children's Games*, oil on wood. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.

The Artist

Very little is known about Pieter Bruegel's life and the conditions under which he developed his art and brought it to the great acclaim it enjoys today. His exact date of birth is not known but thought to be around 1525 in the Netherlands. His career spanned only about 18 years, at least four spent traveling in Switzerland, France, and Italy.

Bruegel was an enthusiastic observer of life and nature, and his works are crammed with detail and activity. He captured the sense of the seasons and went often to the countryside to paint and take part in the rural activities of the peasants, their weddings, festivals, dances, and daily routine. He recorded in marvelous detail the peasants' tools, clothing, foods, and activities, and his paintings have served as accurate sources for research into 16th century Netherlands. Pieter Bruegel died in 1569, probably around the age of 40.

The Art

There is so much to see in this busy urban scene! Bruegel had a wonderful knack for showing people absorbed in real-life activity. In this painting, the artist shows a Flemish town seemingly populated by children alone. They play a multitude of games: over eighty are recorded in the scene. How many can you discover? Where is a boy riding a hobbyhorse? Find two boys swinging on a rail, a child on stilts, a group shooting marbles, and another spinning tops. One group of children on the far right is pulling another child's hair! Think of a game you have played and see if you can find it in the painting. Why might these children be outside and playing together at this time? Where are their parents?

Some art historians have called *Children's Games* a simple story of children at play. Others insist that these young people represent adults and their foolishness and injustice in everyday life. Look carefully at the children's faces. Can you find any that express childlike enthusiasm and enjoyment of what they are doing? The gnomelike figures seem almost glum, like children being punished, despite their playful activity.

If you were a historian, what clues would you use to determine the painting's time and place in history? *Clothing; style of architecture; road surface; building materials; hitching post; apparent lack of industrial activity.* Some historians believe they can recognize the cathedral of Antwerp in the distance at the end of the street!

Guided Analysis

Cultural Context:

Bruegel lived and painted during a time when the Emperor Charles V and his son, King Philip II of Spain, were trying to keep Holland and Flanders (the Netherlands) for themselves. They believed that these countries were populated by heretics who opposed and refused to practice the Catholic religion of Spain. Many people were killed. Once bustling centers of finance, commerce, and culture, large cities such as Antwerp became like ghost towns, and animals wandered in the streets eating the grass that grew between the cobblestones. This effort by the Spanish to eradicate the Calvinist Protestants was known as the Inquisition.

Media and Technique:

Most of Bruegel's paintings that have survived are, like *Children's Games*, oil on wood panels, but he also painted with watercolors on linen, tempera on canvas, and made woodcuts. He borrowed the technique of a miniature painter by paying close attention to detail. Although he portrayed life realistically, his scenes are imaginary creations.

Subject:

Bruegel's work has been called a pictorial encyclopedia, a catalog of details of how life was lived in 16th century Flanders. What can you say about the life of the children, and even their families, by looking at *Children's Games*? Look at the details carefully to gather information. *They seem well-fed and clothed and generally happy; they attend a church or have a religious life; they keep their city clean and maintained; their clothing tells something of the weather and prevailing styles.*

Pieter Bruegel, *Children's Games*

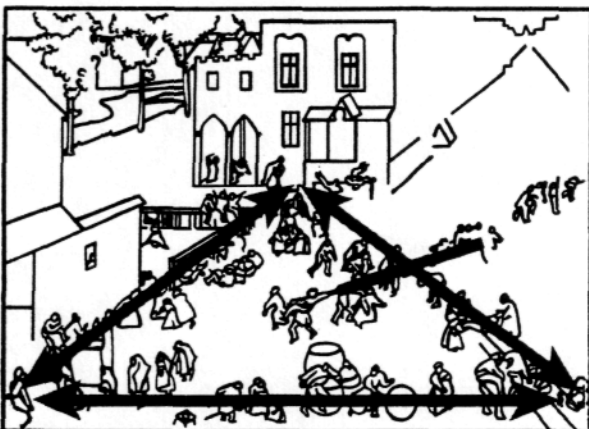
Judgment:

Children's Games is said to be symbolic of human foolishness, and the children at play representations of adults who play the often silly, sometimes fierce and aggressive, "game of life." Is it important to know this interpretation to enjoy the piece? Does knowing it enhance the enjoyment? Without having written documentation from Bruegel himself, what do you suppose this interpretation is based on?

Elements and Principles of Design:

Everything in the painting *Children's Games* is shown in such detail and clarity that the viewer can identify objects even in the remote distance. To achieve this deep, distant look, Bruegel painted the children larger in the close, lower portion of the picture and increasingly smaller the further back they extend in the background. Showing distance in a picture is called perspective. How else has Bruegel given the impression of deep space? *Less detail; lighter color; a misty look in the most remote areas; positioning objects higher up on the painting the farther they recede; the main street converging at a vanishing point on the horizon.*

As hodgepodge as the groupings of children may seem, there is a definite order to the scene. Not only are the buildings and streets arranged in strong horizontals, verticals, and diagonals, but the figure groups also. Trace the strongest diagonal in the scene. *From the dark brown building in the foreground, along the red fence, and on down the street to the cathedral spire.* Can you find other strong diagonals?



A large pyramid is created in the exact center of the painting as shown in the diagram. The "x" formed by two intersecting figure diagonals are implied lines.

Point to strong vertical lines. *Buildings; planks in the fence; windows; trees.* Where are the horizontal lines? *Buildings; hitching post; windows; streets.* Which lines dominate?

A mock wedding procession is taking place, seen head-on and marked by the bride, clad in brilliant red, attended by two children carrying a basket. This procession is seen by some as the key to the interpretation of the painting: children play adult "games," implying that adults are no more than children playing games themselves.

Point of View:

Children's Games has a sense of teeming human activity seen from a higher position as a crowded beach scene viewed from a low-flying helicopter. Where might Bruegel have been sitting to paint this picture? In a building? On a roof? A hilltop? A church steeple? Could he have been sitting in his studio, miles away, simply using his imagination? Explain your answer.

Comparison:

Both Pieter Bruegel's *Children's Games* and Georges Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* are urban scenes filled with human activity. Both show glimpses of leisure time enjoyments, yet they differ in many ways. Compare and contrast these two paintings. Which painting would you rather "walk into?" Why? Which seems more serene and composed? What factors contribute to this feeling? *Color; light; level and type of activity.* *Children's Games* seems almost frantic in spite of its underlying organization. There are so many diagonals in this painting, and diagonals are active, movement-oriented lines. The strong horizontals and verticals in *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* help to suggest more composure.

Activity: Make up a story or poem about the activity in *Children's Games*.

Act out the games and activities portrayed.

Estimate the number of children in the painting — then count them!