1 Painter and Storyteller

Dutch artist Jan Steen (1625/1626–1679) painted stories of daily life, showing merry scenes of family gatherings, rowdy parties, and misbehaving people. His lively, detailed images were meant to be entertaining, but they also sent messages about how *not* to behave. Viewers in the seventeenth century would have laughed at Steen's humor and nodded in agreement with his moralizing stories. Paintings that capture everyday life, called genre scenes, were among the most popular in Dutch art at that time.

These paintings were designed to delight the senses. Imagine you could step into this festive scene. What might you hear? Taste? Smell? Feel? See?

above: Jan Steen, *Self-Portrait* (detail), c. 1670, oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

right: Jan Steen, *The Dancing Couple*, 1663, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection

2 Join the Party!

Under the vine-covered trellis at this country inn people are talking, laughing, flirting, and dancing. What is the occasion? Look behind the dancing man. The tents in the background are probably part of a village festival called a *kermis* in Dutch. People traveled from near and far to meet up with friends, share news, shop, or marvel at goods for sale at a *kermis*. Children also had fun—like the boy on the right, blowing a bubble. Can you spot the girl playing with a pinwheel? Pinwheels could be purchased at fairs, which was the closest thing to a toy store most seventeenth-century children would ever experience. On the left, a baby

3 What a Mess!

No one in this crowd seems concerned about the mess on the floor. Broken eggs, spilled flowers, and the bubbles blown by the boy all symbolize the fragility of life. Steen often included such details to remind viewers not to be too silly or wild and to remember what is important in life. The artist was well known for his paintings of disorder and disarray. Even today in Holland, a messy home is sometimes called a "Jan Steen household."

stands on her mother's lap, holding a hammer toy. The little men raise and lower their hammers in harmony when she pulls on the ends of the toy.

In this painting Steen celebrates a harmonious life, with people of all ages and from different social classes having a good time together. To highlight their diverse relationships, the artist arranged many of the figures in pairs. Find a couple dancing, a pair of musicians playing, and two children talking together. Steen even included himself with his wife, Margriet van Goyen. He's the man with long black hair seated at the table and tickling the chin of the woman next to him.

Winter Wonders

Hendrick Avercamp (1585–1634) was one of the first Dutch artists to specialize in depicting the landscape and daily activities during winter. After training as an artist in Amsterdam, he became a very successful painter in his hometown of Kampen. Family records indicate Avercamp was deaf throughout his life.

Canals and rivers in the Netherlands froze during the winter months. For nearly three hundred years, from about 1550 to 1850, a phenomenon known as the Little Ice Age produced unusually harsh, long winters in Europe. Ice fishing, riding sleighs, ice skating, and the game of *kolf* were some of the popular outdoor activities people enjoyed in the seventeenth century.

In *A Scene on the Ice,* Avercamp shows a variety of people—men and women, young and old, rich and poor—working and playing on a frozen river. His keen eye for detail provides a glimpse into everyday life in the Netherlands on a winter day.

On this wintry day, people dress for the cold by putting on gloves and boots. Gentlemen keep warm by wearing top hats or fur caps and wool capes, while ladies are clad in hooded cloaks and hand muffs. Roofs covered with snow and smoke rising from chimneys further suggest the chilly climate.

Look closely to find:

- a couple ice skating

- fishermen trekking across the ice with their poles

- a group of people loading a sledge with supplies (Because boats were frozen into the ice, goods had to be transported across the river with sledges—large sleds that people could push or horses could pull.)

- a man who took off his gloves to fasten his skates

- two boys playing *kolf* (*Kolf,* which means "club" in Dutch, is a cross between ice hockey and golf. The sport originated in the thirteenth century, but it became very popular in the seventeenth century. Players tried to hit a target, such as a pole in the ice, with as few strokes as possible. *Kolf* was also played on land, but the large expanses of ice in winter made an ideal playing field.)

- well-dressed ladies in an elegant horse-drawn sleigh trimmed with bells (The horse's head is adorned with plumes made of wool and feathers, and its horseshoes are spiked for traction on the slippery ice.)

Imagine: If you could step into this wintry scene, what might you hear? Smell? Feel? See? What activity would you choose to do?

Hendrick Avercamp, *A Scene on the Ice,* c. 1625, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund