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JANUARY 2004



Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525/1530–1569). Five details from *Children's Games*, 1560. See page 10.

A RANDOMIZED INTERVENTION SINCE INFANCY
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Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525/1530–1569)

Five Details From Children's Games (1560)

IN THE LARGER PAINTING ENTITLED *CHILDREN'S Games* (**Figure**), from which the 5 details on this month's cover are drawn, more than 230 children have taken over the streets of a 16th-century Flemish village. They are playing at more than 85 different pastimes in all. If paintings came with soundtracks, *Children's Games* might require turning down the volume.

Artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder sold his work chiefly to merchants, scholars, and collectors in Antwerp, then a wealthy trade center. Although he lived in the city and mixed easily with the educated and well-to-do, he acquired the nickname "Peasant Bruegel" because of his fondness for portraying the people and customs of the Flemish countryside. He and a friend were known to don peasant garb and blend into village life, observing with special interest what people of all ages did in public. Sometimes the pair would even show up uninvited at a peasant wedding, bringing gifts and passing themselves off as friends of the bride or groom. Like *Children's Games*, several of Bruegel's other paintings are packed with figures and bustling with activity: often witty visual commentaries on such themes as folk proverbs or holiday festivities.

Most of the games played by Bruegel's peasant children are easily recognizable today, although they seem a bit quaint in this era of electronic entertainment. Some

of them are forms of play that have delighted children around the world for centuries, a kind of common human bond across cultures. As the eye wanders through the painting, much as Bruegel must have wandered through a peasant village, specific games illustrate ways in which children's play influences their development, helps turn them into social beings, and reveals individual differences.

In the upper left detail, a make-believe wedding procession heads toward us with 2 flower girls leading the way for a silver-crowned bride who dominates the red-clad groom beside her, a rehearsal for an adult ritual to come. A boy on stilts tests his motor skills and balance, excited by the flirtation with danger as he shows off to a female onlooker. At the upper right, 3 boys ride a fence but with quite different attitudes; the first 2 wave exuberantly while the third just hangs on. At the lower left, 1 of 2 teams is about to win a tug-of-war, a game of competition in which some participants are riders and others are ridden. At the lower right, 3 girlfriends simply enjoy one another's companionship in a grassy spot on a sunny afternoon—twirling their skirts, twirling, twirling. . . .

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Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Children's Games*, 1560.