

F.A.M.E.  
October 2005  
“*The Harvesters*”  
Pieter Bruegel ~1527 – 1569

Suggested costume: Peasant attire (for women – head scarf, long skirt, plain colors) or farmer attire.

**Biography:** Pieter Bruegel was born in the mid 1520s (We don’t know his exact birth date as records weren’t very accurate almost 500 years ago). He was from Flanders, which is an area in northern France and southern Belgium. His wife was the daughter of one of his instructors. He came from a family of painters; his parents as well as his children, Jan and Pieter, were also painters. He is also known as Bruegel the Elder, to distinguish him from his son and Peasant Bruegel for the favorite subject matter of his paintings.

We know from historical accounts that he traveled and studied in Italy, Switzerland and France and in the 1550’s became a master painter in Antwerp. He was a successful painter with many supporters, wealthy businessmen and high-ranking officials from the church and state, who acquired his paintings. (Unfortunately for many Gomes students, there is no accounting of how he died).

### **His Paintings**

Pieter lived during the height of the Italian Renaissance. Most painters at that time painted religious scenes or portraits, usually of nobility. Bruegel was different from most of his contemporaries in his subject matter. Most of his paintings were either of beautiful landscapes or depicted the life of ordinary people (peasants) engaged in various activities. He would paint religious scenes, but many of his religious paintings depicted the scenes as taking place in the 1500’s. His paintings have enormous detail and he was a great storyteller in the paintings. In most of his paintings, the faces and expressions of the peasants are very simple; he tells the story through the actions of these people. Bruegel felt it was important to observe the peasant scenes he painted, so he would dress up like a peasant (he wasn’t a peasant) and observe them at celebrations, at work or in town. He also lived in a country that was under the rule of another nation, Spain and there was religious turmoil (Martin Luther/Reformation) during that time, which may have influenced some of his paintings (*page 73 “Two Monkeys. Monkeys are chained, look unhappy and you see a broken hazelnut in the foreground. Some say it depicts the nation under the rule of the Spain; others state Bruegel was depicting people who sell away their freedom for material gain of questionable circumstances.*)

### **“The Harvester”**

The painting today was commissioned by a wealthy businessman and was one of six (or maybe there were twelve) paintings depicting the various months/seasons of the year. Five paintings in this series exist today. The actual painting is much larger, about four feet tall by five feet wide.

*Questions to ask the students to get them involved with the painting (ask as many or as few as you believe appropriate).*

Where are we, the viewers, in this picture? *(The scene is shown from a bird's eye view, which enables Bruegel to capture much detail in the painting. Bruegel painted many of his paintings from a bird's eye view).*

What are they doing in this painting? *(Harvesting hay)* You may also want to mention that this depicts a scene from long ago. If the picture took place today, there would be machines doing all of the work. In this painting, the men cut the hay with a scythe (sithe); they tie the grain into teepee shapes to dry evenly and not mildew (in modern time a machine would turn the hay to help it dry) and a wagon transports the grain.

What time of year do you think this painting takes place? *( hay is harvested in the fall)*  
What time of day do you think is depicted in this painting? *(Noon – no shadows and people on the right-hand side of the painting are cooking, eating lunch and sleeping).*

Take out the elements of painting poster. Ask the students which elements they see in the painting. They should see line. There are strong diagonal lines. The lines in the painting leads ones eyes through the scene and helps focus on all of the details in the painting. Texture is also extremely important. Look at the hay in the front portion of the picture. We can imagine what it feels like by the way Brugel has painted it. Texture is also demonstrated in the tree trunk and clothing of peasants. Perspective is another important element. The people in the front are much larger than the people in the back of the painting.

There are many details in this painting. Bruegel depicts almost all stages in the harvest from cutting the grain, stacking the grain for drying, to transporting it to the mills in town by the lake. Bruegel also shows other details of the town in this picture. In the upper left hand quadrant of the picture you can see men lawn bowling and there are swimmers at the end of the pond and boats toward the top of the picture.

While he shows much detail, look at the faces in the pictures. They are very simple and non-descript. Again, he tells the story through the position of the people in the painting, not the look on their faces.

So, what distinguishes Bruegel from other painters of his time?

- He filled his paintings with much detail
- He liked to paint ordinary people, peasants, in their regular activities
- Most of his landscapes were pictured from a bird's eye view
- While the pictures have a lot of detail, the faces in most of his pictures look similar; he focused on the character's poses rather than their facial expression.

**Art activities (there won't be time for both activities):**

Bruegel liked to tell stories in his paintings and some of his paintings had enormous detail. One painting, *Children's Games*, Bruegel painted an entire town of about 250 children playing games, some nice, some quite mean. Have the children look at the picture and see how many of the games they can find. I have about 30 color copies of the picture (some are better quality than others). Hand the pictures to the children and have them find some of the games the children are playing. Or, if you want to do a "Where's Waldo" type of game with the children. There is a list of 13 games and there is a yellow piece of paper showing the children playing the game within the picture. Have each child look for that particular game within the picture.

Texture. In his painting, *The Harvesters*, Bruegel drew haystacks showing a great deal of texture. We have in the cart a "fall harvest display" that students can look at and use to draw texture. Paper will be available on the cart. Students will need to supply their own pencil for the drawing. Or, have the students draw a haystack, using the picture for guidance.