Pieter Bruegel’s *Children’s Games*, Folly, and Chance

*Sandra Hindman*

I. Introduction

Early information on Pieter Bruegel’s painting, *Children’s Games* (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), is sparse but unambiguous.\(^1\) Signed by the artist and dated 1560, *Children’s Games* includes depictions of more than ninety actual games (Fig. 1). Its present title, recorded as *Khinderspill*, appeared first in a 1594 inventory of the collection in Brussels of the Governor of the Netherlands, Archduke Ernest.\(^2\) In 1604, Carel van Mander described the painting briefly as one “with all manner of children’s games.”\(^3\) *Children’s Games* appeared next in the

---

\(^1\) Earlier versions of this paper were delivered at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., in March, 1979, and at the Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, Belgium, in January, 1980, at the invitation of the Werkgroep Literatuur en Beeldende Kunst. I would like to thank Professor Walter S. Gibson and Keith P. F. Moxey for their useful comments and criticism. I am also grateful to Dr. Klaus Demus of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna for sharing with me information in the museum’s files and for affording the opportunity to study the painting under magnification.

\(^2\) Published in its most complete and accurate form in M. de Maeyer, *Albrecht en Isabella en de Schilderkunst; bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van de XVIIe eeuwse schilderkunst in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden* (Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Akademie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van Belgie, Klasse der Schone Kunsten, Verhandeling, ix), Brussels, 1955, 259.

\(^3\) In Van Mander, 233: “… en een stuk met allerlei kinderspelletjes.”
eighteenth-century catalogue of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.4 Unlike many other Bruegel paintings, Children’s Games was copied only infrequently by his most assiduous copyist, Pieter Brueghel the Younger. An inventory, dated 1614, of Philip van Valkenisse’s collections lists two such copies, now lost, both titled Kinderspel.5

Modern scholarship has proposed diverse interpretations of Children’s Games. A few critics have argued that the painting represents simply a visual encyclopedia of games,6 and considerable literature thus addresses the identification of these games (Appendix I).7 Most scholars have proposed instead an allegorical interpretation. Gaigebet hinted that the painting presents a calendar of the year, in which specific games signal children’s important role in identifiable folk celebrations analogous to those displayed in the Battle Between Carnival and Lent, executed in 1559.8 Others likewise have stressed a seasonal constituent in the meaning of Children’s Games. Tietze-Conrat asserted that the painting represents “Infantia,” the first of the Ages of Man, for which Spring was often used as an emblem.9 Tolnay viewed Children’s Games as an emblem of Summer, taking its place in a painted cycle of the seasonal amusements of the world.10 Van Lennep proposed yet another interpretation, in which Children’s Games represented the first Age of the World, the Golden Age, an age in which playing children connoted man’s innocence.11

Other critics have pointed out that children’s games can represent man’s inherent folly. Stridbeck classified Children’s Games as one of the “topsy-turvy world” paintings, along with Netherlandish Proverbs and Battle Between Carnival and Lent of 1559, all of which expose folly.12 He was the first to note the centrality of the bridal procession which he construed partially as a metaphor for humanity’s procession through life. Stridbeck further demonstrated that specific games were metaphors for deceit, vainglory, and presumption, postures that the seventeenth-century emblematisists, especially Jacob Cats, classed as folly.13 Gibson also affirmed that Children’s Games represents folly, a suggestion that he buttressed by a reference to a near-contemporary poem that compares

5 The original inventory is published in “Verzamelingen van schilderijen te Antwerpen,” Antwerp Archiefblad, xxi, 307, and J. Denècle, Les Galeries d’art à Anvers aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles. Inventaires (Sources pour l’histoire de l’art flamand, ix), Antwerp, 1932, 23. It is discussed and quoted by Gluck, 1951, 54, and Georges Marlier, Pierre Bruegel le Jeune, Édition posthume mise au point et annotée par Jacqueline Folie, Brussels, 1969, 121: a kinderspel vanden selven [helschen Bruegel] and a copie van kinderspel vanden selven [helschen] Bruegel. No copies of this painting are extant.
6 René van Bastelaer and Georges Hulin de Loo, Pieter Bruegel l’ancien, son ouevre et son temps, 2 vols., Amsterdam/Brussels, 1907, 1, 28, 106, and 112, 282. While affirming that Bruegel constructed a “pictorial catalogue of the sports of his day,” two anthropologists argued besides that his accomplishment was in portraying children as they see themselves, unaware that anyone might be watching: Iona and Peter Opie, “Games (Young) People Play,” Horizon, xiii, 1971, 16-19. Klaus Demus has argued that Bruegel’s concerns are strictly with the material fabric of the canvas. Yet Demus’s stress on Bruegel as a painter forces him to deny out of hand the existence of any intellectual content in Children’s Games, and thereby, in the end, impoverishes rather than enriches our understanding of the painting. See Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemälde Galerie, Verzeichnis der Gemälde (forthcoming volume on Bruegel).
7 Appendix I presents a concordance of these identifications. Another folkloric interpretation is by Karl Haiding, “Das Spielbild Pieter Bruegels,” Bausteine zur Geschichte Volkerkunde und Mythenkunde, vi, 1937, 58-74. For the painting as a guide to modern games, with their appropriate rules, see Hartman and Lens.
8 C. Gaigebet, “Le Combat de Carnaval et de Carême de P. Bruegel (1559),” Annales: Economies, sociétés, civilisations, xxvii, 1972, Pt. 2, 313-345, esp. 331: “Le roi des enfants apparaît à cinq reprises dans le tableau que Bruegel a consacré aux Jeux d’enfants. Il est notable que quatre de ces rois sont regroupés dans de scenes jointives et pourraient former la description du cycle annuel des activités de ce petit monde.” Among the objections to Gaigebet’s analysis is the fact that his sources for the folkloric content of Carnival and Lent (and Children’s Games) focus on French rather than Flemish customs: the principal folkloric source for Flanders, Reinsberg-Düringsfeld, is absent altogether.
9 Tietze-Conrat, 127-130. Tolnay, i, 26, has rightly pointed out that all Tietze-Conrat’s examples postdate Bruegel’s painting, thus suggesting the influence of this painting on them rather than the converse. Whereas Tietze-Conrat suggests that the painting would have been the first of a projected cycle of twelve paintings, Gluck, 25, correctly notes that the number of ages varies randomly between two and twelve, concluding: “It would be easier to take a number somewhere in the middle, for instance seven, in which Shakespeare’s melancholy Jacques divides the world in ‘As You Like It.’”
10 Tolnay, i, 23-26. The four works in De Tolnay’s cycle conform to the following seasons: Winter (Ice-Skating at the Gate of St. George), Spring (Carnival and Lent), Summer (Children’s Games), Fall (Kermesse at Hoboken). Only drawings and engravings of the Kermesse at Hoboken and Ice-Skating at the Gate of St. George are extant, although Tolnay claimed that he saw in Amsterdam a painting of Ice-Skating at the Gate of St. George that was copied from a lost painting by Bruegel. Despite the uniform dates of these four works (1559-1560), there seems to be no compelling reason for viewing them as a formal series; rather, they suggest that Bruegel was interested in related themes during this period: i.e., popular culture, games, and the calendar.
11 Jan van Lennep, “L’Alchimie et Pierre Bruegel l’ancien,” Bulletin des Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, xiv, 1965, 125, cites a manuscript illumination from the Splendor Solis by Salomon Trismosin in which putti play diverse games. Comparable is an image of playing children in Lucas Cranach’s Melancholia, which, like the illumination, symbolizes the new age represented by the philosophical stone, as illustrated and discussed in Dieter Koepplin and Tilman Falk, Lucas Cranach Gemälde, Zeichnungen, Druckgraphik, 2 vols., Basel and Stuttgart, 1974, i, 273, fig. 133, and 225, pl. 13. It seems to me that this tradition of frolicking putti is quite distinct from that of Bruegel’s playing children.
13 Stridbeck, 186-87.
folly to children who jump, run, and play. With *Netherlandish Proverbs* and *Battle Between Carnival and Lent*, Gibson considered *Children’s Games* as one of a group elaborating on the *theatrum vitae humanae*, thereby evoking the exclamation by Erasmus’s Folly as she joins the gods to survey the stage beneath her: “Heavens, what a farce it is, what a motley collection of fools.”

When reexamined, many of these observations by previous scholars, coupled with unexplored clues, contribute to a broader interpretation of Bruegel’s painting within its social, literary, and artistic context. First, I will show that the selection of certain games, their folkloric content, and their placement establish the importance of particular play activities for the overall meaning of *Children’s Games*. Second, I will present artistic precedents for *Children’s Games*, demonstrating that playing children consistently illustrated two themes: the months or seasons in calendar miniatures and infancy or youth in the Ages of Man. Third, I will examine related, contemporary literature and artistic traditions in which games and children figure prominently: mimicry, the Ages of Man, emblem books, and theater. Bruegel transformed earlier traditions in which games represented the months or the Ages of Man. The painting uses children’s games to present the folly of man as a characteristic of adolescence and manhood, as well as of youth and infancy. It highlights, in fact, the folly of marriage which it places in the context of a Midsummer’s Eve celebration. At the same time, Bruegel has introduced a comment on the role of chance in man’s life.

II. The Games and Their Meaning

It is worth dismissing immediately prior claims that Bruegel’s children are actually miniature adults. Using Ariès’s distinctions concerning French costumes, an analysis of the dress in *Children’s Games* suggests the relative ages of Bruegel’s children. Before the ages of four or five, girls and boys were dressed alike. Both sexes wore dresses with aprons and bibs, as they appear on the girl with a flute and drum and the boy with the hobbyhorse in the foreground. Until this age, costumes retained shoulder loops for lead strings, as appear on the girl at the barrel in the center foreground. After the age of five, girls adopted a dress with a collar which they retained through adult years. Boys, on the other hand, sported an intermediate costume, consisting of a frock open at the front and extending below the knees, sometimes with pants or socks underneath it. This garment appears on the boy on the barrel at the right. At the age of eleven boys adopted their adult costume: a short jacket with trousers as worn by the boy with the hoop in the foreground. Bruegel’s children, thus, are preadolescents who wear clothes characteristic of sixteenth-century Northern Europe.

The very subject of children’s games suggests at the outset that Bruegel may have wished to illustrate folly. Late medieval texts used childhood to connote a state devoid of thought, lacking in understanding, and synonymous with folly, a view which continued through the seventeenth century. Children’s games were similarly equated with an easy, thoughtless, and sometimes foolish activity, as evidenced by the use of the word *kinderspel* in Flemish literature and proverbs before and after Bruegel’s time. A contemporary viewer of *Children’s Games*, thus, might have seen the entire group of games as emblematic of folly.

Yet visual cues signal the importance of specific games, as well as the relationship of one game to another. Conscious near the prominent building on the left are the boy with the mask, the two girls playing knucklebones, those playing with dolls, and the youth with a whirligig (Figs. 1, 2, and 4). The building itself contributes a sharp diagonal continued by the fence behind it. A group playing blindman’s buff occupies an important position between building and fence. The fence links this group with the bridal procession, in which the bride marks the center

---


16 Formal clues have been discussed by Stridbeck, 183-86; and W. Vanbeselaere, *Peter Bruegel en het nederlandsche manierisme*, Tielt [1944], 50-52.

17 Tolnay, 1, 23; Bastelaer and Hulin de Loo (as in n. 6), 1, 28; and F. Grossman, *Bruegel, The Paintings, Complete Edition*, London [1966], 191.


19 In Bruegel’s Vienna *Kermesse* this costume appears on a child who also sports a small bell attached to a string at the shoulder. On lead strings, see Ariès, 49.

20 As cited by Verwij and Verdam, vii, 1443 (kinderachtigheid, onbezon- nenheyt, doaaheyt, onverstand); and *Woordenboek*, vii, 3079-3082.

21 See Verwijs and Verdam, vii, 1432 (i.e., ‘Het is gheen kinderspel of gekheid, het is eene allesbehalve makkelijke taak’); *Woordenboek*, vii, 3058, with examples of authors who use geen kinderspel and geen gekheid interchangeably.
of the panel (Fig. 3). Both the group playing blindman’s buff and the bridal party are also linked with the baptismal procession by the accents of bright blue and the forward movement to the lower left (Fig. 5). A second diagonal, created by the large board serving as a table, extends from the right corner and guides the eye back to the bridal party. In the lower right corner, the girl playing shop occupies a position similar to that of the girls playing knucklebones in the left corner (Figs. 1 and 31). The diagonal on the left is dominant, however, for it is continued in that of the background building (Fig. 6). This area includes a number of activities associated with St. John’s Day and Eve, June 23: a bonfire, the gathering of logs, and singing at doors (Fig. 7 and Appendix 1). Although not particularly highlighted, the left background of the painting is important, nonetheless, for the lush foliage, warm lighting, and many swimming activities all suggest that the season is summer.

Three specific images on the face of the building on the left provide clues to Bruegel’s outlook on the human condition. The first, the mask, occurs in other paintings and prints by Bruegel where it sometimes signals deception (Fig. 2). The second image, located almost directly below the mask, is a youth playing with a whirligig (Fig. 1). Both

22 On Bruegel’s use of color, see Hans Sedlmayer, “Die ‘Macchia’ Bruegels,” Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien, N.F., vui, 1934, 137-159, Vanbeselaere (as in n. 16), 52, who links the use of green in Children’s Games to Bruegel’s interest in nature.

23 In Carnival and Lent the masked figures suggest street spectacle. Vanbeselaere (as in n. 16), 50, cites the compositional importance of the mask, noting that it adds a tragic air. Gaignebet (as in n. 8), 324-25, likewise interprets masks as dealing with perception, and notes furthermore that the figures who chin up to the windowsill, unable to see over the ledge, underline the notion of man’s inability to govern properly his own actions because of his imperception.
his mindless activity and vacant expression suggest that he is emblematic of a Netherlandish proverb associating the pulling of a whirligig's string with foolishness: "he is as foolish as a whirligig." 24 The third image, the owl, may represent just the opposite of folly, wisdom. Although the owl appears often as the emblem of sin in works of this period, this bird can signify wisdom and artistic genius, as it does in a Bosch drawing. 25 But Bruegel tells us that such positive attributes are short-lived, for a boy with a pop-gun is about to topple the owl from its safe niche. 26 Thus, the left-hand portion of the painting suggests man's tendency to deceive others — through masking — and to deceive himself — through folly.

Between the house and fence, the group playing blindman's buff also illustrates the theme of folly. As played in Antwerp, the girl, blinded with a hood, tagged a boy, who in turn became her mock bridegroom. 27 Blindman's buff was, thus, a type of courtship game. The blue hood or cloak, worn as a blindfold, refers to the common Flemish proverb, "to put a blue cloak on someone," describing the action of an unfaithful wife. This proverb came to connote deceit and even folly in general, as suggested by its use in an engraving of proverbs done between 1558 and 1560 by Frans Hogenberg, of which there are at least eight variants, and in Bruegel's own Netherlandish Proverbs. Contemporary inscriptions entitle these engravings: "This representation has been called the blue cloak, but it might better be called the follies of

24 Variations of the whirligig, which functions like a windmill, are supplied by Drost, 116, and de Cock and Teirlinck, vi, 200-01, and fig. 20. De Cock and Teirlinck, vi, 201, supply the proverb: *Hij is zoo zot als een drijnkte.* Children playing with windmills may illustrate folly, for they also wear fool's caps in the margin to the Penitential Psalms in a late 15th-century French Hours, reproduced in Antonia Fraser, *A History of Toys,* London, 1966, 59, fig. 67 (Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms Douce 276, fol. 44).

25 In this context two Bosch drawings are relevant: *Owls in a Tree* (Rotterdam, Boymans-van Beunigen Museum) and *The Field Has Eyes, the Wood Has Ears* (Berlin, Kupferstickkabinett). They are discussed by Jakob Rosenberg, "On the Meaning of a Bosch Drawing," in *De Artibus Opuscula. Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky,* ed. Millard Meiss, 2 vols., New York, 1961, i, 412-20; and Otto Benesch, "Der Wald, der sieht und hört," *Jahrbuch der preussischen Kunstsammlungen,* xviii, 1937, 260. Dirk Bax, *Ontijffering van Jeroen Bosch,* The Hague, 1948, 159, on the other hand, contributes an essentially negative reading to the image of the owl. See also one of Bosch's earliest critics, José de Sigüenza, who argued for a positive reading of the imagery, quoted in Bosch in Perspective, ed. James Snyder, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. [1973], 41. In one copy of Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs* (Belgium, private collection) an owl, who perches in a tree on the left overlooking the inn of the topsy-turvy world, may illustrate the proverb *Wijs als een uil* (or alternatively *De uil zit op de kruk*), as Marlier (as in n. 5), 125, fig. 52, suggests.

26 On the pop-gun see Hartman and Lens, 34; Drost, 122; de Cock and Teirlinck, v, 244-48.

the world.”

28 On the proverb, Zij hangt haar man de blauwe huik om, and the engravings see Louis Lebeer, “De blauwe Huycx,” Gentse Bijdragen tot de Kunstgeschiedenis, vi, 1939-1940, 161-229; and J. Grauls, Volkstaal en volksleven in het werk van Pieter Bruegel, Antwerp, 1957, 89-90. Lebeer supplies the inscription: “Dese wobedinghe wort die blauwe huyck ghenamen. Maer des weylts abuysen haer beter betaeit.” See Verwijs and Verdum, i, 6-7, for the medieval association of abus with madmen (gekken) and fools (sotten); and ii, 1290, for texts that equate the color blue with falsity.


30 The folk customs are identified by Hills, 14; on the use of cakes see de Cock and Teirlinck, vii, 157, and ter Gouw, 548.

31 Hills, 29-30, suggests that the figure on the bride’s right may be the bridgegroom or, alternatively, that this figure and the one on her other side may be her parents or sponsors. Hartman and Lens, 74, also suggest that the children on either side of the bride are her parents or godparents, but this hardly seems likely since they are both boys. It is most probable that the accompanying male figures are pages who customarily appeared in the bridal procession and are seen on either side of the bride in Bruegel’s Wedding Procession in Open Air (Brussels, Musée Communal), Gluck, 1937, pl. 25. The woman behind the bride in Children’s Games — one of only two adults in the composition — is probably the mother of the bride or groom, for a similar figure appears in the Brussels Wedding Procession and again next to the bride at the table in the Vienna Wedding Feast. If the Brussels Wedding Procession is an accurate record of such processions, it is not surprising that the bridgegroom is absent in the bridal procession of Children’s Games, for he would have led his own procession, as he appears ahead of the musicians between the trees in the Brussels panel. In any case, Bruegel’s bride cannot be a May Queen, as effectively countered also by Hills, 29, for essential elements of the May Day ritual, such as the crown or garland of flowers, are absent. Nor can she be a Pinkster or Whitsun bride, as Gibson, 85, maintains, for the Whitsun bride wore white, while actual brides were black. The problem of the identity (or absence) of the bridgegroom in other Bruegel paintings is explored by Ernst Scheyer, “The Wedding Dance by Pieter Bruegel the Elder in the Detroit Institute of Arts; Its Relations and Derivations,” Art Quarterly, xxviii, 1965, 167-193, and Walter S. Gibson, “Some Notes on Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s ‘Peasant Wedding Feast,’” Art Quarterly, xxvii, 1965, 194.

32 Perhaps he alludes also to the proverb, “marriage is surely no children’s game” (Trouwens is voorwaar geen kinderspel), cited in Pieter Jacob Harrebomke, Spreukwoordenboek der Nederlandsche taal of Verzameling van nederlandsche spreukwoorden en spreukwoordelijke uitdrukking van vroegeren en lateren tijd, 3 vols., Utrecht, 1858-1870, i, 407.

33 A detailed description of the rules and play of this game (bikkelken) is in Hartman and Lens, 14-20; see also Drost, 95, 97, 100-08.


35 Ibid., 438-39, quotes Lucian’s Amores on the relationship between love and knucklebones; and he further quotes Martial’s Apophoreta on the difficulty of throwing “Venus.”

Bruegel’s wedding ceremony also follows folk customs (Fig. 3). His bride wears her long hair loose over a black dress, as she does in other marriage paintings by Bruegel. Escorts virtually surround her to avert misfortune during the procession, while children holding flowers precede her. By depicting folk customs so closely, Bruegel has captured the seriousness of at least two moments in early adult life. At the same time, by juxtaposing the representations of marriage and baptism to that of blindman’s buff and by including the blue cloak, Bruegel suggests that folly accompanies life’s major events.

The inclusion of the game of knucklebones, conspicuously placed in the left corner of the painting (Fig. 4), introduces the theme of chance and relates at the same time to the theme of marriage. An ancient form of jack, knucklebones is represented in Children’s Games by two girls who play with sheep or oxen anklebones, called tali. Some account of this game is necessary for understanding of its meaning in Bruegel’s painting. In 1529, Erasmus attested to its popularity by devoting an entire colloquy to knucklebones, in which he traced its history back to ancient Greece when it was extensively played by boys and men, adding that it is “only a girl’s game nowadays.” The principle of its play was based on the fact that two of the four playing sides of the talus are different. The bone turned outward was called the “dog,” while that turned inwards (toward the other leg) was called “Venus.” When the bones were thrown, the first player to throw “Venus” won, but because of the peculiar structure of the bones “Venus” was also the most difficult throw. Victory was further taken to signify good fortune in love and marriage, as defeat portended the opposite. In Children’s Games...
the frowning player shown in profile has just thrown two
"dogs," and so she is destined to be unlucky in love.
Bruegel's very choice of knucklebones, given its contem-
porary associations, suggests that he wished to convey
that there is ill fortune in marriage. But Bruegel has also
made a general statement that chance may lead to mis-
fortune, for it was only luck, not skill, that governed vic-

tory at knucklebones.

Symbolic meaning, as it relates to love and marriage, is
articulated further by the careful delineation of a par-
ticular time of year. Folkloric references to various sum-
mer holidays in the background of *Children's Games*
clearly confirm that the season is summer, a fact also
suggested by the luxuriant foliage on the left. The most
frequent allusions are those to St. John's Day and Eve
which, occurring near the summer solstice on June 23 and
24, constituted the summer counterpart of Christmas.
Like Christmas, this holiday commemorated a birthday,
that of Saint John the Baptist, whereas most other saints'
days fell on their days of martyrdom. The related Feast
of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29 was the occasion for
performing many similar folkloric rituals, and it was also part
of the circle of the Feast of Midsummer which terminated
on July 2 with the Feast of the Visitation. On September
29, St. Michael's Day marked the end of summer, as
earlier festivities in June had signaled its beginning.

The focal point of the St. John's Day celebration was
the burning of a large bonfire, seen at the center of the
street in the far right background of Bruegel's painting
(Fig. 7). Children went from house to house asking each
family for a log for the fire, as they appear to be doing in
the right background. Another child carries a lantern in
memory of Saint John the Baptist as the true light. Still
others swimming on the far left are engaged in another
customary activity of the holiday. Swimming was both a
reference to John as "Sint Jan de wasasser" as he was
called in Flanders and an allusion to his role as baptiser of
Christ. Hanging from windows on the central building
are "St. John's baskets" in which women placed herbs
gathered to cultivate good fortune on St. John's Day. On
the right a group of children, dressed in paper hats, like
mitres, and carrying toy crosiers, form a mock proces-
tion that may be part of a folk celebration for the Feasts of
Peter and Paul. Yet another child on the far right wears a
paper crown and carries a large loaf of bread, called a
vollaard. Baked on Christmas and New Year's Day, this
currant loaf was also baked for St. Michael's Day. Parents
placed a *vollaard* underneath their children's pillows on
the night before and on the next day the children carried the
loaves through the streets.

The setting for St. John's Day activities replicates
historical fact in other respects as well. The St. John's Day
bonfire traditionally was situated near a village square, of-
ten in front of the town hall, unlike the Easter fires which
burned on high ground. Throughout Flanders the holiday
coincided with the election of new magistrates, a fact that

36 See also a Canova watercolor depicting knucklebones attended by
Cupid, illustrated in Mario Praz and Giuseppe Pavanello, *L'opera comple-
ta del Canova (Classici dell'arte, lxxxv).* Milan, 1976, pl. xxiii and D.
36, 138-39, esp. 139. The color copies a Greek marble originally
from Herculanum and now in the Museo Nazionale, Naples.

37 On St. John's Day in Flanders and Brabant, see ter Gouw, 19, 233-36,
and esp. Reinsberg-Diiringsfeld, i, 412-426, adapting information from
les saisons, les mois, les semaines, les jours, les fêtes, dans les temps
anéant à l'introduction du christianisme en Belgique, avec l'indication
et l'explication de différentes dates qui se trouvent dans les documents
du moyen âge, et qui en partie sont encore usitées de nos jours."
*Commission Royale d'Histoire ou Recueil de ses bulletins, vii,* 1844, 11-
192. Also useful are the following: Arnold van Gennep, *Contributions au
folklore des provinces de France,* ii, *Le Folklore de la Flandre et du
Hainaut français (Département du Nord),* Paris, 1935; Kornelis ter Laan,
"Folkloristische woordenboek, The Hague, 1974; Jozef Casselberghe,
Vroomheid en volksgevoel in Vlaanderen, Folkloristisch Calendarium,
Hasselt, 1967; E. Hoffmann-Drayer and Hans Bächold-Staubli, eds.,
Handwörterbuch der deutschen Aberglaubens,* 10 vols., Berlin and Leip-
zig, 1927-1942, iv, 704-727 (Johannes der Täufer).

38 Reinsberg-Diiringsfeld, i, 441.

39 *Ibid.,* 456. Old nursery rhymes stress this connection between St.
Michael's Day and the end of summer, as in de Cock and Teirlinck, vii,
108.

40 On the St. John's fire, see *Handwörterbuch der deutschen
Aberglaubens,* iv, 734-741 (Johannisfeuer); Reinsberg-Diiringsfeld, i,
415-17.

41 De Meyere, No. 88. During these visits they chant a refrain, "Hout,
hout, timmeren hout./ Wy komen al om sint Jans hout:/ Gieft eentwat./
En houdt eentwat; Op sinte Pieter nog eentwat," requesting a log also
for the St. Peter's bonfire six days later; in Reinsberg-Diiringsfeld, i, 417,
and de Cock and Teirlinck, vii, 91.

42 De Meyere, No. 87; Reinsberg-Diiringsfeld, i, 416.

43 Reinsberg-Diiringsfeld, i, 420-21; and on swimming see also Erasmus,
Colloquies (as in n. 34), 30.

44 Reinsberg-Diiringsfeld, i, 422. The summer season rules out their
usual identity as St. Nicholas baskets.

45 On such processions see Reinsberg-Diiringsfeld, i, 436-441;
Coremans (as in n. 37), 26; and de Cock and Teirlinck, vii, 92-104.

46 The paper crown usually distinguishes the child-king of the Epiphany
and carnival celebrations, as it reappears several times in the left portion
of Bruegel's *Battle Between Carnival and Lent,* discussed by Gaigebert
(as in n. 8), 329, 331. These carnival celebrations among the children,
resulting in the election of a king from their peers, are discussed in
greater detail by C. Gaigebert, "Sur le jeudi-jeudiot," *Bulletin folklor-
ique de l'Île-de-France,* xxx, sér. 4, 1968, 35-44, and xxxi, sér. 4, 1969,
105-08. The presence of three children with paper crowns (de Meyere,
17, 26, 34; Hills, 19, 40, and 46; and Gluck 14, 34, 42) in *Children's
Games* remains unexplained. The identity of the *vollaard* was noted by J.
Wyns, "Bij Bruegel in de leer voor honderd-en-een dagelijks dingen."
*Ons Heem,* xxxii, 3, 1966, 97-131, esp. 125.

47 Its association with Christmas and New Year's is documented by
Wyns (as in n. 46), 125, and with St. Michael's Day by Hartman and
Len, 63.
further stresses its civic character. Although Serlio’s perspectival drawings have been cited as sources for the setting of *Children’s Games*, contemporary Flemish buildings more closely approximate those in the painting. Often identified as a town hall, sometimes as a guild house, the background structure preserves features common to official civic architecture of the period: stone construction, an arced loggia, crenellation, a wooden portico, and large arched windows. Bruegel’s structure is similar to the original Antwerp town hall as it appeared in a painting by Mostaert (Fig. 8), before its modernization in 1561 by Cornelius Floris. Similar also are the adjacent wooden houses with their trap doors, cellars for the storage of food and wine, rectangular barred windows, and wooden porches. Indeed, accidents resulting from the proximity of such wooden structures to the bonfires may have resulted in the city edicts forbidding them. Although not a reproduction of an actual cityscape, *Children’s Games* nevertheless presents an ethnically accurate site for the St. John’s Day activities.

References to St. John’s Day acquire special meaning in relation to the theme of the painting, since St. John’s Eve, known as Midsummer’s Eve, was above all a time for lovers. On Midsummer’s Eve, to ensure the marriage of a maiden to her beloved, lovers clasped hands across the bonfire, tossed flowers to each other, or even flung themselves through the fire into one another’s arms. Any girl who found a four-leaf clover on St. John’s Day was supposedly assured also of finding a husband. Games played during the Midsummer’s festival often were connected with marriage. For example, on St. Peter’s Day, the victor of a game of *bollenspeel* was declared king of summer, and he chose a queen to rule with him. If a female won, she selected her royal husband. The folkloric setting provided in *Children’s Games* thus served to link the games in the painting to the traditional love feast, Midsummer’s Eve.

Other evidence suggests that summer was linked to love and marriage. Popular drama included the enactment of a battle between summer and winter every year, sometimes performed as part of the Midsummer’s celebration. In one Middle Dutch version Venus herself intervened to arbitrate this quarrel between the seasons. In this context, games of tug-of-war, fighting, and pulling hair, as they appear in Bruegel’s painting guiding the viewer’s vision back to the extreme right, have been seen as emblematic of the winter-summer conflict. Poems and plays also included testimonies to summer, beginning with the month of May as the time for lovers. Corroborative documentary evidence demonstrates that a significant number of actual marriages and conceptions occurred in the summer...
months, while the largest number of births took place in the spring. Indeed, the end of the Midsummer’s festival on July 2 was marked by the Feast of the Visitation, especially venerated by married women who were still childless.

In summary, the distinction in *Children’s Games* between episodes of mimicry and other games singles out courtship, marriage, and baptism as focal events. Of these events, the central placement of the marriage motif underscores its significance. Bruegel’s inclusion, near the mimicry episodes, of the mask, the fool with the whirligig, and the blue cloak — symbols of deceit and folly, signals an association between folly and some of life’s milestones, especially marriage. Finally, the depiction of St. John’s Day festivities serves to provide a contemporary folkloric context for the theme of the folly of marriage, a ceremony that was allegorically, as well as actually, associated with the summer season. It may be added that the treatment of marriage in *Children’s Games* takes its place in a pervasive sixteenth-century literary tradition that viewed marriage as foolish because it both encouraged lust and led inevitably to the domination of the man by the woman.

Through the game of knucklebones, Bruegel additionally draws attention to the element of chance in play. As the capriciousness of chance determines the outcome in knucklebones, other games, like blindman’s buff, have similarly unpredictable conclusions. Human reason cannot control the course of play. Bruegel’s children, who willingly engage and take pleasure in games, dispense with reason and submit to chance. In so doing, they manifest foolish behavior. In the specific instance of knucklebones, chance further glosses marriage, for it leads to ill-fortune in love, as blindman’s buff leads to a haphazard selection of a mate.

III. Artistic Precedents: Calendar Illustrations and the Ages of Man

Many representations of children’s games are earlier than Bruegel’s painting, thereby providing an artistic context from which Bruegel could have drawn his inspiration. Most extensive are the depictions of games in the calendars of Ghent-Bruges *Horae*, and occasionally games appear as marginal engravings of other subjects in Books of Hours. Some fifteenth-century engravings of playing children further expand the repertory from which Bruegel could have worked. In addition, other illuminations and prints of the Ages of Man supply a smaller corpus of game imagery. A rapid survey of these artistic precedents is instructive. It firmly establishes, on the one hand, the wealth of pictorial imagery of children’s games in the preceding century among artists with whom Bruegel could have been familiar. On the other hand, a review of these antecedents refutes previous assertions that Bruegel directly exploited this imagery.

A compilation of miniatures depicting games (Appendix II) demonstrates that such precursors of *Children’s Games* are more numerous than previously was assumed. They include the following Ghent-Bruges examples, executed for unknown patrons and displaying complete calendars of children at play: the Antwerp Breviary (Mayer van den Bergh Museum), and the “Spinola” Hours (Aachen, Collection of Professor Dr. Peter Ludwig), the “Golf-Book” (London, British Library, Add. Ms. 24098), and the Hours of Conde-Duque de Olivares (Valencia, Archivo del Colegio del Patriarca). Three additional manuscripts, executed for known court
figures, also incorporate many illustrations of children’s games: the “Ellis” Hours of Albert of Brandenburg (on deposit, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Dep. Astor A.24/1-2); another so-called “Golf-Book” or Prayerbook of Charles V (present location unknown), ordered by Maximilian for his grandson, and the Breviary of Eleanor of Portugal (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, M.52). All these manuscripts, as well as still others containing games, were early sixteenth-century products of the workshops of Simon Bening and Gerard Horenbout in Bruges and Ghent respectively.

Various games illustrating the months of February through November in these manuscripts recur in Children’s Games (Appendix II). For example, nearly all the play characteristic of February in the calendars (Figs. 9 and 10) — hoops, acrobatics, tag, piggyback, and blind hood — appears interspersed with other games in Bruegel’s painting. Also present in Children’s Games are those games designated for March and April such as top and whip, procession with rackets, and hoops (Fig. 11); for June through September the hobbyhorse tournament with windmills, windmills, and stilts (Figs. 12 and 13); and for

---

9 February, from a Breviary, Antwerp, Museum Mayer van den Bergh, fol. 2r (photo: ACL)

10 February, from a Book of Hours, Aachen, Collection Professor Dr. Peter Ludwig, fol. 2r (photo: Rheinisches Bildarchiv)

9A Detail of Fig. 9, children playing hoops

10A Detail of Fig. 10, acrobatics, tag, piggyback, golf and stilts

11 March, from a Breviary, Antwerp, Museum Mayer van den Bergh, fol. 2v (photo: ACL)

12 June, from a Book of Hours, Aachen, Collection Professor Dr. Peter Ludwig, fol. 4r (photo: Rheinisches Bildarchiv)

11A Detail of Fig. 11, tops and whips and processions with rackets

12A Detail of Fig. 12, hobbyhorse tournament with windmills

---

66 Published by Frederick Startridge Ellis, The Hours of Albert of Brandenburg ... Executed by the Artists of the Grimani Breviary, London [1933]; and A. Biermann, “Das verschollene Stundenbuch des Kardinals Albrecht von Brandenburg,” Mainzer Zeitschrift, xxix/xxxv, 1968-69, 47-66. The “Ellis” Hours and other books for Albrecht of Brandenburg have also been studied as a group by A. Biermann, “Die Miniaturenhandschriften des Kardinals Albrecht von Brandenberg (1514-1545),” Aachener Kunstblätter, xvi, 1975, 15-144.

67 The “Golf-Book” is described and illustrated in Bernard Quaritch, Catalogue of Rare and Valuable Books ..., No. 328, London, January, 1914, lot 573, 88-90, and Drost, pls. v-vi. Those games normally found in calendar margins occur instead in margins throughout the Hours, including the game of golf found facing the Visitation, resulting in the misleading title, the “Golf-Book,” a title generally reserved for British Library Add. ms 24098. On the Breviary of Eleanor of Portugal, see the entry and bibliography in the catalogue by John Plummer, Liturgical Manuscripts, New York, 1964, 36, pl. 15.

In addition to the publications already cited on manuscripts belonging to this group, see the following accounts: Joseph Destée, Les Heures de Notre-Dame dites de Hennessy, 2nd ed., Brussels, 1922; F. Winkler, Die flämische Buchmalerei des XV. und XVI. Jahrhunderts, Leipzig, 1925; Paul Wescher, “‘Sanders und Simon Bening und Gerard Horenbout,’” Art Quarterly, ix, 1946, 191-210; and Paul Wescher, “Beiträge zu Sanders und Simon Bening und Gerard Horenbout,” Festschrift Friedrich Winkler, Berlin, 1959, 126-135. Two unpublished early 16th-century French Hours (Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms Douce 135 and 276) also contain fourteen and thirty-six games respectively, decorating not only the calendar but other texts as well.
October and November, knucklebones, stilts, pulling hair, and hoops (Fig. 14). 68

Further comparison of Bruegel’s painting with the illuminations reveals, however, many more differences than similarities. Understandably absent from the summer landscape of Children’s Games are play activities peculiar to December and January: sledding, skating, and snowball fighting. Still other games characterizing the summer months are also missing in the painting. Bruegel’s figures engage in no archery or bird-snaring activities; they play no ball games; nor do they participate in water jousts or butterfly chases or May Day processions, despite the fact that the calendars show these activities as clearly suitable warm-weather amusements. Also lacking in the manuscripts are nearly all the games or acts of mimicry which I have highlighted as important to an understanding of Children’s Games: marriage, baptism, playing with dolls, blindman’s buff, knucklebones, and the St. John’s Day festivities. Of these, only knucklebones appears in the London “Golf-Book,” by whom boys play an altogether different version (Fig. 14). Such voids in the calendars further underline the importance of Bruegel’s selection of and focus on unusual games. Even when corollary games were incorporated in the painting — i.e., hoops, top and whip, and the windmill tournament — the positioning and exact activity of the children in miniatures and paintings remain dissimilar (Figs. 1, 9, and 11).

What remains significant about these manuscripts in relation to the painting is the existence and proliferation of illuminations of children’s games. Patronage could explain this new subject matter. For example, the Prayerbook of Charles V supposedly was a gift to the child-prince, and presumably it had been decorated in the margins with games to enliven the religious subjects depicted in the full-page miniatures. Yet, it is unlikely that children were the primary owners of these luxury manuscripts. More probably, these marginalia reflect the view that children’s recreations at different times during the year were distinct from, but parallel with, the corresponding adult labors of the months. Through their profusion, these illustrations of games evidence a social awareness of children at play and secure a pictorial background for Children’s Games.

A few prints and drawings further testify to an interest in children’s games. One drawing, perhaps by Israel von Meckenem, shows four children chasing butterflies and performing acrobatics within a roundel (Fig. 15). 69 Related to roundels of the adult labors of the month, this drawing might have served as a design for stained glass. 70 Yet it preserves a model-copy relationship with a miniature of children chasing butterflies in the London “Golf-Book,”
suggesting a link with calendar illustration as well. Other engravings, such as one by Israel von Meckenem, show nude children playing top and whip, hobbyhorses, acrobatics, and so forth. Similar naked infants frolic in outdoor settings in prints by the Master of the Amsterdam Cabinet, copied by the Master bg. While such illustrations evince an emerging interest in childhood, they are otherwise unconnected with Children’s Games.

Children’s recreations are also the subject of fifteenth-century illustrations of the Ages of Man. One Flemish Hours interpolated a short text of the Seven Ages into the devotional offices, including with it marginal pictures of each age (Fig. 16). A child with a hobbyhorse and windmill personifies Infans (from birth to the age of seven), while a slightly older youth playing with top and whip identifies Pueritia (until the age of fifteen). This same imagery symbolized childhood in a woodcut from one imprint of the Ages of Man in Bartholomeus Anglicus’s De Proprietatibus Rerum, while a child playing cup and ball signified the first age in a broadsheet of the ten Ages of Man executed by the Netherlandish Master of the Banderoles (Fig. 17). Although I will consider later the exact relationship of the Ages of Man topos to Bruegel’s Children’s Games, these prints and miniatures amply demonstrate that certain toys and games were evident symbols of the age of childhood, as games also were accepted representations of the months of the year. Bruegel looked elsewhere, however, for the precise symbolic framework of Children’s Games.

IV. A Literary and Artistic Context

I believe that Bruegel’s Children’s Games transformed earlier artistic traditions in which games illustrated the months or Ages of Man partly by alluding to contemporary literary traditions where games and children figured prominently: mimicry, the Ages of Man, emblem books, and theater. These literary traditions had analogous artistic traditions subsequent to Children’s Games that likewise reflected the literary milieu that spawned them. I will argue that Children’s Games demonstrates an awareness of each of these literary models, but that it nevertheless is more than a summation

71 Compare to Miniatures and Borders (as in n. 63), pl. xxx.
72 Bartisch, Le Peintre-Graveur . . . , vi, 275, No. 188; and Max Geisberg, Der Meister der Berliner Passion und Israel von Meckenem; Studien zur Geschichte des westfälischen Kupferstechers im fünfzehnten Jahrhundert (Studien zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte, xlii), Strassburg, 1903.
73 J. C. J. Bierens de Haan, De Meester van het Amsterdamse Kabinet, Amsterdam, 1947, 35, plts. 61-63.
74 Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms Douce 8, fol. 6, which is unpublished except by Fraser (as in n. 24), 69, fig. 79. The inaccurate reversal of pueritia and infantia occurs in the manuscript itself.
75 Fraser (as in n. 24), 63, fig. 73.
76 Hollstein, xii, 64.
of them. Rather, Bruegel's special genius enabled him to present in compelling graphic terms a peculiarly verbal interpretation of folly: namely, that theater with its moralizing plays is an arena for man's folly.

These literary examples are products of a general tradition testifying to the emerging popularity of games in the sixteenth century. Nearly contemporary with Bruegel, the first Latin and Dutch lists and definitions of games appeared in the dictionaries of Hadrianus Junius and Kilianus, issued in 1567 and 1574 respectively.77 In his earlier Colloquia Familiara, Erasmus had included both sports and games, asserting that a boy's character was revealed clearly by the games he played and how he played them.78 Contemporary with Erasmus, the humanist Juan Luis Vives (1492-1540) wrote several treatises in Latin on the education of children. De Tradendis Disciplinis ("The Transmission of Areas of Knowledge") was published in Antwerp in 1531, and the Linguae Latinae or Colloquiae ("The School Dialogues), was published in Breda in 1538.79 Vives, like his mentor Erasmus, maintained that play built character, restoring the body for further intellectual study.80 Such publications demonstrate that sixteenth-century Flanders did supply a climate, as Ariés has pointed out for France, in which childhood play emerged as a distinct entity.81 The existence of these literary traditions provides, moreover, a verbal context for Bruegel's choice of games as a subject,82 as the depictions of games in medieval marginalia established an artistic context.

Vives, Erasmus, and the etymology also shared a relatively sophisticated understanding of play and games which encourages closer scrutiny of Bruegel's painting as their conceptual analogue. These authors already differentiated between sport and games, adult and children's amusements, and gender-linked recreations.83 An interesting excerpt from the Linguae Latinae testifies besides to a perception of the potential symbolism of children's games. Vives presented a new game "in which one [player] is elected king," that player being a certain Philip, who was the thinly disguised young prince of Spain.49 Devised to prepare his player to be king, this game was interpreted by Vives as mimicry, as Bruegel was to do for some of the pastimes in Children's Games.

Other writers also evinced an awareness of children's propensity for mimicking adult activities. One fifteenth-century Flemish proverb ("As the old sing, so pipe the young") insinuates a broad acceptance of mimicry by the society, and the addition of this proverb to a print emanating from Hieronymus Cock's shop testifies to its use within Bruegel's own milieu.85 Mimicry is also the subject of a chapter in Sebastian Brant's popular Ship of Fools, in which the author cautions parents against misbehavior, since children so easily copy all that their elders do:

78 Erasmus (as in n. 35), 22-30, includes tennis, putting the shot, "pall-mall" (or beugelbaan), and jumping.
80 Watson, 1908, 19, 206; Watson, 1913, 121, 299-300; and Renson, 1976a, esp. 432-39.
81 Ariés (as in n. 18), passim; see also Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Helen Iswolsky, Cambridge, Mass., 1968, esp. 231-38, although he may have overstated his case when he asserted that "... games were not as yet thought of as a part of ordinary life and even less of its frivolous aspect" (p. 236). On the contrary, it was in part because of a consciousness of games and children as an everyday social reality that Bruegel selected such a subject.
82 Many other 16th-century texts included lists or discussions of games, such as the 1542 edition of Rabelais, Gargantua et Pantagruel (Oeuvres complètes, ed. Pierre Jourda, 2 vols., Paris, 1962, 1, 83-87), where 217 games and sports were recorded. Subsequent translations supplemented this list by adding games played outside France; see Bakhtin, 231. Some 15th-century literature also included games, such as Jean Froissart, L'Expinette amoureuse (Oeuvres de Froissart. Poésies, ed. Aug. Scheler, t. Brussels, 1870, esp. 90-95); and John Lydgate, Pilgrimage of the Life of Man (Early English Text Society, lxxvii, lxxxii, xci), ed. F. J. Furnivall, London, 1899, lxxxiii, 304-06. I thank Walter Gibson for bringing these references to my attention.
83 See especially the works of Vives edited by Watson, 1908 and 1913, and the discussion of Vives's classifications of play by Renson, 1976b (as in n. 79), iv-3, iv-11.
84 Watson, 1908, 175.
85 The Dutch expression is Soo doude pijpen en singhen, oock desse jonghe sotkens fier; this print, Family of Fools, is catalogued by Timothy Riggs, Hieronymus Cock, Printmaker and Publisher (Outstanding Dissertations in the Fine Arts), New York and London, 1977, 316, No. 18, as a print after Bosch, with the assertion that it has "only the vaguest resemblance to his work."
What you do, that your child will do,
In evil children copy you
Break jars, your child will break them too ... 
Let him expect that they will gape 
And play the mimic, play the ape ... 
The son will do as does the father, 
The daughter do as does the mother ... 
Our children will resemble us ... 
In children's presence take great heed, 
They'll copy you in word and deed.86

The accompanying woodcut in which a fool hands a backgammon board to a child, warns of the ill effects of such mimicry.

A group of broadsheets of the topsy-turvy world further embellish this tradition of mimicry. In them, a youth beats his father and a daughter feeds her mother who reclines helplessly on a couch.87 Other examples, in which those depicted engage in incongruous activity, show a child who rocks a cradle containing an adult and an elderly couple who plays with babyish toys.88 Because children and their elders have exchanged roles in them, these broadsheets conform most closely to the topsy-turvy world imagery. But insofar as the children perform activities commonly reserved for adults, they also share characteristics with Bruegel's children who mime adults in marriage and baptism ceremonies.

Related broadsheets depict monkeys who ape human activity,89 exploiting the linguistic similarity between "an ape" (een aap) and "to ape" or mimic (naïp). Especially important is a series of sixteen little-known prints of apes by an Antwerp follower and imitator of Bruegel, Pieter van der Borcht IV (1540-1608).90 The second print is an amusing variant of Bruegel's Children's Games, for in it monkeys imitate children playing games, many of which duplicate those found in Bruegel's painting (Fig. 19).91 In the foreground, monkeys play at masking and at bowls; in the middle ground they entertain themselves with Bok, bok, hoops, top and whip, and golf; and in the distance they play leapfrog and at shooting the popinjay. Accompanying Latin-Dutch inscriptions describe some of these games.92

Pieter van der Borcht's series draws not only on mimicry. The sequence of subjects partially conforms to that of the Ages of Man, thereby also belonging to the second of the literary and artistic traditions cited above. The first print introduces the monkeys during their infancy, being fed, nursed, and spanked (Fig. 18). Following infancy, the second print of games represents their childhood. Although the remainder of the prints do not continue such clear distinctions of given ages, the next few prints in the sequence clearly suggest that various courtship activities followed childhood, as the monkeys dance in the third print, feast and kiss at a kermess in the fourth, and ice-skate as couples in the fifth. Yet, even as adult monkeys, they have not abandoned their games, for the seventh print displays them engaged in a water joust.93 Games cease only when men (or monkeys) hunt and make war in the final print.94

Sixteenth-century literature and art often related children's games to the Ages of Man, associating children's games not only with childhood, but also with infancy, adolescence, and even manhood. Only old age cast off a link with games, but even here the concept of a second childhood, as advanced by Erasmus in his Praise of Folly, permitted the inclusion of games as characteristic of senility.95 Another early example of the Ages of Man, by Thomas More, includes nine tituli to describe the activity displayed on a group of tapestries.96 More called the first of these "Chyldhod," as illustrated by a boy playing with

---


88 Kunzle, 1978, 50; and Van Veen, 39, 41, and 42.


91 Published in connection with Bruegel's painting by Drost, pl. vii; and later by G. Glück, Das grosse Bruegel-Werk, Vienna [1951], 55.

92 Glück, 1951, 55, reproduces its two inscriptions as follows: "Ludere nam paribus gestis, disoquo, trochoque/ Ex graciis palmis arte ferire pilas" and "Sy schieten naar den doel, sy colven, en sy caetsen/ Sy spelen met den reep en loopen oock op schaetse."93

93 Played by children in the Mayer van den Berghe Brevariul; Gaspar (as in n. 61), pl. viii.

94 Compare the curious collection of children's games, also ending with war imagery, by Jacques Stella, Les Jeux et plaisirs de l'enfance (Paris, 1637), Nieuwkoop, 1968, esp. 49 and 50. In this instance, the onset of war signals the end of the Siècle d'or whose innocence and sweetness, the text informs us, described the preceding games.

95 Erasmus (as in n. 15), 79.

a top and whip. In the verses the boy states: “I am called Chyldhod, in play is all my mynde,/ To cast a coyte, a cokstele, and a ball,” concluding with a wish that he could play all his life. In the second tapestry, “Manhood,” a young man, holding a hawk, rides a horse, while under the horse the boy reappears with his top and whip. More’s verses inform us that though this youth learns to hunt and hawk, he still prefers his earlier games. Even as man falls in love in the third age, “Venus and Cupyde,” the poem compares love’s activities to child’s play: “Now thou which erst despyesest children small,/Shall waxe a chylde agayne and by my thrall.” It is only in the fourth age, when Cupid withdraws his arrow, that “responsible matters shall of love oppresse./Thy childish game and ydle byssinesse.”

Quite similar to More’s verses is a poem by Jan van Doesborch, published in Antwerp in 1524.97 Old age and manhood are pictured in two woodcuts which preface the poem. They reminisce about the lighthearted games of their youth and many of these games, such as tops, dice, Heer bayliu, and Bok, bok, appear in Bruegel’s painting. The language of the poem also conjures up the imagery of the painting, as it describes the spellbound mood of children at play, mesmerized by the melody of the tops or the fantasy of the knucklebones.98 Such games occupy their time until Venus and Cupid appear to entice the youths to love and marriage. Yet, even then, old age and manhood repeatedly lament an earlier time in the recurring refrain: 

Hej, heyt voorleden tijt waer sijde duere.

Considerable pictorial imagery conformed to this literary perspective which viewed play as characteristic of the Ages of Man through adolescence. In 1570 Hieronymus Cock published a series of prints of the Ages of Man. Based on models by Stradanus and executed by Furnius, these engravings commence with Infancy, which shows children playing with a hobbyhorse, a walker, a teeter-totter, and swings around the figures of the Three Fates who will determine their course through life (Fig. 20).99 The next print, Youth, shows figures on horseback, but games recur in the third print, on adolescence, where some youths play ball while others engage in courtship activities, suggesting that games occupied an accepted position in the pictorial imagery of the ages through adolescence (Fig. 21).100 Games recur in three prints representing the first three decades of human life in a series also executed in Antwerp by Galle after designs by

98 For example, in the first stanza: “Inder tijt mijnder kintsheyt onbesneden/ Heer bayliu of ter bare was mijn spel/. Oft ook bock over hage met lichten leden/ Te springene, ende coecouc heeren rij ic wel./ Te clossen, te toppen ende dat nonneken snel/ Te drayene, dat was mi een melodie./ Te clossen, te toppen ende dat nonneken snel/ Te drayene, dat was mi een melodie./ Te rollen, twaar mi nv een ghequel./ Ende die clincke te slaen, elck sijnen tije/ En de coten lagen in mijn fantasie.”
99 Described in Hollstein, vii, 44, Nos. 31-36; Riggs (as in n. 85), 358-59, No. 188; Lydia DePauw-De Veen, Jérôme Cock. Editeur d’estampes et graveur, 1507-1570, Brussels, 1970, No. 100, 38; and Drost, pl. viii (detail only).
100 The subsequent prints in the series are: (4) Les Vertues en l’estude; (5) La Triomphe des vertues; and (6) La Récompense ... en la ciel. See impressions of the complete series, signed P. Dufour, in the Bibliothèque Royale, Brussels.
101 Unrecorded by Hollstein, the series of ten prints, of the ten decades of life, was executed by Philip Galle; Tietze-Conrat, 130-31, pl. 2.
world and proverbs. Composed of multiple images of individual games, such broadsheets sometimes conclude with a single illustration of courtship or marriage. One print of infancy by Nicolas de Bruyn, after a drawing by Maerten de Vos, includes numerous children’s games arranged in a village square quite suggestive of Bruegel’s setting in Children’s Games (Fig. 23). On one level, this print is merely another example of children’s games characterizing the Ages of Man, and this is precisely how its contemporary Dutch inscription explained it and how Tietze-Conrat later interpreted it. Closer scrutiny, however, discloses that blindman’s buff occupies the center of the composition. A sixteenth-century viewer would have understood the presence of blindman’s buff—not commonly represented in other game imagery—as a signifier of marriage, an analogy which the Latin inscription formulates: “The boy rejoices with levity, while he commences the responses and marks Hymen with a sure foot.” Another print of children’s games by Crispin van de Passe the Elder, also after de Vos, further secures this connection through an inscription which alludes to the blindfold as a prop in the game and to summer as the appropriate season for its play.

Although a knowledge of these literary and artistic traditions dealing with mimicry and the Ages of Man pervades Bruegel’s painting, a third literary tradition, emblem books, used the actions of games precisely to signal man’s folly, as did Bruegel. As identified by Stridbeck, Slive, Benesch, among others, they include: Jacob Cats, Silenus Alcibiadias sive Proteus, Vitae Humanae Ideam, Emblemata ... (1618), and Pieter Roemer Visscher, Sinnepoppen (1614). To these can be added the anonymous Kinderwerck, ofte Sinnebeelden van de Spelen der Kinderen (1626), and Conrad Meyer and Johann Heinrich Ammann, Nichtege Kinderespiele (1657), the latter largely dependent on Cats’s Kinderespel, a poem used to introduce his Sinne-Beelden, eertijt Minne-beelden, the third part of Silenus Alcibiades, as well as his earlier poem, Houwelijk.

According to Stridbeck, numerous emblems signifying folly to their seventeenth-century compilers found their

102 Reproduced in Heurck and Boekenooen (as in n. 89), 38, 78, 80, and 158; and Van Veen (as in n. 87), 57-63.
103 Illustrated in Heurck and Boekenooen (as in n. 89), 158; another is in Van Veen (as in n. 87), 60, and Heurck and Boekenooen, 38. Both date from the 17th century, but their relationship to the earlier “world upside down” broadsheets suggests that they reflect older models.
104 Tietze-Conrat, 129.
105 “Exultat levitate puer dum reddere voces/ Incipit, et certo vix pede signat Hymen.”
107 Stridbeck, 184-191; Benesch (as in n. 12), 97 and 112, n. 20, and Slive (as in n. 12), 491-92.

109 Published in facsimile, Sinnepoppen van Roemer Visscher, ed. L. Brummel, The Hague, 1949; described in Landwehr, Nos. 720-25; Praz, i, 530-31; ii, 63.
110 In Minne-plicht. Ende Kusheyt-kamp. 1626; described by de Cock and Teirlinck, i, 41-47; extensively quoted by Hartman and Lens, passim.
111 See the facsimile, Conrad Meyer, Die Kinderespiele, ed. Conrad Ulrich, Zurich [1971]: this work included twenty-six engravings of various games, incorporating some that were not described by Cats, but using blindman’s buff as the first illustration and the first game described in the text.
112 Cats, 233-15.
counterparts in *Children's Games.* Following Cats, the boy blowing bubbles in the left corner of Bruegel's painting is a symbol both of the transitoriness of life, and pride in material possessions or greed. Those on stilts convey conceit, while those who turn somersaults suffer from distorted vision, for they see the world upside-down. Stridbeck similarly extracted from Visscher's *Sinnepoppen* other emblems of games displayed in Bruegel's painting. Among them, swimming with a bladder signals mistrust; *Pick, Olfe offte Graef* connotes tyranny; and boys playing with hoops (Fig. 24) express the dictum *beter stil gehaeten* ("it is better to stand still"). The frontal position of these boys trundling hoops led Stridbeck to interpret this action as emblematic of the painting's principal moral: the futility of life's activity.

It is worthwhile placing Bruegel's *Children's Games* within its appropriate chronological context in Antwerp emblem literature of the third quarter of the sixteenth century. Antwerp was, in fact, the center of emblem-book publishing in Belgium which began there with the publication in 1554 of *Tpeleys der gheeleder ingiuen oft der constiger gheesten* translated from La Perrière's *Le Théâtre des bons engins,* originally issued in Paris. Two more editions were printed in the next decade. Although no other emblem books predate Bruegel's painting, the sixties witnessed a proliferation of emblem publishing; many editions adapting devices from Alciati which must have been available earlier in Antwerp. In 1561, Paradin's *Les Devises heroiques* appeared, followed by a Dutch translation. By the middle of the decade, Plantin's shop issued Latin emblem books by the Flemish humanists, Johannes Sambucus and Hadrianus Junius, with successive translations. Finally, in 1566, the first edition of

114 Stridbeck, 189-190.
115 *Sinnepoppen* (as in n. 109), 140, 143, and 160. Other emblematic games or toys are: rackets, 8; tops, 20; shooting the popinjay, 41; dice and cards (as games children should not be taught), 101; walking on stilts, 137; jumping rope, 144; swimming, 147; top and whip, 165. The accompanying 183 engravings are by Claes Jansz. Visscher.
116 Stridbeck, 191.
Alciati appeared in Antwerp, again issued by Plantin.121

Conspicuously absent from these earlier compendia, however, are most of the specific examples used by Cats and Roemer Visscher — boys rolling hoops, swimming, walking on stilts, turning somersaults, riding hobbyhorses, playing Pick, Olye offte Graef — and the considerable range of games that characterized their texts. Only one recurring emblem, blowing bubbles, finds an analogue in Bruegel’s painting (Fig. 25). The fragility of the bubble which bursts when captured and the concomitant folly of the child who believes, nonetheless, that a bubble can be seized, refer in the emblem literature to the transitory nature of life, as well as to the folly of man who presumes that he can temper its course.122 As Slive has suggested, the detail of a single child blowing bubbles in the lower left corner of Children’s Games may convey this meaning, a meaning which is partially in line with the view of chance presented in the painting. If there is a shared ground between the painting and specific emblems, it is therefore based on this one detail.

There is, nonetheless, some additional evidence that depictions of games already manifested symbolic meaning before Bruegel. For example, the Dutch version of La Perrière’s Théâtre included five emblems of sports and games, among which were tennis, racket ball, chess, backgammon, and dice.124 Introduced as adult pastimes rather than children’s recreations, these games were also present in medieval literature which assigned them similar moral meanings: chess was designed to instruct the players both upon the social equality of the classes and upon the transitory quality of life; dice taught the hazards of fortune or chance; and tennis instructed on the mistrust of things certain. Medieval antecedents of emblem literature also focused on the pastimes of adults. Jan van den Berghe’s Dat Kaetspel ghemoralizeert, for example, related ball games to the justice system, and Antonius de Roovere’s poem, Gheestelijck den bal te slane,125 elaborated an allegory that compares the ball’s hardness to God’s power, its three seams to the Trinity, and so forth.

Most closely related to Children’s Games, however, is a fourth literary example which focused on folly and used the games of children as its metaphor: the prologue to the fourteenth-century Abele spelen.126 It depended, in part, on a linguistic phenomenon for its meaning. The Dutch noun, spel, means ‘a play,’ as in stage representation or a dramatic composition, and the same noun also means ‘a game,’ for there is no separate Dutch word for “game.”127 Entitled Een behinsel van allen spelen (“A beginning to all plays [games]”), the Abele spelen prologue compares the games of children to the subsequent folly of the stage. In the poem, as children play with stones, or at cup and ball, with dice or knucklebones, at chess or other board games, as they run in the streets, or ride on hobbyhorses, to dried stubble, to a post, to nothing.”

121 Landwehr (as in n. 108), Nos. 8-25; Praz (as in n. 108), t, 248-252. A facsimile of the related edition of 1551 was edited by Henry Green, Andreae Alciati Emblemata Flumen Abundans; or Alciati’s Emblems in Their Full Stream (Holbein Society Facsimile Reprints, v), Manchester and London, 1871; see also Henry Green, Andrea Alciati and His Books of Emblems; A Biographical and Bibliographical Study, London, 1872, (reprint New York, 1965); and Dmitrij Tschizewskij and Ernst Benz, Andreas Alciati Emblemata Liber mit Holzschnitten von Jörg Breu [1531], (Emblematicaes Cabinet, x), Hildesheim and New York, 1977.

122 In Hadrianus Junius, Emblemata, xvi, 22, with the motto: Cuncta complecti velle, stultum; and slightly later in Geoffrey Whitney, A Choice of Emblems and Other Devices, Leiden, 1586 (The English Experience, clxi), Amsterdam and New York, 1969, 55, with the same motto.

123 Slive (as in n. 12), 491, also quoted An Herbal for the Bible (1587) comparing man’s life “to a Dreame, to a smoke, to a vapour, to a puffe of winde, to a shadow, to a bubble of water, to hay, to grasse, to an herb, to a flower, to a leave, to a tale, to vanitie, to a weaver’s shuttle, to a winde, to dried stubble, to a post, to nothing.”

124 La Perrière, Théâtre (as in n. 118), 20-21, 64-65, 92-93, 128-29, 162-63.


126 The prologue occurs only in the Van Hulthem manuscript (Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, ms 15.589-623) of this text, executed about 1410, and edited by Hoffmann van Fallersleben, vi, 1-2, with commentary, 169-216. Most other editions of the Abele spelen omit the prologue which may postdate the plays. Further bibliography on the Van Hulthem manuscript can be found in Jan Deschamps, Middeelnederlandse handschriften uit Europese en Amerikaanse Collections, Leiden, 1972, 2nd ed., 131-37.

127 On spel see the Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal, xiv, 267-2689; and the Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek, vii, 1671-1685.
their games are like plays. They are like the theater, the prologue implies, for there are lessons contained in both activities. The prologue concludes with an exhortation to the audience: "One finds examples clear and many, even if they play the fool. Therein lies their subtlety. Now listen and try to understand." This connection between games and the theater or between "play" and "the play" is, I believe, the underpinning of Bruegel's painting.

Yet another fact reinforces the thesis that Children's Games depends on such a prologue, for both the painting and the plays focus on the theme of marriage.Performed consecutively in two parts, the first play was an *abele spel* or "noble play [game]," in which a magic world of make-believe provided the setting for a fairy-tale romance. The second play, a *sotterie*, literally "a folly," followed as a short skit. These burlesque farces inverted the refined love of the plays by treating the disillusionment of married life. Women are usually the victors in these plays, and men are the cuckolded husbands, as both harangue and deceive each other. The viewer could infer from the sotterie, presumably designed as a gloss on the preceding refined drama, that the reality of everyday life was something other than that presented in the first play. In so doing, the viewer would have been following the exhortation of the prologue, to look for moral example in common plays as in everyday games. As the existence of such a prologue may have encouraged Bruegel to call forth the linguistic essence of *spel* as both a "game" and "a play," so Bruegel's audience, likewise, would have understood children's games in part as plays. In this sense, Children's Games truly conforms to the genre of *a theatrvm vitae humanae* or *theatrum mundi*, as suggested by Gibson.

Whatever other meanings it now evokes, Children's Games still represents real children playing actual games in front of a believable town hall, a fact that also contributed to the way it was perceived. Among the artistic antecedents for depictions of games were choir-stall sculpture and town-hall statuary (Figs. 26 and 27), whose placement may have reflected the social reality that children played in and around the town hall. This phenomenon may also have contributed to the secondary nomenclature for the town hall as a *Spilscuur*, or "play barn." At the same time, the designation, *Spilscuur*, doubtless derived from the fact that the town hall was the common locus before and in which plays were performed, as it is in the painting by Mostaert which includes the performance of a Passion play in front of the

---

128 Hoffmann von Fallersleben, 2: "... die selke keien ende dander clossen./ som so cloten si ane den bloc./ selc worselt ende selc trect dan stoc./ selc speelt met appelan, selc met noten./ die selc couten, die ander coten./ die selke dobbelt, die ander caets./ d'een speelt tafelspel ende d ander scaets. ..."

129 *Ibid.*, 2: "Men vint exemptel harde vele./ al eest dat se sotto spelen./ daer subtiliteit leghet ane./ nu hoort ende pijn t te verstane!"


Antwerp town hall (Fig. 8). In addition, therefore, to the literary association which Bruegel’s most literate viewers would have brought to the painting, the everyday reality of his viewers—be it their speech or their pastimes—provided a ready context from which to perceive *Children’s Games* as a theater for the folly of all.

The century following Bruegel witnessed continuing associations between children’s games and folly, often developing the related theme of marriage. Previously cited as a literary parallel to Bruegel’s painting is Jacob Cats’s poem, *Kinderspel*, which exists in two slightly different versions, one prefacing his emblem book, *Silenus Alcibiades*, and the other introducing a didactic treatise on marriage, entitled *Houwelijck*. 135 Both versions preserve the oft-quoted statement on play:

Play, even if it appears without sense, contains a whole world therein; the world and its complete structure, is nothing but a children’s game; thus, after the frost thaws when you look at all that foolish youth does, you will understand on the street how the whole world goes; you will find there, I know it well your own folly in children’s games. 136

One version of *Kinderspel* continued with a lengthy treatment of blindman’s buff as a parody of marriage. After a description of blindman’s buff which “offers a blind choice and nothing more,” Cats proceeded to catalogue the bride’s shortcomings which the bridegroom “sees … sometimes all too clear,” concluding that: “The game, it has its rules therein: The game it has but one big catch. One keeps forever what one gets!” 137 For Cats, as for Bruegel, the game of blindman’s buff explicitly glossed the chance and folly of marriage. Perhaps it is no accident that this parody of blindman’s buff occurs only as an introduction to Cats’s poem on marriage, being omitted in the other version of *Kinderspel* introducing his emblem book.

Like the poem, the engravings of children’s games illustrating *Kinderspel* and prefacing *Silenus Alcibiades* and *Houwelijck* were individually fashioned to accommodate their different texts (Figs. 28 and 29). Randomly cited as parallels with *Children’s Games*, neither print by Adriaen van de Venne has been carefully scrutinized. 138 The first, illustrating *Silenus Alcibiades*, includes a variety of games in a city square: from right to left children walk on stilts, blow bubbles, play with dolls, fly kites, ride hobbyhorses, and jump rope (Fig. 28). A city hall, a church, and domestic architecture define the background. Setting and content are thus similar to those in Bruegel’s painting. The second engraving, introducing *Houwelijck*, offers an even closer affinity with *Children’s Games* (Fig. 29). Most of the customary games are relegated here to a city square in the background in order to make room for three activities which dominate the foreground. On the right a group plays blindman’s buff; on the left girls play with dolls; and in the center a marriage procession led by drummers marches into the foreground. The three mimicry activities depicted in the print prefacing *Houwelijck* convey the folly of marriage which commences after the games of childhood are terminated.

135 Especially by Stridbeck, 185-86; and Benesch (as in n. 12), 97 and 154, No. 19; see Cats, 213-16.
136 Cats, 213: “Dit spel, al schijnt ‘et sonder sin,/ Dat heeft een kleyne werelt in;/ De werelt en haer gants gestel/ En is maer enkel kinderspel;/ Dus sooje na den eysch bevroet/ Al wat de malle jonckheyt doet;/ Gy sult vernemen op de straat/ Hoe dat de gansche werelt gaet;/ Gy sult er vinden, meyn ick wel;/ Uw eygen mal en kinderspel.”
137 Cats, 213: “Het speeltje, vrienden, dat begiet/Een blinde greep, en vorder niet. … Maer na dat hy de vrieyst vingh;/ Nu siet hy vlack in alle dingh;/ Hy siet en haer, en haer gebreke;/ Haer ydel hooft en stegen neck;/ Hy siet haer feynen alleger;/ Hy siet by wijlen al te klaer;/ Maer, of hy veel of luttel siet;/ Nogh eens te gripen magh hy niet!/ En schoon hy vint on-aerdigh vleye;/ De greep is maer voor enne reys./ Maer waerom doch en grammen sin?/ Dit speeltje heeft die weten in./ Dit speeltje heeft een groote sleep/ Men hout daer eeuwigh wat men greep.”
138 Cited and illustrated by Stridbeck, 185, fig. 48; and Slive (as in n. 12), fig. 23, 491.
Another later print isolates blindman’s buff as a symbol of the folly of marriage (Fig. 30). An oversized wicker basket is filled to the brim with miniature likenesses of men and women. Outside the basket stand hooded figures of a man and a woman, hoods recalling those employed by blindman’s buff in Children’s Games. Each player has just reached into the basket to pick a mate, and captions over their respective heads announce, “I’ve got one,” as a figure is pulled from the basket. One accompanying in-

---

28 Adriaen van de Venne, Children’s Games, from Jacob Cats, Silenus Alcibiades, 1618 (photo: Washington, D.C., Folger Library)

29 Adriaen van de Venne, Children’s Games, from Jacob Cats, Houwelijk, 1622 (photo: Brussels, Bibl. Roy.)


Unrecorded.
scription below the image, alluding to the folly of matchmaking, recalls the language of Cat's poem describing blindman's buff: "Let us stick our heads in sacks/ So that we can see no one's faults/ And each grasp out of the basket one [person]/ Or we will not bet anything during our lifetime." An attitude of resignation is implied by the suggestion that every match might as well be blindly arranged. This engraving, like those by Van de Venne and the poem by Cats, employs the images of children's games as metaphors of courtship and marriage.

V. Conclusion

The interpretation of Children's Games, as I have outlined it above, argues for an artist who was intent on depicting the everyday reality of peasant children, while at the same time eliciting verbal allusions, the recognition of which would enhance the richness of the painting. Van Mander indicates that already in the seventeenth century Bruegel enjoyed a reputation as a painter of nature's peasants. Recent research by Alpers, Monbaillieu, and others has substantiated the validity of this claim by demonstrating that Bruegel's paintings support historical data on the peasant in the sixteenth century.

In order to obtain evidence, however, that verbal content was a concern of Bruegel, it is essential to turn to the works themselves. Children's Games shares formal and conceptual characteristics with Bruegel's works from the end of the 1550's. Like the Kermesse and Hoboken of 1559, for example, Children's Games incorporates a high horizon, numerous clusters of people, and a system of interlocking diagonals connecting the diverse groups. That both works include depictions of many children's games is another common feature. Still other works from this period evidence Bruegel's interest in language and theater. Both the drawing and print of Elck, dated 1558, include a legend, "no one knows himself," which derives from sixteenth-century theater, as the character, Elck ("Everyman"), comes from the Dutch play by the same name. Also executed in 1558, the drawing of the Alchemist depends for its meaning on the pun, Al ghemist, or "all is lost." It thus amply reveals an artist aware of the potential of language, as do the theatrum mundi paintings. Of them, Children's Games is most like Netherlandish Proverbs of 1559, in which people act out written or spoken proverbs, all manifesting universal folly. It is also close to the Battle Between Carnival and Lent of 1559 which draws from and evokes imagery of carnival plays in which personifications of the two holidays confront one another.

I would argue that the peculiarly literal, even theatrical, quality of these works was noticed by Van Mander in Het Schilderboeck.

Hy heeft oock ghemaectt een stuck/ daer den Vasten
teghen den Vasten-avondt strijt:de en der/ daer de
remedien worden ghebruycyt teghen de doot: een en-
der van allerley spelender kinderen/ en meer ontellijke
sinnekens.

(He painted a picture in which Lent and Carnival are
fighting: another where all kinds of remedies are used
against death; and one with all kinds of children at games;
and innumerable other little, clever things.)

Upon an examination of the Dutch passage several points emerge as important. First, on a superficial level, the grouping of the paintings suggests that Van Mander regarded them as comparable or related. Second, if Van de Waal's translation of the problematic last phrase, meer on-
tallijke sinnekens ("innumerable other little, clever
things") is revised, this alters the meaning of the entire
passage. There exists no ready English equivalent for
sinnekens, with the result that Van de Waal chose the ap-
propriately vague phrase, "clever things," to connote their
meaning. By 1604, sinneken could have connoted merely
"senses" or "meanings," but this translation does not ac-
cord well with its context in the Schilderboeck. Its alter-
native meaning, drawn from sixteenth-century rederijker
drama, was "a symbolic or allegorical person in a spel van
sinne," which corresponds to its use here. Like the fool

140 "Laet ons thouf in een sack streecken/ Soo en sien wij niemandts
gebreken/ En grijpen wt dese mande elck een/ Ofsi wij krygender van
ons leven gein."

141 Van Mander, 233; trans. C. van de Wall, Dutch and Flemish Painters,
New York, 1936, 156: "Nature was wonderfully felicitous in her choice
when, in an obscure village in Brabant, she selected the gifted and witty
Pieter Bruegel to paint her and her peasants, and to contribute to the
everlasting fame of painting in the Netherlands."

142 Svetlana Alpers, "Bruegel's Festive Peasants," Simiolus, vi, 3-4,
1972-73, 163-176; and A. Monbaillieu, "De 'Kermis van Hoboken' bij P.
Bruegel, J. Grimmer en G. Mostaert," Jaarboek van het Koninklijk
Museum voor Schone Kunsten, 1974, 139-169.

143 Caren Hamereman, The Johns Hopkins University, has documented the
ethnographic accuracy of the games played and other activities
present in the Kermesse at Hoboken. The results of some of her research
were presented at the Middle Atlantic Symposium on the History of Art,
March 29, 1980.

144 M. Seidel and R. H. Marijnissen, Bruegel, New York [1971], 61, n. 79;
see also L. Müns, Bruegel. The Drawings, Complete Edition, New York,
1968, 227, No. 138. An edition of the play, Eckerlijc, is: The Mirror of
Salvation. A Moral Play of Everyman c. 1490, trans. Adriaan Barnouw
(Bibliotheca Neerlandica extra Muros, ii), The Hague, 1971.

145 A recent contribution is by Mattias Winner, Pieter Bruegel d. Ä. als
Zeichner: Herkunft und Nachfolge: Eine Ausstellung des Kupferstichkabinetts

146 Various plays are cited in Stridbeck, 180-84, published also as idem,
"Combat between Carnival and Lent by Pieter Bruegel the Elder,"
Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, xix, 1956, 96-109; and
Seidel and Marijnissen (as in n. 144), 26, 43.

147 Van Mander, 1604, 234; and Van Mander (as in n. 141), 156.

148 Middelnederlandsch Handwoordenboek, vi, 1127-1142.

149 Middelnederlandsch Handwoordenboek, vii, 1158: "'zinnebeeldig per-
soon' . . . in de 16de-eeuwse 'spelen van sinne.'"
with his bauble, the *sinneken* functioned as had the Devil in earlier medieval drama; by their costumes, actions, and words these characters usually supplied examples of foolish behavior.  

Read with an understanding of the word *sinneken*, Van Mander’s passage thus suggests that these paintings contain allegorical characters, who, in some way, instruct on folly. An examination of Van Mander’s punctuation (not followed by Van de Waal) implies, I believe, that he related *sinneken* especially to *Children’s Games*, for the colon setting apart each painting from the next is absent between his mention of the painting and his use of this phrase. For both Van Mander and Bruegel, children playing games were like the theatrical *sinneken*: they argued for rational behavior while acting in just the opposite manner, that is, foolishly.

I do not wish to assign undue importance to this literary side of Bruegel’s art in general or *Children’s Games* in particular, and perhaps consideration of one final detail in the painting establishes the proper perspective for the interpretation that I have advanced. In the lower right corner of the painting a girl usually identified as playing shop is the counterpart to the girls playing knucklebones in the opposite corner (Fig. 31). The representation of playing shop is unusual: there were no representations of this activity preceding Bruegel. That this child, like those in the marriage and baptismal processions, is engaged in mimicy further underlines her significance. Closer examination of her precise activity reveals that, as she plays shop, she is occupied with a still more specific task: the scraping of red bricks in order to make pigment for paint. The funnel and scales enable her to weigh and measure this red dust. As Dürer’s diary of his journey to the Netherlands tell us, Antwerp was the exclusive European source for red pigment, for this was made from new bricks, uniquely fashioned in Antwerp.  

Dürer informs us that he purchased some of this special pigment to take back to Nuremberg. On one level, the presence of this activity thus can be considered natural in a painting showing the everyday pastimes of children in Bruegel’s native Antwerp. On another level, however, this detail must be a reference to the painter, for it functions as a playful artistic signature. Just below the red dust and funnel, the wooden plank is inscribed “BRUEGEL 1560.”

Such an amusing pictorial gesture epitomizes Bruegel’s sense of humor, another characteristic frequently underlined by his early critics who, like Van Mander, declared that “one cannot help laughing, or smiling before works” by Bruegel, or who, like Lampsonius, stated that he selected for his paintings “pleasant topics to laugh about.” Added to Bruegel’s heightened appreciation of visual and verbal stimuli around him was the vision of a humorist, able to elicit laughter in others as he laughed simultaneously at himself.

The Johns Hopkins University Baltimore, MD 21218

**Appendix I**

**Identification of the Games**

This appendix attempts to reconcile the three published diagrams of *Children’s Games* (de Meyere, Glück, and Hills). Each diagram preserves a list of the games, often using different Dutch names. Unique numbering systems characterize the three schemata as well. Because of its accuracy and completeness, de Meyere’s numbered diagram has served as a model here (Fig. 32), and in the columns below I have coordinated games from Glück and Hills with it. When alternative identifications exist, I have retained both names or terms. In the far left column each number is preceded by my English translation from de Meyere, whom I have only occasionally corrected. When Hills cited no Dutch equivalent, I have retained her German terms. I have not checked every entry against the folklore sources on games, but it is hoped that the discrepancies that come to light here will provide a basis for further research, especially with an anthropological or social focus, on *Children’s Games*.

150 On the function and role of the *sinneken*, see the summary in J. J. Mak, *De rederijkers* (Patria vaderlandsche cultuurgeschiedenis in monografieën, xxxiv), Amsterdam, 1944, 58-78; and esp. W. M. H. Hummelen, *De sinnekens in het rederijkersdrama*, Groningen, 1958.

151 Albrecht Dürer, *Diary of His Journey to the Netherlands* 1520-1521, ed. J.-A. Goris and G. Marlier, Greenwich, Conn., 1971, 66-69; “Master Dierrick, the glasspainter, sent me the red colour that is found in Antwerp in the new bricks. . . . I have paid 1 st. for brick-colour.” See also J. Veth and S. Muller, *Albrecht Dürer’s niederländische Reise*, 2 vols., Berlin and Utrecht, 1918, 11, 154, and passim, where they note that after Dürer’s return to Nuremberg a red color, which had already appeared in Antwerp painted glass, appeared in Dürer’s and other German panel paintings. In his forthcoming study of the economics of Renaissance art, Richard Goldthwaite confirms the existence of this industry in Antwerp in the 16th century.

Diagram of Children's Games (from de Meyere, De Kinderspelen, pl. 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GAME</th>
<th>de Meyere</th>
<th>Gluck</th>
<th>Hills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knucklebones (Jacks)</td>
<td>bikkelen</td>
<td>bikkelen; hilton</td>
<td>Fangsteine; Steinschenspiel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing with dolls</td>
<td>de speelpop</td>
<td>moedertje spelen met de pop</td>
<td>Spiel mit Puppen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doll's house</td>
<td>het poppenhuisje</td>
<td>[not in Gluck]</td>
<td>[not in Hills]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altar game</td>
<td>het altaarspel</td>
<td>pastoortje spelen</td>
<td>Altärlein machen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owl and owl-coop</td>
<td>uil en uilenkot</td>
<td>[not in Gluck]</td>
<td>Vogelkruk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop-gun</td>
<td>de spuitebuis</td>
<td>klakbus; propschieten; vlierbus</td>
<td>Wasserpistole; het kinderspuitje</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masking</td>
<td>het masker</td>
<td>mommenaanzicht; masker</td>
<td>mombakkes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swinging</td>
<td>schommelen</td>
<td>schongelen</td>
<td>schommelspelen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whirligig</td>
<td>de drilnoot; het notenmolen</td>
<td>drilnoot; nootmolentje</td>
<td>de drilnoot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blowing soap bubbles</td>
<td>zeebpellen blazen</td>
<td>bellen blazen; bobbels</td>
<td>bellen blazen; zeepbel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cap of rushes</td>
<td>[same as 10]</td>
<td>biezenhood</td>
<td>hoed van biezen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play with a bird</td>
<td>het spel met den vogel</td>
<td>met een vogel spelen</td>
<td>Meisen jängen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rattle</td>
<td>de klater</td>
<td>rammelaartje, teerlingtopje; kleuterspaan</td>
<td>teerlingstopje</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Stone, stone on the leg&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Steentje, steentje om het been&quot;</td>
<td>7a. A stone like a horse or a dog is attached to the gate</td>
<td>10. [described but not identified]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptismal procession</td>
<td>de doop</td>
<td>[not given in Dutch]</td>
<td>Taufprozession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blindman's buff</td>
<td>blindefmannetje</td>
<td>blinden; blindefmannetje; blindspel</td>
<td>Blinde Kuh; blindefmannetje</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child's stool</td>
<td>kinderstoel</td>
<td>[not in Gluck]</td>
<td>[not in Hills]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Odds or Evens; Paper Scissors, Rock; Hot Potato:

Hobbyhorse:

Hand seat:

Playing drum and flute [whistle]

stirring a mudpie:

Rolling a hoop:

Girl's hoop:

Call down a bung hole:

Rocking a barrel:

Running with a pig's bladder:

Lift:

"How many horns does the goat have?"

Playing store: making pigment from bricks:

A brick: [not in the Meyere]

Mumblety-peg

Bricklaying:

Pulling hair:

Finding beetles [perhaps fireflies]:

Run with a cake:

Round the blind man:

Leapfrog:

Tug-of-war:

Running the gauntlet:

Turning somersaults:

Head stands:

Turning cartwheels:

Climb over a fence:

Ride on the fence:

Bridal procession:

Blind pots:

Walk on stilts:

Blind hood:

Skittles or marbles:

Twirl around:

Walk on high stilts:

Swing on the fence: [not in the Meyere]

Hang on the fence:

Balance a broom:

Pickaback: piggyback;

Hide and seek:

Spinning tops:

Spinning tops:
“Who sits here in the blue tower?”:
Rattle:
Windmill tournament:
Digging a well:
Jumping over sandbags:
Here we go round the mulberry bush; twirling:
Jumping over sandbags:
Swimming with a bladder:
Bathing one’s feet:
Swimming along the shore:
Before or after the swim:
Throwing a ball against the wall:
Defecating:
Bowling with knucklebones:
Hockey:
Skittles:
Hare and Hound; Badger the Bear; Frog in the Middle:
Climbing a wall:
Fighting:
Hitting the wall:
Procession game:
Follow the leader:
Go on a visit:
First one there; follow the leader:
Push someone off the bench:
Piggyback:
Horse Bayard and the Four Heemakinderen:
St. John’s Fire:
Dragging trees for St. John’s Fire:
Carrying torches:
Singing at doors:
Wandering:
Joy pennant:
St. Nicolas baskets:

66. wat zit er in mijn blauwen Toren?
67. het klepbord
68. op het kelderluik openen
69. ‘t pissertje
70. het kootspel
71. het klinkerdspel
72. naar de putten
73. katje, katje koningstoelje; de ontroorde koning
74. de duyvel aan een Koord
75. tegen de kelderdeur oploopen
76. muurke-botsen
77. processie spelen
78. rattenstaart
79. bezoek ontstaan
gerenateacherna
80. van de bank duwen
81. van de bank dringen; drummen
82. koetje, kalvertje
83. balleken steken; duike, duike, reve
84. Ros Beiaard en de vier Heemakinderen
85. St. Jansvuur
86. takkenbossen dragen
87. fakkel dragen
88. zingen aan de deur
89. wandelen
90. den wimpel uithangen
91. de korven

74. wie zal ik kiezen?
75. van draaien wi; molen spelen
76. afsbossen; spanbotten; muurke botsen
77. processie gaan
78. dwarloop of wild jagen; Hansje sjokken; zwaan, kleeft aan
79. portierje spelen
80. naalpopje; katje jagen
81. van de bank dringen; drummen
82. koetje, kalvertje
83. van moet ik in je landen trekken
84. het ros Beiaard en de vier Heemskinderen
85. Sint Jans-vuur
86. takkenbossen dragen
87. fakkel dragen
88. zingen aan de deur
89. wandelen
90. den wimpel uithangen
91. de korven

50. aanen en blairens; ballon-spelen; van draaien wi
51. muurke-botsen
52. bigelspen
53. sjaal en daardoe; in het zo kloppen
54. twinkelkens
55. [described but not identified]
56. westerspel
57. spanbotten; muurke-botsen; tikken mee censens
58. stom-en-ambacht; Handwerks- of Schlampenspel
59. Portierje spelen
60. roedocht
61. Kalleke slagen; Porschek; Niggelslagen; Megger; Triebelspel
62. petjeball; negenpotten; putteken-balleken
63. Barentreiber; Teufel an der Kette; twee aan een kort; bierenhoete
64. Wandlauwen
65. Rammeln
66. Spanbotten; muurke-botsen; tikken mee censens
67. Singen ein Lied
68. Gänsemarsch
69. Kass trucken; Pressuurst machen
70. koetje-kalvertje dragen
71. Johannisyfer
72. Jongensgevecht
73. dierspel; kalfje
74. niet in Gluck
75. niet in Gluck
76. niet in Gluck
77. [described but not identified]
78. Holzschnieden; Fingerziehen
79. Papierstreifen
80. die Körben
81. Sint Niklaas korven met roede en met schoenen
## Appendix II  Games in the Calendars of Ghent-Bruges Manuscripts1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration</th>
<th>Game</th>
<th>Manuscript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Months</td>
<td></td>
<td>Antwerp Breviary (Museum Mayer van den Bergh)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>1. tournament of barrels on sleds</td>
<td>Hours of Eleanor of Portugal (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, M. 52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. sledding</td>
<td>1v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. serenade</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. skating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. snowball fighting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>*1. playing with hoops</td>
<td>2r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*2. acrobatics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*3. tag</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*4. piggy-back</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*5. golf</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*6. stilts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*7. &quot;blinden hoedetje&quot; = &quot;blind hood&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. *duitje pletsen, &amp; kunzeren (unidentified)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. backgammon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>*1. tops and whips [Easter?]</td>
<td>2v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*2. procession with rattles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*3. playing with hoops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. *soldaantje spelen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>1. ball-in-the-camp</td>
<td>3r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*2. procession with rattles [Easter?]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*3. tops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. *potje speelen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. *stulteren</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>1. May tree</td>
<td>3v</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Apart from the calendar, other texts in Books of Hours were occasionally illustrated with games, as follows: (Hours of the Virgin) *Lauda*, ball-in-ring and golf, Quaritch Hours (as in n. 66), fols. 45v and 46r; *Teresa*, top and whip, Quaritch Hours, fol. 71v; *Sext*, bridal dancing, Hours of Albert of Brandenberg (as in n. 65), fol. 33r; *Nones*, skittles with knucklebones and hoops, Quaritch Hours, fols. 86v and 87r; *Seven Penitential Psalms*, blowing soap bubbles, Quaritch Hours, fol. 120v; *Cursus Sancti Bonaventurae de Passione Christi*, May Day procession, Hours of Albert of Brandenberg, fol. 37r; *Prayer to Saint Anthony*, top and whip, Vienna, Oesterreichische Nationalbibliothek, ms 2844, (Biermann, 1975, 133, pl. 176; as in n. 65); and *Salus Sancta Facies*, top and whip, Hours, Hilversum, private collection, fol. 194 (see L. Lieftinck, ""Kunstwerk of juweel? Het gebedenboek van de Heer C.H. Beels te Hilversum," Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek, viii, 1957, 1-28).


4 Woordenboek (as in n. 68)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>1. tournament on hobbyhorses with paper windmills</td>
<td>4r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. fighting</td>
<td>4v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. archery</td>
<td>4r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. hawking</td>
<td>23v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. bird trapping</td>
<td>9r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. marbles</td>
<td>9r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. tilting at a ring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>1. bowls</td>
<td>4v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. chasing butterflies</td>
<td>5v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. rattles</td>
<td>4v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>1. water joust</td>
<td>5r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. throwing sticks at popinjay</td>
<td>5v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. bird snaring</td>
<td>25v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. tournament with paper windmills</td>
<td>26v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. kite flying</td>
<td>11r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>1. marbles</td>
<td>5v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. stilts</td>
<td>26v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. golf</td>
<td>27v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. bird snaring</td>
<td>6r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. ball game</td>
<td>5v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. quarrels with sticks</td>
<td>6r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. birds on the crutch</td>
<td>12v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>1. skittles with knucklebones</td>
<td>6r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. racket ball</td>
<td>6v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. stilts</td>
<td>6r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. jump rope</td>
<td>6v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. hoops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. crack-the-whip</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>1. golf</td>
<td>6v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. pulling hair</td>
<td>7r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. hoops</td>
<td>6v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. bowls</td>
<td>28v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. knucklebones</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. piggyback</td>
<td>7v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. follow the leader</td>
<td>7v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. stilts</td>
<td>7v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>1. sledding</td>
<td>7v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. bowls</td>
<td>7v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. skates</td>
<td>7v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. tug-of-war on sleds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[beginning December]</td>
<td>5. snowballs</td>
<td>15r</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Quaritch (as in n. 66), 88-90; and Drost, pls. v-vi. 
* This unpublished manuscript relates to a small group also in the Walters, mss W. 426, 427, and 428.
Bibliography


Gouw, Johannes ter, *De volksvermaken*, Haarlem, 1871.


Hills, Jeannette, *Das Kinderspielbild von Pieter Bruegel d. Ä.*, 1560; eine volkskundliche Untersuchung (Veröffentlichungen des Österreichischen Museums für Volkskunde, x), Vienna, 1957.


Meyere, Victor de, *De Kinderspelen van Pieter Bruegel den Oude verklaard*, Antwerp, 1941.


