



## **Primary School Teachers' Notes National Gallery Education 2005-2006**

**Two Boys and a Girl making Music**  
**by Jan Molenaer, 1629**  
**oil on canvas 68.3 x 84.5 cm**

### **About the artist**

#### **Who painted this?**

This picture was painted by Jan Miense Molenaer in 1629. He has signed it with his initials and the date on the trunk in the bottom left-hand corner.

Molenaer was born in the Dutch city of Haarlem in about 1610 and died there in 1668. His wife was fellow artist Judith Leyster, although she hardly painted anything once they married and had children. Molenaer specialised in genre scenes, pictures of people both rich and poor enjoying themselves and going about their business.

Like most artists in the Netherlands, a Protestant country, he focused on one type of subject matter so that buyers wanting this kind of picture would come straight to him. Protestant churches do not use art in their worship, so the church was no longer the main client for artists. Instead they had to paint pictures that they thought would sell on the open market.

### **About the painting**

#### **What's going on in this painting?**

Three children are shown playing a variety of musical instruments, some of which they have made themselves. The children do not look as if they are part of a rich family – almost everything around them, including their clothes, has seen better days. Nevertheless, they seem to be happy with their lot. The painting has a jolly atmosphere with the three children making a lot of noise and enjoying themselves. And it's painted in a realistic way, so you can imagine being in this room with them, singing along and hearing their laughter.

## **Making music**

Musical parties were popular among 17th-century Dutch painters – sometimes whole families were depicted playing together. People playing music was a way of exploring ideas about harmony and unity. But would you imagine a calm, soothing soundtrack accompanying this painting? It all seems a bit more raucous than that.

One boy plays a violin while the little girl bangs on a helmet with two spoons. The boy on the right is playing a rommelpot, Dutch for 'rumbling pot'. This was made from a jug containing water, with skin stretched tautly over the top. A small stick was pushed through a hole in the skin – when you moved the stick around inside the jug it created an ear-splitting sound.

The scene communicates a sense of fun and play to us. The mended kolf club (used for a game similar to golf) resting against the back wall suggests this too. However, it was popular among artists at this time to use comedy to communicate thought-provoking ideas.

## **When is a chair just a chair?**

There are quite a few details in this painting that may mean the artist was trying to communicate more than you might at first think.

For instance, the boy on the right is sitting on a kind of folding chair used by the military on campaigns. On the left there is a trunk, another object used by soldiers on the move. The girl in the centre wears a gorget (part of a suit of armour) and has created a makeshift drum by beating a helmet with spoons.

These might simply be props which were lying around the artist's studio. On the other hand, Molenaer could be making a reference to the Thirty Years War, a religious and political conflict that engulfed central Europe in the early 17th century. The artist came from the Netherlands, an area that fought for independence from Spanish Catholic rule during this war. If this is the case, then perhaps the well-thumbed book under the jug with the broken neck is a Bible, and therefore another possible reference to the war.

We can't be sure what exactly the artist was trying to say. Many of the objects represented here had a symbolic significance in Dutch 17th-century art and literature, but the range of ideas that could be communicated was broad. It's likely that he intended there to be several layers of meaning with which different viewers could engage.

## **Playing with emblems**

The items carefully arranged around this mischievous group occur frequently in Dutch paintings of this period. Birdcages, footwarmers and books were especially popular. Molenaer, like many other artists of his time, made heavy use of symbols taken from emblem books, which gave possible interpretations of various objects. A lot of these motifs can mean different things depending on the context in which we see them.

Molenaer was known for his inventive symbolism and in this painting he has combined popular motifs in new and unexpected ways. On the left there is a birdcage. It could have been included to indicate that these children will one day 'fly the nest' on their journey into adulthood. On the right the boy rests his bare feet on an empty wooden footwarmer. In other paintings of the same period depicting women with footwarmers full of hot coals, it was usually interpreted as a symbol of a warm relationship. Therefore here it could possibly allude to the transient nature of childhood and how soon the three children will grow up and maybe have children of their own.

Perhaps what Molenaer is communicating to us is that the carefree, innocent days of childhood don't last forever – that around the corner the responsibilities of adulthood are waiting and childhood is a time to be cherished. The pipe in the other boy's hat is also a symbol of transience.

## **Using the picture in the classroom**

A digital zoomable image of the painting is available at [www.nationalgallery.org.uk](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk). Small details, sometimes difficult to see when looking at the original or an A1 print, can be enlarged and explored using an interactive whiteboard, or digital projector, for group work, or on a PC. A printed reproduction of the painting can be purchased from National Gallery shops and by mail order at [mailorder@nationalgallery.org.uk](mailto:mailorder@nationalgallery.org.uk) or on 020 7747 2870. A copy will also be given to teachers attending the Gallery's CPD courses 2005/6 which introduce teachers to the Take One Picture scheme (details available online).

## **Using Two Boys and a Girl making Music across the National Curriculum**

Since 1995, with the Take One Picture scheme, the National Gallery has been promoting how a single image can be used to stimulate

cross-curricular work in primary schools. Information and work from many schools who have taken part over the years can be seen on the Take One Picture website ([www.takeonepicture.org.uk](http://www.takeonepicture.org.uk)) and on a Take One Picture DVD, available from National Gallery shops.

Take One Picture is a vehicle for teachers to share principles of cultural enrichment and good teaching and learning practice. The scheme supports a holistic approach to the curriculum, which exploits the links between subject areas. This aligns closely with the DfES Primary National Strategy: Excellence and Enjoyment.

### **A few suggestions**

- With the aim of creating opportunities to enable children to use and share information they already know, make available an area in the classroom for pupils to contemplate the still image and write down observations, thoughts and questions about it. Use these comments to develop group speaking and listening skills.
- Make historical enquiries into the lives of 17th-century Dutch children and make a comparison with the pupils' lives today. Themes such as clothes, pastimes and beliefs could be studied.
- Using observation, design and research skills ask the pupils to make their own rommelpot.
- Compare the structures and sounds of professionally crafted instruments and ones improvised by the children in the classroom and the painting.
- Explore ways of communicating as a group through sounds other than speech.
- Make a scientific enquiry into the properties of the different materials represented in the painting.
- Send a virtual image of this painting to a school in the Netherlands asking them to share their thoughts about it.
- Ask the pupils to choose a character in the painting to write a story about. These could also be developed into scripts and acted out. Themes such as 'friendship' could be used to link with PSHE.
- Find mathematical solutions to measure the volume of the various containers depicted.
- Compare the designs of the two chairs and discuss the differences. Look at other folding chairs and ask the pupils to design their own to suit a particular purpose.