

Primary School Teachers' Notes
National Gallery Education 2006 – 2007

An Autumn Landscape with a View of Het Steen in the Early Morning, by Peter Paul Rubens, probably 1636

About the Artist

The Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) lived in Antwerp for most of his life, although he was actually born in Germany when his family fled their homeland to escape religious persecution. After his father's death Rubens moved to Antwerp and trained as an artist. In 1600 he travelled to Italy and Spain and spent around eight years studying the High Renaissance masters, such as Michelangelo and Raphael, whose work greatly influenced his own.

In 1608 he set up a workshop in Antwerp. His skills were very much sought after, not only by those wishing to commission a painting, but also by other artists eager to work as his apprentice and learn from him. His success led to prestigious contracts and he moved in influential circles; he worked for many of the crowned heads of Europe. This put him in an excellent position to act as an ambassador for his country and to incorporate political and diplomatic missions with artistic ones.

Rubens's career unfolded against the backdrop of the Thirty Years War in Europe and civil war in England. The struggle between Catholicism and Protestantism marked the history of the time. In the Netherlands Protestant Holland was resisting Spanish Catholic domination and Catholic Flanders was ruled from Antwerp under Spanish allegiance. Rubens himself had converted to Catholicism.

From 1630 Rubens spent less time on official work and concentrated more on painting. Following the death of his beloved wife four years earlier he married a young and beautiful woman named Hélène Fourment. It was with her, from 1635, that he lived at Het Steen, the house pictured in the painting.

About the Painting

The painting shows Rubens's country château at Elewijt, an area of countryside between Brussels and Antwerp. It was here that he spent the last five years of his life. The château is called Het Steen, meaning 'stone house'. When it came up for sale it was described as: 'A manorial residence with a large stone house and other fine buildings in the form of a castle, with garden, orchard, fruit trees and a drawbridge, and a large hillock on the middle of which stands a high square tower, having also a lake and a farm... the whole surrounded by moats.'

The property brought with it the title of Lord of Steen, which must have given Rubens some satisfaction as it was later inscribed on his tombstone. After removing himself from international affairs Rubens led a quiet life at Het Steen with Hélène and their children. This sense of calm and relaxation is reflected in the mood of the painting. When looking at it we can imagine the pleasure Rubens would have gained

from admiring the sweeping panoramic view over the park, pastures and farmlands. He watched the changing seasons, the effects of light on the landscape at different times of the day, and animals in both their working and natural habitats.

The painting depicts a typical early autumn morning at Het Steen. A farmer and his wife can be seen leaving for market on a cart loaded with produce for sale, including a calf with tied feet. In the foreground a hunter and his sharp-nosed dog are creeping up on a flock of partridges gathered under a small tree. Further back in the fields on the right two dairymaids can be seen milking cows. If we follow the stream left from where it is crossed by a small wooden bridge, back towards the house, we can see a fisherman leaning over the wall by the moat. Perhaps he's just got a bite! Behind him a finely dressed lady and gentleman are strolling by a gate, while another woman, possibly a nurse, sits below the trees cradling a baby. Could these figures be the artist and his family pictured in this pastoral idyll, where man and nature exist in harmony?

Painting a Landscape

The artist is trying to trick our eyes into thinking that we are not looking at a flat two-dimensional surface, but a real view across the countryside. He creates space and a sense of distance by putting the horizon line two-thirds up from the bottom of the painting, so that there is a large expanse of land. This is divided into three roughly equal horizontal bands of colour. The traditional perspective technique uses predominantly brown shades in the foreground, merging to green tones in the middle distance, fading to blue close to the horizon.

The feeling of depth is enhanced further by the artist adding more detail to the foreground. Rubens has finely painted goldfinches and a kingfisher among the bushes, with chrysanthemums, yarrow and burdock growing nearby. In the centre foreground he has carefully described white blackberry flowers and young red fruit in the brambles around the tree stump. As we look into the distance details become harder to see: it is more difficult to distinguish the individual shapes of trees, although we can just spy a windmill and a town in the far background.

To enable us to have such an extensive outlook over the landscape we would need to have both a high viewpoint as well as a much lower one: Rubens has cleverly given us two different perspectives. We share the eye-line of the hunter crouching down and looking up, as well as that of someone standing and looking at the scene straight on. It is a mark of Rubens's skill that we can change viewpoints effortlessly as our eyes move around the painting.

The Wooden Structure

The picture is painted on 19 oak panels of various sizes. It is curious that Rubens should have chosen to produce a finished painting on such an unstable surface. Perhaps, as the painting was a personal portrait of his home and not for sale, he used pieces of wood left over from making other paintings. One of the joins can be clearly seen running parallel to the bottom edge.

Time and Light

Time and light are important themes in the painting. The changes in colour which occur when late summer moves into early autumn can be seen in the trees, fruits and other plants. The early morning autumn sun shines on a landscape in which the

inhabitants go about their work, appropriate to the time of day and season. Light gleams everywhere. It catches the droplets of water as they fly up from the horses' hooves splashing through the puddles in the lane. The copper cream-churn hanging from the arm of the woman riding on the cart sparkles, and the sun itself glints through the clouds. It's the beginning of a new day.

It was also the beginning of a new phase in Rubens's life when he could enjoy the fruits of his labour. However, days and seasons pass in cycles, and Rubens was coming towards the end of his days. Perhaps this painting was a way of reminding himself of what he most valued.

Using the Picture across the Curriculum

Since 1995, through the Take One Picture scheme, the National Gallery has been promoting the use of a single image as a resource for cross-curricular work in primary schools.

The scheme enables teachers to share good teaching and learning practice and the principles of cultural enrichment using an holistic approach which highlights how subject areas support and inform each other. This aligns closely with the DfES Primary National Strategy: Excellence and Enjoyment. Information about the scheme can be found on the Take One Picture website (<http://www.takeonepicture.org.uk>) and on the Take One Picture DVD (www.nationalgallery.co.uk), available from National Gallery shops. The DVD also contains 10 exhibition films and short talks by Gallery experts on past featured paintings.

Resources

A digital image of the painting is available on the Take One Picture website (www.takeonepicture.org.uk). It can be used in the classroom on an interactive whiteboard or projector, or by individuals on PCs. It has a zoom facility which enables the viewer to see small details in the painting which are sometimes even difficult to see in the original with the naked eye.

A printed reproduction of the painting can be purchased from National Gallery shops, by mail order at mailorder@nationalgallery.org.uk, or by telephone on 020 7747 2870. A copy will also be given to teachers attending the Gallery's Continuing Professional Development courses 2006/7, which introduce the Take One Picture approach. Details of these courses, and availability, can be found at www.takeonepicture.org/cpd/schedule.html or by telephoning 020 7747 2844.

Introducing the Picture

It is a good idea to display the picture in the classroom for a few days before the teacher plans to use it in a lesson. This will give students the opportunity to discuss the image between themselves and reflect on it. Placing it against a large sheet of plain paper with an invitation to write down any questions will provide the teacher with a variety of lines of enquiry which can be developed together as a whole class, or even as a whole school.

Other possibilities include covering up parts of the picture and revealing areas during the course of a series of lessons. This would enable the class to hypothesise about the different elements in the painting. The same activity could be achieved using the digital image with a 'spotlight' programme on an interactive whiteboard.

Some ideas for Cross-Curricular Work

Use the picture as a 'text' for a speaking and listening lesson to develop skills in visual literacy, collaborative problem solving, logic and reasoning. You could ask questions such as:

- Who are the people in the picture and what are they doing?
- What time of the day is it and how do we know this?
- What season is it?
- Where might this place be?

Ask what sounds the students might hear if they stood in the landscape. Make a 'soundscape' incorporating the students' ideas and music. (Music/Art and Design)

Take a close look at the figures in the picture and ask students to make up identities for them that could be extended into stories or plays. (English/Art and Design)

Students could use a 'freeze frame' to discover what might happen to the people or animals next, or a 'hot seat' to think about characterisation. (Drama/Art and Design)

Descriptions could be written about places the students know well, perhaps their own homes and neighbourhoods. Compare different styles of writing about homes, for example passages from novels and estate agents' details. (Literacy/Geography/Art and Design)

Ask students what the magpies might see as they look down. Use the information to create an aerial map of the landscape. You could look at websites such as Google Earth (<http://earth.google.com/>) to help students picture this perspective. Can you find Het Steen today? (Geography/ICT/Science/Literacy/Art and Design)

The class could 'adopt a tree' over the course of a year, observing and recording the way it changes with the seasons. (Science/Citizenship)

Look at the landscape that can be seen from a classroom window. Use simple viewfinders made from paper or card to help visually record specific scenes. Older pupils could find out how to make and use an Alberti Square. (Maths/Geography/Art and Design)

Look at the period of history during which the painting was made. (History/Art and Design)

Make dioramas in boxes to illustrate perspective, dividing the foreground, middle distance and background. Incorporate techniques using detail and colour to create the illusion of a large space. (Maths/Art and Design/DT)

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