

NOVEMBER 1986 VOLUME 17, NUMBER 2 PUBLISHED BY SCHOLASTIC UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ISSN 0004-3052

# art & man



THE ART OF  
PETER BRUEGEL  
TELLING A STORY



# THE WORLD OF PETER BRUEGEL



Artists in the 16th century told stories of everyday events — filled with highly realistic details.

## WHAT WOULD IT BE LIKE TO TRAVEL BACK IN TIME TO THE MEDIEVAL WORLD OF ARTIST PETER BRUEGEL?

**M**EN TRAMPING THROUGH THE snow, ominous, black birds circling the bare branches, people skating on ice-covered ponds in the gray winter light. Do the images shown above look familiar? Perhaps you recognize this scene from Christmas cards, posters, book covers, or even record album  
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covers that have featured this painting. Or maybe in a month or so, if you live in the north, you might see a snowy landscape very much like this while you are on a skiing trip, a winter weekend in the country, or even looking out your own window at home.

This painting, *Hunters in the Snow*, is one of the most famous images of winter ever created. And

PETER BRUEGEL (1525-1569). *HUNTERS IN THE SNOW*, 1565. OIL. 46" x 63<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM, VIENNA.



except for the hunters' clothing, can you find much else in the landscape that looks very different from the way it might today — the houses, the boys playing hockey on the ponds in the distance, the children sleighriding? This work was done over 400 years ago by the Flemish painter Peter Bruegel (BROY-gel). Not very much is known about the artist. He was born around 1525 (just a little over 30 years after Columbus discovered America) in a small village on the border between the modern countries of Holland and Belgium. Bruegel studied painting when he was young, and in 1551 became a Master Painter in the large, thriving Belgian city of Antwerp. He travelled in Italy for a year, then returned to Antwerp where he worked in a studio making engravings. In 1563, Bruegel married, moved to Brussels, and had two sons, both of whom later became painters. During the last five years of his life — the artist died in 1569 — Bruegel created his greatest masterpieces, including nearly all of the works shown in this issue.

Bruegel's 16th-century Flanders was a hard place in which to live. The climate was forbidding — the winters were long, dark, and cold — and it was a time of violent political and religious conflict. The powerful Catholic Church clashed constantly with the new Protestant sects. Imagine living in a world without heating, plumbing, transportation, electricity, or medical care. There was little communication — no TV, radio, newspapers, and hardly any books. Artists did paintings for a few wealthy patrons and made engravings — from which many less expensive copies could be printed — for the ordinary people. And all of these visual images had to tell stories. They had to be instructive, entertaining, loaded with details, and contain symbols or messages that could be "read" like a book. The Bible was a favorite source for artists, and Bruegel's painting *Fall of the Rebel Angels* (right) is based on a Biblical story. Angels bathed in the bright light of heaven chase a group of evil angels who have been transformed into horrible monsters. Here Bruegel's imaginary details — the scales, wings, and claws of each fantastic creature — seem as believable as the details depicted in the "real" world of *Hunters in the Snow*. In this work, the artist has used tiny details to bring an entire era to life. In the foreground, the hunters and their tired dogs return home after a long day in the woods. At the left, a group of women roast a pig under the sign of the Inn of the Stag. And in the background, warmly dressed villagers carry firewood and play hockey and other games out on the ice.

In this issue, you'll see more of the extraordinary



FALL OF THE REBEL ANGELS (DETAIL), 1562. OIL. 46" x 63 3/4". MUSEES ROYAUX DES BEAUX ARTS, BRUSSELS.

**Flemish artists, like Bruegel, also told fantastic, nightmarish tales featuring monsters and devils.**

paintings of Peter Bruegel, you'll learn how other artists use detail to build visual messages, and finally you'll create your own story, using a contemporary version of Bruegel's narrative techniques. □



# BRINGING A STORY TO LIFE



PEASANT WEDDING, 1567. OIL, 44 7/8" x 64 7/8" KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM, VIENNA.

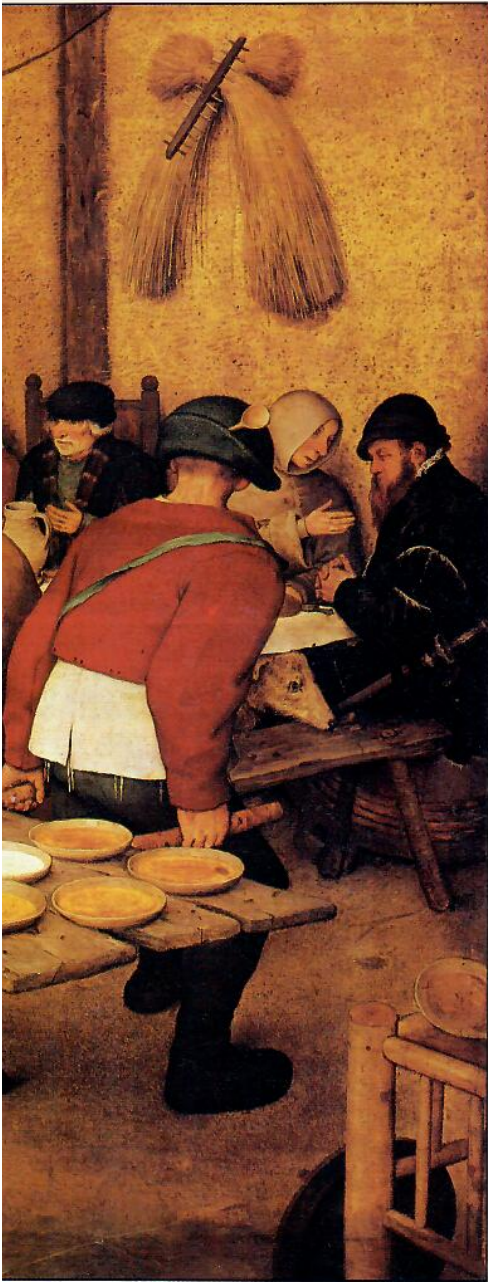
## WHAT IS THE STORY BEHIND THIS PAINTING?

**H**AVE YOU EVER BEEN TO A wedding, or seen one on TV or in a film? First there is the ceremony, then a reception or some kind of party. And people usually take photos to remember

and tell the story of the event. That's what Peter Bruegel has done in this work. But what makes most wedding pictures just snapshots, while Bruegel's painting *Peasant Wedding* is a great work of art?

In telling the story of this wedding dinner, Bruegel





Artist Peter Bruegel lived in the city, but he liked to take trips into the country. Sometimes he disguised himself as a peasant and went to country fairs and weddings like the one at the left, bringing gifts and claiming to be a relative of the bride or groom. The wedding guest seen in the detail below is thought to be a self-portrait of the artist.



PEASANT WEDDING, (DETAIL)

point your eye enters the picture, where does your attention eventually go? The guests sweep in the door at the left, and your eye moves down the table to the right. Or, if your first glance falls on the two men in front (carrying dishes on an old door that has been turned into a tray), your eye still moves up to the focal point of the picture — the face of the young woman in the upper right-hand portion of the work. Her expression, the dark cloth hung behind her, and the paper crown above her head indicate that she is a new bride. The stacked hay behind the wooden beams in back shows that this wedding feast is taking place in her father's barn — the crossed sheaves of wheat on the wall stand for the end of harvest-time.

Now that you have figured out what is going on, can you tell who the people in this visual story are? You've already found the bride, but where is the groom? Is he the man at the head of the table handing out bowls? Or is her new husband the young man at the left pouring mugs of beer? However, if you look closely at the features of these two men, they both look very much like the bride. They are also wearing farm clothes. Could they be her brothers? A woman, her figure partially hidden, sits beside the bride. This may be her mother. But then who is the older couple on the other side of the bride? They are sitting in a place of honor and seem better dressed than the other guests. Could they be the parents of the groom? The groom could be the richly dressed man on the extreme right talking to a hooded monk, although this guest is probably an official from a nearby town. Can you find any other possible grooms? What about the man in the center, leaning back with a cup in his hand? His features look like those of the older couple next to the bride, and all three are in "city" clothes. If he is the groom, how might the bride be feeling?

Like all great works of art, *Peasant Wedding* can be "read" on many different levels. Most of Bruegel's people are "types" not individuals, and each of their faces represents a specific emotion. The musician on the left looks at the feast with *envy*, while the man in the center *greedily* demands another drink. Bruegel usually also included objects as symbols to emphasize moral messages. The pile of beer mugs in the lower left corner stands for *gluttony*, while the peacock feather worn by the little girl sitting next to the mugs is a symbol of *vanity*. And finally, there is one mystery in this painting that no one seems able to answer. Look at the man on the right who carries the front end of the "tray." How many feet does he have? Look at his shoes. If this man has only two feet, then which two are they? □

answers all the questions a good newspaper reporter would. *What* is going on; *where* and *when* is it happening; *who* are the people involved? How has Bruegel composed his picture so you know almost immediately that this is a wedding? No matter at what



# BUILDING A TOWER TO NOWHERE

MASTERPIECE OF THE MONTH: PREVIEW



PETER BRUEGEL, TOWER OF BABEL, 1563.

WHAT STORY DO THESE THREE SCENES TELL? TURN THE PAGE TO FIND OUT.

**W**HAT DO YOU THINK OF WHEN you look at the building shown above and on the next page? Does it look like a modern skyscraper, an ancient monument, or a giant sculpture being carved out of a mountain? And, is it being constructed or is it actually falling apart?

If you lived in Peter Bruegel's time, you would probably have no trouble identifying this building. Not many people in 16th-century Flanders were able to read, but there were certain narratives that nearly everyone knew by heart. And the Biblical story of the

construction of this enormous structure, *The Tower of Babel*, was one of them. In ancient Babylon a proud and greedy king, Nimrod, ordered a tower built that would reach the clouds and challenge heaven. For his arrogance, God punished Nimrod by causing his workers to speak in a babble of languages. No one was able to understand anyone else, so the tower was never finished. This story was very popular not only because in it an oppressive ruler was put in his place, but also because the theme reflected the political and social conditions of the period. Flanders had been taken over several times, and the people already had to use many different languages. Now, in Bruegel's time, the country was ruled by the King of Spain, who was forcing everyone to speak Spanish. No one was allowed to protest openly, but artists like Bruegel were able to choose subjects and include details containing double meanings and disguised messages.

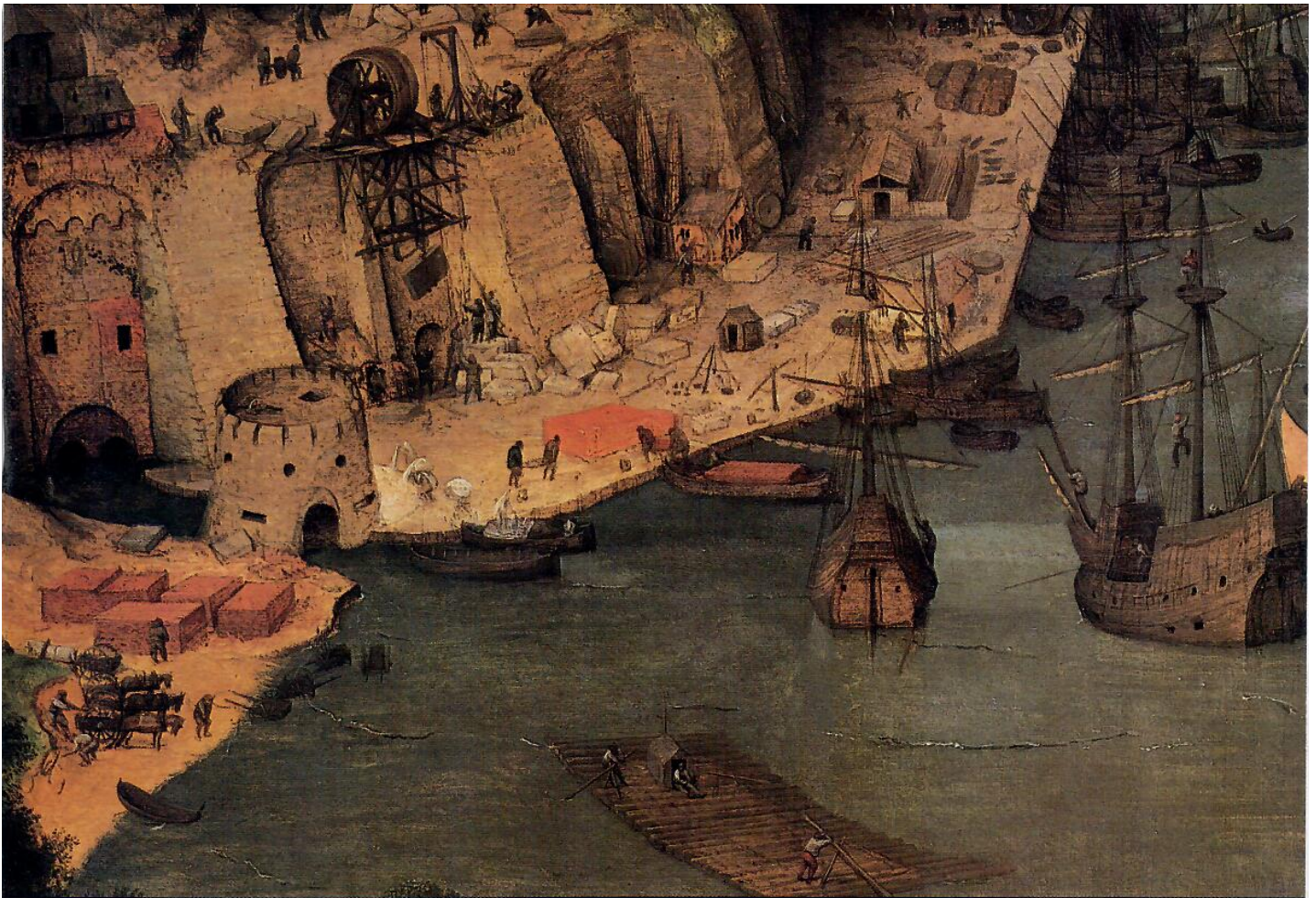
Bruegel has combined an ancient Roman Colosseum with a busy Flemish city to create his *Tower of Babel*. The painting tells a number of stories. Can you find the detail on this page that tells the story of Nimrod? Bruegel places the king in the lower left corner of the painting, presenting him as a petty official whose arrival merely slows down the work — in fact, some of the stonemasons just ignore him and continue working. The base of the tower isn't badly built, but when you look at the top, can you see the consequences of Nimrod's folly? The arches don't go together and many sections have never been completed. Can you even find structures that shouldn't be where they are? Bruegel's painting could also serve as a visual history lesson, showing how people lived during this period. Whole walled villages can be seen



TOWER OF BABEL (DETAIL).

In this detail, can you find the main character in the story — the king who wanted to build the tallest tower in the world?





In this detail taken from the painting shown above left, Bruegel shows exactly how Flemish ships unloaded their cargoes onto flatboats and rafts. The materials were then raised by cranes operated by men running inside treadmills.

in the background, ships are unloading in the harbor, and every detail of the farms at the base of the tower is included. In addition, this work is a kind of instruction book on building techniques of the time. Workers are shown cutting stone, laying bricks, plastering, and using complicated machines to lift heavy loads.

In this and all his other paintings, Peter Bruegel has used a vast number of meticulously executed details to give his stories a feeling of reality. But only when the viewer carefully studies this work do the tiny details reveal themselves. They are all incorporated into one powerful, central image. In creating a painting like this, Bruegel would make a number of sketches and notes, then take them back to his studio.

He would carefully arrange all the elements in his composition, working on a large wooden panel made of aged oak. The artist would do the final painting in oils, building up his colors with layer after layer of thin, transparent oil glazes. This gives the work its luminous, almost "glowing" effect.

Bruegel created *The Tower of Babel* over four centuries ago. His tower doesn't look very modern, but can you find a contemporary parallel with city skyscrapers that seem to go up, last for a few years, then are torn down to make way for newer skyscrapers? Do you think Bruegel's larger message might be that worldly success based solely on material achievements is doomed to failure? Does it apply today? □

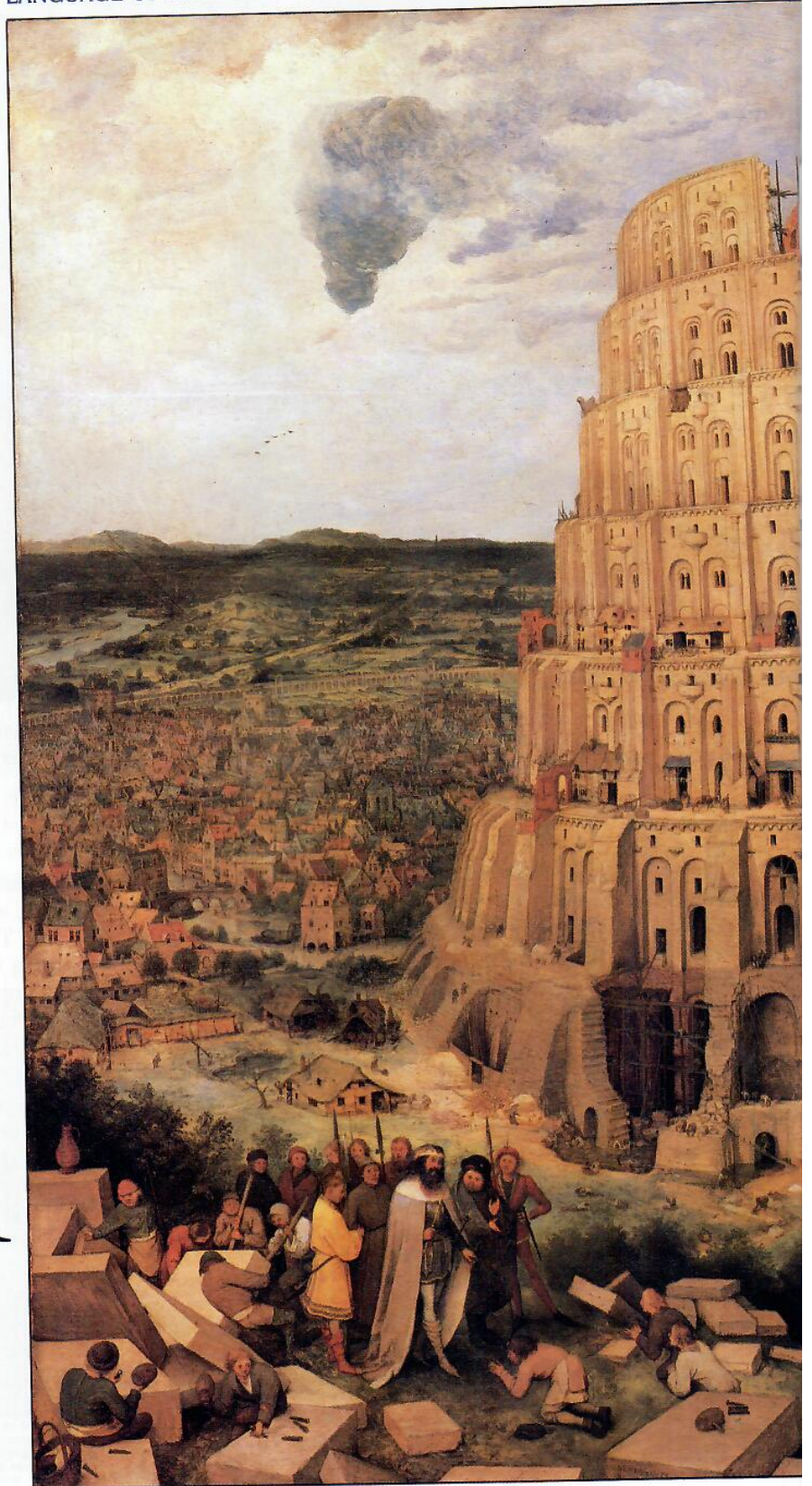
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**ART & MAN (ISSN 0004-3052; in Canada, 2-c no. 9360)** is published six times during the school year, Sept./Oct., Nov., Dec./Jan., Feb., Mar., Apr./May, by Scholastic Inc., 730 Broadway, New York, NY 10003-9538 for \$4.95 each per school year, for 10 or more subscriptions to the same address. 1-9 subscriptions, each: \$9.90 student, \$19.00 Teachers' Edition, per school year. Single copy: \$1.50 student, \$3.25 Teachers'; special issue: \$2.00 student, \$5.00 Teachers'; (For Canadian pricing, write our Canadian office, address below.) Second-class postage paid at Monroe, OH 45050-9998 and at additional mailing offices. Postmasters: Send address changes to Office of Publication, ART & MAN, 351 Garver Rd., Box 2700, Monroe, OH 45050-2700. Communications relating to subscriptions should be addressed to ART & MAN, P.O. Box 644, Lyndhurst, NJ 07071-9985. Canadian address: Scholastic-Tab Publications, Ltd., 123 Newkirk Rd., Richmond Hill, Ontario L4C 3G5. Available on microfilm through Xerox University Microfilms, Inc., 300 N. Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Also available on microfiche through Bell & Howell Micro Photo Division, Old Mansfield Rd., Wooster, OH 44691. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1986 by Scholastic Inc. All Rights Reserved. **Material in this issue may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any form or format without special permission from the publisher.**

COVER: PETER BRUEGEL (1525-1569). HUNTERS IN THE SNOW, (DETAIL).



"AND THEREFORE IS THE NAME OF THIS TOWER CALLED BABEL; BECAUSE THE LORD DID THERE CONFOUND THE LANGUAGE OF ALL THE EARTH." — THE BOOK OF GENESIS 11:9



# THE TOWER OF BABEL

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**art&man** MASTERPIECE OF THE MONTH # 2  
**BY PETER BRUEGEL**



PETER BRUEGEL (1525-1569), TOWER OF BABEL, 1563. OIL. 44 7/8" x 61" KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM, VIENNA.



# STORIES OF PEOPLE & NATURE

Find out how young, contemporary American artists are updating one of Peter Bruegel's favorite themes.

## MYSTERIES IN PAINT

In pictures like *Hunters in the Snow* (see cover and page 2), Peter Bruegel painted a world in which the small figures of human beings were overwhelmed by the vast, hostile elements of nature. Today, even with all our modern conveniences, natural forces still control our lives to a certain extent. And many contemporary American artists like Jennifer Bartlett base their work on this theme. Bartlett's environmental work *Sea Wall* (below) is made up of a large painting, four nearly life-sized wooden boats, four small metal houses, some cement blocks, and an odd little bench. Compare the three-dimensional objects in front to those shown in the painting. Do they look similar? But what does all this mean? Imagine walking

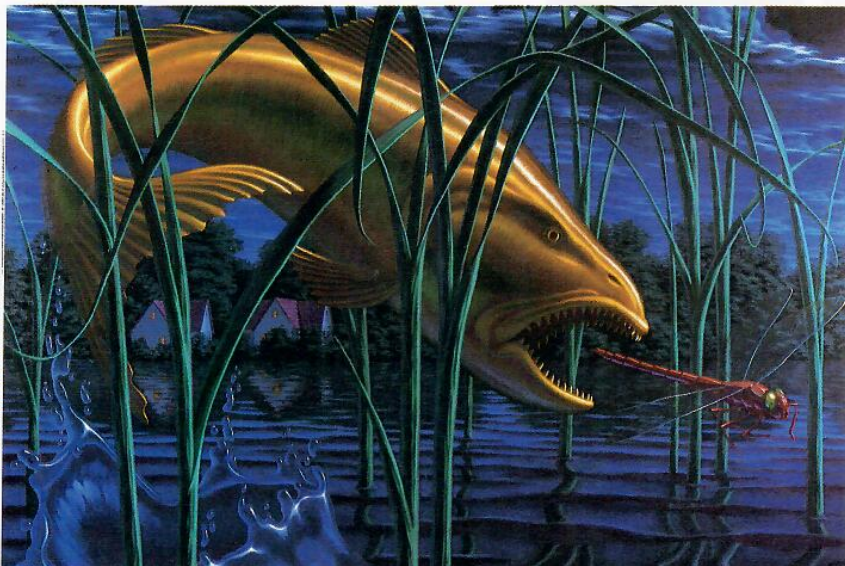
among these objects, looking at them from every side, and comparing them with their painted images. What seems to have happened to these pastel, toy-like, "real" forms when depicted by the artist in paint? Bartlett has shown them as they might look on a stormy night. Threatening waves break over the seawall, and all the objects seem to hang in space in a weird, dream-like way. How would *Sea Wall* work as a painting only, or as just a group of sculptures without the painting in back? In this work is nature calm and comforting, or hostile, or both? And who is it who sees it that way? If you think of *Sea Wall* as a kind of performance or drama, then the painting is a backdrop and the boats and houses are props. Who might the main character be in Bartlett's play?



JENNIFER BARTLETT (B.1941), SEA WALL, 1985, MIXED MEDIA,  
14 x 20 BROOKLYN MUSEUM, N.Y. PHOTO BY ROBERT E. MATES.



LEONARD KOSCIANSKI (B.1956). SMALL POND, 1985. OIL. 8' X 12'. KARL BORNSTEIN GALLERY, SANTA MONICA, CA.



Great white wolves attack each other, huge birds swoop down on terrified pigs, and here a monstrous, shark-like fish is about to snap up a large insect. This scene from a seemingly cruel, but necessary, cycle of nature could almost be taking place in a prehistoric time. The place looks swampy, the plants lush and primitive, and the creatures are gigantic and dinosaur-like. But this impression is created by their expressions, size, and color. The fish is really an ordinary trout or salmon and it is capturing a small dragonfly. And look closely to the left, under the fish's tail. You can just make out the lights of two small houses in the background. Their identical size, shape, and close placement indicate that suburbia is not far away. By day this probably looks like a sleepy little pond, surrounded by highways and subdivisions. But at night, when human beings are asleep, nature takes over.

### SUBURBAN STORIES

American artist Leonard Koscianski (Ko-zi-ANN-skee) also looks at contemporary Americans' relationship with nature. What do you see first

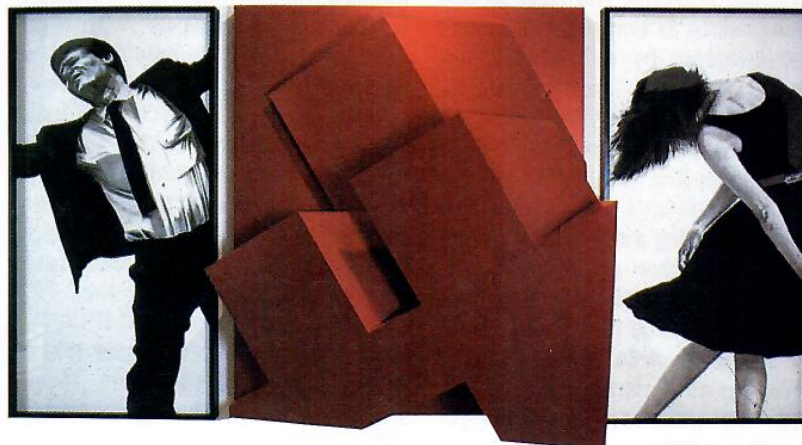
in the painting above and where would you imagine the event pictured is taking place? All of Koscianski's stories take place in very natural-looking areas — woods, ponds, meadows. Some savage drama is almost always going on.

### TALES OF THE CITY

What kind of story does the work shown below right, done by contemporary American artist Robert Longo, suggest to you? A black and white drawing of a man is on the left, a woman is on the right. Separating these two figures is a large three-dimensional form containing simplified rectangular shapes that look somewhat like buildings. The work is called *Men in the Cities: Final Life*. The two people on each side seem to be twisting and turning. Are they jumping, or dancing, or perhaps dodging objects being aimed at them? Why are they wearing "business" clothes, why are their figures so tightly cropped, and how are these two people related to the diagonal red shapes in the

middle? The artist has said, "I looked around one day and realized that we're all individual figures of isolation, walking on cement, looking up at glass walls and tops of buildings which sometimes seem to be falling on top of us. I felt like this really small guy surrounded by the creepy monu-

mentality of buildings." What do you think he means, and how is this reflected in the work below? Are people who live in cities cut off from nature, or have they created their own version of nature? What might the artist be saying about people's relationship to their own self-created surroundings?

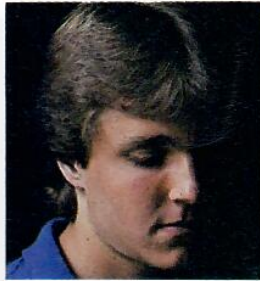


ROBERT LONGO (B.1954). MEN IN THE CITIES: FINAL LIFE, 1981-82. MIXED MEDIA. 7' X 18'. METRO PICTURES, NY.



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## ARTIST OF THE MONTH



# CHRIS ALDRIDGE SENDING HIDDEN MESSAGES

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**T**ake a look at the drawing on the right. What do you think this fantastic landscape is all about? What do all the eggs and birds represent? Can you find a mirror, a bridge, and a devil hidden in the hillside? Before you read this article, think about why the hawk in the center is pulling an egg out of some black sticky liquid. Where will it take the egg afterward? Compare both sides of the landscape.

Seventeen-year-old Chris Aldridge — the artist who did this Scholastic Art Award-winning drawing — likes to incorporate mysterious messages into his art. Ordinary objects like eggs, birds, and mirrors take on unexpected meanings in his highly detailed fantasy worlds. We talked to Chris at his home in Raleigh, North Carolina, last summer as he was getting ready for his first year at North Carolina State University.

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### **How did you learn how to do ink drawings like this?**

In the 9th grade, my teacher showed us how to use pen and ink. Shading with pencil or charcoal is easy, but with ink you have to use lines or dots. It takes a lot of practice. I started by working with a simple shape — like a ball — shading it with dots until it looked round. I did this in my spare time, working on it a little at a time.

### **Was this drawing a class assignment?**

Yes, every year our class has a calendar competition. We do ink drawings, and the best ones get put in a calendar we sell to make money for the art department. This also made me want to excel — to get

my work into the calendar.

### **How did you begin?**

I kept thinking about the drawing, at home or in all my classes. It just popped into my head that I wanted it to be a landscape, with two pieces of land connected by a bridge. One side would be barren, rocky, and arid. The other, lush and green. I also got the idea for the bridge to symbolize Christ. You can see how his arms are stretched out and his head is bent down. And so the bridge became a kind of bridge to a better life.

### **How did you figure all these things out so they'd work together?**

I'd sketch out the things I already

knew I wanted. Then I'd have to figure out what would be a good symbol for what. Like the eggs — they represent humans who are trapped in black stuff which stands for sin. They're flowing down toward their death, shown by cracked eggs and scraggly bushes.

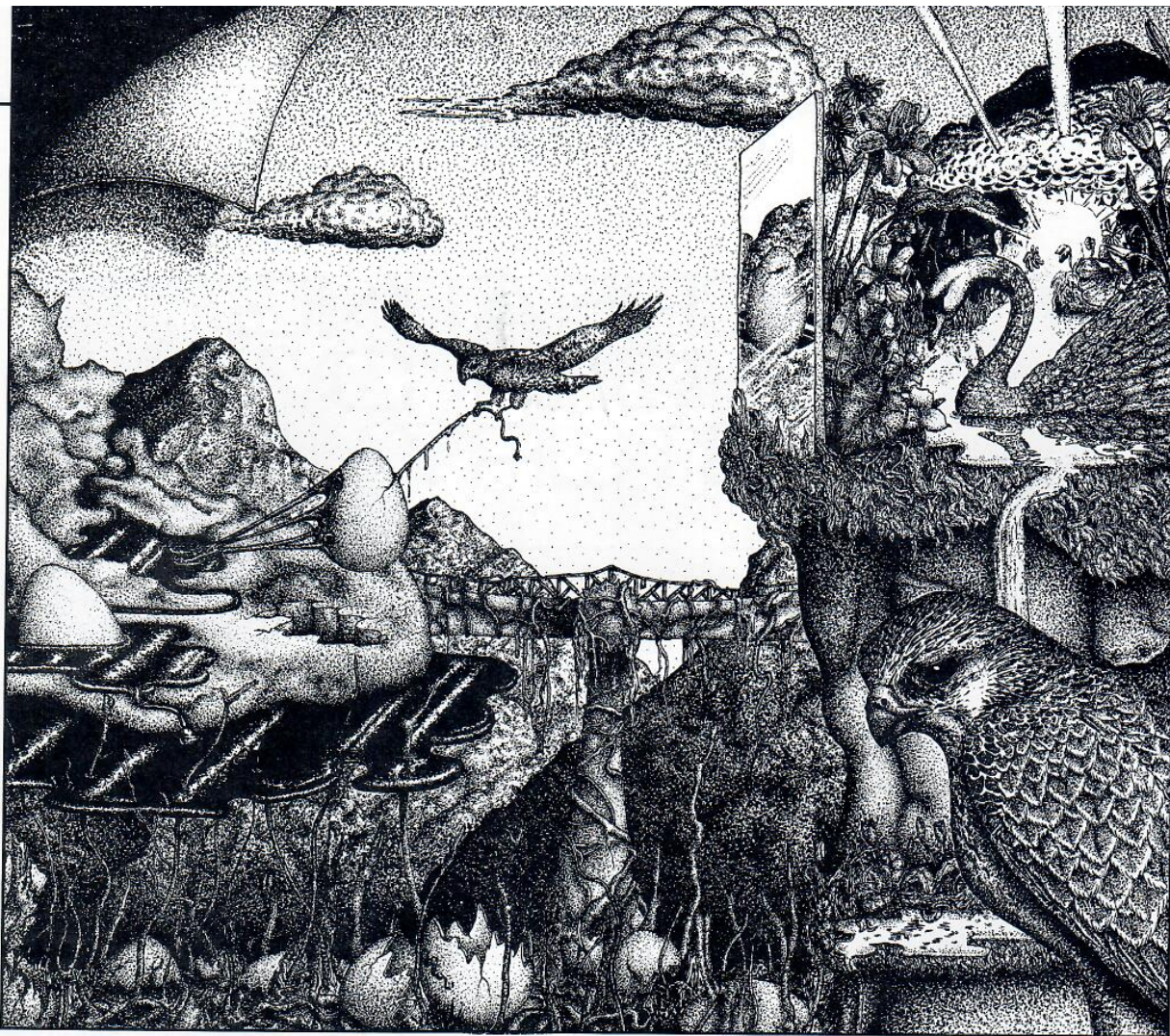
The more I thought about the images, the more they changed — for example, at first I was going to use worms instead of eggs.

### **How did you do the final drawing?**

I did it one section at a time — penciling it in first. I'd do the parts I was most confident of and avoid the things I was scared of. Like the black liquid stuff coming out of the devil's mouth.

PHOTOS BY JANET SODERBERG





**What devil?**

It's pretty hard to make him out, but maybe you can see the profile of his eye and nose and horn in the mountain over in the upper left corner. I didn't really want his face to stand out too much. I didn't want my meaning to be too obvious. It's more interesting if other people can find their own meaning in my drawings too.

But anyway, gradually I tackled the hard stuff as I felt more confident about it. The hawk in the foreground was difficult because he was so close and I wanted him to be perfect. I found some pictures of birds, which helped. I was striving for realism — as much texture and detail as possible.

**What do the birds represent?**

The hawks are like warriors, and they're trying to free the eggs from

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**“I didn't want my meaning to be too obvious. It's more interesting if other people can find their own meaning in my drawings too.”**

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the black stuff and bring them over to the other side. Meanwhile the mirror is blocking the eggs' view. All they can see is their own world — not how nice it might be to be over where the swans are. As I drew, things came to me that I hadn't even planned — like the way the corner of the paper seems to curl. Actually I spilled ink up there, and this is how I covered it up. But it came to symbolize the idea of things being temporary. Time is always passing.

**Did anything else present a problem?**

After awhile, everything started to blend in. I didn't have enough light and dark. I had to keep mak-

ing the mountains darker to make images like the bridge and bushes stand out. I was getting exasperated. The whole thing just started looking junky. I had wanted to keep it clean. But I'd put in so much work, I had to keep going.

**Were you pleased when it was done?**

It wasn't exactly what I wanted, but then again, my drawings never really are. The satisfaction came more when I was working on it, thinking about it, molding it. I guess that's what I like about art. It gives you a chance to express on paper, in one shot, what might take thousands of words to say. There's infinite possibilities to it.



# CREATING YOUR OWN STORY

Discover a way to tell a story without using any words.

**C**ompare the painting on the left by Peter Bruegel with the one reproduced on the cover. In each work, what story is the painter telling? In one he shows people struggling against natural forces; in the other, he depicts people interacting with each

other. Although Bruegel's paintings are filled with carefully observed details, each work is based on a definite, overall *theme*. In this workshop, you will be combining many different elements to create your own modern landscape with a story behind it.

## MATERIALS

- A variety of topic magazines
- 12" x 18" oak tag paper
- India ink and fine pen points
- Rubber cement
- X-Acto knives
- Paper towels
- Thick cardboard to cut on

## STARTING OUT

**1** You will be creating a landscape in which a figure — or figures — relate in some way to tell a story. Collect images from magazines and think of a theme. Carefully remove the whole page the image you want is on.

PETER BRUEGEL (1525-1569) THE PEASANT DANCE. (DETAIL) 1568. OIL. 44 7/8" x 64 5/8" KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM, VIENNA.



In this detail from his painting *The Peasant Dance*, Bruegel combines many different stories — two children dance, a man argues with a musician, two men fight, a couple embrace, a man coaxes a woman out to dance — in order to tell the story of a village festival.





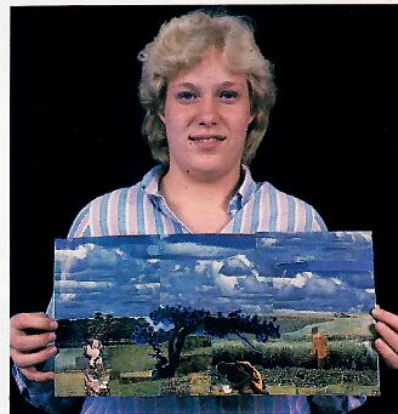
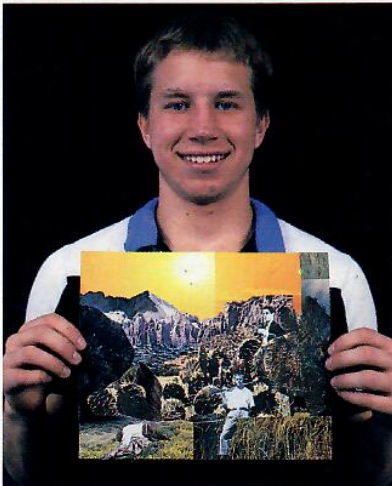


**2** When you have enough pictures and a theme, *carefully* cut out specific images with an X-Acto knife. (Cut on top of thick cardboard.) Arrange images into an organized, balanced composition within a rectangular or square format. Do not glue down yet. Establish a foreground, middleground, and background. You can use *contrasts* of size, light and dark, and color to make each area stand out.



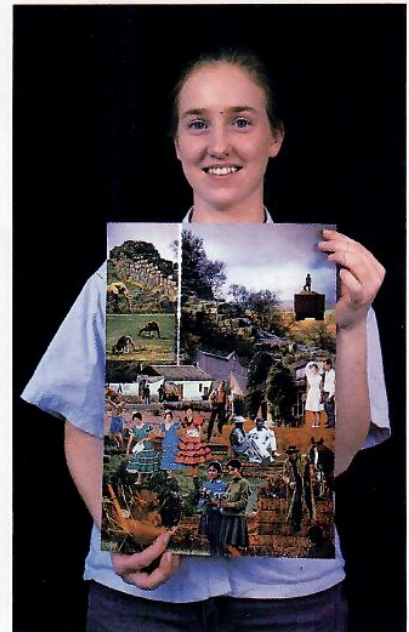
**3** Telling a story should be the main objective. Try to avoid Surreal overtones — such as making small objects too large and combining unrelated objects. Keep size relationships as they might “real-

ly” appear and make *transitions* between foreground, middle-ground, and background. You can do this by overlapping and making objects in front appear large. When your composition is arranged, carefully glue down all the parts.



#### SOME SOLUTIONS

Which of these themes might you choose — man in harmony with or struggling against nature; the interactions of people in a small town; the relationship between two people in various settings — on vacation, having an adventure, sharing outdoor work? You can combine parts of different figures; various different landscape areas can



“blend” into each other. Balance your composition using large and small shapes. Your collage should have one major *focal point* — like the main character in a story.

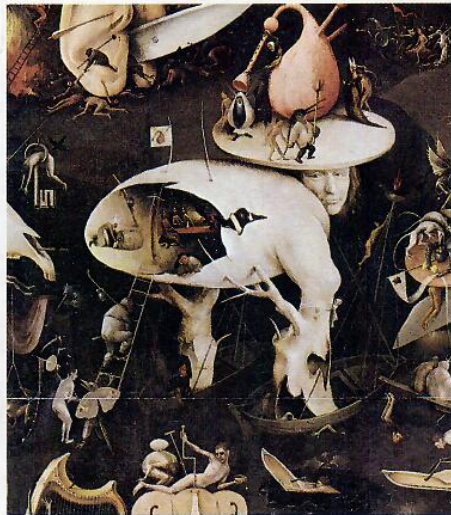


## ARTS ALIVE

Peter Bruegel lived four centuries ago, but today  
his work is more popular than ever.

### THE AGE OF BRUEGEL

Peter Bruegel was one of a number of Flemish artists who worked in the 1500s. One of the best known of these artists was Hieronymus Bosch (heer-ON-a-mus Bosh), some of whose most frightening and nightmarish images were used by Bruegel in his own works. (You may recognize the detail on the right from one of Bosch's most famous paintings). You can see nearly 100 drawings by Bruegel, Bosch, and others in a new exhibition *The Age of Bruegel: Netherlandish Drawings of the Sixteenth Century* at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, from Nov. 2, 1986-Jan. 11, 1987. The show will then go to the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City, Jan. 29-April 5, 1987.



HIERONYMUS BOSCH (1450-1516), GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS. (DETAIL) C. 1500. OIL. PRADO, MADRID.

### BRUEGEL PRINTS

As you can see by comparing the print on the right with the painting detail shown above, Peter Bruegel was greatly influenced by the work of the earlier artist Hieronymus Bosch. Can you find a gigantic egg with legs and a huge knife in the pictures of both artists? If you



live in the New York City area, you will be able to see this work and 70 other Bruegel engravings in a new exhibition, *The Prints of Peter Bruegel*. The show will open at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Jan. 13 and continue through March 15, 1987.

PETER BRUEGEL (1525-1568), PATIENCE, 1557. WOOD ENGRAVING.



### BRUEGEL TODAY



Peter Bruegel had two sons, both of whom became artists. Contemporary American painter Pat Steir has used a flower painting by Bruegel's younger son Jan (see smaller painting, left) to tell her own visual story. She has enlarged Bruegel's image, broken it up into panels, and done each square in the style of a different art movement — Cubism, Impressionism, etc. This capsule history of art — *The Bruegel Series* (far left) will be at the Dallas Museum of Art: Nov. 1, 1986-Jan. 4, 1987.

PAT STEIR, (B. 1939), *THE BRUEGEL SERIES*, 1985. OIL. 19 x 15. DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART, TX.

JAN BRUEGEL (1568-1625) STILL LIFE, 1618. KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM, VIENNA.