

ART APPRECIATION

The Table as a Social Form:

Ceremony, Labor, and Belonging

The English place setting

Two butlers inspect the glasses before the guests arrive. From a guest's chair, all that work might look like the host's good taste.

"good breeding requires time, application and expense"

Thorstein Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class (1899), ch. III



The Gilded Age · HBO · 0:49

Pizza with the family

The McCallisters pass around boxes of pizza. The talk overlaps and everyone eats with their hands. When Kevin asks for plain cheese, the kind he likes is already gone.



Home Alone · Chris Columbus, 1990 · 1:32



Serving the feast

Two men carry shallow dishes on a door lifted off its hinges. A seated man twists to receive a dish. The carriers fill the foreground, although the feast is being held for someone else.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Peasant Wedding, c. 1567. Oil on panel. Detail, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



THE LINE OF THE TABLE

The table narrows toward the open barn door.

Bruegel, The Peasant Wedding, c. 1567. Detail.

The guest of honor

The bride sits against a green cloth, her hands folded beneath a paper crown. According to a Flemish custom, she waited until the groom joined the feast that evening.

“the bride was not permitted either to eat or to speak beforehand.”

Cäcilia Bischoff, Kunsthistorisches Museum (2010)



Detail of the bride beneath the paper crown. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

A child at the feast

At the edge of the feast, a child licks a finger beside the beer jugs. Bruegel gives this small pleasure a place of its own. Genre painting takes scenes of everyday life as its subject.



Detail of the child and the serving jugs. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



A meal under the tree



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Harvesters, 1565. Oil on oak. Detail, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In the tree’s shade, a man lies flat while the others share bread and cheese.

Beyond them, workers bend to gather the cut wheat into sheaves.

“Bread was the mainstay then.”

Linda Civitello, food historian, The Met audio guide

The ploughman and Icarus

"In picture after picture Bruegel collected the evidence for a prosecution which he had no sure reason for believing would ever be mounted."

John Berger, "The Case Against Us," Portraits, p. 41

In Berger's words, "The charge he wanted brought was that of indifference." A man guides a plough in the foreground. At the lower right, Icarus's legs break the surface of the water. Berger asks how a disaster can go almost unseen.



Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, authorship uncertain. Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.

Two events in the same landscape



Detail of the ploughman at work.



Detail of the falling legs beside the ship.

> “The peasant bent over his plough could not be held entirely responsible for failing to notice Icarus.”
>
> John Berger, “The Case Against Us,” Portraits, p. 42

From above, the viewer can see the furrow and the splash at once. The ploughman has the horse and the ground directly in front of him.

The guest who also serves

“He made no neat division between the innocent and the guilty. He refrained from moralising. He set no single figure up as a bad or good example.”

John Berger, “The Case Against Us,” Portraits, p. 43

A seated guest turns to take a dish from the carriers. For a moment he is both a diner and a server. Berger’s account of Bruegel gives that small exchange room to mean more than one thing.



Detail of the door and the table. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Peasant Wedding, c. 1567. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

A crowd around the cross

> “In a painting all its elements are there to be seen simultaneously.”

John Berger and collaborators, Ways of Seeing (1972), p. 26

Christ has fallen near the center of the crowd. The mill on the crag and the mourners at the front are easier to see at first. In Ways of Seeing, successive details from this panel show how a film can direct attention through a painting.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Christ Carrying the Cross, 1564. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

What paper contributes

> “The paper lends itself between the lines to becoming tree, stone, grass, water, cloud.”

John Berger, “To Take Paper, to Draw,” Landscapes, ch. 2, PDF p. 40

Berger wrote this about a mountain landscape drawing associated with Bruegel. In another sheet, The Beekeepers, pale paper suggests the workers’ sleeves. Closely spaced pen strokes give the basket hives their woven surface.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Beekeepers, c. 1568. Pen and brown ink, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin.

What the field holds together

> “His moral passion is revealed only in the unwavering determination with which he presents the facts for judgement.”

John Berger, “The Case Against Us,” Portraits, p. 43

The man asleep beneath the tree and the men swinging scythes share the same afternoon. The painting holds both moments in view. A worker in the field would experience only one of them at a time.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Harvesters, 1565. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

“To the peasant all food represents work accomplished.

John Berger, “The Eaters and the Eaten” (1976), p. 371

A pocketknife and a place setting



The Gilded Age, HBO. The English place setting.

"The knife is worn, used for many purposes other than eating, and usefully sharp."

"Every dish has its own cutlery and plate."

John Berger, "The Eaters and the Eaten," p. 371

A worker uses the same knife to share a loaf. At the formal table, separate utensils mark each course, and a kitchen door keeps the preparation out of sight.

A feast and a break from work



The Peasant Wedding · Detail



The Harvesters · Detail

The wedding carriers are still working while the guests celebrate. In the field, part of the working day belongs to the people eating.

“The feast, small or large, is made to mark a special recurring moment or an unrepeatable occasion.”

John Berger, “The Eaters and the Eaten,” p. 373

A merchant’s dining room

The Antwerp merchant Niclaes Jongelinck commissioned six seasonal landscapes for his country dining room. At his own table he could look across a field where other people were eating.

“a real fantasy of visibility”

Adam Eaker, curator, The Met audio guide



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Harvesters, 1565. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The cutter’s back

A cutter bends low to swing his scythe. From across the dining room, the field might look orderly. Up close, the bend in his back gives that order a physical cost.

“in a sympathetic yet idealized light”

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, collection entry



Detail of the workers cutting grain. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Bruegel's crowd

"In Brueghel, peasants form a large part of the crowd which is mankind"

John Berger, Portraits, ch. 24, class PDF p. 203

The bagpiper glances at the dishes. The child licks a finger. Each has something quite particular to do within the crowd.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Peasant Wedding, c. 1567. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

TUESDAY · JEAN-FRANÇOIS MILLET

Millet gives three women the foreground. What in the painting tells us how much of the harvest they control?