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N A T I O N A L C O L L E G E O F A R T A N D

D E S I G N , D U B L I N

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AIMS OF PERSONAL PROJECT:

1. To achieve a deepening knowledge and an increased insight into the subject under consideration.
2. To understand the interplay of seasons on the environment and the role man plays in it.
3. To achieve the mood of each season through composition.
4. To develop perceptual skills.
5. To develop technical skills.
6. To gain insight into theme by historical research.

SCOPE OF PERSONAL PROJECT

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My sculptural work up till now has largely been based on the figure in isolation or in a group. The background or its setting never seemed too important or was neglected as I tried to gain as much knowledge as I could of the figure itself, and to use it to suggest different emotions and expressions.

Here in the West of Ireland countryside, I see the landscape as an important backdrop and also a very influential element when seeing the figure. Here I see people going about everyday work in time with the landscape.

The seasonal changes are reflected in the figures. What they wear and the work they do changes in accordance with it. The stance and mood of the person is also affected by the seasons.

The figure working in the landscape, and how the work is affected by the seasons will form the basic theme for my personal project.

INTRODUCTION

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Seasonal changes must be one of the most basic rhythms of life. But yet when one is in a city one hardly notices it. In rural areas it defines and regulates things and events, even down to the simple fact, of where a dog positions himself to guard his masters home.

John M. Synge in his account of the Aran Islands frequently makes reference to the link between the environment and the people. In writing about a burial and keening he states "In this cry of pain the inner consciousness of the people seems to lay itself bare for an instant, and to reveal the mood of beings who feel their isolation in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and seas."

In describing the Aran man he states "this work changes with the seasons in a way that keeps him from the dullness that comes to people who have always the same occupation. The danger of his life on the sea gives him the alertness of a primitive hunter and the long nights he spends fishing in his curagh bring him some of the emotions that are thought peculiar to men who have lived with the arts.

He himself was also affected "The island had never seemed so desolate. Looking out over the black limestone through the driving rain to the gulf of struggling waves, an undescrivable feeling of dejection came over me."

The fact is when living in a rural area you cannot help being affected by the change in climate and seasons. One must concede that we are all to some extent the product of our environment.

When Paul Henry, moved to the rural area of Achill in 1910 from Paris - his first priority was to absorb and be absorbed by its pattern of life. Upon the hard life of the inhabitants, he reflected, "I have yet to see people who worked so hard for so little gain. It meant incessant toil with the spade; ploughs were useless in most of these stoney fields." Paul Henrys paintings of this period depict the rugged existence of the local peasants, launching their boats against the Alantic breakers, fishing and cutting peat. Paul Henry said "I wanted to live there not as a visitor but to identify myself with its life."

With myself, it was the opposite, when somebody grows up in an area, and has not been used to anything different, you run the risk of not appreciating or noticing the details and way of life and of not being as observant.

But being away for a large number of years, and then returning, my senses and interest were sharpened to the way of life around me. I began to think of my childhood, and the jobs and activities that we as children had, to also play our role in the activities of the farm. Gradually as I was growing up, the way of life altered from being very manual work, to the gradual introduction of machinery, and things changed. Now my brother runs a modern updated farm compared to the one my father worked. Of course some activities are still widely practised and I had a chance to observe men cutting turf, digging potatoes, and hay making. But for instance with the horse and hay shifter, I had to memorize and draw from memory.

So for me this project was a way of looking back and only now appreciating what I had lived through as a child. It made me aware that even today, with the introduction of machinery, man is still linked closely with seasonal changes.

## THE PROJECT ~~~~~

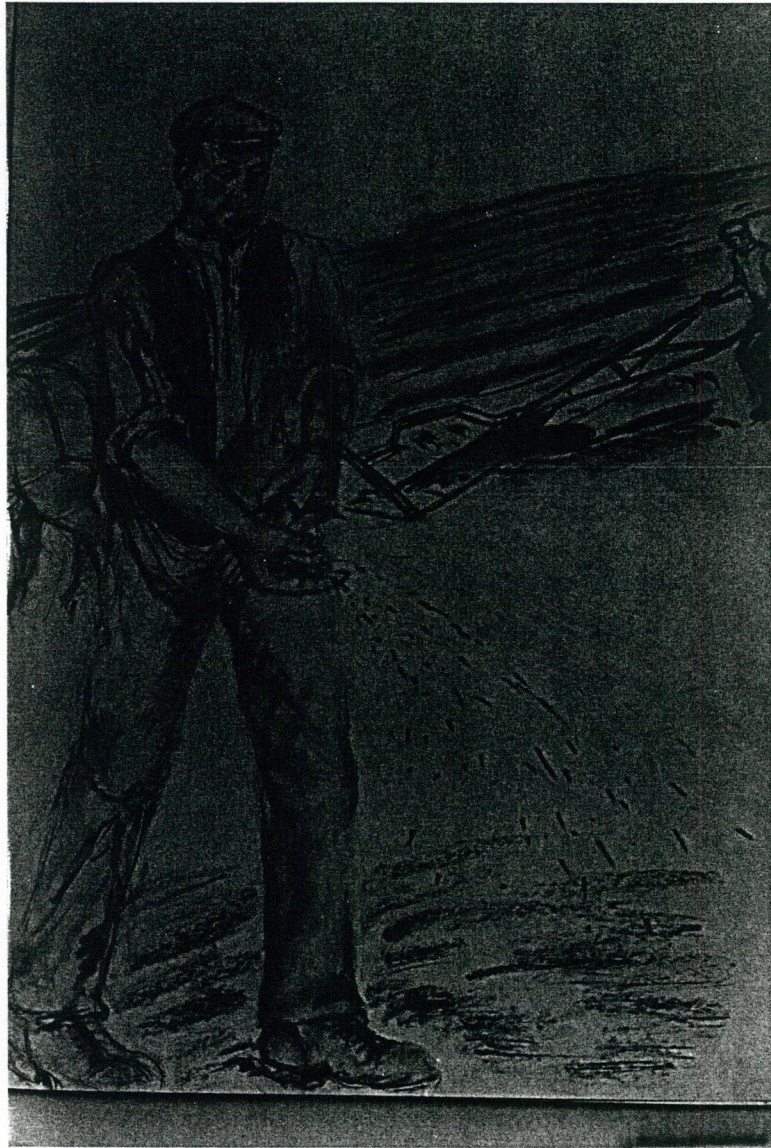
In my sketchbook I began to assemble various sketches relating to the figure doing something, which was linked to the season at the time. I enjoy drawing the figure at all times and now it would be central to a series about the seasons.

At first I thought, I would show, how one product e.g. hay, potatoes, continues its cycle through the seasons, from sowing, reaping, storing, to food. I photocopied sketches and played around with various compositions, but it did not seem to work, having the same activity repeated in the one scene. I then went on to do various compositions of activities that would be done in a certain season. These were more interesting. The problem I found was that I tended to cram too much into the scene. It was a matter of going back and editing and reshuffling images into different places to improve;

- a) visual attractiveness
- b) scale and distance and
- c) directional lines

within each of the four images.





Drawing For SPRING Panel

Panel One

SPRING

~~~~~

Ploughing the Ground
Sowing the Seed.

Here we have the universal theme of making the ground fertile and the beginning of life. The men are caught up in the rhythm of the work, and work with optimism. They are glad that the cold dead months of winter are over and that the stirrings of new life are beginning.

The pull is on the traces, it is March
And a cold old black wind is blowing from Dundalk.
The twisting sod rolls over on her back -
The virgin screams before irresistible sock.
No worry on Maguire's mind this day
Except that he forgot to bring his matches
"Hop back there Polly, Hoy back, woe, wae."
From every second hill a neighbour watches
With all the sharpened interest of rivalry
Yet sometimes when the sun comes through a gap
these men know God the Father in a tree:
The Holy Spirit is the rising sap,
And Christ will be the green leaves that will come
At Easter from the sealed and gaurded tomb.

Patrick Kavanagh
Extract from the Great Hunger.

Patrick Kavanagh, himself worked on the land and he writes from experience. He has a unique way of summing up the toil and hardship the men go through but that it is all worth it for the hope that they carry for the new seed.



Clay Relief For Spring Panel

"April, and no one able to calculate
How far it is to harvest, they put down
the seeds blindly with sensuous groping fingers,
And sensual sleep dreams subtly underground."

In the composition of the panel I made the sower the dominant figure in the foreground, and behind him is the activity of the ploughing with the seagulls screeching overhead. Along with the composition of each panel, I had also to link up each panel with the next panel to it. The outward thrust of the sowers hand leads on in the direction of the next panel.

The quietness of the sower scattering his seed is contrasted with the busy scene stretched out behind him, of horse, plough and driver.

"My father worked with a horse-plough,
His shoulder globed like a full sail strung
Between the shafts and the furrow.,
the horse strained at his clicking tongue.

An expert. He would set the wing
And fit the bright-steel pointed sock.
The sod rolled over without breaking
At the headrig, with a single pluck.

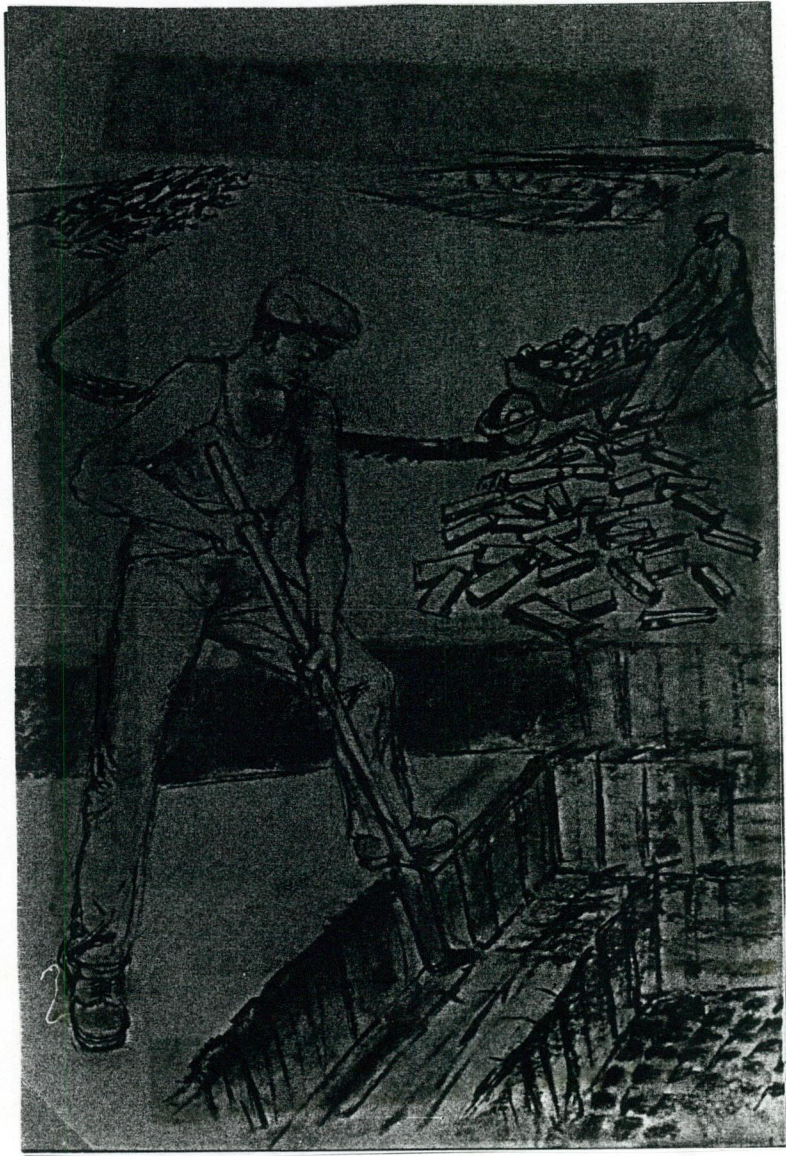
Of reins, the sweating team turned round
And back into land - His eye
Narrowed and angled at the ground
Mapping the furrow exactly.

I stumbled in his hob-nailed wake,
tell sometimes on the polished sod,
Sometimes he rode me on his back
Dipping and rising on his plod."

Seamus Heaney
Follower.

Seamus Heaney based a lot of his poetry, on remembered scenes from his childhood on the land, though he did not grow up to experience working on the land. He describes the awe in which he held his father in, through his skill at managing the horses and the plough.

I also remember following my father and the plough through the furrows, and later watching at the harrowing and the rolling of the ground after oats had been sown.



Drawing for Summer Panel

Panel Two -

SUMMER
~~~~~

Cutting the Turf.

Here the summer activity of cutting the turf is shown. It is the height of summer and the figures are in the full flow of work. They have only a certain time laid out for this job in the calendar of their minds, and must work as urgently as possible while the weather holds.

"I love this turf-face  
its black incisions,  
the cooped secrets  
of process and ritual;

I love the spring  
off the ground,  
each bank a gallows drop,  
each open pool

the unstopped mouth  
of an urn, a moon drinker,  
not to be sounded  
by the naked eye."

Seamus Heaney.  
Kinship.

Seamus Heaney was perhaps the first poet to appreciate the bog landscape. He refers to "Trove of the turf cutters' honeycombed workings."

This refers to the honeycomb design that the turf spade makes when cutting out the sod from the bank of turf. This I have



Clay Relief For Summer Panel



included in the bottom corner of the panel and it makes an interesting pattern. The cut turf laying scattered in heaps also adds to this abstract pattern the figure moving between these heaps with his barrow, is like a busy ant in the wide expanse of the bog. Heaps are connected by the rutted track, the barrow and man make with their constant movement to and fro. This was all mans work but the child had its place too.

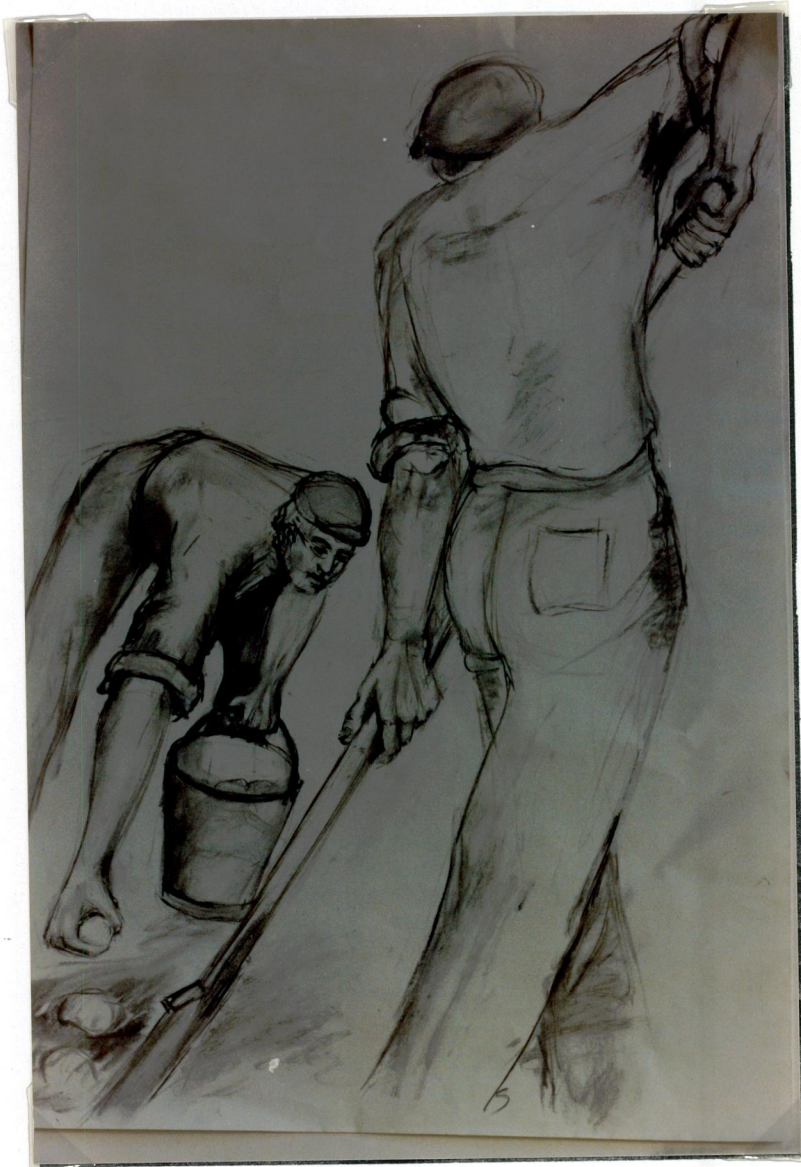
"I was his privileged  
attendant, a bearer  
of bread and drink,  
the squire of his circuits."

Seamus Heaney  
"Kinship"

Here the poet describes how he had the important job as a child of bringing food to the men. Often a fire was lit for cooking purposes, and I would be sent to fetch water from the well up the side of the boggy mountain. Food always tasted much better eaten in this way.

"My grandfather could cut more turf in a day  
Than any other man in Toner's bog.  
Once I carried him milk in a bottle  
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up  
to drink it, then fell to right away.  
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods  
Over his shoulder, going down and down  
For the good turf, Digging.

Seamus Heaney.  
"Digging."



Drawing for Autumn Panel

Panel Three -

AUTUMN  
~~~~~

Digging the Potatoes.
Bringing in the Hay.

In this panel, there is the autumn harvesting of the potatoe fields and the gathering in of the hay by the horse and hay shifter to the haggard. It is a time of reaping the rewards of the work done in Spring and Autumn, and storing it away for the hard Winter months. The farmers knows the enemies he must protect his yield against - the wind, rain, and frost. This is still yet another busy period, and everything is given its allotted time.

"When summer died
and wives forsook the fields
we were abroad,
saluted, given right-of-way.

Watch our progress
down haw-lit hedges."

Seamus Heaney.
"Kinship."

This extract of a poem refers to the traffic of horses and carts loaded with turf, or sheaves of corn, or bags of potatoes, travelling homewards. The hay shifter was my favourite as it had rubber wheels and gave a smoother ride across the stoney roads besides the cart with its iron rimmed wheels.



Clay Relief For Autumn Panel

In the panel I show the patience of the horse waiting while its load is hauled up. Glad of a rest, from the constant journey from field to haggard. It was slow progress and I remember a neighbour getting a tractor and cock-lift one autumn, and I knew that the age of the hay-shifter and its leisurely progress had come to an end.

"The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
to scatter new potatoes that we picked.
Loving their cool hardness in our hands."

Seamus Heaney.
"Digging."

The potatoe digger and picker are to the foreground of the panel with the digger creating a strong diagonal in the composition. To counteract this the lines of the potatoe drills are going in the opposite direction. Then there is the strong horizontals of the horse and hay shifter in the background.



Drawing for Winter Panel

Panel 4

THE WINTER
~~~~~

Cutting Reeds.  
Fodder for Animals.

In this panel the activity of bringing fodder (hay) to cattle out in the bare fields, to help them survive the cold months, is portrayed. The man trudges along in wellingtons, hoping that the time will pass quickly and that his store of fodder will hold out, until the new grass starts growing in Spring.

"They are my Alps and I have climbed the Matterhorn  
With a sheaf of hay for three perishing calves  
In the field under the Big Forth of Rocksavage."

Patrick Kavanagh.  
"Shancoduff."

Besides the feeding of the cattle, there is little else to do on the farm in the winter months and also owing the short days. Instead the farmer of ten did some craftwork or mending in the long winter nights indoors. The making of creels and baskets was a very practical occupation, and the raw material was to be found locally. So in this final panel I have included the figure of a man cutting reeds to suggest these other activities that take place in the winter.



Clay Relief for Winter Panel



### Overall View of Panels Together.

The largest problems were in the beginning, over the composition of each panel and how it related to the previous and following panels. The level of the horizon line had to be considered also.

I have tried to form a flowing link between the figures in the various panels. In the first three panels there are the three small figures in the background. Then there are the foreground figures which progress in a diagonal line progressively getting smaller from the sower, to the turf cutter, to the potatoe picker and last to the reed-cutter. Finally there are the potatoe digger and the man with hay moving out at another angle from the panels.

In the central panels I have counteracted the strong diagonals of the turf bank with the diagonals of the potatoe drills going in the opposite direction, the same idea is echoed in the directions of the spades in the same two panels.

While doing the clay panels I enjoyed the various textures and patterns I could achieve with different marks on the clay. I polished the sky areas, so as to make them stand out.

### Conclusions and Ideas for Future Development.

Through this personal project, I have become aware of the great privilege I had in growing up in the place and time that I did. But while going to school I was not taught to use this rich environment as a source for writing, drawing etc. Rather one had the idea that happenings far away were far more acceptable and important. The work produced suffered from this as the subject was not known personally.

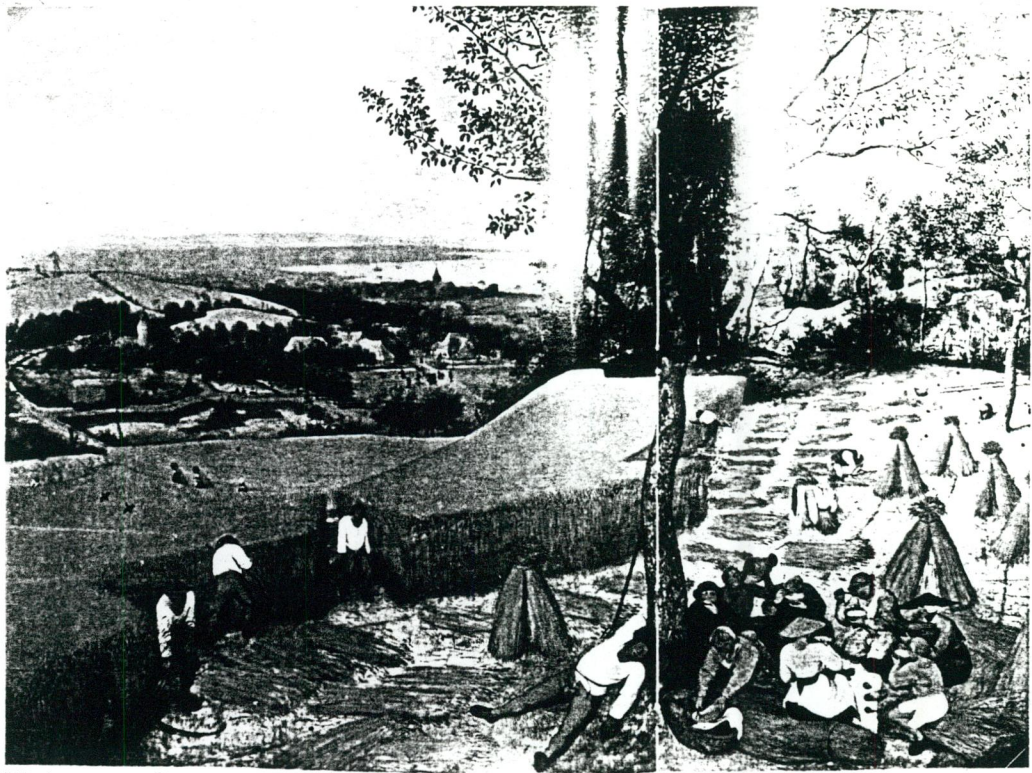
In the classroom, it is important to talk and work from themes which relate personally to the pupil, and which is something he is experiencing at the moment. To make it known that it is acceptable to choose the mundane occurrences at home as a source and that one should be proud of these. Appreciation of everyday work and the environment around should be taught through discussions and projects.

When discussing art history and our heritage, proper emphasis should be put on artists who used their own background as starting points. It is only when things like these are pointed out again and again, that the student will feel assured of his own work.

In my own work I would like to develop some aspects of the clay reliefs into round models. The figure of carrying a burden on

his back, interests me as an image, as does the rythm of somebody working a spade or a sythe. Also the combination of a figure and the form of say a basket being made, or a barrow being pushed etc. would also make an interesting sculptural group.

Also I would like to develop the landscape more in the colour studies based on seasonal changes that take place during the yearly cycle. Some of these aspects of my work would hopefully find their way of benefiting classroom work also.



"Haymaking" Bruegel



"Hunters in the Snow" Bruegel

## Social Realism.

For many centuries the subject matter of most art work were based on religious, mythological, historical and fantastic themes. These themes dominated because of the fact that artists were commissioned to do this type of work.

An artist who held no position at court, and produced no altar pieces or portraits was Peter Bruegel, the Elder, who painted in the middle years of the sixteenth century. While he did emphasize religious and moral themes in his work, he refreshingly depicted peasants and their families going about their everyday work. In no way did he seek to beautify them, and his figures have often an awkward and ugly appearance. This approach was not fashionable at the time and Bruegel was little known in his own lifetime. The frankness of much of his imagery had been a source of embarrassment to Victorians also.

Today, due to the ability of his work to reproduce very well photographically, he had become very popular. His work is entertaining to look at and because of its honesty it has gained new respect. A master of figure painting and landscapes, it was as a delineator of the natural scene that he began his career.

In his preparatory work for prints, we see that it is divided into two distinct groups;

- a) Landscapes seen from a distance and
- b) Sketches of peasants close to, observed from life.

The small scale of the figures establishes by contrast with the space they inhabit, the frailty of the human species. His ability to draw ordinary-people as they are, to pin down with economy and ease, exactly how they stand, walk, and gesticulate were masterly and impart an almost documentary character to scenes.

Around 1566 Bruegel was commissioned to do a series on the months for financier Nicolas Gughelinck. They are as epic of rural life and the fate of man linked to the rythm of the seasons and are a powerful representation of nature observed in its changing aspects. His use of colour - symbolies of brown, white and golden yellow that evoke the atmosphere of the seasons. "Haymaking" In the background a very calm landscape is dominated by green. In the foreground various figures go about the business of haymaking. A sense of happiness prevails the picture.

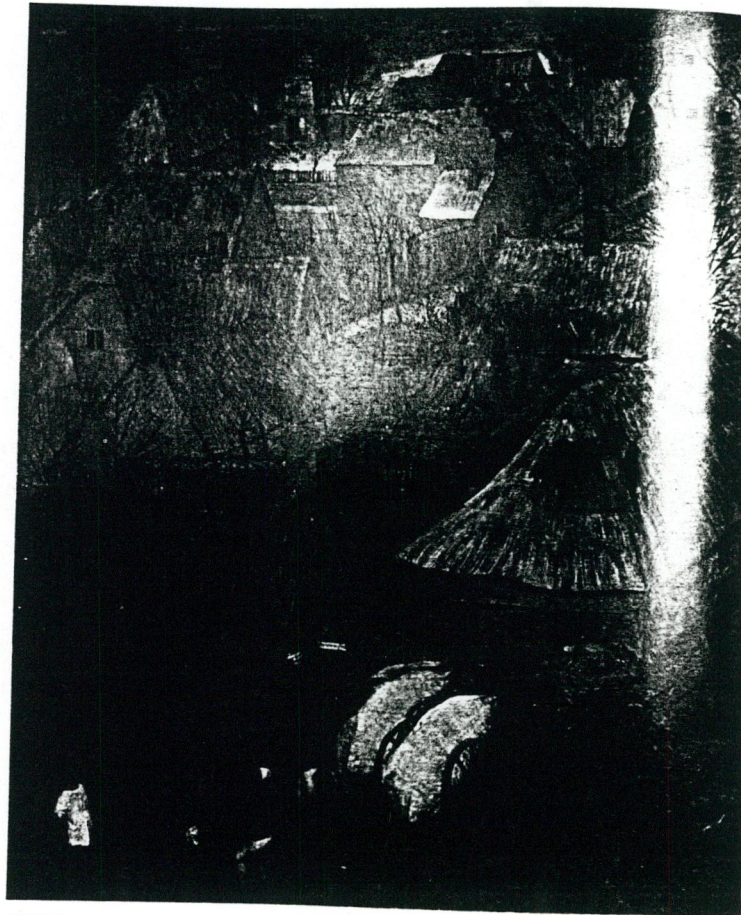


PLATE XXXIV

"The Dark Day". Beuigel



24. THE RETURN OF THE HERD (OCTOBER OR NOVEMBER?). 1565. Panel, 117 x 159 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

'The Return of the Herd' Beuigel

In the "Dark Day" he achieves a very moody, gloomy atmosphere, owing to the menacing black sky and the colours of brown and black which dominate. Again we have figures going about the activities which mark the seasons, one of them making a bundle of firewood and the other pruning a willow tree.

An autumnal landscape is depicted in "The Return of the Herd". The painting majestically evokes the time when the flock returns to the stalls.

"The Harvesters" is dominated by golds and ochres, not greens. Here as in the other paintings of this series, man appears not because he has to illustrate some story, but rather he occupies a place in the painting because it suits him.

In, probably the final picture of the series, "Hunters in the Snow", white, brown and green are the only colours that portray cold, peace and silence. He portrays the total submission of man to the pressures of the natural world in this severe landscape.

A deep commitment to the intrinsic properties of colour and line that saved Bruegel from the twin pitfalls of triviality and mere literary illustration. His refusal to stress detail and texture helped him to give maximum emphasis to the silhouette of his forms. He was not simply a landscapist but choose to depict the social class most directly affected by seasonal changes -  
The Peasantry.



"The Gleaners" Millet



"The Washer Woman" Millet



Bruegel was the first Artist who began to depict the working class in their own right, going about their everyday jobs and giving them significance. It was not until centuries later that this theme re-emerged. Artists such as Van Eyde, Velasquez, and Vermeer did portray everyday scenes, but there was a romanticism to them.

In the mid nineteenth century realism became dominant. Subject matter was the dividing line between Romanticism and Realism. Subject matter of everyday, Contemporary life as seen or seeable by the artist.

Gustave Courbet (1819-77) wished only to be of his own time and to paint only what was made visible to him. All mythological, religious, historical, fantastic, purely imaginative subjects are ruled out, since they are not visible to the modern eye.

Plain people of the kind he has shown in the "Stone Breakers" 1847 were considered by the public unsuitable for artistic representation and were linked in the middle class mind with the dangerous newly, defiant working class, which was finding outspoken champions in men like Marx, Engels, and in novelists like, Balzac, Zola and Dickens.

Courbet challenged the whole iconographical stock of traditional paintings and summoned public attention to what Baudelaire called "Heroism of modern life".

Francois Millet (1814-75) who was himself from peasant stock undertook to glorify the humble countryfolk of France. In "The Gleaners" (1857) he characteristically poses them as monumental figures against the flat dull land and sky. The quiet design of Millet's paintings accents his scrupulous truth of detail and contributes to the dignity he gives to even the simplest rural tasks. The solemn grandeur with which Millet invests the poor, causes him to be identified with socialism of a kind prevalent in his life time.

In Paris the lithographer and painter Honore Daumier (1808-79) was in close touch with this social ferment. He does not set them off with the sometimes romantic realism of Millet, but simply shows them to us in unposed attitudes and unplanned arrangements of the millions thronging through the modern city. People anonymous insignificant, dumbly patient and with all they cannot change. Daumier's subjects are real, as is also his view of it. Faces that are vague, impersonal, blank and are unprepared for the observer.



CONSTANTIN MEUNIER - The Ironworker, 1890. Bronze, 160x117x75  
Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, Paris

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"The Ironworker" Constantin Meunier.

Constantin Meunir (1831 - 1965) was a sculptor, whose turning point in his career was his discovery in 1873 of the industrial world and its pictorial possibilities. In the beginning he was a painter but changed to sculpture later on. His subjects were scenes from the life of the miners and depicted the misery of the working people from the industrial areas of Belgium e.g. The Iron Worker (1886). His vast monument to Labour, owned by the Belgian government was left unfinished. In it we have the relief "The Harvest".

These artists, through their unaffected ability to look at life around them, opened up new pathways to generations afterwards. Manet and the Impressionists led on from their innovations to the twentieth century.

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