

Weakened Individuality and Allegorical Carrier - Children Image Under the Pen of Peter Bruegel

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Abstract:

As an artist in the High Renaissance, Bruegel's images of children in real life are rare among genre painters at that time, which reflects the painter's early attention to children. But in Bruegel's paintings, the most important role of children is to serve the theme of the picture, rather than to express themselves. They are the carrier of moral allegory. Children's individuality is weakened and their faces are stylized so that they can play a better auxiliary role in the painting. The aesthetic features of these children images reflect the northern artistic characteristics in Bruegel's painting style and indirectly prove the social status of children at that time.

Keywords:

Peter Bruegel, Children Image, Individuality of Characteristics, Allegorical Carrier

1. Peter Bruegel and His Images of Children

As one of the most original and thoughtful folk painters of the High Renaissance in the Netherlands, Pieter Bruegel the Elder was a meticulous observer of life. There was often a realistic irony in his paintings, resulting in many monumental works. Compared with his contemporaries, he was one of the early painters to pay attention to the peasants, with a clear class stance and a focus on the realities of worldly life. In his genre paintings, children are the characters worthy of our attention.

The number of children in Bruegel's paintings is very rare among northern artists of the same period. Even the Italian and Roman painters of the South painted vivid children, but they often depicted them as Christ Child and angels. The Southern painters almost always dealt with religious subjects, with a typical ideal of beauty. Bruegel, by contrast, mostly portrayed children in real life. Although from the perspective of image verisimilitude, Bruegel's images of children were not as close to reality as those of Italian painters, which was partly related to the tradition of Netherland art. However, we can not deny that Bruegel's works are not only the embodiment of humanism, but also more realistic meaning, reflecting the early childhood care.

In the following, we will make a brief summary based on Bruegel's images of real-life children, and list the paintings that will be used for research and analysis in this paper. Bruegel's genre paintings with images of children mainly include "The Peasant Dance" and "The Peasant wedding", and his allegorical paintings include "Children's Games", "The Fight between Carnival and Lent", etc.

In terms of the paintings related to children, the most representative one is "Children's Games", which depicts more than 240 children, and is the most abundant collection of children's games at that time. For the children in the painting have numerous activities and expressions that show the atmosphere of adults, this work is also interpreted by many scholars as an allegorical painting. In addition, Bruegel's genre paintings "The Peasant Dance" and "The Peasant wedding" also depict two children dancing together and three children at the wedding reception. As for the allegorical painting, more than ten children are depicted in "The Fight between Carnival and Lent", and a boy is also described in "The Peasant and the Birdnester".

2. Aesthetic Features of the Images of Children

2.1. Face shaping - people's cognition and representation of themselves

If the history of the face is understood as a cultural history, it is a history of images originating from religious rituals -- the face is an image transformed through other images, such as masks and portraits. The history of human representation of facial images is also a history of human self-cognition in a sense.

People in the Stone Age already understood the mask as the image of the face, and tried to restore this image through the replacement of the face [1]. The association between the face and the mask has been a part of human consciousness for a long time. It is not only related to the ancestor worship of primitive people, but also the beginning of the image representation of the face. Until the 15th century, with the rapid development of Western civilization, as "man" began to discover himself, the representation of face in painting images has not only been the pure "face" itself, but also has a close connection with individual self.

2.1.1 Weakened facial depiction and indifferent emotion

In Bruegel's works, children are depicted in relative detail in "The Peasant Dance", "The Peasant wedding" and "The Peasant and the Birdnester". The children in these three paintings are either arranged in the front of the picture composition, or appear as only one of the two figures in the picture. "Children's Games" and "The Fight between Carnival and Lent" both adopt a bird's eye view and panoramic composition, and the painting is no longer a small group or single portrait, but a large group portrait. We all know that in such group portrait, the depiction of the characters in the painting will inevitably lack some details. Therefore, we mainly discuss three paintings: "The Peasant Dance", "The Peasant wedding" and "The Peasant and the Birdnester", while the "Children's Games" and "The Fight between Carnival and Lent" are briefly analyzed.

As is shown in Figure 2, the children in the front of the picture are holding hands and dancing together, taking part in the carnival of the adults. Judging from their clothes and headgear, these are two girls wearing headscarves. The girl on the left is supposed to be older, and they are both wearing aprons. Their height is less than the waist of an adult man, but they are dressed just like adult women. The girls turn

sideways against the viewer, with white headscarves blocking over half of their faces. The girl on the left can just be seen smiling, with a high nose but not a full forehead. The shorter child looks up at her sister. From the angle the artist gave us, we can only see that she has a full head and a round face. On the contrary, the people sitting next to the two children (Figure 3) either squinted at the sky with great dissatisfaction or toasted in a relaxed manner, with rich expressions and body language. Even if the two children's expressions are not stiff, they are slightly perfunctory compared with the lively peasants around them.



Figure 1. Pieter Bruegel, *The Peasant Dance*, 1567.



Figure 2. Two dancing children: detail of *The Peasant Dance*.



Figure 3. Two sitting farmers: detail of *The Peasant Dance*.



Figure 4. Pieter Bruegel, *The Peasant Wedding*, 1567.

Similar to this is the little girl wearing a red hat at the very front of the "The Peasant wedding" (Figure 5). With her fingers in her mouth, she cradles the soup dish in her other hand, and a half-eaten piece of dry bread on her apron, as if she's feeling a little unfinished about the finished soup. Her hat was so big that she had no complete features, no expression or expression, except for her rosy round nose. Like her, another little girl in a red hat and green dress sat at the banquet with her back to us (Figure 6). We can't see any more information about them. On the far left of the room, a child with a green hat (Figure 7) sits at the corner of a table carrying food to her mouth.



Figure 5. *The eating girl*: detail of *The Peasant Wedding*.



Figure 6. *The Girl in a green dress*: detail of *The Peasant Wedding*.



Figure 7. *The Girl in a green hat: detail of The Peasant Wedding*



Figure 8. *A Perspective from a part of The Peasant Wedding*



Figure 9. *The chatting guests: detail of The Peasant Wedding*



Figure 10. *A man and a women: detail of The Peasant Wedding*

The child in the green hat is wearing a skirt and apron, for that reason she is also judged to be a girl, and is the child furthest from the audience in the analysis of this subsection. Her eyes are a little closed under the weight of her hat and her expression is a little dull, but the two adults behind her, also in the corner of the room, are vividly depicted. In Figure 9, a man and a woman are chatting. The woman is relaxed, but her features are not very pretty with a masculine roughness. The taller man has his back to us, but we can clearly see that he is smiling. In accordance with the table tilt angle and perspective view (Figure 8), a man and a woman in figure 10 are also standing back next to the girl in the green hat. Although their faces are not as good as the figures at the front of the picture, they still have full and distinct features, as well as obvious facial expressions through the corners of the mouth and the slant of the eyebrows.

A similar situation exists in the depiction of characters in the allegorical painting “The Peasant and the Birdnester” (Figure 11). This painting is one of Bruegel's most enigmatic works. A heavyset peasant is facing the audience with an elusive smile that drew people to watch what was happening in the trees. The boy pointed at by the farmer is digging for the bird's nest, unaware of the danger, and his hat has fallen off his head. Nonetheless, the farmer is also in danger of disaster: he has lost his money bag and was about to fall into the stream ahead [2]. Leaving aside the various allegorical interpretations this painting has evoked, consider the boy in the upper left (Figure 12). He is clinging to a tree difficultly, using all four limbs to keep his movements steady except one hand for the bird's nest. With most of the back of his head facing the viewer, we can only see his full forehead and red nose, while we can't make out his other features to infer his expression at all. In contrast, the farmer (Figure 13), who carries a certain “sense of righteousness”, shows a subtle emotion through the cold, calm eyes and smiling lips. Through the comparison, we can find that “The Peasant and the Birdnester”, like the “The Peasant Dance” and “The Peasant

wedding”, has some defects in the depiction of children's faces, both in terms of facial features and expressions.



Figure 11. Pieter Bruegel, The Peasant and the Birdnester, 1568.



Figure 12. The Birdnester, detail of The Peasant and the Birdnester.



Figure 13. The Peasant, detail of The Peasant and the Birdnester.



Figure 14. The children: details of Children's Games, Part I.



Figure 15. The children: Details of Children's Games, Part II.

In the details of “Children's Games” (Figure 14, Figure 15), it is not difficult to see that most children have similar features: round eyes like black holes, wide noses, narrow mouths, indistinguishable ears, and dispensable eyebrows. Although the clothes and movements of these children distinguish each of them well, it is undeniable that there is a certain degree of stylization in the depiction of their faces,

which is more evident in the details of “The Fight between Carnival and Lent” (Figure 16).



Figure 16. The children: details of The Fight between Carnival and Lent.

2.1.2. Face and Self-representation

Humans are wired to react particularly quickly to a “human face” and we are immediately alarmed if anything remotely resembling it enters our field of vision. In natural history, expression as a tool of communication predates language. Just as people are able to read expressions on the faces of others by looking at them, facial expression are governed by the will of individuals themselves [3]. In other words, expression is an action that man performs through his face.

The history of the human face can be traced back to Stone Age masks, which used the face as an expression and representation. Masks embodied the ancestral faces and reflected the social characteristics of a “face” through this form of transformation from figurative to abstract. Until the early modern period, with the embryonic capitalist system, the early portrait began to have a similar legal status as the will [4]. As the portrait got more realistic, it also became a permanent "presence" proof that people as individuals were once alive in the world.

In the early Renaissance, portraits were highly prized as proof of the face. But beyond that, portrait was not only the pure “face” itself, but also had a close connection with the individual self. The face was a description of the subject, while the portrait provides a form of painting for the representation of the subject's “self” through the representation of the “face”. In addition to the realistic description of facial features, a “portrait” was also a face with specific emotions in a specific scene, which was felt by the viewer through expressions, eyes, gestures and other ways. In this kind of “being felt” and “feeling” communication between the portrait and the viewer, the individual depicted by the “portrait” completes the self-representation in the form of images. Moreover, portraiture also adapted to changing social norms and had social attributes. The image of the person represented by the portrait should conform to the social status of the person being represented in reality or expectation. In this sense, portraiture also represented the identification of a social and cultural identity.

In addition to the development of portraiture, physiognomy related to the human "face" became popular during the Renaissance. The pseudoscience of assessing personality based on appearance has a long history, dating back to ancient Greece [5]. In the sixteenth century, with the development of the Renaissance printing, physiognomy books came into circulation, and then penetrated the folk proverbs and the legends of the proverb. For example, long ear is the sign of stupid but has a good memory, aquiline nose is a symbol of malicious, deception and lusty, and thin lips

mean sensitivity, lustful and lying...[6]. These aphorisms, which may seem absurd to us today, reminded people with these physical traits to be more aware of their possible shortcomings and to police themselves than the average person.

Whether as a portrait that reproduces the face, or as a physiography that judges people's character quality according to the facial features, the "face" during the Renaissance had become the carrier of presenting individual self from both external image and internal personality.

Bruegel lived in the early modern period, when the European Renaissance was at its peak. By this time portraiture had long been in fashion and had reached a new level of realism. Bruegel was born in the North and his artistic style had a strong national flavour of the Netherlands. But after his visit to Italy and Rome in 1552-1554, he quickly absorbed the nourishment of Southern art. "The Peasant Dance," "The Peasant wedding," and "The Peasant and the Birdnester" were all painted around 1568, while "The Fight between Carnival and Lent" and "Children's Games" were dated about 1559 and 1560 respectively. By the time Bruegel created these works, he must have seen the realistic and elegant portraits of Italian people, many of which were images of the infant Christ and the angels, which vividly showed the innocence and loveliness of children. In Antwerp in the 16th century, with the continuous development of the bourgeois class, folk culture and elite culture interpenetrated with each other, and worldly themes had already occupied the main position of Bruegel's paintings [7]. Therefore, Bruegel, who had a penchant for aphorisms, would have heard of such oral proverbs, even if he did not study physiognomy. In the portrait "The Head of the Old Woman" (Figure 17), Bruegel depicted a peasant woman with a hooked nose and thin lips, all of which were exposed to a negative interpretation of physiognomy, as if to evoke in the reader's mind an image of a vulgar peasant [8].



Figure 17. Pieter Bruegel, Head of a Peasant Woman, 1565.

It is not difficult to see that under the cultural tide at that time, Bruegel must have some understanding of the relationship between "face" and "self-representation". However, the lack of facial depiction of children's images in his works also makes children lose the opportunity to complete the process of self-representation through being felt by the audience.

2.2. Composition Arrangement -- Leading Role and Supporting Role

In genre painting, artists often reveal people's identities through artificial actions and situations, thus depicting a specific storyline. In the process of understanding and perceiving this story, we can identify the characters in the picture with their identity. But in Bruegel's images of children, it is difficult for us to guess what happened to these children and what identity they have. As main characters, they serve the moral of the image; as supporting characters, their role in the picture is also to express the

theme. The children in these images are missing some of their own personalities. In other words, it is difficult for us to develop a sense of identity from these children in the images.

2.2.1 As The Main Character -A Single Symbolic Meaning

Just like the two paintings “Children’s Games” and “Fable of the Bird’s Nest”, although children are the main characters of the picture, their degree of individuation is relatively low. The children in “Children’s Games” cover the whole picture, showing a total of about 84 different kinds of games. These children's games were popular from the Middle Ages to the 16th century, and many also have folk allegories. For example, the “blue cloak” represents “deception” in Bruegel's “Netherlandish Proverbs”, but in his “The Adoration of the Kings”, the Virgin's headscarf is dark blue, which means hope and truth [9]. While in late medieval and early Renaissance love poems, blue is also the color of fidelity. The game covered with blue cloth also suggests the complex relationship between deception and loyalty in human nature. These games have a distinct adult culture, and the children who lack individual depictions are like actors performing the act of “playing” under the direction of an artist, rather than specific, personalized people.

Another example is the boy in “The Peasant and the Birdnester”. He’s in the upper left corner with his back to the viewer. Like the farmer, he is also the main character in the picture, while he is far away from the audience. There is no need for any emotional representation, and his own behavior constitutes a part of the fable.

Just as expressions and movements can convey a character’s character and emotions, artistic images need very clear clues about the situation in which the action is taking place. As Gombrich said, “pictographic method” means that the picture does not pursue the natural lifelike, but just like narrating a plot with a short paragraph of words. In fact, it is a kind of typical narrative painting with a clear situation that allows one to translate this type of picture into words [10]. Christian art images of the Middle Ages embody this characteristic, and they are closer to illustrations of moral theology, in which the figures are not individual people, but moral labels and pattern that allow us to identify concepts. From this aspect, we can find Bruegel's tendency to return to medieval stylization.

Bruegel was not without the ability to return to reality and verisimilitude, and we can see the master's power in the textural depiction of different objects in his other paintings. However, the characters in his works are always indifferent. Children express the theme with their own actions and reactions, and at the same time, they also constitute the narrative factor in the picture with stylized characteristics. In the paintings analyzed above, each child presents the behavior and the implied meaning behind the behavior in the mode of “pictograph”, which is more like a single allegorical symbol to convey the meaning of the whole picture.

2.2.2 As The Supporting Role - The "Harmonics" of Adult Activities

As analyzed above, in “The Peasant Dance”, “The Peasant wedding”, “The Fight between Carnival and Lent”, the expression of children is missing. Some of them dance in the picture with the theme of “dance”, and some of them eat in the picture with the theme of “wedding”. There are also children, along with the adults on the “carnival” and “Lent” two theme activities.

What they are doing in the picture has no other meaning to explore except for the theme of the painting. Here we can think of the “choral effect” proposed by Gombrich -- it explains the theme through the reactions of onlookers, and the crowd making various reactions becomes the “chorus”, which explains the meaning of the movements and sets the tone for the reactions of the viewers[i].

The children in the picture directly participate in the social activities of adults, which means that artists began to include children in the painting when depicting families and people, indicating that people in the Renaissance began to sprout modern feelings towards children. However, as the carriers of adult social culture, compared with the adults who are also in the supporting roles, they are just the “harmonics” of adult activities after all, and complete the “chorus effect” needed by the artist as a group of different age stages.

3. The Formation of Aesthetic Features

3.1. Personal Choice of Artist

Bruegel’s painting inherits the tradition of Netherlandish art. The characters in his works are simple in image and concise in form, with the tendency of simplified medieval forms [11], which is completely different from the characteristics of Italian art, such as beautiful image, strong three-dimensional sense and attention to the overall effect. Compared with Italian artists, who focused on the dramatic presentation of emotions on individual faces, northern artists paid more attention to capturing the essence of some groups by weakening the personality of the characters, conveying the commonality by individuals, and showing a certain kind of people with typical appearance and personality through a portrait. Compared with Italian paintings, the characters in Bruegel's paintings are relatively impassive, and the appearance depiction tends to be stylized. They do not have vivid personalities, but are integrated into the whole of the painting.

Bruegel, like a sober director, assigned children the task of showing the allegory without their own identities, attributes, and stories. They were just one of the symbols that make up the fable. In order to express the universality and allegorical nature of the whole, the artist abandoned the expression of a certain individuality. The innocence of children took a back seat to the expression of human commonality. However, when the artist showed the images of children, he also showed the ugly parts of human nature through allegory as a warning. This is another way of expressing the secular humanistic consciousness. Instead of pursuing realistic naturalism, he turned to the idea of painting.

3.2. The Position of Children in Society

In *The Disappearance of Childhood*, Postman refers to “shame” as a psychological premise for the formation of the concept of “child”. When the adult had “shame” in front of the children and realizes that certain things should not be shown to the children, the group of “children” would begin to be distinguished from “adults”. The spread and popularization of culture were closely related to the formation of “shame”. Just as Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, when humans had “wisdom”, they would know “shame”. Postman pointed out that the reason why westerners realized this “shame” on a large scale was associated with the invention of printing and the spread of words in the 15th century. The Renaissance set off a trend of ideological liberation and enlighten the multitude [12]. As Postman put it, with the rapid

development of cultural transmission and the formation of “shame”, people’s cognition of children has gradually become different from adults.

In the Middle Ages, the view on children was deeply influenced by religious theology, such as “theory of original sin” and “preformation theory”, which were popular. It was not until the development of Renaissance humanism that the attention to children was extended from the the liberation of person. The cultural enlightenment of the Renaissance led to the development of the progressive view on children, which opened up the way for “the discovery of the child” in later generations.

From about the 5th to the 15th centuries, there was a considerable change in people's ideas about children. The socio-economic background of the Middle Ages had always been a state of agricultural economy with low productivity and widespread poverty. Under this condition, there were no objective conditions for children to be valued. It was not until between the 11th and 13th centuries that this particularly bad situation in Europe improved, along with some changes in attitudes towards children, such as the advances in paediatric medical knowledge. With the economic boom of the 14th and 15th centuries, more detailed depictions of children appeared in art, and institutions such as orphanages gained momentum [13]. Since the 15th century, the status of children in the family had also changed with the transformation of labor forms.

The importance of children in family relationships could be found in medicine, education and painting. For example, Paolo Bagellardo’s “Handbook of Infant Diseases” (*Libellus de Egritudinibus infantiu*), published in 1472, proposes detailed treatments for infant diseases. Since then, the child has become a subject within the family, rather than an uncertain role. He is a life that people need to invest in and take care of using the scientific method. For another example, Erasmus' book “The free Rducation of Children's Enlightenment” (*De pueris statim acliberaliter instituendis*) published in 1529, these recurring themes of 15th-century Italian humanism were embodied and reinforced in the field of education [14].

In art, we can still find the figures of children when comparing with the northern artists of Bruegel’s time, such as “The Artist’s Family” (Figure 18) by Hans Holbein (1497-1543) in Germany, and the work “Portrait of Antonius Anselmus, His Wife and Their Children” (Figure 19) by Maarten de Vos (1532-1603) in Holland. Although children in these paintings only appear as “kids of their parents” in family portraits, the portraits themselves were meant to show specific social status and provide proof of “existence” for the people being depicted.



Figure 18. Hans Holbein, *The Artist's Family*, 1528.



Figure 19. Maarten de Vos, *Portrait of Antonius Anselms, His Wife and Their Children*, 1577.

People generally discuss “identity” from three aspects -- individual identity, familial identity, and social identity.

As continuator of the family, the children in the family portrait gained family recognition, as the girls in Figure 19 had the opportunity to reproduce the family identity as the “the daughter of Antonius Anselms”. But from the perspective of true individual self, children had no room for “self-identity” at all. Their “self-identity” carried the cultural concepts given by adult society. Due to physiological objective factors, children's self-cognition had been determined by adults before they could think independently.

Another work by Hans Holbein, “Edward VI as a Child” (Figure 20), is a special portrait, and we are pleased to see that a child was so valued by a painter. But even so, the painter's primary task is to serve the imperial power. His images show Edward VI's exalted social status above all, not the children themselves. Therefore, this kind of child portrait is very rare, as unique as the supremacy of imperial power.



Figure 20. Hans Holbein, *Edward VI as a Child*, 1538.

From the perspective of society, the patriarchal society still determined that children could not have the equal “cultural identity” with adults. Of course, paternal love exists in all ages, but the truth is that even if the Renaissance people began to “discover children”, they didn't really distinguish children from adults [15].

Review the important connection between face and self-representation, in the cultural context of that time, the space for children to explore the individual identity was very limited. The image reproduction of portrait to the human face and the self-representation of the human person was based on the premise of “recording”, while the precondition for being recorded was that the person had a certain social and cultural identity. Therefore, even though humanistic spirit played a positive role in the

field of children's education, compared with adults, children did not get the real social identity.

4. Conclusions

Bruegel had an early concern for children, and his genre paintings began to integrate the daily life of children into adult activities. However, in order to express the commonness and essence of "human beings", as well as the moral meaning of the whole painting, Bruegel weakened the individuality of children by simplifying the facial depiction, which is the most direct method, and made them become indispensable allegorical carriers in the picture.

From the artistic point of view, this choice allows the painter to have a larger and more free creative space, but also pay more attention to people themselves, prompting the painter to inject more thinking into the painting. Bruegel abandoned the pursuit of verisimilitude and devoted himself to the idea of painting by returning to the essence. From the perspective of social culture, "children" as a social group did not get their own social identity. During the Renaissance, children were still far from being truly discovered, which is one of the reasons why it was difficult for them to get a complete and comprehensive image representation in figure paintings like adults.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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