INTERTWINED: DUTCH ART OF THE PAST AND CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN ART

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Artists learn from other artists and always have. It is common for artists to relate their work to the art of their immediate predecessors, but a recent trend in Canadian painting reveals a strong interest in Dutch art of the past. Among the many contemporary Canadians who refer to old Dutch and Flemish masters are Jeremy Smith (b. 1946), Dan Price Brown (b.1939) and David Bierk (b. 1944). Smith updates a subject by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Brown emulates Johannes Vermeer, and David Bierk recycles a work by Jan van Eyck. Brown and Smith in style and subject, approach the past with a sober and serious attitude; Bierk's incongruous juxtaposition of old and new injects a note of humour. These are fresh and positive attitudes towards Dutch and Flemish art which contrast remarkably with A.Y. Jackson's bemoaning, in the days before the Group of Seven, the preference of Montreal art patrons for Dutch paintings over contemporary Canadian works.[1] This paper explores the relationship between the Dutch past and contemporary Canadian artists by re-examining the role of art based on art, and the process of creation.

It must be stressed that the three artists under discussion here work independently of one another. While they are of similar age, live in Ontario, and all paint in a representional style, they are linked in this study by their obvious admiration for Dutch artists.[2] Each incorporates recognizable imagery of past artists into their contemporary paintings, with varying results. All three change the scale and technique used by the masters they admire. None of the three, to my knowledge, has a Dutch background, although Brown studied for a while in the Netherlands. And the works selected for discussion here were all completed within a short time span, between 1971 and 1974.

All three Canadians have studied the Dutch and Flemish artists carefully. Their works exhibit more detailed knowledge of the masters they emulate than is immediately perceptible. On the other hand, each Canadian artist uses a medium and technique different from those of the Dutch masters they admire. In order to examine the multiple links between past and present, the three artists will be discussed in sequence, for their style and technique, their knowledge of Dutch art, and the new insights they offer about Dutch art of the past.

Jeremy Smith's *Playground* (Fig. 1), painted in 1972-73, pays homage to Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Children's Games* of 1560 (Fig. 2).[3] When looking at the two works side by side, the similarity of subject is obvious, but Bruegel's influence is evident also in Smith's composition, colouring, and the stylization of figures. In addition, there are further parallels in the interpretation and meaning of the paintings.

The high panoramic viewpoint used by Bruegel allows the inclusion of an encyclopedic number of figures. Bruegel's children are tightly arranged in horizontals and diagonals on the streets of a town. Smith to some extent repeats the horizontal and diagonal groupings; the eye moves from group to group aided by the occasional red garments seen against the sandy soil of the beach. Further diagonal movement is encouraged by the arrangement of buildings in Bruegel's town and echoed by Smith's landscape. In Smith's version, the composition demonstrates a knowledge of Bruegel's pictorial devices and the ability to use them in a twentieth century context. A major alteration is in the setting, moved from Bruegel's town to an Ontario lake shore, Lake Joseph in Muskoka.

Bruegel stylized his figures by making them all appear roly-poly, short and round. Few faces are visible and those few are round and expressionless; he emphasizes gestures. In the Canadian version, the children too are well-fed, but some faces with sad and bewildered expressions are visible. Bruegel's viewpoint is more elevated than Smith's and thus has more figures. Nevertheless, Smith's painting has been praised with its 165 figures as "one of the most ambitious figure compositions ever attempted by a Canadian painter."[4]

The games that Smith's children play are not only the traditional ones as found in the Bruegel painting, such as piggy-back riding, standing on their hands, pulling hair, climbing trees, and fighting. Smith also includes some twentieth century activities such as watching television, flying a toy airplane, and using flashlights. Some variation in size and age can be discerned in Bruegel's painting, but Smith introduces a different note, and a more sinister one at that, by the inclusion of some adult-sized figures, particularly at the lower left. One man waves a page ripped from a book, another chews his fingers, and a third appears to have been knocked unconscious. As closer examination reveals, the activities are not as frivolous and light-hearted as they first appear. Numerous scuffles are in progress, a boy in the foreground is about to pop a little girl's balloon, a boy on the dock appears to have drowned, and many isolated figures look utterly alone in the midst of all the activity. The games are not all fun and frivolity. It is this mood that parallels Bruegel's.

Bruegel's painting has been the subject of debate, but the consensus is that on one level it represents an encyclopedia of children's games and, on another level, comments on the folly of mankind.[5] Walter Gibson connects the subject with an anonymous Flemish poem of 1530 in which "humanity is compared to children who jump, run, play and follow their own foolish inclinations."[6] The lush landscape at the upper left of Bruegel's composition adds a quiet touch to a frantic and busy scene, but as is typical of sixteenth century painting, this element has symbolic connotations. Nature is "the one redeeming feature of a world dominated by the folly of man."[7] By implication, Smith's encompassing landscape should relieve the folly and violence of the children; but it doesn't, particularly because of the menacing qualities in the landscape itself such as the white-caps on the water or the sharply-cut bluff on the right.

And Smith's purpose was "to capture the transience of man's activities against the permanence of earth, water and sky."[8] A purpose then, which parallels Bruegel's.

An important difference between the two works is scale; Smith's painting is only two-thirds the size of Bruegel's. Even more significant is the change in technique. Bruegel's painting is executed in oil on a panel; Smith works in egg tempera, a medium which requires the painstaking application of each brushstroke. It is a less flexible technique than oil. Egg tempera dries quickly, creates opaque brushstrokes, and produces hard lines, but also contributes to the sense of clarity found in Smith's *Playground*. Smith also makes a subtle reference to another motif of Bruegel's; in the centre foreground is a loaf of bread stuck with a knife. This alludes to the pig carrying a knife in Bruegel's *Land of Cockaigne* (1567), demonstrating that Smith's familiarity with Bruegel is wider than at first realized.[9] Comparison of the two versions of children playing encompasses theme, composition, and interpretation. Moreover, and most importantly, Smith calls our attention to Bruegel's *Children's Games* for a twentieth century audience. That Smith shares Bruegel's pessimistic world view is food for thought.

Another method of offering homage to an artist, and a more traditional approach, is the device of a painting within a painting. D.P. Brown, in his 1971 painting *The Letter* (Fig. 3), pays tribute to Vermeer's *View of Delft*, painted c.1662 (Fig. 4). Brown depicts a woman seated at a table writing a letter; framed on the wall behind her is Vermeer's famous cityscape. Vermeer painted two views of Delft, but the majority of his works depicted single figures, usually women, performing ordinary activities. The theme of reading, writing or receiving letters occurs with frequency in his work and indeed in seventeenth century Dutch painting as a whole.[10] For example, in Vermeer's *The Loveletter* (c. 1671) (Fig. 5) a woman is interrupted at her music-making by her maid with a letter. On the wall behind is a seascape, a detail which has been interpreted as indicating the letter has arrived from a distance.[11] By analogy, then, the landscape functions in Brown's painting to indicate the letter is meant for someone far away. An element of mystery is created here because the viewer cannot see the words being written.

Brown has adapted many compositional ideas from Vermeer, such as the lighting which comes from the left, the light-coloured wall behind the woman, the shallow space and highly organized geometric character of the composition. Brown has placed the woman to the left of centre and behind the table. This is a device often used by Vermeer, as is the careful definition of the various objects on the table which form a still-life.[12] Because the space is so shallow, the woman is viewed across the highly reflective surface of the table top; the woman's hands and all the objects on the table: the book, the envelope, the bottle of ink, and the cup and saucer, cast shadows on the table's surface. Not only is this a device to display the artist's consummate skill in *trompe-l'oeil* still-life painting, it is also another means of echoing the buildings and ships in Vermeer's painting and the shadows they cast upon the water.

Brown's woman is as self-absorbed and as oblivious to the viewer as those in Vermeer's paintings. He has succeeded in recreating a scene reminiscent of Vermeer, including the air of serenity. But the total effect of Brown's painting is hard and brittle; the immobile woman is closer to the picture plane than those in Vermeer's paintings. As a result of the technique, Brown's figure is also startlingly clear. Compare Vermeer's Woman in Blue Reading a Letter (Fig. 6) with Brown's The Letter; in the Vermeer, the changes in colour on the woman's dress are irregular and suggestive, whereas in Brown's painting every fold on the woman's blouse is defined with a clear line and every shadow has a precise contour.

That Brown's painting captures the elements of a Vermeer composition and yet fails to achieve Vermeer's characteristic softness is no doubt due to the difference in technique. Brown uses egg tempera and his characteristic brushwork is evidenced by the long parallel strokes; even the framed Vermeer on the wall is rendered in this manner. Thus, Brown's version of Vermeer's *View of Delft* is a re-painting and not a photographic reproduction. Vermeer painted the *View of Delft* in oils, which permitted the blending of individual brushstrokes and created the sense of soft light and air permeating the city, and he enhanced his colour by the addition of small pin-points of pure colour on the surface of his ships and buildings. Brown retains his own style of brushwork throughout; surprisingly, this enables him to faithfully suggest Vermeer's entirely different approach. Another important feature here is the change in scale; Vermeer's painting is reproduced by Brown smaller in size than a postcard. One third the size of the original, Brown's *View of Delft* none the less captures the essence of Vermeer and is a testament to Brown's skill.

Another element which must be considered is the lack of obvious Canadian features in Brown's painting. There is no indication that the room in which the woman writes is in Canada. Although painted in 1971, it has an old-fashioned appearance due in particular to the fountain pen, bottle of ink, the elaborate multi-buttoned dress and the hair-style of the woman. Vermeer likewise often employed older styles of dress on his figures to express a sense of timelessness.[13] We know Brown painted this work in Ontario, yet no feature identifies the woman or the room as Canadian, let alone a Canadian of the 1970's. However, Vermeer's paintings which appear to us today as unmistakably Dutch have no features which outwardly proclaim their nationality either. In time, perhaps Brown's paintings will acquire a distinctive air of Canadian identity; as it is, with the Vermeer hanging on the wall, it can be easily mistaken for a Dutch painting.

In another painting, *At the Piano* (1972) (Fig. 7), Brown continued to explore Vermeer's pictorial ideas. Here, a young girl is absorbed in her music and echoes the woman in the painting *A Lady with a Lute* (c. 1663) by Vermeer, which hangs on the wall.[14] Brown again varies the brushwork and uses his characteristic long strokes, which cover not only the wall behind the figure but also the wall in *A Lady with a Lute* and

the shadowed side of the girl's face. The two musicians are momentarily distracted and lost in thought. Attention is drawn to the heads of the musicians by the window sill in Brown's painting and by the pointed finial on the map in Vermeer's work. And like the woman in *The Letter*, here too the girl's head overlaps the framed reproduction on the wall. But a different element is introduced with the light-source coming from the window on the right. Through the window, the red brick walls of a neighbouring house are visible, recalling Vermeer's *The Little Street in Delft*.[15] Both Vermeer and Brown use windows with splayed brick to form segmental arches above the windows, but Vermeer's brushwork only suggests the individual bricks, whereas Brown's are each carefully defined. This difference is again explained by the pictorial depth, which is far more shallow in Brown's painting, and the egg tempera technique, which is based on line and creates a hard surface.

Other Vermeer devices are the shallow space, the geometric organization of the composition and the placement of the chair in the foreground. The mood of tranquility recreates that of the Vermeer. Again Brown has reproduced the Vermeer painting in miniature to include all the details, from the bottle-glass in the window to the map on the wall, but using his own style. Brown's use of Vermeer is more than a mere painting within a painting: his admiration for Vermeer is visible in every facet of these works.

Turning now to David Bierk's use of the painting within a painting, an entirely different effect is achieved in *Laundromat, Canadian Interior*, painted in 1974 (Fig. 8)[16] Here, not only the title indicates that what we see is in Canada; the little boy wears a Canadian flag T-shirt. Otherwise the imagery might be found anywhere in North America. (Bierk moved to Canada from California in 1972.) "His earliest paintings in this country represent an injection of Canadian content into West Coast Pop imagery;" with a tongue-in-cheek approach, Bierk interweaves contemporary mythology with historical references.[17]

In *Laundromat, Canadian Interior* the family (mother, father and child) is placed deep into the space of the painting, in front of a cloud-filled window through which light falls onto the tiled floor of the laundromat. The unexpected element which alters the mundane quality of the subject is the inclusion of Jan van Eyck's 1436 painting of *The Madonna Enthroned with St. Donatian and St. George, Venerated by Canon George van der Paele* (Fig. 9). Suspended horizontally in the foreground, van Eyck's painting is positioned to parallel the floor and hover above it. By turning the placement of the painting within a painting from its usual vertical position (parallel to the picture plane) to a horizontal position, the perspective of the Madonna painting is exaggerated by the change from a rectangular format to that of a trapezoid. The suspended painting suggests that the mystery can be explained by something or someone placed forward, beyond the frame, in the viewer's position. This parallels van Eyck's use of the oriental carpet which appears to extend forward from the panel into the spectator's space.

Bierk's laundromat is organized in composition and content to parallel the Madonna of Canon van der Paele. Van Eyck's painting is renowned for its display of glowing colours and its textured surfaces, from the brocade of St. Donatian's robes to St. George's armour.[18] Bierk's laundromat too is filled with numerous simulated textures: the metallic surfaces of the laundromat's dryers, the chrome baskets, the formica table top, the wood-grained table support, the flocked wall-paper and the softness of the clouds viewed through the spotless window. The window has no view other than the clouds, likewise in the van Eyck, the bottle-glass window behind the Madonna shows light, but not a view, an allusion to Divine Wisdom.[19] And Bierk, like van Eyck, uses a tiled floor to emphasize the recession of the room.

In the van Eyck the monumental immobilized figures dominate the composition. In Bierk's painting a subtle reversal occurs: the setting takes precedence. Symmetrical placement of figures is used by both artists, and the focus of attention in each is the child. In Bierk's painting the parents flank the young boy holding a bottle of Coca-Cola, the ultimate pop symbol of twentieth century life. The Christ child in van Eyck's painting holds a parrot symbolizing immortality.[20] By analogy then, does Bierk's little boy suggest that Coke makes us immortal? The children in both works function simultaneously as the focus of attention and as the figure expressing awareness of others. In the van Eyck, the Child is the focus of everyone's attention, but looks - and is the only one who looks - at Canon van der Paele. Following suit, Bierk has the boy as the centre of interest for the parents, but again it is only the child who is aware of the suspended painting. Van Eyck's Madonna and Child form a conical shape which Bierk has reversed in his arrangement of parents and child; here the apex directs us to the hovering van Eyck picture. In fact, the more Bierk's painting is analyzed, the more features it has in common with van Eyck's. Each element of the analysis demonstrates Bierk's understanding of van Eyck and his ability to manipulate by reversal and analogy. Bierk has learned, but hasn't imitated.

Bierk's incorporation of the van Eyck painting in the laundromat, of course, exchanges van Eyck's elegant church setting for one that is so ordinary that it heightens the contrast between the two. Perhaps Bierk is demonstrating the twentieth century worship of machines in contrast to the fifteenth century worship of religious figures. That Bierk is able to reproduce the van Eyck in a different shape and from a different angle is impressive. Because of the trapezoidal format, the figures in Bierk's recycled van Eyck are shorter and wider in their proportions; yet from a distance, they appear perfectly normal. Another change Bierk made was to lighten and simplify the frame; van Eyck's painting survives in its original frame and with an inscription along the bottom edge.[21] There is also a dramatic change of scale. Bierk usually works on a large scale as he does here; however, the Bierk version of van Eyck is approximately one-sixth the size of the original. As with the other Canadians discussed in this paper, Bierk has also changed technique. The exact painting technique and medium used by van Eyck is much debated, but it is

assumed that he painted on panel with a combination of tempera and oil.[22] Bierk uses oil.

The juxtaposition of the van Eyck and the contemporary laundromat cannot be readily explained; but it does make us look again, not only at the van Eyck, but also at Bierk. Whatever conclusions may be drawn, the obvious fact is Bierk's admiration for an old master. Finding van Eyck in a Canadian laundromat is a mystery and that is what makes his painting so intriguing.

Each of these Canadians studied the older master for different purposes. Smith's studies of children lead him to plan a composition using children playing, and the natural precedent in western art was Bruegel's composition. Smith, to my knowledge, has done no other paintings in homage to Bruegel, but his painting *Secrets (1973-74)* utilizes the same compositional devices as *Playground* with its elevated viewpoint and multitude of figures.[23] Brown's interest in geometric compositions and quiet studies of single figures in domestic settings allies him to Vermeer. Although Brown still often paints single figures, he has not continued the painting-within-a-painting device. Several of Brown's later works, in the same meticulous technique, make even more complex use of multiple figures, e.g., *The Auction (1975)*.[24] Bierk's explorations of simulated textures and realism found natural parallels in van Eyck's work; in another painting he included van Eyck's Adam and Eve from the *Ghent Altarpiece*. Utilizing the same realist techniques to further explore texture and form, Bierk later created his *Canadian Shield Rock* series, large paintings depicting actual rock outcroppings.[25]

These Canadians have, then, not only made allusions to Dutch art of the past, but each has adapted and learned from the masters emulated. By comparing these paintings and their antecedents, we have been able to discover part of the process of the artist: what figures from art history attract the representational artists, and how the content and style of the Dutch and Flemish past have been integrated into new works of art. Thus a painting from the past is recalled and examined, not only for itself, but also for comparison with its updated version. All three Canadians have moved on now to other subjects, demonstrating that this fascination with the Dutch old masters was a short-lived phase. But while they were using earlier art as a subject and demonstrating their debt to the Dutch masters, they have also renewed the contemporary relevance of old Dutch and Flemish masterpieces.

NOTES

[1]A.Y. Jackson, *A Painter's Country* (Toronto, 1958), p.18. cf. Marta H. Hurdalek, *The Hague School: Collecting in Canada at the Turn of the Century* (Toronto: 1983), p.13: 'The Hague School painting represents a significant, although today nearly forgotten chapter in the history of Canadian collecting. Never before or since have Canadian collectors focused their attention upon a single European school as they did from the last decades of the nineteenth century until the First World War.'

[2]Rothmans of Pall Mall Canada Ltd., *Aspects of Realism*, 1976, unp., 'Canada', claims the majority of realist artists in Canada come from the Maritimes and live in rural areas. Bierk lives in Peterborough, Brown in Collingwood and Smith in Toronto.

[3]Paul Duval, *High Realism in Canada* (Toronto, 1974), il. p.168-169 as *Children's Games*.

[4]*Ibid*; p.167; here Duval claims Bruegel's composition contains only eighty figures. Wolfgang Stechow, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder* (New York, 1969), p.64, says there are 'about eighty identifiable games'. Since many of the games are played by groups of children, the total number of children far exceeds eighty. Robert L. Delevoy, *Bruegel*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Lausanne, 1959), p.58, counts over 200 children.

[5]Stechow, p.64.

[6]Walter Gibson, *Bruegel* (Toronto, 1977), p.85, published at Antwerp by Han van Doesborch. He continues: 'The round-eyed, unblinking gravity with which Bruegel's children pursue their games suggests that they, too, symbolize folly, and it is significant that they have invaded areas of the city usually reserved for the conduct of adult affairs, including the large building overlooking the square.'

[7]Stechow, p.64.

[8]Duval, p.167.

[9]Stechow, pl.35, p.121.

[10]Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago, 1983), esp. p.192-207.

[11]Madlyn Millner Kahn, *Dutch Painting in the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1978), p.293.

[12]Helen Dow, *D.P. Brown: Twenty Years* (Hamilton: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 1985) curiously does not include *The Letter* or *At the Piano*. Pl.5, *Reader* (1971) is identified as 'Vermeer-like'.

[13]Kahn, p.292.

[14]James A. Welu, 'Vermeer: His Cartographic Sources', *Art Bulletin*, LVII (December 1975), fig. 7, p.536.

[15]Kahn, fig. 193, p.253.

[16]Roundstone Council for the Arts, *Canadian Artists in Exhibition 1973-74* (Vol. 2 of The National Artist's Survey of Canada) (Toronto, 1974), p.90, illustrated as a 'Work in Progress.'

[17]Michael Burtch, 'David Bierk at the Art Gallery of Peterborough,' *Artmagazine*, XIII (May/June/July, 1982), p.64-65.

[18]Otto Kurz, 'Hubert and Jan Van Eyck' in *Encyclopedia of World Art*, v.V, p.326: 'In *The Madonna with Canon van der Paele* the feeling for light and for surface texture reaches its highest point.'

[19]Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge, 1953), v.I, p.148.

[20]George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (New York, 1954), states (p.19) that the goldfinch is a symbol of the Passion or the connection between the Incarnation and the Passion. Herbert Friedmann, *The Symbolic Goldfinch*, The Bollingen Series VII (New York, 1946), tells us (p.55) that the goldfinch, who is occasionally replaced by a parrot, represents the soul and symbolizes the Resurrection.

[21]Panofsky, v.2, pl.248.

[22]Valentin Denis, *Jan van Eyck: The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, trans. Michael Langley (Milano, 1964), p.51-54.

[23]*Aspects of Realism*, pl.8.

[24]*D.P. Brown: Twenty Years*, pl.15.

[25]Rhonda Rovan, 'Peterborough: Artspace Steps Out,'*Artmagazine*, VIII (Oct/Nov 1976), p.39-40.

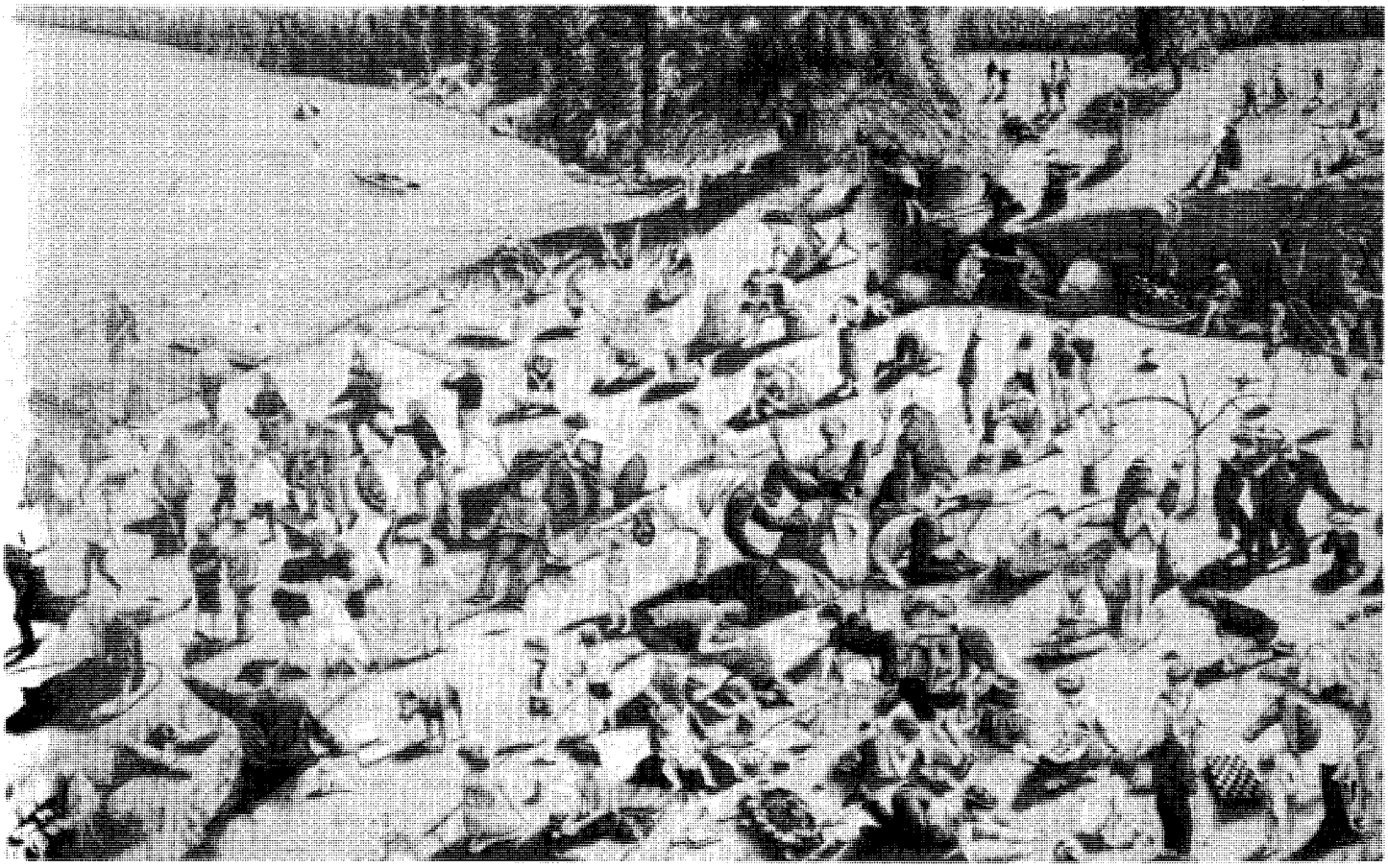

Fig.1 Jeremy Smith, *Playground*, 1972-74
Courtesy of Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto
Egg tempera on panel, 75 x 117 cm. (29 1/2 x 46")

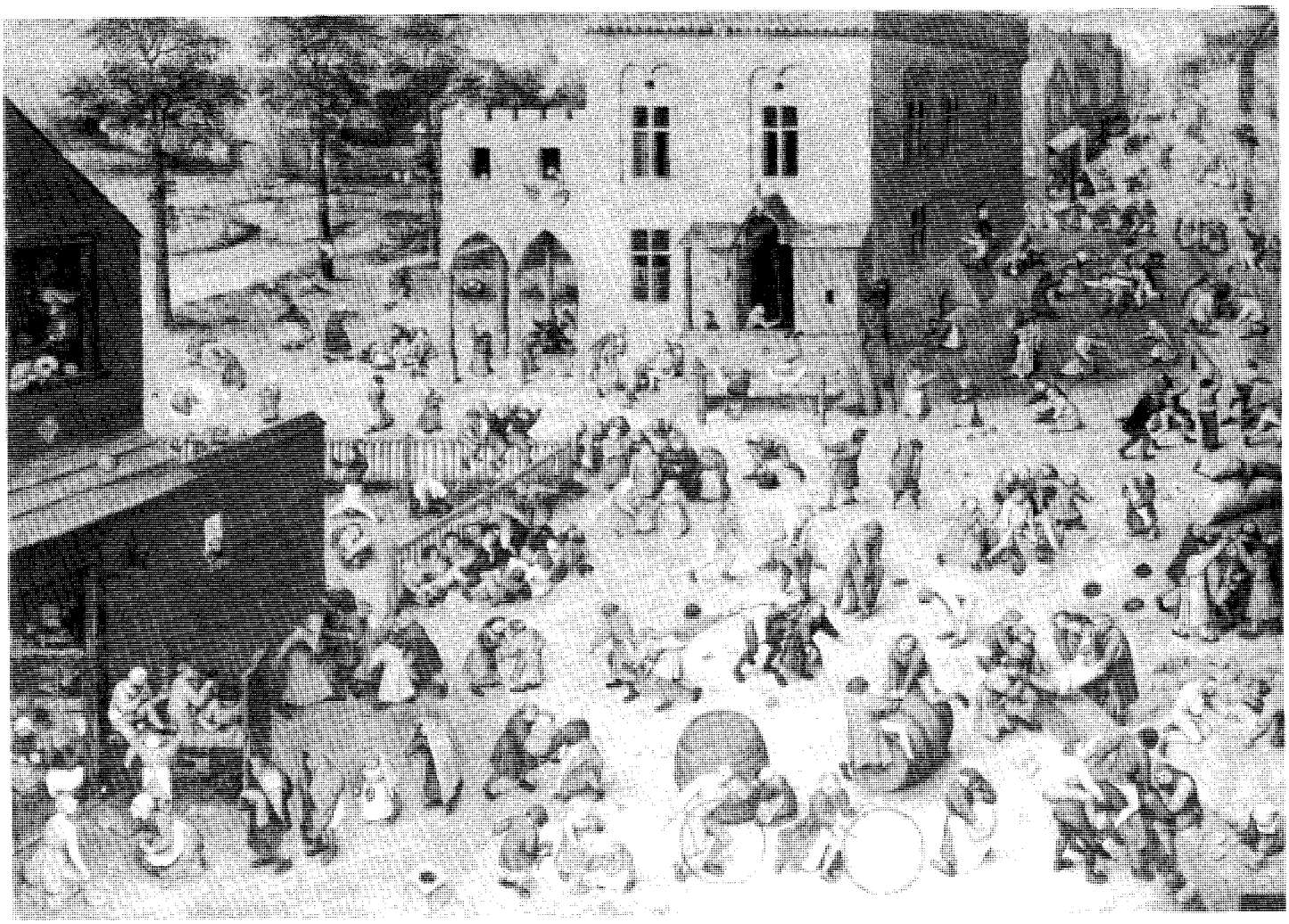

Fig.2 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Children's Games*, 1560 Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum
Oil on panel, 118 x 160 cm. (46 1/2 x 63 3/8")

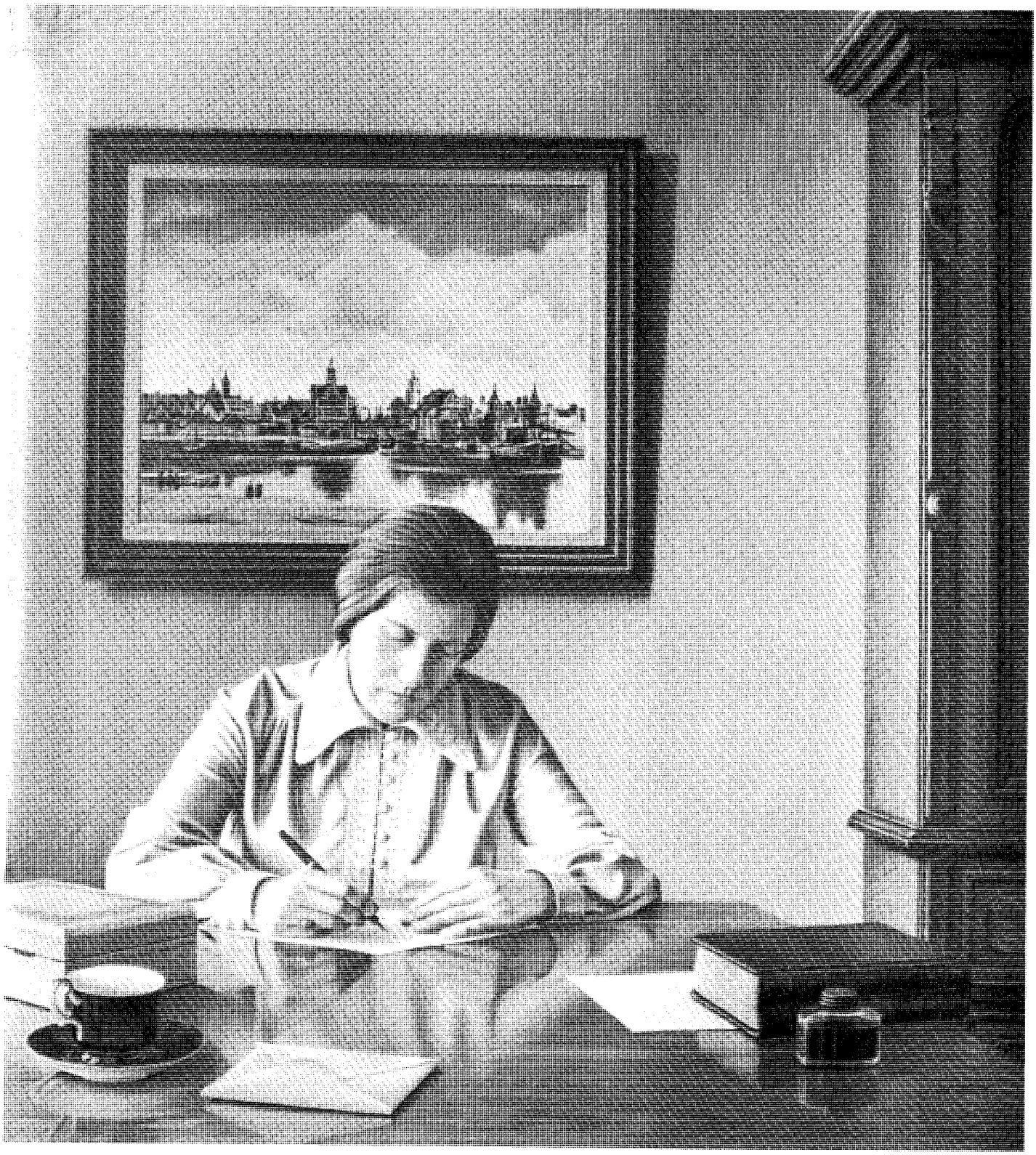

Fig.3 D.P. Brown, *The Letter*, 1971
Courtesy of D.P. Brown
Egg Tempera on Panel, 40.5 x 34 cm.
(16 x 13 1/2")

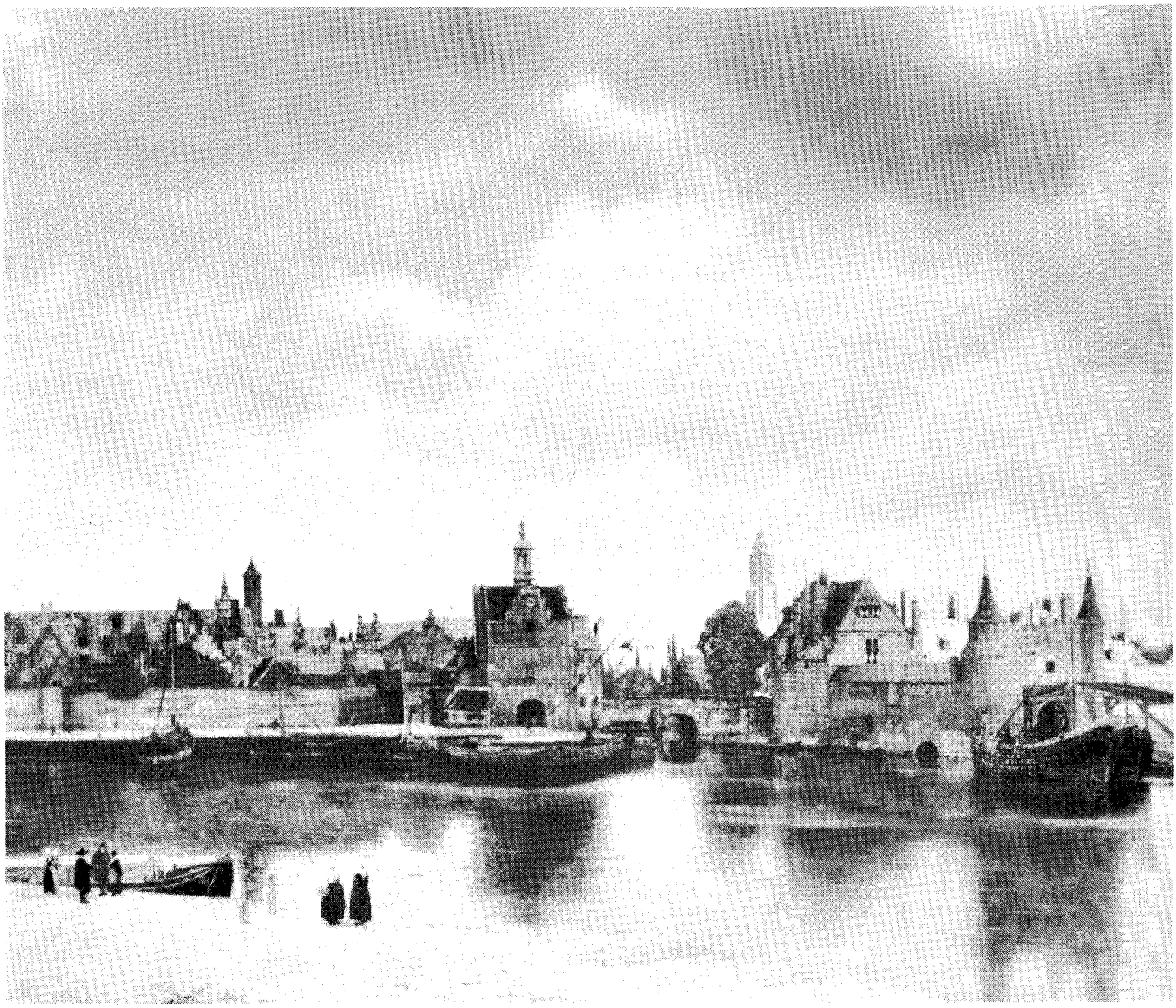

Fig.4 Johannes Vermeer, *View of Delft*, c1662
The Hague, Mauritshuis,
Oil on panel, 98.5 x 117.5 cm. (38 3/4 x 46 ¼")

Fig.5 Johannes Vermeer, *The Love Letter*
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum
Oil on canvas, 44 x 38.5 cm. (17 1/2 x 15")

Fig.6 Johannes Vermeer, *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, c. 1664
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum
Oil on canvas, 45.6 x 38.8 cm. (18 x 15 1/2")

Fig.7 D.P. Brown, *At the Piano*, 1972
Courtesy of D.P. Brown
Egg tempera on panel, 38 x 33 cm. (15 x 13")

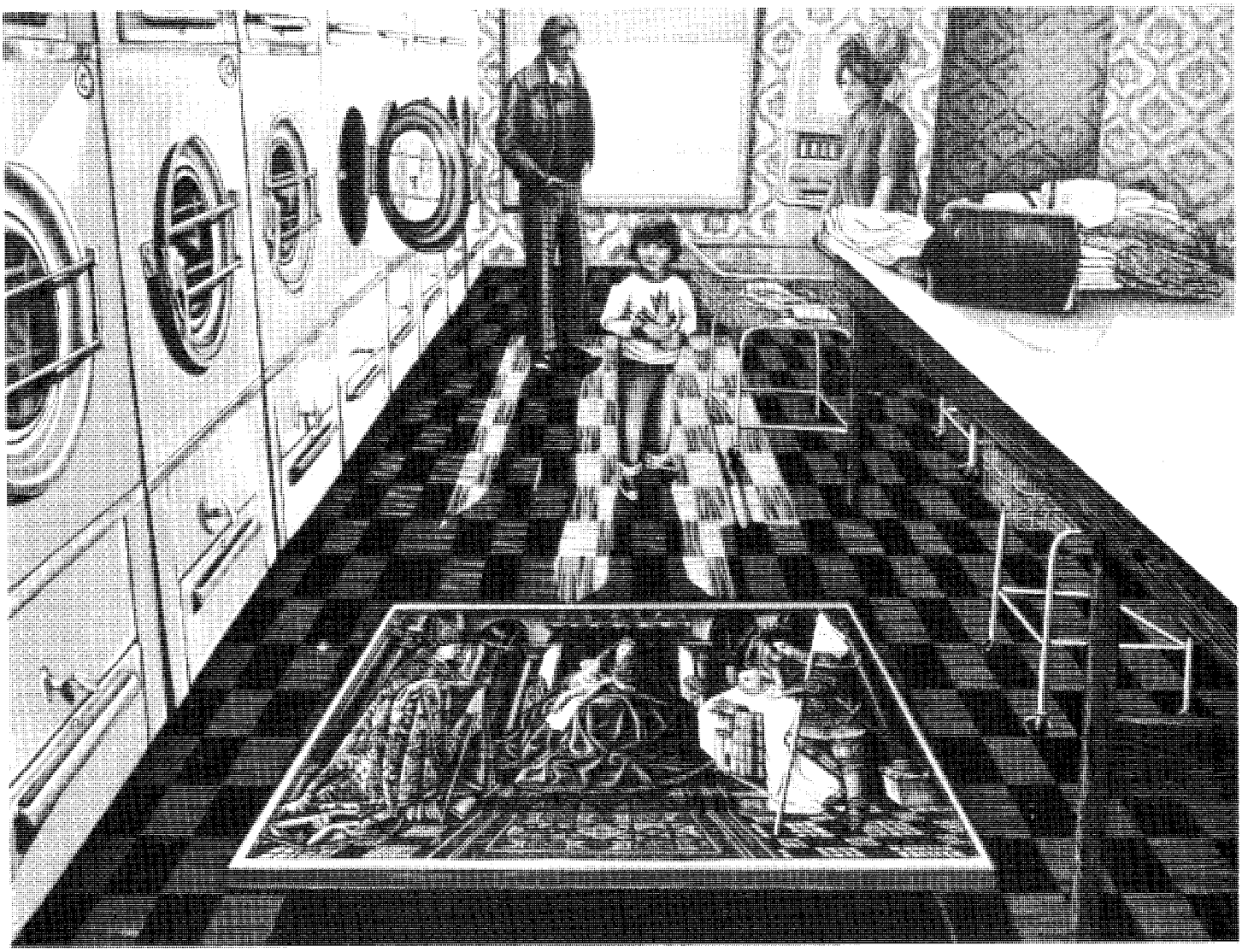

Fig.8 David Bierk, *Laundromat, Canadian Interior*, 1974
Courtesy of David Bierk
Oil on canvas, 183 x 244 cm. (72 x 96")

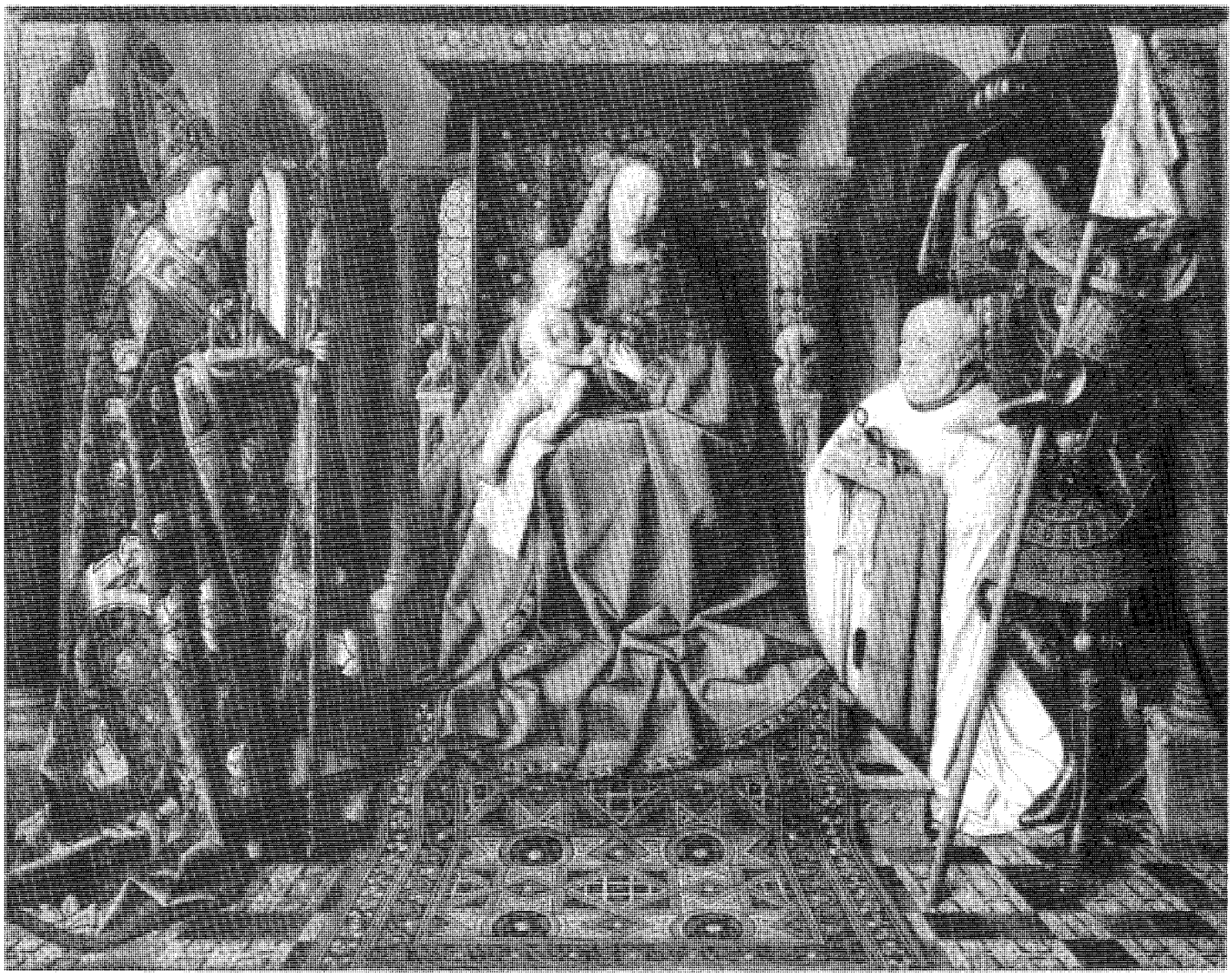

Fig.9 Jan van Eyck, *The Madonna Enthroned with St. Donatian and St. George Venerated by Canon George van der Paele*, 1436
Bruges, Groeningemuseum
Copyright A.C.L. Bruxelles
Panel 122 x 157 cm. (48 x 62 3/4")