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For Baroque artists Jan Steen and David Teniers the Younger, the simple sports like skittles, bowls, or archery contests were potent symbols of community life and freedom from oppressive work.

Jan Steen (1626-1679), SKITTLE PLAYERS OUTSIDE AN INN, 1660-1663. Oil on oak panel. 13.1" x 10.6". National Gallery, London, UK. Photo: © The Bridgeman Art Library. Used by permission.

Joyful Recreation

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ
AND HALEY STEWART

The simple sports of skittles, bowls, and archery contests – in part because they require no expensive equipment or highly specialized training of participants – became fashionable leisure pastimes for kings and peasants alike in the early modern era. For Baroque artists Jan Steen (1626-1679) and David Teniers the Younger (1610-1690) who often depicted the joyful recreation of these games, they were also potent symbols of community life and freedom from oppressive work.

The prolific Dutch painter Jan Steen never planned to be a full-time artist. The son of a brewer in Leiden, he attended college for one year before dropping out to study in the new painters' guild in his hometown. His wife Grietje's father, the landscape painter Jan van Goyen, may have been one of his teachers. Meanwhile, Steen's father attempted to bring the artist into the family business by purchasing a small brewery for him in Delft. This project failed and the family's brewing business eventually declined and collapsed. Steen's career as an artist was riddled with financial problems, too, and we know that near the end of his life he supported himself by operating a tavern in his house. It was not until after the artist's death that his work became very popular in Holland.¹

While Steen painted diverse subjects – including portraits, and mythological and biblical scenes – he is best known for genre scenes, depictions of common people in everyday activities, like *Skittle Players outside an Inn*. In this image the young man in the foreground is bowling a ball toward nine cones, or "skittles," arranged in a square. Several players can enjoy the game of skittles (or, *kegelen* in Dutch) on any reasonably flat piece of ground. They take turns rolling a ball down a short lane in order to topple the wooden pins, with the winner being the first one to knock over a pre-arranged number of them. The modern game probably derives from fourth-century German monks tossing rocks at a *kegel*, a small club, which in the context represented a sin or temptation to be avoided.² By the seventeenth century skittles had migrated from the gardens of monasteries to the lawns of pubs, as depicted in Steen's idyllic scene.

Steen usually developed his compositions more impulsively than most artists and did no due preparatory drawings; rather, he added features and characters as he went along to tell a story.³ In *Skittle Players outside an Inn*, a sign behind the fence on the left establishes the location as the yard of the inn in the background called “The Swan.” Two men from the inn (notice the younger one holds a Delftware tankard) stop to observe the skittles player’s throw; a barefooted child with a bright red hat and yellow shirt watches too. The art historian Wouter Th. Kloek notes that these spectators were a late addition to the composition, as they are painted over the background. In the lower left foreground, a man and woman in common dress enjoy their own conversation; they are joined by a wealthy man (seen from the back), with a smoking pipe in hand and dressed in fashionable attire. To squeeze all of this activity into the foreground, Steen has positioned the skittles player much too close to his target—he should be throwing from near the plank fence. The background figures also were added later to complete the composition: the horse is painted over the plank fence; an additional fence, a peasant woman with a red blouse, and a fisherman in a blue hat are painted on top of the background trees.⁴

This startling mixture of villagers—men and women, old and young, wealthy and poor, leisured and working people—are drawn together on a carefree afternoon. The game of skittles, while vital to the scene, is not its theme. It is not so much a contest—indeed, where are the other players?—but an occasion for relaxing play and community gathering. In the final composition, bold splashes of bright red draw the viewer’s eye not to the figure of the wealthy man, but to the two women and barefoot child. Unlike many of his contemporaries who preferred to embellish the wealth and status of their subjects, Steen celebrates his figures’ commonness.⁵



While Jan Steen struggled financially in his on-and-off career in art, David Teniers the Younger flourished in Antwerp and his paintings were lauded in Flanders and abroad. This may be due in part to the fact that the local art dealers highly respected the work of his father, David Teniers the Elder, with whom he studied and collaborated. Teniers the Younger also made an artistically advantageous marriage: he wedded Anna, the daughter of Jan Breughel the Elder and granddaughter of Pieter Breughel the Elder, two of the most eminent painters in this period. While Teniers crafted many religious scenes, his depictions of everyday life—like *The Game of Bowls* and *The Trio of the Crossbow* discussed here—were the basis of his reputation. Elite patrons in Antwerp commissioned his works. In 1651 Archduke Leopold William, Governor of the southern Netherlands, appointed the artist to be his court painter. Later Teniers was made a noble.⁶ *The Museo Nacional*

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David Teniers the Younger (1610-1690), THE GAME OF BOWLS, 1650-1660. Oil on canvas. 16.5" x 30". Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. Photo: © Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

del Prado in Madrid, Spain, displays many of the artist's finest paintings today because, living in seventeenth-century Flanders, Teniers was a subject of the Spanish crown.

The sport Teniers depicts in *The Game of Bowls* is still a popular outdoor pastime throughout Europe. Its many variations, from lawn bowling (Scotland) and bocce (Italy) to bolle (Denmark) and petanque (France), share some common features: players take turns rolling or tossing balls at a target, either a fixed stake (as depicted in the painting) or a smaller ball (called a "jack") that is tossed first, and the player with the closest placement at the end of the round wins the point. Unlike skittles, bowls is a game filled with subtle strategies – like knocking away an opponent's closest ball, "hiding" one's own ball from the opponent, or, when a jack is used, repositioning the target altogether.⁷

In the foreground of *The Game of Bowls*, one player bowls a ball as his opponent waits anxiously by the stake. A boy walking by is engrossed by the game and is tempted to stop, but his little dog trots eagerly onward. Leaning from the tavern door a woman serves the men who have gathered around an upturned barrel to drink and converse, while four other patrons are drawn into watching the game of bowls nearby. Teniers employs a simple compositional device here: he balances the mass of shapes on the left with a large object on the right, in this case a picturesque crumbling obelisk. The smaller buildings of the village in the center give a sense of space and depth.⁸

The same device is employed in *The Trio of the Crossbow*. Two large ruins of wall on which a group of villagers have mounted their targets flank the action in the foreground. Space and depth are suggested by the smaller buildings of the village on the right and by two figures, one on each side, who walk through the hills. Yet the composition is far from static: the stance of the archer, the expectant glances of the spectators, the angle of the benches, the walking figure in the center (Is he not a bit careless to walk so close to the archer's line of fire?), the orientation of the dog, and the flow of evening sunlight suggest motion from left to right. The unusual horizontal layout of the images reinforces this idea of movement.⁹

While neither of Teniers's paintings is as intimate or socially complex as Steen's *Skittles Players outside an Inn*, they share the latter's warm respect for country life and the peasantry. Teniers developed this positive view of the peasantry slowly over his career; his early paintings are filled with "sinister and satirical distortion" of country people depicted in the "smoky, half-darkened interior" of buildings, much in imitation of the work of Adriaen Brouwer.¹⁰ In the two later paintings discussed here, Teniers employs a palette of warm colors to depict his figures in the bright outdoor light.



Early in Thomas Hughes' novel *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857) – the nostalgic account of English schooling that so greatly influenced the development of "muscular Christianity" in England and North America – the narrator describes a village feast from the days of Tom Brown's youth in the Vale of Berks. Everyone in the community, rich and poor, old and young, gathered in the churchyard (on the occasion of some forgotten saint's feast day) to enjoy local food and drink and to share in gossip and games. Tom joined the other boys in silly contests of "wrestling, ... jumping in sacks, and rolling wheelbarrows blindfolded."

Tragically, the English country holidaymaking of such "veasts" is a thing of the past, the narrator opines, because the wealthy and educated young men no longer mix company with the working class boys. Will the people of England ever be whole again? Can the destructive class distinctions of modern capitalist industry – "buying cheap and selling dear, and its accompanying overwork" – be reversed? "Well, well, we must bide our time. Life isn't all beer and skittles," the narrator notes, "but beer and skittles, or something better of the same sort, must form a good part of every Englishman's education."¹¹

The moment of grace in the simple sports of the English country "veast" came because all the people could play, and all did play. They met on a pleasant evening in the churchyard or around the village inn and celebrated nothing more important than one another's company. This is the enduring meaning of David Teniers and Jan Steen's paintings of the games of skittles,

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David Teniers the Younger (1610-1690), THE TRIO OF THE CROSSBOW, c. 1645. Oil on canvas. 21.25" x 34.6". Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. Photo: © Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

or bowls, or archery contests.

We have inherited a certain distrust of simple games: they are lollygagging, terribly unproductive activities. In the fourteenth century, King Edward III and parliament banned the game of bowls because they feared it would interfere with more important sports like archery, which developed skills of war essential to the nation state. King Henry VIII adjusted the ban in 1511 to allow other gentlemen aficionados, like him, who owned a bowling green worth over £100, to play the sport at any time. The poor and middle classes were prevented from wasting their precious working time on bowling, except in celebration of one season—Christmas. This ban was not officially lifted until 1845.

On the other hand, the story is told that when John Knox, the leader of Presbyterianism in Scotland, visited John Calvin in Geneva on a Sunday afternoon, Mr. Calvin was playing a game of bowls.¹² We like to think he invited John Knox to play a round with some of his working class friends.

NOTES

1 Lyckle de Vries, "Steen, Jan," in *Grove Art Online, Oxford Art Online*, accessed September 12, 2008, www.oxfordartonline.com.

2 "Skittles—History and Useful Information," in *The Online Guide to Traditional Games*, accessed September 11, 2008, www.tradgames.org.uk/games/Skittles.htm.

3 "[Steen's] rapid execution seems to have been rather careless in some cases," de Vries reports. "Aesthetic concerns were never uppermost in his mind, and creating forms never became an end in itself. Steen did not master even the most basic rules of linear

perspective, was careless about human anatomy and seems to have trusted to improvisation rather than careful planning in his compositions. The almost complete absence of drawings from Steen's hand reinforces the impression that most of his paintings must have been executed directly on to the support." (de Vries, *op cit.*)

4 Wouter Th. Kloek, "Skittle Players outside an Inn," in H. Perry Chapman, W. Th. Kloek, and Guido Jansen, *Jan Steen: Painter and Storyteller* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1996), 169-171.

5 de Vries, *op cit.*

6 Hans Vlieghe, "Teniers," in *Grove Art Online, Oxford Art Online*, accessed September 12, 2008, www.oxfordartonline.com.

7 "Bowls," in *The Online Guide to Traditional Games*, accessed September 11, 2008, www.tradgames.org.uk/games/Bowls.htm.

8 See the discussion of this painting in the online gallery of *Museo Nacional del Prado*, where it is oddly titled *The Skittles Game*, accessed September 12, 2008, www.museodelprado.es/en/ingles/collection/on-line-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/the-skittles-game/.

9 The online gallery of *Museo Nacional del Prado* discusses this image under the title *The Archery Contest*, accessed September 12, 2008, www.museodelprado.es/en/ingles/collection/on-line-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/the-archery-contest/.

10 Vlieghe, *op cit.*

11 Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 41-42.

12 On the checkered history of bowls, see "Bowls," *Classic Encyclopedia* based on the eleventh edition of *The Encyclopedia Britannica* (1911), accessed September 11, 2008, www.1911encyclopedia.org/Bowls.



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