

PRIMARY TEACHERS' NOTES

The Castle of Muiden in Winter
Beerstraaten

The Castle of Muiden in Winter by Beerstraaten



This picture is by a 17th-century Dutch artist. It shows a castle, which was built in the late 13th century, and which still exists – it is open to the public as a museum. In Beerstraaten's time the castle was still occupied and during the 17th century it had become a meeting place for poets and scholars, and it is often mentioned in the poetry of the time. In the painting we are looking at the castle from the north-east. We can see the main entrance approached by a wooden drawbridge. This was later replaced by a stone bridge after a number of people had fallen into the moat. Although the details of the building are quite accurate, Beerstraaten has largely invented the landscape around the castle. For example the buildings in the background on the right are probably meant to represent the town of Muiden which is close to Amsterdam. It was not visible from this viewpoint. On the left, beyond the dyke, is the river Vecht, at the mouth of which, on the left bank, is a beacon. In the distance is the sea. Some of the skaters on the frozen moat have kolf clubs – for playing an early version of golf.

The 17th century was very important in Dutch history. The United Provinces of the northern Netherlands successfully broke away from their Spanish Catholic rulers and set up an independent Protestant Republic – now modern Holland. Through international trade this new country became very prosperous and the new money led to the development of towns and extensive land drainage schemes. While the Dutch Reformed church commissioned virtually no art works, there was a new demand for small scale paintings for the home from the newly wealthy merchant classes. For the first time, artists began to produce works without a commission in the hope that they would be able to sell them, and a new trade, that of the art dealer, emerged. Enormous numbers of highly skilled painters worked in 17th century Holland – and most of them specialised in particular types of picture – for example, still life or landscape.

Beerstraaten was born in Amsterdam in about 1622 and died there in 1666. Very little is known about his life. He largely painted topographical works – accurate pictures of different parts of Holland such as views of Dutch towns and castles (often winter scenes), and he also did some imaginary seaports and a few sea-battles. He signed his name in various ways. On this painting he has put I. BEER-STRAATEN./1658 (the N is reversed).

Working with Prints

The National Curriculum for Art requires you to look at the work of artists with children at Key Stages 1 and 2. If your school has no local Art Gallery or if going on outings is difficult, you may need to use reproductions instead of the 'real thing'. The experience will of course be a different one, but using a good quality print such as this one of Beerstraaten's Castle of Muiden in Winter, and introducing it to your class in an imaginative way can be a valuable and enjoyable activity. Looking at works of art can also enrich other curriculum areas such as History, Geography or Science; it could even be the focus of a term or half-term's project.

Where do I start?

Decide how you will introduce the print. You could put it on the wall casually and leave it for a couple of weeks to see how the children react. You might put out a comments book or a tape recorder to register first impressions and only later do a more formal 'looking session'. Alternatively you could bring it out 'cold', say at story time, and begin there.

The looking process: some discussion leads

What?

It is always best to start with what you can see: there would be little point in you talking about an artist such as Beerstraaten whose life and career are largely unknown. Instead talk about what the subject of the painting might be: there are many people visible but the castle dominates the picture as it still does the landscape: this is a painting about a building, almost a portrait of it. Why were castles built and when? Children might then be able to work out that this one might be much older than the painting. Features such as the moat, the thick walls, rounded towers and small windows would suggest that it is a fortified building. Some children will have seen pictures of or visited other medieval castles similar to this one (e.g. Beaumaris Castle in Anglesey, or Kidwelly Castle in Carmarthen). And did you notice the toilet on the right hand wall?

Where?

Where is this castle? A flat landscape full of waterways as well as a dyke are all clues to its location in Holland. Get older children to estimate how much of the picture is covered by sky (a characteristic of Dutch landscapes).

When?

The sky is also a clue for the season – of course it is winter, but get the children to look closely at the weather: there is a glimpse of clear sky to the far left, but otherwise the heavy dark clouds say imminent snow, although snow is not lying thickly on the ground – the white fringes on the trees may be frost... how cold is it? Cold enough for ice that is safe for skating, and for a large horse to walk on it! (RH background) Look at everything happening on the ice: it's a playground (kolf), a roadway, a meeting place.

Taking things further

If you spend time with your pupils looking at and talking about a print such as this one, you are fulfilling the National Curriculum requirement to teach visual literacy. But you are also asked to make connections between the work of artists and children's own work, so looking at this print could lead you to...

Art

Get the children doing their own sky studies, under different weather conditions; use different media: watercolours, pastels, wax crayons. Look at John Constable's cloud studies. The light castle is silhouetted against the dark sky, as are the trees on the left and the dark moving figures against the ice. Look at paintings by Hendrick Avercamp (1585-1634) for more ice pictures, or L. S. Lowry's small figures at work or play. (Try your own silhouettes; light against dark or the opposite.) Look at the moving figures and ask the children to do quick sketches of children moving about in the playground. If you have a nearby ice-rink perhaps you could sketch there. Talk about colour: get the children to notice it is mainly black, white, grey and brown. You could try limiting the colours you give the children to use: this is a good way to force them to mix colours to produce different shades. Paint a picture of a local brick or stone wall. Discuss the overall colour and then look closely to see all the different shades. A quick and effective way to do this is with prints: vegetable, lino or polystyrene.

But there is more to this picture than Art... looking at it and talking about it is a way of developing...

Language skills

Oral communication first. Play a game where you blindfold a child who hasn't seen the picture yet, and get the rest of the class to describe the picture in words. They will need to be precise about colour and the composition of the painting. There might also be an opportunity for them to learn new terms such as background, *foreground* and *silhouette*. This picture could also stimulate imaginative writing: what might it be like inside the castle? Who or what might live in there? Read and write stories or poems about human and animal castle-dwellers e.g. *Griffin's Castle* by Jenny Nimmo, or *The Stories of Green Knowe* by Lucy Boston, for older children. For Key Stage 1, try *Meg's Castle* by Helen Nicholl and Jan Pienkowski.

Geography

If you are doing a 'weather' or 'seasons' topic, use this picture to illustrate ideas about temperature, climate, seasonal activities etc.. You could link this with art by painting this view in spring, summer or autumn. It might also enrich a study of waterways.

Science

Materials and their properties (Attainment Target 3) – if you are experimenting with reversible/irreversible changes you could also look at this as an example of the freezing process!

Technology

Talk about why castle walls are thick and the windows small, and what the moat and drawbridge are for. Key Stage 2 pupils could make a cooperative model of this castle in its setting, perhaps designing a working drawbridge. Get them to think practically – how would the castle inhabitants survive in a siege? They would need a well and places to store dried food; perhaps also a vegetable patch in the courtyard.

Music

Listen to the Frost Scene from Purcell's *King Arthur* or *Winter* from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. Compose your own frost or ice music. Or write spooky castle music.

Doing your own thing

The above cross-curricular links are suggestions only. If you are involved in a rolling programme of topics you may not be able to focus on one picture in such a broad way; you will know best how to fit it in, and working with pictures may be most easily included in the Art curriculum. But as you have seen, all works of art, including paintings, relate to many areas of learning. We hope you will feel able to exploit this potential as fully as possible in your own way.