Exercise 40. Genre Painting: Life at Home
(Student page 119)

Picture 1 is by Jan Steen (1626–1679), a Dutch artist noted for his genre paintings. Picture 2 is by an American artist named Doris Lee (1905–1983). Genre painting was particularly popular in seventeenth-century Holland and nineteenth-century America, but there are examples from many other eras as well.

1. Picture 1 shows the Eve of St. Nicholas in a Dutch home. A large family with many children is excited because St. Nicholas has just visited, leaving toys for the family, including a doll for the little girl at center. But the boy on the left is crying because he has been naughty and therefore has not received anything. The standing man on the right is waving good-bye, perhaps to St. Nicholas, while the little boy near the grandmother is gloating over his brother’s misfortune. Food and clothing lie scattered around. Picture 2 shows a bustling family preparing Thanksgiving dinner, with five women busily at work, and children and babies all over the room. In the distance the dining table is prepared. The dog and cat are waiting for their treats. One woman is making pastry, another is getting dishes for the table, while a third takes off her hat to begin helping. The woman at the stove is cooking, while twins in the left corner shout for their supper.

2. The room in the Steen painting shows the family to be comfortably well off, with its leaded windowpanes, hanging curtains, and carved moldings. The many small items in the room—from the shoe to the decorated pillow—indicate a warm, inviting atmosphere. Similarly, the Lee kitchen, while old-fashioned with its iron cookstove and open shelves, is nonetheless a comfortable and inviting room, filled with bustle and such small, appealing details as the ornaments on the shelves, the calendar on the wall, the broom in the corner, and so on.

3. In each painting the tiled floor suggests the room’s perspective with its angling lines. In each painting the dimensions of the room are indicated by the diagonal angles of the walls, ending with a door or a window at the far end. In each, the space beyond the window or door is delicately indicated as well. Both pictures are made up of a series of geometric rectangles and angled planes so that the action takes place neatly within a precise space.

4. The mood in both pictures is one of contentment, satisfaction with family life, warmth, and enthusiasm, with emphasis on personalities and human interaction.

5. The Steen painting shows a close-knit family celebrating a holiday with their children. While it points out that one little boy didn’t get any gifts from St. Nicholas—making the moral point that he should have behaved better—its basic message is that the traditions of family life are warm, comforting, and satisfactory. Middle-class life is the subject of this painting, and it is a happy picture.
6. The life-style portrayed by Doris Lee is of old-fashioned American midwestern values, where women cook busily in the kitchen, preparing for a family holiday. It celebrates tradition, Americana, simplicity, and cooperation—all strong values in the traditional household.

7. The values expressed in this painting had many supporters who resented the arrival of modern, abstract, and foreign ideas in art. A long-term conflict between proponents of new art and believers in traditional art arose with the beginnings of modern art in the United States. When this painting was made (in 1935), the battle had been won by modernists in many parts of the country, but it was still going on in the art world in the Midwest, where the Art Institute of Chicago acquired this very traditional picture.

8. Aside from the subject of the painting—which depicts women who spend so much time cooking—the style of the painting is now considered old-fashioned. While contemporary styles of art include some pictures of daily life, these works are commonly devoted to “pop” images or satire. The traditional values implicit in this picture and the rather prim, folk-art style are no longer “in vogue.” Among the many reasons for this are the sophistication of today’s audience, a century of modern images, television viewing, and the collapse of family life as it was known in the past. Genre art has been absorbed by other media (see answer to question 10).

9. Genre painting often tells a little story (like the boy who didn’t get any presents) or anecdote. These short stories are illustrated by the painting and were extremely popular in various times, including nineteenth-century America. Storytelling pictures allow the viewer to “read” the story pictorially—to the delight of people who understand the message and enjoy the illustration of it.

10. Television sitcoms, movies, and even photographs in magazines now replace the homey little stories of genre painting. People daily see such pictures through television and movies—not unlike the scenes once included in genre painting.

11. Genre painting is the depiction of daily life, small events or stories, and families that are representative of the time and place in which they live.

12. Short stories can be shared with the class.