

Landscape with men playing 'Mail a la Chicane', 1624

by Paul Bril (from Antwerp, 1554 – 1626), painted while living in Rome

Accession #40.3

G312



Current Galley Label:

Paul Bril was born into a family of artists active in Antwerp. Around 1580, he moved permanently to Rome, where he worked initially as a fresco painter in the Vatican (*which was then in progress*). In the 1590s he began to paint small landscapes stylistically indebted to an earlier Flemish tradition. Gradually, he developed a more classicizing mode in which ruins, bucolic figures (*pertaining to shepherds, rural*) and a calmer, pastoral sentiment prevailed. At his death in 1626, Bril was renowned throughout Italy for his idealizing landscapes, and his work would have a profound influence on Claude Lorrain.

MIA's 44 second audio of the painting:

<http://www.artsconnected.org/resource/96318/landscape-with-men-playing-mail-la-chicane-by-paul-bril>

Key points:

- Bril was well accepted in Rome's artistic circles - His approach to landscape was, at the time, something of an innovation in Italy. His poetic interpretations of nature were much in favor. Bril's preoccupation with light, stemming from his northern inheritance, is perhaps the most outstanding quality of his work. Bril had many commissions in Rome.

- Flemish Landscapes' influence on Italian Art - Until northern artists (and particularly those from Flanders) had begun to filter into Italy, Italian painters of the Renaissance had been chiefly interested in the depiction of the human figure. The painters of north, who had a long tradition of landscape painting, were more occupied with nature than with man. [*There were exceptions, of course. Both Giorgione and Titian, for example, had used landscape extensively in some instances; these Italian paintings could be classified as landscapes. Despite nature's dominant role in such pictures, however, it is treated with a formality and an eye to design that sets it immediately apart from the northern conception of landscape painting.*] The changing seasons [*and temperatures*] of the north gave nature a personality and variation, such that Northern artists never tired of picturing the moods and miracles of nature. In Italy they encouraged an interest in nature which was previously tentative in Italian painting. Bril was a leader of this movement that would later include distinguished artists like Poussin and Claude Lorrain. Bril was not an outstanding figure, but an able practitioner of the art of chiaroscuro (gradations of light and shade), which was just then beginning to have an intense interest for the Italians.
- MIA painting's notable points – It is an early example of pure landscape painting. Bril's treatment of light is well illustrated in this landscape, in which the middle and far distances are bathed in the soft, greenish light characteristic of his last works. The intervening hills of the scene are thick with foliage, and are momentarily shadowed by a passing cloud. In the left foreground a high, crumbling wall bordered with tall trees casts a dark shadow over a pair of golfers trying to drive from a deep trap.
- Connections to Golf – Various predecessor games to modern day golf existed as far back as the Middle Ages. In Scotland, the object was to hit the ball into a hole in the ground. In Europe the game of Pall Mall had similar rules but required hitting the ball through a hoop above ground. Mail a la Chicane from France required hitting a tree or a door with the ball (which is most likely the game depicted here). *Encourage guests to really look at what is going on, finding similarities and differences to the modern day game. Go into the gallery and look closely at the painting as you read the following details:*
 1. This seems to be a cross between modern golf and croquet. The clubs depicted are of two types: a short mallet, like a croquet stick but with a thinner barrel, and a wooden driver with an excessively long shaft. The balls are large, rather like croquet balls, but must have been very light in weight considering the size of the clubs.
 2. Bril's figures are natural and lively. To the right, a foursome is getting underway, and the man who is about to drive off raises his left arm – is he calling out “Fore!”? His companion is also signaling to the players ahead, while the other two members of the group are getting balls from an attendant emerging from a small building that is apparently the seventeenth-century equivalent of the Pro's quarters. Clubs and balls are

displayed on wooden arms projecting from beams, and large net bags of balls are slung from long hooks over the doorway.

3. In the middle foreground two players are caught in what looks like an inescapable trap. One is measuring his shot with his club and the other looks on. The two groups waiting their turn to drive appear to be impatient over the delay caused by the players in the trap. In the left foreground a caddy, with a net bag of balls over his shoulder and two clubs in his hand, watches his player tee the ball and get ready for the drive.

Possible Questions:

- 1) Classic: What is going on this picture? Look closely, describe what you see.
- 2) What similarities and / or differences do you see with modern day golf?
- 3) What techniques has the artist used to show us depth/distance?

Possible Tours:

Landscapes, Cityscapes and Escapes

Highlights to 1850

The World at Play (include Game of Go, The Gamblers, Veracruz Rattle or Yoke (ball players), American card table in period rooms, Rejects from the Bat Factory, Modernism Scooter, etc)

EXPANDED RESEARCH:

Short Thematic Essay entitled “*Dutch and Flemish Artists in Rome, 1500-1600*” discusses in further detail the reasons these artists flocked to Rome – what they learned and what imprint they left behind. Link:

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/noro/hd_noro.htm



Self Portrait by Paul Brill
Museum of Art - Providence, Rhode Island

Sources:

www.artsconnected.org

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/noro/hd_noro.htm

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_and_Mattheus_Brill