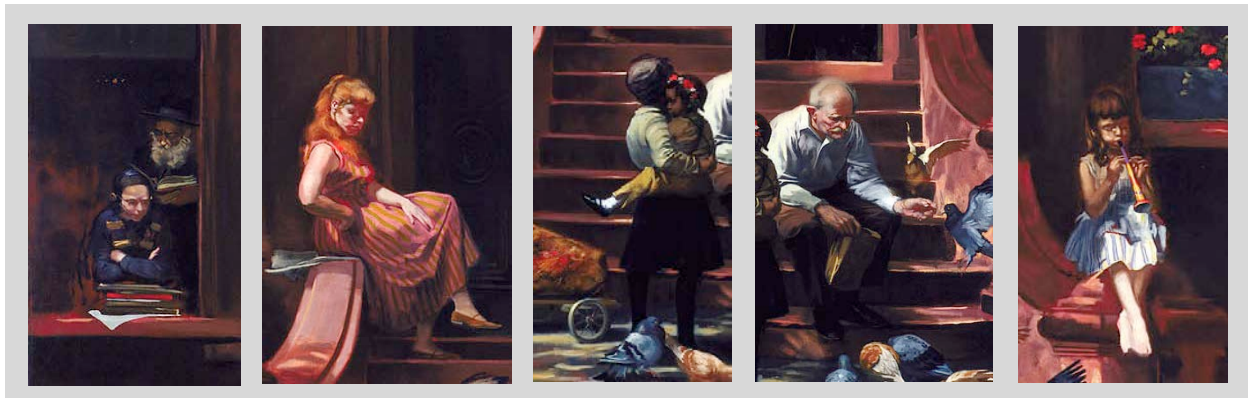


## **Activity: Observe and Interpret**

*Artists make choices in communicating ideas. What can we learn about urban life in the post-war United States from this painting? What message is Harvey Dinnerstein trying to convey? Observing details and analyzing components of the painting, then putting them in historical context, enables the viewer to interpret the overall message of the work of art.*

### **Observation: What do you see?**

**Take a closer look at each individual depicted in this scene. Then, considering them as a group, what do you notice about the people represented?**



A diverse group of people congregates on the front steps of an urban brownstone. The people are old and young, male and female, representing different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The clothing and hairstyles of the two male figures in the window indicate that they are probably part of a Hasidic Jewish community. There is a red-haired young woman, perhaps Irish, sitting at the top of the steps. Two young African American girls stand on the sidewalk. One of them is looking at an old man sitting on the steps, feeding a flock of pigeons. A little girl, ankles crossed and barefoot, is perched atop the end of the bannister playing a horn.

Dinnerstein sketched people he saw on the streets outside his studio and elsewhere around the city and used them as figures in his painting. He depicted his daughter Rachel as the girl playing the horn, and also included his neighbor's dog, sitting on a strange wagon pieced together from odds and ends and covered in a colorful tapestry.

### **What clues has the artist given us about the setting of this painting?**

The style of architecture represented in this painting – brownstone townhouses – are most commonly found in urban areas, especially on the East Coast. We don't see any grass or

gardens, but there is a box of flowers on the window ledge, and the shadows on the sidewalk suggest that there might be trees on the street. We see a flock of pigeons, birds commonly found in cities. The group of people Dinnerstein has represented indicates that we are looking at a diverse, urban neighborhood. Imagine the sounds you might hear if you stepped into this scene – the little girl’s horn, the beating of the pigeons’ wings, perhaps the wagon rolling or the dog barking – the neighborhood is full of life.

Dinnerstein painted this scene based on a combination of several buildings in his neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. The elaborate pediment over the doorway serves as a church or temple-like structure situated above the motley assortment of outcasts, each of type of the left-behinds: poor Jewish and Irish immigrants, racial minorities, and the elderly.

**Divide the painting down the middle, into two halves. What do you notice?**

Dinnerstein chose to compose the painting so that the doorway of the brownstone is centered precisely on the mid-point of the canvas. This architectural symmetry, in addition to the repeated use of vertical and horizontal lines, gives the scene balance and stability.



[Brownstone](#), 1968-1960, Harvey Dinnerstein, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum

## Interpretation: What does it mean?

Harvey Dinnerstein combined his sketches and memories of people and places in Brooklyn into this scene of urban community life in the late 1950s. In *Brownstone*, he intentionally chose to represent a diverse array of people, and included signs of vibrancy and life, including the blooming flowers, the music from the little girl’s horn, and the colorful wagon. Although there are shadows and darkness, The composition of the painting, employing repetition of vertical and horizontal lines and architectural symmetry, gives the scene a sense of calm, balance and tranquility.

At the time Dinnerstein created this painting, many middle class Americans were migrating out of cities in favor of the suburbs, taking advantage of new means of transportation and more affordable homes stemming from a post-war economic boom. Those who stayed in the city were often minorities or immigrants. Dinnerstein, who grew up, lived, and worked in Brooklyn,



wanted to paint a tribute to the urban neighborhood community as a still-vital societal institution. By making the ordinary people of Brooklyn the subjects of his painting, Dinnerstein was celebrating the multicultural and inter-generational communities that he felt made urban life so vibrant, yet commenting on the lack of wage-earning middle-class Americans who were financially able to move to the suburbs.