Sunlight streams from a mullioned window onto a table at which four young children cluster. Showing their hair and faces glowing with the sun's touch, von Bremen has created the focal point for The Children's Pet, a lovely, touching scene of hearth and home. Three of the young children crowd around the end of a table to see, touch, and feed the family pet, a small yellow-and-gray bird. At the far side of the table sits the eldest boy, who is perhaps twelve or thirteen years old. His head is slightly tilted to his right as he holds the bird perched upon his left index finger, his arms braced upon the table top from elbow to wrist. His sister, the oldest of the two girls, and apparently eleven or twelve years of age, sits closely at her brother's right side, her brunette head tilted to touch his right shoulder. Her left arm is draped across his back, her fingers gently clasping her big brother's shoulder. Across the table from the two oldest children sits a younger sister, of eight or nine years of age. The girl's back is presented to the viewer and her face is not quite in one-quarter profile. Her left hand rests on a book lying flat at the edge of the table, her fingers resting between the opened pages. The youngest family member is a boy of five or six years. He is on the left, at the end of the table, partially kneeling upon a chair on which a dark blue cushion sits to bolster his height. His right elbow rests on the edge of the table, and his hand is positioned just like his big brother's, index finger extended. He may be extending his arm and hand to emulate his brother or he may hope that the small bird will come to perch on his finger. The gazes of both boys are fixed upon the bird, small tender smiles fixed upon their entranced faces. The
eldest girl also shares the smile, but her gaze is directed toward her younger brother, her eyes gentle and loving as she watches. The second girl of the family is slightly removed from her three siblings, but her gaze is directed toward the family friend as well. It appears that this girl was at the table reading quietly when her siblings decided to remove their pet from its cage. The cream-and-red fringed table cloth is pushed away from the end of the table where the three children hold and feed the bird, yet the cloth still lies flat beneath the girl’s book.

The entire scene is one of a close, loving family and of all the good that the word “family” implies. Warm sunlight spills into the room from a mulioned window through which a neighbor’s orange-red roof can be seen, as well as distant hills in the background. A large red geranium blooms on the sill. A single dead leaf rests on the sill next to the terra cotta planter. Below the window, a brown padded window seat holds the beginning of a sweater, the needles crossed and the knitted body partially falling over the edge, as if it had been hastily discarded for the pleasure of seeing their pet. The ball of soft-blue gray yarn has fallen to the floor and rolled under the window seat. Two small discarded clogs, which belong to the shoeless younger brother, are strewn on the planked wooden floor in front of the window seat as if thrown off when he clamored onto the chair to see the bird.

Against the outside wall directly behind the table is a large hutch. Atop the dark, reddish-brown china hutch are two pots: a pitcher and a cabbage pot. They range in color and size from a small blue and white delft-like tea pot to a large light blue and green cabbage pot. The dark yellow ceramic coffee pot has decorative bands of red and bright yellow. A larger pitcher for water is second from the viewer’s right. All softly reflect light from the window. The door to the hutch is partially opened, showing another, smaller blue- and white pitcher. A dark brownish-red sideboard with raised wooden panels sits to the right of the hutch, holding a bronze soup tureen and a tall green bottle. There is obvious comfort in the room, not necessarily wealthy comfort, but rather the comfort that comes from having plenty in a well-loved and loving home. The room is neat, but not spotless, as if the children know that it is acceptable to actually live and be a child here. This is a family that not only shares the look of one another, but also the goods and materials brought into the home. The socks of three of the young children are all of the same dark, aqua, woolen yarn. You can almost see the mother sitting by a fire at night, knitting socks for her children from the same skein of yarn.

The children all have wonderful full, curved cheeks, flushed with a warm rose color. Their mouths are small and a deep rose color. This is a home of a family that has plenty, as proven by the bread used to feed the bird and the bread and crusts that litter the table and floor. Their clothes are unpatched, clean, and neat. The eldest brown-haired boy wears a charcoal-colored jacket with large brass buttons over a collared white shirt. Extra table linens peek out of a partially opened drawer at the end of the table. A mustard-yellow pie plate sits empty at the far end of the table, just waiting to be put away or filled with a dinner treat.

Red catches and carries the eye around the painting, from the red geraniums blooming against the bright window to the bow tied around the eldest girl’s neck. The red pattern woven into the edge of the cream tablecloth literally walks the eye around the edge of the cloth to the russet red, fully gathered dirndl of the strawberry-haired youngest girl. Her attire is very typical of the German middle class of the mid-nineteenth century: short puffed sleeves on a white blouse, a charcoal woolen vest trimmed with red to match her dirndl, a warm yellow apron tied over the front of her skirt, and a red cap perched on top of her head, fastened beneath her chin by black ties.

The painting is symmetrically divided in two different ways. The first and most obvious is the horizontal division created by the table top, which is placed slightly left of center and is highlighted by the sunlight streaming from the window. Von Bremen further balances the painting vertically. Two figures are on the left half and two figures are on the right, the vertical center line dividing the older girl and the older brother. Another symmetrical division occurs diagonally, through von Bremen’s use of value, beginning on the upper left beside the window and continuing to the lower right. The left diagonal is awash with sunlight; the right is shadowed and darkened by the large wood china hutch and side board. The diagonal division creates two large triangles which are repeated in diminishing size throughout the painting. The largest interior triangle uses the table top as its base. The youngest girl, with her back presented to the viewer, is one point, and the opposite point of the triangle is created by the youngest boy, who is kneeling on a chair at the end of the table. The apex of the triangle is the head of the eldest boy; the line between the two
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boys including the oldest sister, whose head rests upon her big brother's shoulder. Smaller triangular areas regress from the larger exterior triangle. One appears between the three children closest together, another by the elder boy's hand, which holds a piece of bread for the bird, the boy's chin, and the small bird cage. This area is further defined by the boy's dark jacket, which acts as a backdrop. The smallest triangular area is created by the children's hands, which hold, feed or stretch out to the bird, framed yet again against the boy's dark jacket.

The lines that move the viewer's eyes are created by the room's structure and the furniture. The horizontal window sill catches the vertical line of the youngest boy's chair, which catches the strong horizontal line of the chair seat that is highlighted by the sun. This leads to the vertical table leg, to the horizontal table top, and on to the cluster of sunlit children's heads. The viewer's eye is then led to the vertical line of the hutch, where the eye is caught horizontally by the pitchers and drawn vertically down to the sideboard. This leads back to the horizontal line of the table and back to the children. No matter where one starts to view this painting, Von Bremen has used line, color and shape to constantly concentrate and move the eye around and through the painting.

The points of comparison between von Bremen's *The Children's Pet* and Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *The Drunken Cobbler* are few and are rather patently obvious. Both are genre works. Each painting displays a scene of family interaction. Each depicts interior rooms with rosy-cheeked children, and both use a wide palette of brown hues and values. The artists have painted their subjects close to the front of the picture plane, and both paintings reflect a realistic painting style. At this point, however, the similarities come to a screeching halt.

Greuze utilized an open, linear method of composition for the neoclassical *The Drunken Cobbler*. The line of characters stretches left to right across the picture plane, beginning with the stooped and scolding wife, across the top of the heads of the two imploring children, to the exaggerated, stumbling posture of the drunken father. The title character is used quite deliberately. The figures are placed closely to the picture plane, and the viewer has the feeling of observing a scene of desperation and anger within the family. Every stereotypical element of a household with a drunken father is displayed. Clothes are rumpled and tattered, the wife wears the kerchief and apron of a hardworking woman, the children are barefoot (a cobbler's children barefoot!) and the poor dog's ribs are showing. There is a feeling of theatre throughout the painting. Even the beams and wall supports act as a frame to the tableau. There is a strong moralistic tone to this painting: excess drink leads to family ruin and poverty. This work is a neoclassical
admonishment to the viewer to control his or her body and desires, or the consequences will be dire.

In contrast, The Children’s Pet allows intimate participation in these young children’s lives. Sunlight beams through a clean widow, welcoming the viewer in. The children are well-dressed and clean. There is so much food, that crusts of bread scattered on the floor attract no attention. The children in Greuze’s painting would be diving to the floor for those crusts, and snatching at the bread being fed to the bird.

Von Bremen’s use of a closed composition is another point of contrast. The obvious focal point is the children surrounding the bird. Where Greuze seems to frame his tableau with exterior horizontal and vertical line, von Bremen leads the viewer through the work with multiple horizontal and vertical lines that lead to the focal point.

Both painting styles are realistic, but each leans in opposing direction. Greuze emphasizes the worst that life has to offer, the doom and gloom, a social commentary typical of the Enlightenment philosophy. The brush strokes appear to be smooth and flat, the figures clearly delineated. In contrast, von Bremen’s sentimental piece displays qualities of a good, stable, loving family. The brush stroke is fluid and slightly extends from the children, creating a soft, gentle, almost glowing aura, particularly around the children’s heads. The painting celebrates the loving emotions of these family members. The work is neither passionate nor explosive in style or subject, but it is overwhelming in emotional intensity.

Initially I thought The Children’s Pet almost too sweet, but von Bremen included enough elements related to real life to rescue the work from saccharine overload. Where Greuze paints sloth, squalor, and lack of control, the general neatness of von Bremen’s work is only disrupted by normal signs of children living and playing. Real life with children is slightly messy on the surface, but clean under the pure light of familial love.