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Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Adriaen van Ostade
Dutch, 1610 - 1685

The Cottage Dooryard

1673

oil on canvas
overall: 44 x 39.5 cm (17 5/16 x 15 9/16 in.)
framed: 74.3 x 69.2 x 7.6 cm (29 1/4 x 27 1/4 x 3 in.)
Inscription: lower center: Av. Ostade 1673 (Av in ligature)
Widener Collection 1942.9.48

ENTRY

Situated within the earthen courtyard of a vine-covered cottage is a tender vignette of domestic harmony and tranquility. The mother at the center of the family group busily cleans mussel shells in preparation for the evening meal. While the husband watches from the doorway of the wooden wall at the rear of the courtyard, an older sister cares for her youngest sibling as two other children play with the family dog. No comings or goings, no exceptional confrontations or other unusual circumstances provided motivation for this scene; rather, Adriaen van Ostade seems to be celebrating the peaceful existence of this family tending to daily life.

When writing about Van Ostade in the early eighteenth century, Arnold Houbraken marveled at the lively and spirited nature of the artist's peasant scenes. To emphasize Van Ostade's remarkable naturalism and tender view of country life, Houbraken compared his images of rural folk to those found in an early eighteenth-century pastural poem about a country *kermis* (fair).[1] In his associations between poetry and Van Ostade's image Houbraken emphasized the artist's imaginative interpretation of reality. In this painting, for example, Van Ostade captured not only the various attitudes of the members of the peasant family but also the sense of their home environment, whether it be the earthenware pots scattered here and there, the clothes hanging over the line, the dovecotes, the beehives, or the broken panes of glass in the upper windows. Their world seems real and tangible; the textures of the bricks, mortar, wood, glass, and cloth are convincingly indicated through subtle nuances of Van Ostade's brush. Finally, his organization of light and shadow helps unify the scene while his selected color accents enliven the image.

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Van Ostade almost certainly composed this work from various studies made from life; it was his practice throughout his career to make drawings of figures that he then used as points of departure for his paintings and etchings.[2] Although no preliminary drawings have been associated with this work, specific evidence that he composed this painting in the studio comes from a comparison with a finished drawing from the same year entitled *Pig Slaughtering in Peasant Village* [fig. 1]. Many elements in the two compositions are identical, including the wash hanging on the line, but the artist has modified the building and setting in subtle ways: he changed the leading in the windows and opened the vista to the background to create the sense of a village street rather than a courtyard. One motif, however, has remained the same: the vine clinging to the cottage, a traditional image of fertility and conjugal felicity.[3]

Van Ostade painted *The Cottage Dooryard* near the end of a long and illustrious career during which he created numerous drawings and etchings of rural life as well as paintings (see *Tavern Scene*). As his style evolved from a relatively dark to a light palette, his attention shifted from depictions of rowdy peasants to those whose lives embodied family values centered on mutual caring and sharing of domestic responsibilities. Country folk in his late work no longer occupy hovels, but rather more substantial structures, which are rustic in appearance and simply furnished.

The stylistic evolution, in many ways gradual and quite understandable in the broader context of Dutch art, does, nevertheless, raise questions about the changing nature of the artist's image of country life. If, following Houbraken's lead, one views Van Ostade's images of peasants as poetic evocations of rural life that he has "thought up" rather than as descriptive reality, then it is important to try to understand his attitudes toward his subject matter.[4] The shift in style and concept may be sociological as well as artistic. Whereas during the 1630s and 1640s there seemed to be widespread assumptions that lower-class people were bestial or vulgar, by the 1670s the rural Dutch, unaffected by the influx of foreign influences and the pursuit of wealth that was so evident in city life, came to embody the ideal virtues at the foundation of Dutch culture. These, in large part, had been codified in the prolific writings of Jacob Cats, whose work was frequently republished throughout the century, and would continue to be so until the mid-nineteenth century. The domestic tranquility and homey virtues found in Van Ostade's depictions of lower-class households during the latter part of his career thus represent a view of peasant existence seen through a veil of nostalgia for a

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simpler, less complex way of life, one that incorporated values that had been at the essence of Dutch society. In this regard, it is interesting that Van Ostade created this idyllic scene the year after he had fled Haarlem because of the French invasion of the Netherlands.[5]

One also wonders whether the exquisite watercolors [fig. 2] Van Ostade made after this and other similar late paintings spoke to the same need.[6] The positive response to these late paintings and their related watercolors was immediate and lasting and may explain much about the widespread appeal of mid-seventeenth-century Dutch art in the Netherlands at the beginning of the eighteenth century.[7]

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Adriaen van Ostade, *Pig Slaughtering in Peasant Village*, 1673, pen and ink and watercolor, British Museum, London. Photo © Trustees of the British Museum

fig. 2 Adriaen van Ostade, *The Cottage Dooryard*, 1673, watercolor, Amsterdams Museum, Museum Fodor, Legacy Collection, Amsterdam

NOTES

[1] Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlandtsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1976), 1:348. The poem by L. Rotgans, *Boerekermis* (Country Fair), was published in 1708. The identification of the poem was made by Broos in Ben P. J. Broos et al., *Great Dutch Paintings from America* (The Hague, 1990), 359.

[2] The drawings have been cataloged by Bernhard Schnackenburg, *Adriaen van Ostade, Isack van Ostade: Zeichnungen und Aquarelle: Gesamtdarstellung mit Werkkatalogen*, 2 vols. (Hamburg, 1981). For a discussion of Van Ostade's use of drawings see Peter Schatborn in Douglas Lewis, *The Drawings of Andrea Palladio* (Washington, DC, 1981), 79–80.

[3] As Robinson has noted in Peter C. Sutton and Jane Iandola Watkins,

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Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting (Philadelphia, 1984), 289 n. 4, the image was inspired by Psalm 128: "Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the side of thine house: thy children like olive plants round thy table."

[4] Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlandtsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1976), 1:347–348. "Als ook de beeltjes in hunne bekleeding, en allerhande bedryven, zoo natuurlyk boers en geestig, dat het om to verwonderen is; hoc hy 't heft weten to bedenken."

[5] Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlandtsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1976), 1:347. Houbraken writes that Van Ostade left Haarlem for Amsterdam in 1662, but the explicit mention of the French invasion in his sentence makes it clear that he meant to write 1672.

[6] Bernhard Schnackenburg, *Adriaen van Ostade, Isack van Ostade: Zeichnungen und Aquarelle: Gesamtdarstellung mit Werkkatalogen*, 2 vols. (Hamburg, 1981), 1:41, 73 n. 111a, lists more than fifty such watercolors from the period between 1672 and 1684, and suggests that Van Ostade's technique was influenced by the watercolors of Hendrick Avercamp (1585–1634). Broos in Ben P. J. Broos et al., *Great Dutch Paintings from America* (The Hague, 1990), 359, has noted that Constantijn Sennepart (1625–1703), the art dealer with whom Van Ostade stayed in Amsterdam after he had fled Haarlem and who purportedly suggested to Van Ostade that he make such watercolors, owned drawings by Avercamp.

[7] Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlandtsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1976), 1:347.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a moderately coarse-textured fabric, tightly woven in a plain weave. It has been lined with the tacking margins trimmed, but cusping visible in the X-radiograph indicates the dimensions have not been altered. The fabric weave is visible through the thick, smooth white ground.

The paint was applied in thin layers with no appreciable brushmarking or impasto. The vehicular pastes of the figures, architecture, and sky give way to fluid opaque washes in the foreground. Lean granular yellows and transparent green glazes were employed in the foliage. A pentimento is visible in the upper left tree.

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The condition of the painting is excellent. Abrasion is slight, and losses are confined to the edges and an area of flaking around the foreground figures at right. In 1975 a double lining was removed and the support was relined. An aged surface coating was removed.

PROVENANCE

Adriaen Swalmius [1689-1747], Schiedam;[1] (sale, Rotterdam, 15 May 1747, no. 2); Jacques Ignace de Roore [1686-1747], Antwerp; (his estate sale, The Hague, 4 September 1747, no. 84);[2] Pieter Bisschop [c. 1690-1758] and Jan Bisschop [1680-1771], Rotterdam; purchased 1771 with the Bisschop collection by Adrian Hope [1709-1781] and his nephew, John Hope [1737-1784], Amsterdam; by inheritance after Adrian Hope's death to John Hope, Amsterdam and The Hague; by inheritance to his sons, Thomas Hope [1769-1831], Adrian Elias Hope [1772-1834], and Henry Philip Hope [1774-1839], Bosbeek House, near Heemstede, and, as of 1794, London, where the collection was in possession John's cousin, Henry Hope [c. 1739-1811]; by inheritance 1811 solely to Henry Philip Hope, Amsterdam and London, but in possession of his brother, Thomas Hope, London; by inheritance 1839 to Thomas' son, Henry Thomas Hope [1808-1862], London; by inheritance to his wife, née Adèle Bichat [d. 1884], London; by inheritance to her grandson, Henry Francis Hope Pelham-Clinton-Hope, 8th duke of Newcastle-under-Lyme [1866-1941], London; sold 1898 to (Asher Wertheimer, London); sold 1899 to Peter A.B. Widener, Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; inheritance from Estate of Peter A.B. Widener by gift through power of appointment of Joseph E. Widener, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; gift 1942 to NGA.

[1] For a detailed discussion of the provenance, see Ben Broos, *Great Dutch Paintings from America*, exh. cat. Mauritshuis, The Hague; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Zwolle and The Hague, 1990: 355-359.

[2] The seller's name in the 1747 sale catalogue is given as Jaques de Roore; he was a painter and art dealer in Antwerp. There are many variants of his name in the literature.

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EXHIBITION HISTORY

1815 British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom, London, 1815, no. 142.

1857 Art Treasures of the United Kingdom: Paintings by Ancient Masters, Art Treasures Palace, Manchester, 1857, no. 735.

1881 Exhibition of Works by the Old Masters, and by Deceased Masters of the the British School. Winter Exhibition, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1881, no. 106.

1891 Loan to display with permanent collection, South Kensington Museum, London, 1891-1898.

1909 The Hudson-Fulton Celebration, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1909, no. 69.

1984 Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting, Philadelphia Museum of Art; Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin; Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1984, no. 93, repro.

1990 Great Dutch Paintings from America, Mauritshuis, The Hague; The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, 1990-1991, no. 47, repro., as Courtyard with a Woman Cleaning Mussels.

1998 A Collector's Cabinet, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1998, no. 43.

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