NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Jan Steen
Dutch, 1625/1626 - 1679

The Dancing Couple

1663

oil on canvas
overall: 102.5 x 142.5 cm (40 3/8 x 56 1/8 in.)
framed: 131.4 x 171.8 cm (51 3/4 x 67 5/8 in.)
Inscription: lower left, JS in ligature: JSteen. 1663
Widener Collection 1942.9.81

ENTRY

Arnold Houbraken begins his discussion of the life of Jan Steen with a general assessment of the relationship between an artist's personality and the nature of his creativity:

> One whose nature is inclined toward farce and jest is more qualified to represent something seriously than is a dry-spirited man able to paint some droll activity; . . . The one who is jocular in spirit uses all sorts of objects . . . that he represents and models naturally, sadness as well as joy, calmness as well as wrath, in a word, all bodily movements and expressions that result from man's many emotions and passions.[1]

Although Houbraken's musings about the relationship between an artist's character and his works of art may have no factual basis, they do offer an appealing explanation for Steen's empathy for the remarkably wide range of character types that populate his paintings. Whether or not, as Houbraken would

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like us to believe, Steen's "paintings are as his manner of living, and his manner of living is as his paintings,"[2] the artist must have felt comfortable among the young and the old as well as the wise and the foolish. In paintings such as *The Dancing Couple,* he could depict with equal ease the tender warmth of a mother's love and the raucous laughter of an inebriated country peasant. His empathy for people is evident not only through the conviction with which he represented such figures and their emotions but also in the way he included himself as a participant in the scene. For who should be sitting at the banquet table in the midst of this outdoor celebration but Steen, grinning widely as he reaches over to chuck a woman's chin as she drinks from her wine glass.

To judge from the span of ages and social classes enjoying the festivities in *The Dancing Couple,* Steen must have intended the viewer to understand that the celebration was taking place under a vine-covered arbor outside a country inn. The crowds surrounding the tents visible in the background suggest that a local village fair, or *kermis*, occasioned this party. One visitor to the *kermis*, the young girl with a white cap seen talking over the porch railing, holds a pinwheel, a child's toy of the type sold at booths associated with such fairs. Another trinket that may well have been sold at the *kermis* is the delightful hammer toy proudly held by the young child on her mother's lap.[3]

The *kermis*, however, was not only for children. People of all ages and social classes enjoyed the festivities, and they traveled from miles around to do so. Country and city folk alike marveled at the quacks who showed their wares, watched intently as traveling theatrical groups performed, and, most of all, ate, drank, and made merry. Proscriptions for proper behavior were temporarily put aside. In *The Dancing Couple,* the celebrants gather, intent upon enjoying sensual pleasures to their fullest, to eat, drink, smoke, and flirt with abandon. Indeed, all five senses are represented in the scene as well as all ages of man. To the enormous delight of onlookers, a young country ruffian has even led a comely and seemingly shy city lass to dance. Lasciviously bedecked in a beret decorated with cock feathers, he robustly kicks his feet in time with the music while she demurely ventures forth, uncertain, but not unwilling to join in the fun.

Steen was a marvelous narrative artist, in large part because of the way he could exaggerate expressions, attitudes, and even his figures' costumes to help tell his story. In this picture, Infrared Reflectography and X-radiographs [see X-radiography] indicate that he made a number of compositional changes to accentuate the contrast between the two main protagonists. Initially, the male

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dancer was bareheaded. He held a rather ordinary hat, with no feathers, and wore a smaller collar [fig. 1]. His pose, in reverse, approached that of the comparable figure in a smaller-scale depiction of the scene on panel, which may well have been Steen's first essay with this composition [fig. 2].[4] By placing the beret with its cock feathers on the man's head and by enlarging the collar to the point where it becomes inappropriate for the rest of his costume, Steen emphasized that this villager was playing the role of a dandy in search of sensual pleasure.

A comparable change occurred with the laughing peasant standing outside the porch. Steen initially depicted him thrusting aloft a tall beer glass instead of holding the caged fowl on his head.[5] The transformation of the peasant from a celebrant to a passerby who has stopped to observe the scene may well have been made to emphasize the unusual character of this pair of dancers. By making the peasant into a poultry seller, however, Steen changed not only the nature of the man's participation but also his thematic impact. The Dutch verb *vogelen* means both "to bird" and "to have sexual intercourse," and a number of Dutch paintings of poultry sellers play upon the pun.[6] The poultry seller, thus, was almost certainly intended to highlight the sexual undertone of the dance taking place directly before him.

No matter how humorous or empathetic Steen's narratives might be, they were rarely conceived without some comment on the foibles of human behavior. In so doing he drew upon his wide-ranging familiarity with Dutch proverbs, as well as literary and emblematic traditions. A Dutch viewer, for example, would have recognized in the centrally placed empty barrel a reference to a well-known folk saying adapted as an emblem in Roemer Visscher's *Zinne-poppen:* "Een vol vat en bomt niet" (A full barrel doesn't resound) [fig. 3]. Visscher's emblem implied that ignorant people fill the air with words, but wise, sensible people deport themselves in a quiet, capable manner.[7] While this reference can be seen as a general commentary on the foolishness of the dancing couple performing just behind the barrel, Steen also emphasized the transient character of the illicit pleasures being sought and enjoyed by including other motifs that carried certain symbolic connotations. The most obvious of these are the broken eggshells and cut flowers that have fallen onto the floor, motifs that have traditional *vanitas* associations in Dutch art. The same theme is more subtly indicated with the boy blowing bubbles, a visual reference to *homo bulla,* the idea that man's life is as a bubble.[8] Although it looks wondrous and glistening at its best, it can disappear in an instant.[9]

With the tenuous relationship of the ill-matched dancing couple Steen certainly sought to provide a warning about the transience of sensual pleasures. As a

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contrast he included other couples whose attachments are built upon firmer foundations. Seated around the table are three pairings in which the love between the figures can be construed only in a positive sense: the mother who playfully holds her child on her lap, the old couple who have grown together over the years, and the young adults, whose tender love is evident in the way the man reaches over to touch his partner.[10] To emphasize the disparity between the dancing couple and these groups Steen has once again included objects from daily life that have associations with images from emblem books. Above the old couple, for example, hangs a cage with two birds, which resembles an emblematic image in P. C. Hooft's *Emblemata Amatoria,* first published in Amsterdam in 1611. The emblem "Voor vryheyt vaylicheyt" (Instead of freedom, safety) [fig. 4] stresses that love is strengthened when limits are placed upon it, and that with freedom comes danger.[11] The contrasts in meaning between this cage with birds and the cage held by the poultry seller could not be more extreme.

Finally, the toy that is held so prominently by the young child in her mother's lap may well have been chosen by Steen as a means for commenting on the importance of harmony in human relationships.[12] As the slats of this toy are moved to and fro, two men hammer in unison at a stake between them. In character the toy relates to an emblem in Jacob Cats' *Spiegel van den Ouden ende Nieuwen Tijdt* (The Hague, 1632), in which a number of men work in timed unison as they hammer on an anvil [fig. 5].[13] Cats' commentary broadens the theme of teamwork by emphasizing that to live together in harmony each person must contribute his or her own special quality. In particular he notes that when the husband honors his wife and the wife her spouse, the household lives in peace.[14]

The large scale of this work is characteristic of Steen's paintings during the years that he worked in Haarlem. While the refined technique in which he worked during the mid-to-late 1650s, when he was active in Leiden and Warmond, is still evident in the sheen of the fabrics worn by the women, the brushwork here is quite free and expressive. It would appear that the artistic climate in Haarlem, where both Frans Hals (Dutch, c. 1582/1583 - 1666) and Adriaen van Ostade (Dutch, 1610 - 1685) were active, encouraged such loosening in his painterly technique. It may also be that the traditionally strong bonds between Haarlem artists and Flemish traditions reinforced Steen's predilection to look back to Flemish prototypes for his composition.

Scenes devoted to dancing at a *kermis* occur in works by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Flemish, c. 1525/1530 - 1569), and were frequently represented by other artists

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working in the Bruegel tradition.[15] The closest in concept are the *kermis* paintings by David Teniers the Younger (Flemish, 1610 - 1690) [fig. 6], in which festive peasants of all ages come together to enjoy the celebrations. Teniers' paintings were well known to the Dutch, and one of his compositions may have inspired Steen to produce this memorable work. The figure of the man seated at a table near the dancers who reaches over to chuck a woman's chin in *The Dancing Couple* is a motif that Teniers used often. Teniers also delighted in dressing his rakish peasants in berets decorated with cock feathers. Should Steen have looked at a painting by Teniers for inspiration, he transformed his Flemish prototype into a specifically Dutch idiom, in which visual delight in the sensuality of the image is tempered by a provocative intellectual and moralizing framework. To ensure that the human issues involved would be brought home, Steen confined his narrative to the foreground, where the pictorial world seems almost to mingle with the real, and the moral issues confronting the players become ones the viewer must consider as well.[16]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

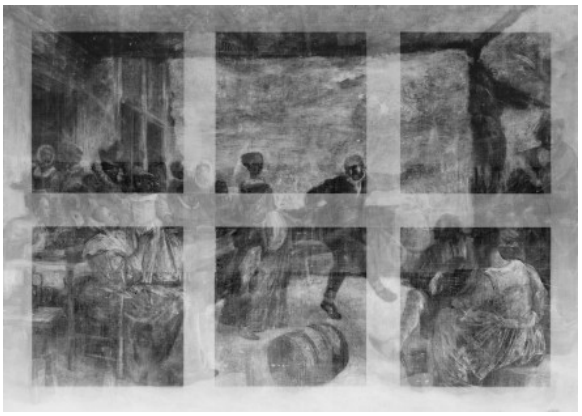

fig. 1 X-radiograph composite, Jan Steen, *The Dancing Couple*, 1663, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection, 1942.9.81

fig. 2 Jan Steen, *A Terrace with a Couple Dancing to a Pipe and Fiddle, Peasants Eating and Merrymaking Behind*, c. 1663, private collection (Sotheby's, London, 4 July 2007, lot 36) . Photo courtesy of Sotheby's Picture Library

VAN DE SINNEPOPPEN. 35

XXXIII

Een vol vat en bomt niet.

DEse Sinnepop is ſoo klaer datſe weynigh uytleggin-ghe behoeft: want men ſiet dat de onverſtandighe men-ſchen de aldermeeſte vvoor-den over haer hebbē, op ſtra-ten, op marckten, op vvagens en in ſchepen; daer de ver-ſtandighe vvyſe lieden met een ſtil bequaem vveſen he-nen gaen.

Een vol vat en bomt niet.

E

fig. 3 Roemer Visscher, "Een vol vat en bomt niet," emblem from *Zinne-poppen*, Amsterdam, 1614

Voor vryheit vaulicheit. SERVA SED SECURA

Plus ſeur que libre.

fig. 4 P. C. Hooft, "Voor vryheyt vaylicheyt," emblem from *Emblemata Amatoria*, Amsterdam, 1611

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fig. 5 Jacob Cats, *Spiegel van den Ouden ende Nieuwen Tijdt*, The Hague, 1611

fig. 6 David Teniers the Younger, *The Village Feast*, 1651, oil on copper, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. Photo: Studio Tromp, Rotterdam

NOTES

[1] Arnold Houbraken, *De Groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen*. 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753; reprint: Amsterdam, 1976), 3:12–13: “Een, welks natuur geneigt is tot klugt, en boertery, is bekwamer om iets ernstig te verbeelden, dan een droefgeestige om potsige bedryven door ‘t penceel te malen; . . . die boertig van geest is, bedient zig van allerhande voorwerpen . . . dat men alles even natuurlyk, zoo wei droefheid als vreugt, bedaarthheid als toorn, met een woort, alle Lichaams bewegingen, en wezenstrekken, die uit de menigerhande gemoedsdriften ontspruiten, weet te verbeelden, en na te bootsen.”

[2] Arnold Houbraken, *De Groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen*. 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753; reprint: Amsterdam, 1976), 3:13: “zyn schilderyen zyn als zyn levenswyze, en zyn levenswyze als zyne schilderyen.”

[3] According to Nynke Spahr van der Hoek from the Speelgoed- en Blikmuseum, Deventer (letter of July 27, 1989, in NGA curatorial files), this toy is probably German in origin. It appears to be the oldest representation of this type known. Such toys were sold only by peddlers or at fairs because

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toy shops did not exist in this era.

[4] This smaller version was sold at auction in 2007 as *A Terrace with a Couple Dancing to a Pipe and Fiddle, Peasants Eating, and Merrymaking Behind* (Sotheby's, London, July 4, 2007, lot 36). This painting (oil on panel, 55.7 x 77.2 cm) is indistinctly signed "JSteen." Since it depicts, in reverse, the initial composition of *The Dancing Couple*, it must be by the artist's hand and predate the National Gallery of Art's version. It is the only known instance in which Steen created a reversed image of one of his works, and the only time he created an enlarged second version. Nothing is known about the circumstances surrounding the execution of either work, and no convincing explanation for the unique relationship between these two paintings in Steen's oeuvre has been proposed.

[5] The arm and beer glass are visible to the naked eye on the surface of the painting.

[6] Eddy de Jongh, "Erotica in vogelperspectief: De dubbelzinnigheid van een reeks 17de-eeuwse genrevoorstellingen," *Simiolus* 3 (1968–1969): 22–74.

[7] Roemer Visscher, *Sinnepoppen* (Amsterdam, 1614). The full text of the emblem is as follows: "Dese Sinnepop is soo klaer datse weynigh uytlegginghe behoeft: want men siet dat de onverstandighe menschen de aldermeeste woorden over haer hebben, op straten, op marckten, op wagens en in schepen; daer de verstandighe wyse lieden met een stil bequaem wesen henen gaen."

[8] Hendrick Goltzius (after?), *Quis Evadet* (The Allegory of Transitoriness), 1594, engraving; see Walter L. Strauss, ed., *The Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 1 (New York, 1978), 292, no. 10 (97).

[9] For a discussion of this theme in Dutch art and literature see Eddy de Jongh et al., *Tot Lering en Vermaak: betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstellingen uit de zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1976), 45–47.

[10] This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that the model for the man is Steen, and the woman has been identified as his wife. The identification was first made by Ben Broos, in Ben P. J. Broos et al., *Great Dutch Paintings from America* (The Hague, 1990), 422, on the basis of a comparison with an image of a woman who has been tentatively identified as Steen's wife, Grietje van Goyen, in a painting in the Mauritshuis, *As the Old Sing, So Pipe the Young.*

[11] P. C. Hooft, *Emblemata Amatoria* (Amsterdam, 1611), 66, emblem 28: "Voor vryheyt vaylicheyt. In vancknis vordert my de Min; en was ick vry/Het ongheluck had onghelijck meer machts op my." See also the *Emblemata Amatoria* online text at http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/hoof001embl01_01/hoof001embl01_01_0033.php, which interprets the emblem as follows: "Door de Min gevangen ben ik

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tegen dood beschut" (Captured by Love, I am safe from death, like a bird kept in its cage).

[12] For an excellent article that examines the ways in which children's games could provide commentaries on adult life see Sandra Hindman, "Pieter Bruegel's *Children's Games*, Folly and Chance," *Art Bulletin* 63 (1981): 447–475.

[13] I would like to thank E. L. Widmann for calling my attention to this relationship in her seminar paper at the University of Maryland in 1990, "Jan Steen and the Philosophy of Laughter: Rederijkers and the Theatre of Genre."

[14] Jacob Cats, *Spiegel van den Ouden ende Nieuwen Tijdt* (The Hague, 1632), 14–15: "Die moeten yder mensch het sijne leeren geven, De man die vier' het wijf, het wijf haer echten man, Soo isset dat het huys in vrede blijven kan."

[15] Lyckle de Vries, "Jan Steen, 'de kluchtschilder,'" Ph.D. diss. (Rijksuniversiteit, 1977), 130, note 91, suggests that the composition is based on a composition by Pieter Brueghel the Younger (1564/1565–1637/1638) (see G. Marlier [posthumous, revised and annotated by Jacqueline Folie], *Pierre Breughel le Jeune* [Brussels, 1969], 440, 442, nos. 1, 2, and 3). Broos, in Ben P. J. Broos et al., *Great Dutch Paintings from America* (The Hague, 1990), 423, on the other hand, suggests a painting by Pieter Aertsen (1507/1508–1575).

[16] As noted in *Jan Steen* (The Hague, 1958), no. 18, S. J. Gudlaugsson associated the subject of the painting with a scene from a play by Dirk Buysero, *De bruilof van Kloris en Roosje* (*The Wedding of Kloris and Roosje*). The play was not written until 1688, however, so this theory cannot be supported.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The medium-weight, plain-weave fabric support is loosely woven. It has been lined with the tacking margins trimmed, and broad cusping is visible at top and bottom. A light-colored or white ground was applied smoothly and thinly overall. A creamy pink-colored underpainting of thick, rich paste paint was applied in broad striated strokes to the areas of the sky and floor, with reserves left for the dancing couple, barrel, trellis, musicians, and seated foreground figures. The poultry vendor and trio behind the fence were executed over the underpaint layer.

Paint was applied in thin, opaque layers of rich paste blended wet-into-wet with lively brushwork. The X-radiographs show the underpainted areas and several

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artist's changes. The dancing man originally wore a smaller collar and was portrayed hatless with an outstretched proper left arm. When the arm was lowered to its present position he held the hat in his hand. The opened door was added over the sky, and changes were made in the hat of the man slouched against it. The church steeple was taller and the poultry vendor's raised left hand had a tall glass in it. Infrared reflectography also showed minor changes to the contours and profiles of the other figures. [1]

Small losses are found between the barrel and the dancing man, to the left of the poultry vendor, in the serving maid at the far left, and along the edges. Slight abrasion is present overall. The blue skirt of the woman at far left and the bricks above her were unfinished. The painting was treated in 1930 and again in 1944–1945. During the latter treatment, the painting was relined and discolored varnish and inpainting were removed.

[1] Infrared reflectography was performed with a Hamamatsu c/1000–03 vidicon camera fitted with a lead sulphide tube and a Kodak Wratten 87A filter.

PROVENANCE

Possibly (sale, The Hague, 24 April 1737, no. 7). probably Graf van Hogendorp; probably (his sale, The Hague, 27 July 1751, no. 6).[1] Pieter Bisschop [c. 1690-1758] and Jan Bisschop [1680-1771], Rotterdam, by 1752; purchased 1771 with the Bisschop collection by Adrian Hope [1709-1781] and his nephew, John Hope [1737-1784], Amsterdam; by inheritance after Adrian's death to John, 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 of John's cousin, Henry Hope [c. 1739-1811], London; by inheritance 1811 solely to Henry Philip, Amsterdam and London, but in possession of his brother, Thomas, 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; (P. & D. Colnaghi & Co. and Charles Wertheimer, London), 1898-1901; (Thos. Agnew & Sons, Ltd., London); sold 1901 to Peter A.B.

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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; gift 1942 to NGA.

[1] Mariët Westermann kindly brought the 1751 sale to the attention of Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. For a discussion of the provenance of this painting, including the 1737 sale, see Ben Broos, *Great Dutch Paintings from America*, exh. cat., Mauritshuis, The Hague; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Zwolle and The Hague, 1990: 419-423.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1818 British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom, London, 1818, no. 138, as Merrymaking.

1849 British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom, London, 1849, no. 84, as A Merrymaking.

1866 Possibly British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom, London, 1866, no. 33, as A Dinner Party.

1881 Exhibition of of Works by the Old Masters, and by Deceased Masters of the British School. Winter Exhibition, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1881, no. 124, as A Village Fête.

1891 The Hope Collection of Pictures of the Dutch and Flemish Schools, The South Kensington Museum, London, 1891-1898, no. 25.

1909 The Hudson-Fulton Celebration, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1909, no. 126.

1925 Loan Exhibition of Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century, Detroit Institute of Arts, 1925, no. 26.

1990 Great Dutch Paintings from America, Mauritshuis, The Hague; The Fine Arts Musuems of San Francisco, M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, 1990-1991, no. 59, color repro., as Dancing Couple at an Inn.

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1996 Jan Steen: Painter and Storyteller, National Gallery of Washington, D.C.; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1996-1997, no. 20, repro.

2003 Loan to display with permanent collection, The National Gallery, London, 2003-2004.

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1866 British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom. *Catalogue of pictures by Italian, Spanish, Flemish, Dutch, Franch, and*

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