



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

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. X-radiography [fig. 1] and Infrared Reflectography [fig. 2] indicate that after Steen had laid in his initial monochromatic sketch, he made a number of compositional changes to accentuate the contrast between the two main

protagonists. [4] Initially, the male dancer was bareheaded. He held a rather ordinary hat, with no feathers, and wore a smaller collar. 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. 3]. [5] 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. [6] 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. [7] 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. 4]. Visscher's emblem implied that ignorant people fill the air with words, but wise, sensible people deport themselves in a quiet, capable manner. [8] 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. [9] Although it looks wondrous and glistening at its best, it can disappear in an instant. [10]

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 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. [11] 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. Hoof's *Emblemata Amatoria*, first published in Amsterdam in 1611. The emblem "Voor vryheyt vaylichey" (Instead of freedom, safety) [fig. 5] stresses that love is strengthened when limits are placed upon it, and that with freedom comes danger. [12] 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. [13] 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 Tijd* (The Hague, 1632), in which a number of men work in timed unison as they hammer on an anvil [fig. 6]. [14] 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. [15]

The large scale of this work is characteristic of Steen's paintings during the years that he lived in Haarlem. While the refined technique in which he painted 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 working in the Bruegel tradition. [16] The closest in concept are the *kermis* paintings by David Teniers the Younger (Flemish, 1610 - 1690) [fig. 7], 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. [17]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

August 30, 2017

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

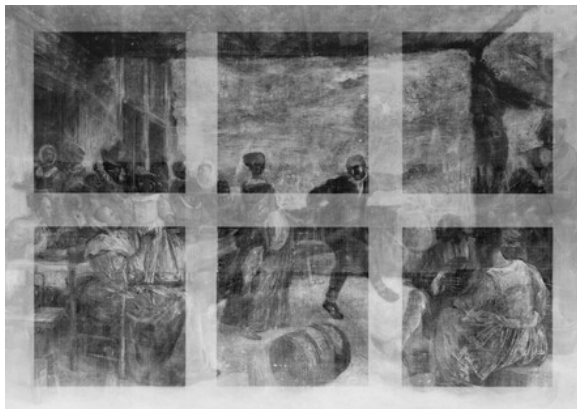


fig. 1 X-radiograph composite, Jan Steen, *The Dancing Couple*, 1663, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection, 1942.9.81



fig. 2 Infrared reflectogram, Jan Steen, *Dancing Couple*, 1663, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection, 1942.9.81



fig. 3 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



fig. 4 Roemer Visscher, "Een vol vat en bomt niet," emblem from *Zinnepoppen*, Amsterdam, 1614



fig. 5 P. C. Hooft, "Voor vryheyt vaylicheyt," emblem from *Emblemata Amatoria*, Amsterdam, 1611



fig. 6 Jacob Cats, *Spiegel van den Ouden ende Nieuwen Tijd*, The Hague, 1611



fig. 7 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 Grootte 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, bedaartheit 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 Grootte 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 toy shops did not exist in this era.
- [4] Other compositional changes in this painting are discussed in the Technical Summary. For a careful examination of Steen’s painting technique in this work, with particular emphasis on the sequence of paint layers, see Michael Palmer and E. Melanie Gifford, “Jan Steen’s Painting Practice: *The Dancing Couple* in the Context of the Artist’s Career,” *Studies in the History of Art* 57 (1997): 127–155
- [5] 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.
- [6] The arm and beer glass are visible to the naked eye on the surface of the painting.
- [7] Eddy de Jongh, “Erotica in vogelperspectief: De dubbelzinnigheid van een reeks 17de-eeuwse genrevoorstellingen,” *Simiolus* 3 (1968–1969): 22–74.
- [8] 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.”

- [9] 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).
- [10] 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.
- [11] 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*.
- [12] 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/hoof001embla01_01/hoof001embla01_01_0033.php, which interprets the emblem as follows: “Door de Min gevangen ben ik tegen dood beschut” (Captured by Love, I am safe from death, like a bird kept in its cage).
- [13] 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.
- [14] 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.”
- [15] Jacob Cats, *Spiegel van den Ouden ende Nieuwen Tijd* (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.”
- [16] 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).

[17] 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 painting is executed on a medium-weight, plain-weave canvas with a thread count of nine threads per centimeter in the horizontal direction and eleven threads per centimeter in the vertical direction. The tacking margins were trimmed on all four sides, and while cusping is visible on the top and bottom edges, only slight cusping is evident on the right edge and even less on the left edge. This suggests that the image area may have been slightly trimmed on the sides.

The canvas was prepared with a double ground consisting of an off-white, semitranslucent calcium-carbonate-based lower layer and a more opaque, warm gray upper layer containing lead white, calcium carbonate, quartz, charcoal, bone black, and earth pigments. A warm pink imprimatura was applied to the sky region and a light, cream-colored paint was used to block out significant areas in the upper right quadrant. Both of these layers were applied directly on top of the ground layer. A monochromatic sketch, loosely applied in brown-black to red-brown paint, was then used to establish the composition. The sketch is visible along the contours of figures, objects, the foreground, and the background, and contributes to the finished image by defining forms.

The paint was applied in thin opaque layers of rich-paste blended wet-in-wet with lively brushwork. The sky was painted in first, with reserves left for the dancing couple, barrel, trellis, musicians, and seated foreground figures. The major figures were completed next; the man holding the basket on his head was sketched in over the pink underpaint, as were the dancing couple, but the sketch of this man was then covered with blue sky paint, suggesting an early change of composition. Next, the subsidiary figures were painted in a back-to-front sequence, with the poultry vendor and trio behind the fence executed over the underpaint layer. The

final sequence of painting included background and foreground details. As Steen worked out this composition, he frequently returned to complete elements, as well as to revise details and contours.

Steen used a palette typical of Dutch seventeenth-century artists, which was identified through analysis of cross-sections and dispersed samples. [1] Three blue pigments were used extensively throughout the composition and include smalt, azurite, and indigo. The pinkish quality of the imprimatura is due to both a red iron oxide pigment and red lake. Vermilion was identified in the child's orange dress. The yellow pigments identified include lead-tin yellow, yellow iron oxide, and yellow lake. While the color green is prominent throughout the composition, no green pigment was identified; the green paints are complex mixtures of the different blue and yellow pigments listed above.

A number of pentimenti are visible in the x-radiograph and infrared reflectogram. [2] In the preliminary sketch the dancing man originally wore a smaller collar and was portrayed hatless, with an upraised proper left arm. Next he was painted with his arm lowered but still holding the hat. Finally the hat in his hand was painted out and replaced by a feathered hat on his head. 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 held a tall glass in his raised left hand.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] For a more detailed explanation of Steen's palette and painting technique for *The Dancing Couple*, see Michael R. Palmer and E. Melanie Gifford, "Jan Steen's Painting Practice: *The Dancing Couple* in the Context of the Artist's Career," in *Monograph Series II: Conservation Research 1996/1997*, National Gallery of Art, Studies in the History of Art, vol. 57 (Washington, 1997), 126–155.

[2] X-radiography was carried out with a Comet Technologies XRP-75MXR-75HP tube, and the images were digitally captured using a Carestream Industrex Blue Digital Imaging Plate 5537 (14" × 17"). The parameters were 25 kV, 5 mA, 15 seconds, and 102 inches distance (from source to plate). The resulting digital images were composited and processed using Adobe Photoshop CS5.

Infrared reflectography was carried out using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera. Two separate images were captured, one filtered to 1.1–1.4

microns (J filter) and the other filtered to 1.5–1.8 microns (H filter. The final image was mathematically calculated using both the J and H filtered images.

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, and Deepdene, near Dorking, Surrey; by inheritance to his wife, Adèle Bichat Hope [d. 1884], London and Deepdene; 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 J. Wertheimer, London), 1898-1901; (Thos. Agnew & Sons, Ltd., London); sold 1901 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; 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.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

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 Museums of San Francisco, M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, 1990-1991, no. 59, color repro., as Dancing Couple at an Inn.

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

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

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- 1856 Westrheene Wz., Tobias van. *Jan Steen: Étude sur l'art en Hollande.* The Hague, 1856: 119-120, no. 89.
- 1866 British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom. *Catalogue of pictures by Italian, Spanish, Flemish, Dutch, Franch, and English masters.* Exh. cat. British Institution. London, 1866: 9, no. 33.
- 1881 Royal Academy of Arts. *Exhibition of of Works by the Old Masters, and by Deceased Masters of the British School. Winter Exhibition.* Exh. cat., Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1881: no. 124.
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