



Jan Steen, *The Dancing Couple* (detail), 1663, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection, 1942.9.81

Steen, Jan

Also known as
Steen, Jan Havicksz
Dutch, 1625/1626 - 1679

BIOGRAPHY

Jan Steen was born in Leiden, where his father was a brewer and grain merchant. The date of his birth is not known, but the artist was twenty years old when he enrolled at the University of Leiden in 1646. Two years later he is recorded as one of the founding members of Leiden's newly formed Saint Luke's Guild. Arnold Houbraken states that Steen's artistic education came from Jan van Goyen (Dutch, 1596 - 1656), the Leiden-born landscape painter who had settled in The Hague. According to Jacob Campo Weyerman, Steen had previously studied with Nicolaes Knüpfer (c. 1603–1655) in Utrecht and with Adriaen van Ostade (Dutch, 1610 - 1685) in Haarlem.

Steen married Van Goyen's daughter Margaretha in September 1649, and he appears to have remained in The Hague until 1654. In that year he is recorded on several occasions back in Leiden. From 1654 until 1657 Steen's father leased a Delft brewery by the name of "The Snake" on his son's behalf, and it seems that the artist lived in Delft during those years. From 1656 to 1660 Steen lived at Warmond, a small town near Leiden. The increased interest in still life details and careful finish of the paintings he produced during this period suggest his contact with the work of the Leiden *fijnschilders* (fine painters).

By 1661 Steen had moved to Haarlem, where he entered the Saint Luke's Guild in that year. During the nine years he spent in Haarlem, Steen created many of his greatest paintings, including a number of large, complex scenes of families and merry-makers containing witty evocations of proverbs, emblems, or other moralizing messages. His pictures, which are marked by a sophisticated use of contemporary literature and popular theater, often depict characters from both the

Italian *commedia dell'arte* and the native Dutch *rederijkerskamers* (rhetoricians' chambers), although Steen was not a rhetorician himself. In addition to genre subjects, he depicted historical and religious subjects during the 1660s and 1670s. He remained a Catholic all his life.

In 1670, one year after the death of his wife, Steen moved to Leiden, having inherited his father's house. Two years later, he received a license to open an inn, a fact that has contributed to his traditional reputation as a dissolute drunkard. Although he sometimes included his self-portrait in this guise in scenes of apparent immorality and chaos, there is no incriminating evidence—beyond his possession of an acute sense of humor—to suggest that his real life mirrored his art.

In 1673 Steen married Marije Herculens van Egmont, who survived him by eight years. In 1674 he was elected *deken* of the Leiden guild, having served as an officer at the rank of *hoofdman* for the previous three years. There is no record of his having had any pupils, although a number of artists, notably Richard Brakenburg (1650–1702), imitated his style.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014


BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1729 Weyerman, J. C. *De levens beschryvingen der nederlandsche konstschilders en konstschilderessen*. 4 vols. The Hague, 1729-1769: 2:348.
- 1753 Houbraken, Arnold. *De Grootte Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen*. 3 vols. in 1. The Hague, 1753 (Reprint: Amsterdam, 1976): 1:374; 2:245; 3:7, 12-30.
- 1829 Smith, John. *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters*. 9 vols. London, 1829-1842: 4(1833):xv-xx, 1-69; 9(1842):473.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

- 1907 Hofstede de Groot, Cornelis. *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century*. 8 vols. Translated by Edward G. Hawke. London, 1907-1927: 1(1907):1-252.
- 1958 Nieuwenhuis, Domela, Peder Niels Hjalmar, and Anton van Duinkerken. *Jan Steen*. Exh. cat. Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague, 1958.
- 1975 Gudlaugsson, Sturla. *The Comedians in the Work of Jan Steen and his Contemporaries*. Translated by James Brockway and Patricia Wardle from 1945 ed. Soest, 1975.
- 1976 Vries, Lyckle de. *Jan Steen: De schilderende Uilenspiegel*. De Grote Meesters. Amsterdam, 1976.
- 1977 Kirschenbaum, Baruch D. *The Religious and Historical Paintings of Jan Steen*. New York, 1977.
- 1977 Vries, Lyckle de. "Jan Steen, 'de kluchtschilder'." Ph.D. dissertation, Rijksuniversiteit, Groningen, 1977.
- 1982 Sutton, Peter C. "The Life and Art of Jan Steen." Special edition of *Bulletin of the Philadelphia Museum of Art* 78, no. 337-338 (Winter-Spring 1982/1983: 3-63.
- 1983 Sutton, Peter C. *Jan Steen: Comedy and Admonition*. Exh. cat. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, 1983.
- 1984 Sutton, Peter C. *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting*. Edited by Jane landola Watkins. Exh. cat. Philadelphia Museum of Art; Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin; Royal Academy of Arts, London. Philadelphia, 1984: 307-325.
- 1991 MacLaren, Neil. *The Dutch School, 1600-1900*. Revised and expanded by Christopher Brown. 2 vols. National Gallery Catalogues. London, 1991: 1:423-424.
- 1995 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*. The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue. Washington, D.C., 1995: 363.

 NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

- 1996 Bok, Marten, Jan. "The Artist's Life." In Chapman, H. Perry, Wouter Th. Kloek, and Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. *Jan Steen, painter and storyteller*. Edited by Guido Jansen. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Washington, 1996: 25-37.
- 2005 Kloek, Wouter Th. *Jan Steen (1626-1679)*. Rijksmuseum dossiers. Zwolle, 2005.
- 2006 Grijzenhout, Frans, and Niek C. F. van Sas. *The Burgher of Delft: a painting by Jan Steen*. Amsterdam, 2006.

To cite: Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Jan Steen," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/constituent/1901> (accessed November 21, 2019).