

1942.9.81 (677)

The Dancing Couple

1663

Oil on canvas, 102.5 x 142.5 (40³/₈ x 56¹/₈)
Widener Collection

Inscriptions

At lower left: *JSteen 1663* (JS in ligature)

Technical Notes: 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-radiograph shows the underpainted areas and several 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.

Small losses are found between the barrel and 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 cleaned in 1930 and in 1944–1945.

Provenance: (Possibly sale, The Hague, 24 April 1737, no. 7).¹ Probably sale, Count van Hogendorp, The Hague, 27 July 1751, no. 6. Jan Bisschop [1680–1771] and Pieter Bisschop [c. 1690–1758], Rotterdam, by 1752; Adrian Hope [1709–1781] and John Hope [1737–1784], Amsterdam, in 1771; Henry Hope [1736–1811], London; Henry Philip Hope [1774–1839], London, in 1811; Henry Thomas Hope [1808–1862], London; his wife Adèle née Bichat [d. 1884], London; Lord Henry Francis Hope Pelham-Clinton-Hope, London; (P. & D. Colnaghi & Co. and Charles Wertheimer, London, 1891); (Thomas Agnew & Sons, London, by 1901); Peter A. B. Widener, Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, in 1901; inheritance from Estate of Peter A. B. Widener by gift through power of appointment of Joseph E. Widener, Elkins Park.

Exhibited: British Institution, London, 1818, no. 138; London, 1849, no. 84; London, 1866, no. 33; *Exhibition of Old Masters, and by Deceased Masters of the British School . . .*, Royal Academy, London, 1881, no. 124. *The Hope Collection of Pictures of the Dutch and Flemish Schools*, South Kensington Museum, London, 1891, no. 25. New York 1909, no. 126. *Loan Exhibition of Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, De-

troit Institute of Arts, 1925, no. 26. *Great Dutch Paintings from America*, Mauritshuis, The Hague; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1990–1991, no. 59.

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."²

While Houbraken's musings about the relationship of an artist's character and his works of art may have no factual basis, there must be some such 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,"³ 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 not only evident 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 was the young girl with a white cap seen talking over the porch railing: she 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.⁴

The kermis, however, was not only for children. People of all ages and social classes enjoyed the fes-



Jan Steen, *The Dancing Couple*, 1663.9.81

tivities, and they traveled from miles around to do so. Country and city folk alike marveled at the quacks who showed their wares, watched intently performances by traveling theatrical groups, and, most of all, ate, drank, and made merry. Indeed 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 tune 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 photography and x-radiographs indicate that he made a number of compositional changes to accentuate the contrast between the two main protagonists. Initially, the male 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.⁵ By placing the beret with its cock feathers on

his head and by enlarging the collar to the point where it becomes inappropriate for the rest of his costume, Steen emphasized that this rude peasant was playing the role of a dandy in search of sensual pleasure.

A comparable change occurred with the laughing peasant standing outside the porch. Instead of the caged fowl he holds on his head, Steen initially depicted him thrusting aloft a tall beer glass.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 not only changed 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 character 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 fallacies 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

Fig. 1. X-radiograph of 1942.9.81

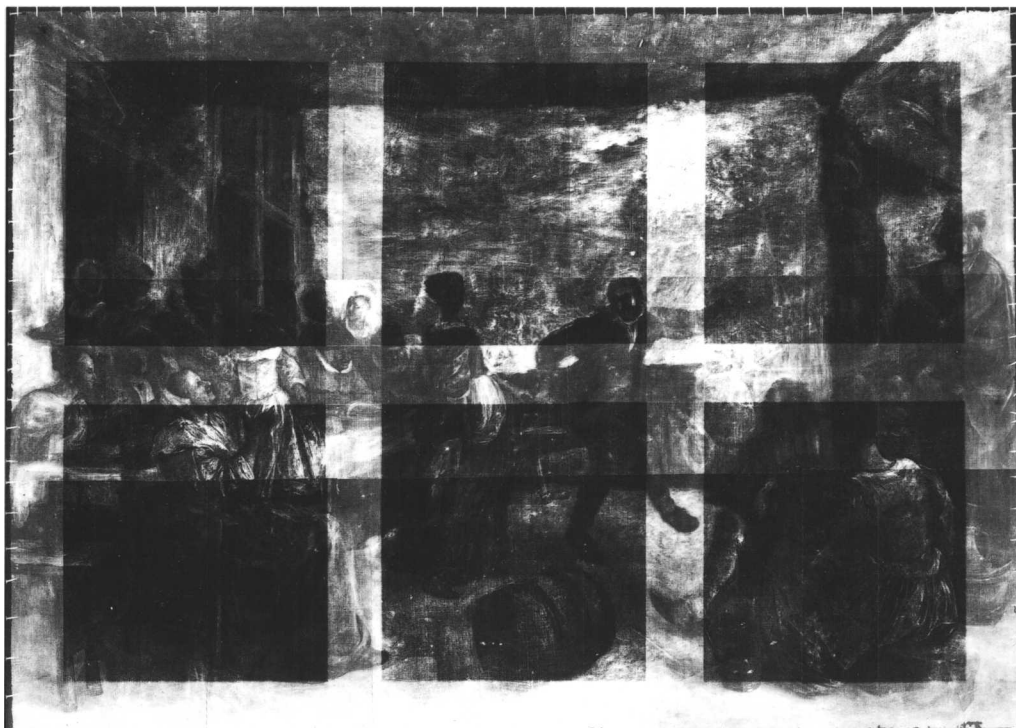




Fig. 2. Roemer Visscher, "Een vol vat en bomt niet," emblem from *Sinnepoppen*, Amsterdam, 1614

Sinnepoppen: "Een vol vat en bomt niet" [A full barrel doesn't resound] (fig. 2). 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 upon the foolishness of the dancing couple performing just behind the barrel, Steen also sought to emphasize the transient character of the illicit pleasures being sought and enjoyed by including other motifs that carried certain connotations. The most obvious of these are 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 While it looks wondrous and glistening at its best, it can disappear in an instant.¹⁰

While Steen certainly sought to provide warnings about the transience of sensual pleasures so expressly evident in the ill-matched dancing couple, he also contrasted their foolish relationship with other couples whose attachments are built upon firmer foundations. Seated around the table are three couples whose love for each other can only be construed in a positive sense: the mother who playfully holds her child on her lap, an 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 contrast 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. 3) 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 so prominently held 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 This toy, which only appears in Steen's oeuvre in this and the earlier version of the composition, allows two men to hammer a stake in unison as the slats are moved to and fro. In character it 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. 4).¹⁴ Cats' commentary broadens the theme of teamwork by emphasizing that to live together in harmony each must contribute their 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 worked in Haarlem. While evidence of 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, Steen's brushwork is quite free and expressive. It would appear that the artistic climate in Haarlem, where both Frans Hals (q.v.) and Adriaen van Ostade (q.v.) were active, encouraged such

Fig. 3. P. C. Hooft, "Voor vryheyt vaylicheyt," emblem from *Emblemata Amatoria*, Amsterdam, 1611





Fig. 4. From Jacob Cats' *Spiegel van den Ouden ende Nieuwen Tijd*, The Hague, 1632

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 (c. 1525–1569), 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 (1610–1690) (fig. 5), where 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.

Teniers often included a man seated at a table near the dancers who reaches over to chuck a woman's chin in much the same way that Steen does in *The Dancing Couple*. 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, where visual delight in the sensuality of the image is tempered by a provocative intellectual and moralizing framework. To insure that the human issues involved are brought home, Steen confined his narrative to the foreground, where the pictorial world almost seems to mingle with the real, and the moral issues confronting the players become ones the viewer must consider as well.¹⁷

Notes

1. I would like to thank Mariët Westermann for the reference to the 1751 sale. See also The Hague 1990, 419–423.

2. Houbraken 1753, 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 natuurlijk, zoo wel 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."

3. Houbraken 1753, 3: 13: "...zyn schilderyen zyn als zyn levenswyze, en zyn levenswyze als zyne schilderyen."

4. According to Nynke Spahr van der Hoek from the Speelgoed- en Blikmuseum, Deventer (letter of 27 July 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 only sold by peddlers or at fairs because there were no toy shops in those days.



Fig. 5. David Teniers the Younger, *The Village Feast*, 1651, Rotterdam, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen

5. When this painting was exhibited (as *Dorpsfeest* or *Village Festival*, oil on panel, 59 x 37 cm) in The Hague 1958, no. 18, it was in the collection of the Duchess of Brissac, Paris.

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

7. De Jongh 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 *Bartsch Illustrated*: 292, no. 10 (97).

10. For a discussion of this theme in Dutch art and literature see 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 Broos, in 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, “*The Way You Hear It, Is the Way You Sing It*.”

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.”

13. For an excellent article that examines the ways in which children’s games could provide commentaries on adult life see Hindman: 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. De Vries 1977, 130, note 91, suggests that the composition is based on a composition by Pieter Brueghel the Younger (c. 1564–1637/38) (see Marlier 1969), 440, 442, nos. 1, 2, and 3). Broos, in The Hague 1990, 423, on the other hand, suggests a painting by Pieter Aertsen (1509–1575).

17. As noted in 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*). Since the play was not written until 1688, this theory cannot be supported.

References

- 1771 *Bisschop Kabinet*: 10.
1781 Reynolds: 169, 200, 204.
1818 London: no. 138.
1824 *British Institution*: 172, no. 7 or 9.
1824 Westmacott: 233.
1829–1842 Smith, 4 (1833): 50, no. 150.
1838 Waagen, 2: 334.
1849 London: no. 84.
1854–1857 Waagen, 2: 118.
1856 Van Westrheene: 119–120, no. 89.
1866 London: no. 33.
1881 London: no. 124.
1885–1900 Widener, 2: 165.
1891 London: no. 25.
1898 *Hope Collection*: xxv, repro.
1907–1927 HdG, 1 (1907): 171–172, no. 655.
1909 New York: no. 126.
1910 Valentiner: 5–12.
1910 Wiersum: 21–186.
1910 Breck: 41–47.
1913–1916 Widener: n.p., intro., repro.
1923 Widener: n.p., repro.
1925 Detroit: no. 26.
1925 Washburn: 460–464.
1931 Widener: 220–221, repro.
1938 Waldmann: 334–343.
1954 Martin: 79.
1958 The Hague: no. 18.
1959 Widener: 53, repro.
1960 Baird: 28–29, color repro.
1961 Bille, 1: 105.
1963 Walker: 35, 315, repro., 344.
1964 Constable: 117.
1965 NGA: 124, no. 667.
1966 Cairns and Walker, 1: 242, color repro.
1968 NGA: 111, no. 677, repro.
1971 Reynolds *Works*: 71.
1974 Buist: 492.
1975 NGA: 332–333, repro.
1976 Walker: 290–291, color repro.
1977 De Vries: 53–54, 162, no. 97.
1980 Braun: 110–111, no. 180, repro.
1981 Niemeijer: 127–232.
1984 Wheelock: 6, 34–35, color repro.
1984 Philadelphia: 312, repro.
1985 NGA: 381, repro.
1986 Sutton: 309, repro. 461.
1990 Buijsen: 63–66, repro.
1990 The Hague: no. 59.
1990 Schneider: 105–106, repro.
1992 NGA: 135, color repro.