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cat. no. 13

**Jan Steen**\*

1626 – Leiden – 1679

*Merry Company in an Inn*

Signed lower left: JSteen

Oil on panel

40.5 x 54.7 cm.

**Provenance:**

London, David P. Sellar Collection

His sale, Paris, Galerie Georges Petit, 6 June 1889, lot 72

France, private collection, until 2019

**Literature:**

C. Hofstede de Groot, *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke des hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 10 vols., Esslingen 1907-1928, I (1907), p. 149, cat. no. 616 (English edition, 1908, p. 161, cat. no. 616)

K. Braun, *Alle tot nu toe bekende schilderijen van Jan Steen*, Rotterdam 1980, p. 154, cat. no. A-421 (works known only from documents)

*Merry Company in an Inn*, a superb and important early work by Jan Steen, has recently resurfaced. The painting was virtually unknown,<sup>1</sup> even though it is among the earliest examples of interiors with people enjoying themselves, a genre in which Jan Steen excelled. The painting was first documented in 1889, when it was sold in Paris as part of the collection of David Sellar of London. The work was subsequently mentioned by the great art expert Cornelis Hofstede de Groot in his list of all the works by the major seventeenth-century Netherlandish masters that were known to him. His own description read as follows: 'A merry company of seventeen persons around a generously laid table. An old woman on the right makes pancakes. In the foreground a man puts a new string on his violin. On the left an old

couple; she in red, he in blue.'<sup>2</sup> It is a brief description, but fortunately it does tell us the number of people in the picture. It mentions the dominant figure of the fiddler putting a new string on his instrument, and calls attention to the intense palette. Hofstede de Groot saw the work with his own eyes, undoubtedly at the sale in 1889.<sup>3</sup> His description concisely repeats the sale catalogue, where the painting was titled 'Les Crêpes'. Hofstede de Groot chose a more general title and mentioned some of the colours.

The few sentences Hofstede de Groot used to describe the work do not do justice to such an elaborate composition. The pivotal figure in the composition is indeed the fiddler resting the violin on his knee to string



it. He has placed his left foot on the rung of a triangular stool with a triangular back support. In his right hand, with which he grasps his violin, he also holds his bow.<sup>4</sup> He appears totally unconcerned by the noisy conviviality, and the company pays him little heed. Pentimenti (changes the artist introduced during the working process) to the cap and to both the fiddler's feet show that Steen found the final form for this figure while he was creating the composition. There is also a substantial pentimento to the leg of the stool under the back.

The group behind the table on the left sway, hand in hand, singing a song, evidently *a capella*. The young man on the right, wearing a hat, seems to have started it. With his smiling face he appears to anticipate Steen's countless self-portraits in his later work.<sup>5</sup> He may be responding to the man standing on the left, below the stairs, who brandishes his hat and raises a *pasglas* in his right hand in a toast.<sup>6</sup> Behind the group stands a man wearing a red beret; a kind of wallflower moving in time with the song. An older couple sits in front of the table, engaged in an intimate conversation. She sits on a low chair, keys hanging on a chain from her hip, hitting the ground crookedly. She has a cloth on her lap, possibly a handkerchief.<sup>7</sup> She wears a white cap, which was painted over a black one. A widow, she may be available for marriage by now. The balding man leans towards her, his left hand, in which he also holds his hat, resting on his right knee. There is a pentimento visible by that knee, which shows that Steen reduced the man's proximity to the woman. The man leans his right elbow on the table, as it were boxing the woman in. The colours of the clothes, blue and grey for the man, with a strip of red vest showing below the hem of his coat, and red for the woman's jacket, create a delightful effect with those of the two children standing to the right of the man at the end of the bench. The smaller child has hold of a glass (or perhaps a silver goblet), which was undoubtedly not the intention. Glass or silver, it would be a museum piece now. The slightly older child, painted swiftly with a fine lost profile, has probably scooped up something tasty into a napkin. A small board or slate, most likely with the alphabet on it, hangs from her waist. With her blue bodice, yellow pinned-in sleeves, green skirt and red cap, she contributes to the richness of colour of the little group around the bench. This part of the work clearly shows Steen's indebtedness to Adriaen van Ostade (1610-1685), to whom, according to Weyerman, he was apprenticed for a while.<sup>8</sup> Standing on the floor behind her, ideally placed to trip someone up, is a large earthenware jug: it was typical of Jan Steen to strengthen the composition with a still-life element like this. Steen also included all sorts of objects to enliven the background. On the wall hang a lantern, bagpipes, a crossbow, a small painting of a *Virgin and Child*,<sup>9</sup>

and a pair of boots. A birdcage dangles from the ceiling: a motif that often features in Steen's work, he had already used it in the *Meagre Kitchen* (fig. 1),<sup>10</sup> which was probably painted somewhat earlier. On the left, beside the door in the rear wall, there is a hat stand with a coat on it and a hat, which, given that all the men have hats or caps, does not belong to anyone. To the right of the door, a servant climbs a ladder and reaches forward to get something from the top of a box bed. The man in a hat seen from behind takes the opportunity to look up her skirt. A pentimento, easily seen with the naked eye, reveals that the girl was originally sketched leaning less far forward. A hat and a sword hang on the box bed surround, which could indicate that someone is actually sleeping in it; the mounded bedclothes also seem to suggest this. In front of these background events sits an older couple who at first glance appear to be watching the fiddler, but in fact, given the way the man holds his knife, they are eagerly anticipating the results of the activities of the fat woman cooking pancakes over the open fire on the right.<sup>11</sup> Steen painted this woman sublimely well, cleverly conveying the effect of her slouching on her stool while busying herself with the frying pan; she is hot from the fire and at the same time tries to keep her distance from it. There is a large pot of batter on her right and the first pancake lies on a plate. To the left of the plate we can see a pentimento, where another plate has been painted out. Beside her sits a young man with his hat pulled down over his eyes. It is evident that



Fig. 1 Jan Steen, *The Meagre Kitchen*, c. 1650/51, oil on panel, 69.7 x 91.9 cm., Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada

Steen widened the face of the chimneybreast quite significantly without taking the trouble to match the colour of the new area. A long, thin wedge, easy to see with the naked eye, runs from the left corner of the chimneybreast to the ceiling. The background around the fire contains all kinds of charming details, including a candlestick, an oil can, a cleaver and a trivet. Nailed to the side of the bed is a piece of paper with illegible notices, evidently a requirement for an inn. Hams hang from the ceiling, and there are earthenware or copper plates and pans around the fire. In the foreground on the right a dog licks a plate with a broken edge.

Among the many pentimenti in the painting, we have yet to refer to the shape of a much larger hat on the hat stand. Above the hat on the stand is a sketch line visible to the naked eye. It corresponds with the taller hat that can be seen in the infrared image (figs. 2, 3). This taller hat is roughly the shape of the one worn by the old man on the right of the table. The infrared image also shows that a lower hat was originally planned for the old man, more or less the same as the one the fiddler wears. In the end, Steen chose to hang a flatter hat on the hat stand and put the tall hat, with a comical dent in the crown, on the old man's head. The infrared reflectogram (fig. 4) reveals a few more changes in the composition. Steen had initially planned a rectangular window where the bagpipes and crossbow are. He had placed a seated child between the man with the glass and the older woman on the left in the foreground. Finely drawn lines can be seen with the naked eye, for instance in the left hand of the older man on the left.

The infrared reflectogram also provides more insights into Steen's working method. For example, there are visible sketch lines, particularly in the sleeves of the main figures, the fiddler, the pancake maker and the man and woman awaiting their pancakes. Almost the entire outline of the dog was sketched, but he drew only the right edge of the plate. The outline of the servant climbing the ladder beside the box bed is also very clear. It would appear that Steen had initially indicated the shape, enlarged it and then decided to return to the line of her back that he had originally intended. It is safe to say that Steen used these sketch lines at an early stage to establish the placement of the figures before he embarked on the underpainting. The reserves are likewise easy to see, for instance for the upper body of the seated woman on the left, and for the violin.<sup>12</sup> There is also bold underpainting for a curtain in the box bed (figs. 5, 6), evidently applied with a fairly broad brush. Interestingly, the curtain has disappeared under a back wall executed with a high degree of precision. Sketch lines can occasionally be found in Steen's early work.<sup>13</sup> It seems likely that he abandoned their use in later works.



Fig. 2, 3 Cat. no. 13, detail of the hat and infrared reflectogram of the same detail



Fig. 4 Infrared reflectogram of cat. no. 13

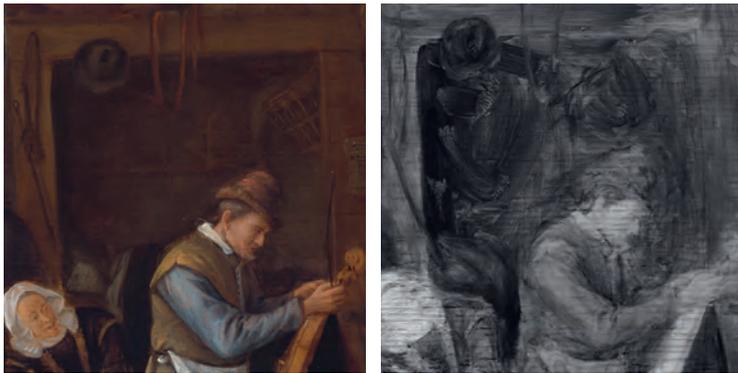


Fig. 6 Cat. no. 13, detail of the box bed and infrared reflectogram of the same detail



Fig. 7 Jan Steen, *The Fat Kitchen*, c. 1650/51, oil on panel, 70 x 90 cm., United States, private collection

The young Jan Steen did not find it easy to become a painter, but from his early years he undeniably had strong ambitions and set the bar high for himself. He modelled himself on successful contemporaries like the Van Ostade brothers and Jacob van Ruisdael (1628/29-1682), although he also looked to older artists. The best-known example in this last category is Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1526/30-1569), whose *Fat Kitchen* and *Meagre Kitchen* he translated into contemporary variations (figs. 1 and 7). These two works are the benchmark for placing the painting under consideration in Jan Steen's oeuvre. With a probability bordering on certainty, they are the two *Kitchens* Harald Appelboom bought in The Hague in 1651 for Karl Gustav Wrangel, at that time Governor of Pomerania, who later built the famous Skokloster Castle in Sweden.<sup>14</sup> Although the work discussed here is close to the two *Kitchens*, in his the use of a subtle point of interest in the shape of the violinist facing right, Steen showed that he had taken a significant step forward. This painting can consequently be fairly reliably dated to around 1652/53. The *Village Wedding* of 1653 in Rotterdam is a key work among the quite rare dated or datable works.<sup>15</sup> Until recently, the leap from the rather average *Winter View* in Skokloster,<sup>16</sup> painted in the style of Isaac van Ostade (1621-1649) and dated to 1650/51, to the convincing and sophisticated composition of the work in Rotterdam, was almost incomprehensible. Meanwhile, the emergence of the small, vibrant fair scene in Bowes Castle, which is dated 1652, shows that Steen was able to manage the crowd in a chaotic fair scene with ease.<sup>17</sup> If we assume that the work under discussion was likewise made around 1652/53, the mystery of Steen's move to extravagant, complex compositions becomes somewhat more understandable.

The great surprise of the almost unknown *Merry Company in an Inn* is the progress Steen made relative to the *Fat* and *Meagre Kitchen*. Caricature still prevails in these two paintings. In *Merry Company in an Inn* Steen lets the energetic jollity revolve around the tranquil figure of the fiddler, who is not distracted from his task. Here Steen portrayed a figure in a truly authoritative pose. Steen was evidently pleased with it, for he reused it in the *Merry Company with a Violinist and a Bagpipe Player* (fig. 8).<sup>18</sup> A composition that in almost all respects corresponds to the painting under discussion, painted on copper, it is in fact a later copy in which the room has a higher ceiling (fig. 9).<sup>19</sup> These two paintings – the variation by the artist himself and the good old copy – prove that the *Merry Company in an Inn* was already appreciated quite early on. In 1889, when the work was sold with the Sellar Collection in Paris, it was in remarkably good company. David Sellar owned four paintings by Steen. Two of them are



Fig. 8 Jan Steen, Jan Steen, *Merry Company with a Violinist and a Bagpipe Player*, oil on panel, 34.2 x 44.4 cm., London, Agnew's (1948)



Fig. 9 After Jan Steen, *Merry Company in an Inn*, oil on copper, 36.2 x 41.3 cm., sale Amsterdam, Paul Brandt, 24/25 June 1959, lot 26

now in important art museums. The *Merry Company on a Terrace*, sold at the time under the title *Les Joyeux Convives*, one of the master's best late works, is now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York (fig. 10).<sup>20</sup> The almost two metre wide canvas *The Mockery of Samson*, an important history painting from the late sixteen-sixties, is in the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne.<sup>21</sup>

All in all, we can conclude that with the *Merry Company in an Inn*, an important early work has come to light; a painting in which Steen made a huge leap forward. The use of focus in the composition, a central figure that claims attention in the scene, was a particularly important innovation.

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Fig. 10 Jan Steen, *Merry Company on a Terrace*, c. 1670, oil on canvas, 141 x 131.4 cm., New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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## Notes

- \* I am grateful to Ariane van Suchtelen and Jérôme Montcouquiou of the Cabinet Eric Turquin for their help.
- 1 When the painting recently surfaced in France it was covered with such a thick layer of brown varnish that it was almost impossible to appreciate its qualities. The exuberant colour emerged as the restoration progressed and the work proved to be in very good condition.
  - 2 'Lustige Gesellschaft. Siebzehn Personen um einen reich besetzten Tisch. Rechts werden von einer alten Frau Pfannkuchen gebacken. Vorn zieht ein Mann eine neue Seite auf eine Violine auf. Links ein altes Liebespaar, sie in rot, er in blau.'
  - 3 Hofstede de Groot identified the titles of paintings he had seen for himself by printing them in capital letters.
  - 4 The fiddlestick is still bow-shaped. The violin has a shorter neck and the scroll is therefore not as square.
  - 5 The man singing in *Inn Scene with Woman Suckling an Infant* in the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (Hofstede de Groot 1907, cat. no. 579; Braun 1980, cat. no. 131) for example, comes very close, but there are many more.
  - 6 A *pasglas* is a tall cylindrical glass with horizontal glass ridges. The glass was passed round in a company and every drinker had to drink from the glass down to the next ridge; anyone who failed had to go a ridge further. The Rijksmuseum has a number of examples in its collection (inv. nos. BK-NM-705, BK-1960-191, BK-NM-5809, BK-NM-9552), but there are also glasses like these in other collections elsewhere.
  - 7 A handkerchief was often given as a gift as a proof of love (see E. de Jongh, *Portretten van echt en trouw: Huwelijk en gezin in de Nederlandse kunst van de zeventiende eeuw*, exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum 1986, p. 110). If that is the case, the couple here are certainly engaged in an intimate conversation.
  - 8 J. Campo Weyerman, *De Levens-Beschryvingen der Nederlandsche Konst-schilders en Konst-schilderessen*, 4 vols., The Hague/Dordrecht 1729-1769, 2 (1729) p. 348.
  - 9 A similar painting hangs on the chimneybreast in the painting in Hamburg, known as *The Twins* (Braun 1980, cat. no. 294, ill. p. 61).
  - 10 See for this work and its pendant *The Fat Kitchen*, W. Kloek in H.P. Chapman, W. Kloek, A.K. Wheelock, Jr., *Jan Steen: Painter and Storyteller*, exh. cat. Washington, National Gallery of Art, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum 1996-97, pp. 103-08, cat. nos. 2, 3.
  - 11 There is a similar scene with a company and a pancake maker by the fire in a painting in the Museum für bildenden Künste, Leipzig, which Braun incorrectly included among the rejected paintings; it was actually made somewhat later than the work under discussion, see Braun 1980, cat. no. B-152.
  - 12 The many short, fine horizontal lines visible in the infrared image are the grain of the wooden panel.
  - 13 See A. van Suchtelen, *In het Mauritshuis / Jan Steen*, exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis 2011, p. 24, with reference to his *Peasants Dancing at an Inn* of c. 1646/48.
  - 14 The details of this purchase of four paintings were published by O. Granberg, 'Schilderijen in 1651 voor Karl Gustav Graf von Wrangel te 's Gravenhage aangekocht', in *Oud Holland* 25 (1907), p. 132. I no longer consider my doubts about the identification of the two paintings with the works included in the sale in The Hague in 1651 (see Washington/Amsterdam 1996-97, p. 106) to be valid: throughout his life Steen seized the opportunity to use a very large stock of motifs time and time again.
  - 15 H.P. Chapman, in Washington/Amsterdam 1996-97, pp. 116-18, cat. no. 6.
  - 16 See, for example, W. Kloek, in Washington/Amsterdam 1996-97, pp. 100-02, cat. no. 1.
  - 17 See A. van Suchtelen, *Jan Steen en de historieschilderkunst*, exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis 2018, p. 34, fig. 1.
  - 18 Braun 1980, among the rejected works, cat. no. B-163, ill. Steen reused a figure or even parts of a composition more than once, sometimes reversed. For the reuse of parts of compositions and mirror imaging see W. Kloek, *Jan Steen 1626-1679*, Amsterdam/Zwolle 2005, pp. 54-62.
  - 19 The painting had a certificate by Hofstede de Groot, dated March 1930.
  - 20 See Braun 1980, no. 374; H.P. Chapman, in Washington/Amsterdam 1996-97, pp. 254-56, cat. no. 48.
  - 21 See Braun 1980, no. 298, ill.; The Hague 2018, p. 102, fig. 6a. The fourth work is a copy after *The Effects of Intemperance* in the National Gallery, London. See Braun 1980, under cat. no. 250.



Detail of cat. no. 13