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Jan Steen

(Leiden 1626 –1679 Leiden)



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Jan Steen was born in Leiden in 1626. He was the eldest son of Havick Steen (1602–70) and Elisabet Capiteyn (1606–69), the daughter of a town clerk.<sup>[1]</sup> The couple was Catholic and had at least eight children.<sup>[2]</sup> Havick gave his profession as grain merchant when the *banns* of his marriage were posted in 1625, but as of 1629 he was working in the family-owned brewery, called the “Red Halberd.” In 1632 Havick and his wife drew up their will, in which they appointed each other heir to an estimated capital of 10,000 guilders. Steen, thus, came from an upper middle-class milieu. His artistic interest may have been aroused by his father’s uncle, Pieter Dircksz Steen (1561–after 1593), who was both a painter and a goldsmith. Furthermore, through the marriage of his aunt Maria Steen (1596–1649) with Justus Livius de Rechte (1606–49) in 1632, he may also have been introduced in his early years to the work of Jan Lievens, Justus’s younger brother.

On 18 March 1648 Steen registered as master painter in the recently founded Guild of Saint Luke in Leiden, but had presumably already been active as a painter for some time. According to Arnold Houbraken, Jan van Goyen (1596–1656) was his teacher, as was later confirmed by Jacob Campo Weyerman. The latter also claims that Steen had trained earlier in Utrecht with Nicolaus Knüpfer (1603–55) and in Haarlem with Adriaen van Ostade (1610–84). Their information came from the Leiden painter Carel de Moor (1655–1738), a good friend of Steen.

More than a year after entering the Leiden painters’ guild, Steen turned up in The Hague, where he may have assisted his former teacher Van Goyen to produce his monochrome landscapes, which were in great demand in the Dutch Republic.<sup>[3]</sup> According to Houbraken, Steen got along well with Van Goyen, and not just with him. Houbraken extensively and very humorously describes how Steen seduced and impregnated Van Goyen’s daughter Margriet, and how he subsequently announced the news to his teacher and his father. The two men had little choice in the matter other than to give the couple their blessing. The young lovers wed on 3 October 1649.<sup>[4]</sup>

Steen continued working in The Hague and quickly built up his reputation.<sup>[5]</sup> Nevertheless, he left the court city in 1654 and settled in Delft, where he rented the brewery “The Snake.”<sup>[6]</sup> His decision to work as a brewer may have been prompted by the ruinous state of the art market resulting from the First Anglo-Dutch War. Unfortunately, the war also adversely affected the brewing industry, and Steen soon landed in serious financial difficulties.<sup>[7]</sup> Even though his contract would only expire on 1 November 1657, he was calling



himself a “gewesen brouwer” (former brewer) four months prior to that date. His father-in-law Jan van Goyen had died a year earlier, but the bequest he left Steen and his wife brought them no relief. Van Goyen’s estate was so heavily riddled with debt that it had to be auctioned, the proceeds of which only just paid off the claims of his numerous creditors.

After his failed Delft venture, Steen returned to Leiden, where in 1658 he once more paid his dues to the painters’ guild. Again, his residence there was brief. The record of his first contribution states that he: “uyt de stad vertrokken [was]” (had left town). His new place of residence was Warmond, just outside of Leiden, where he paid the village tax in 1660. His move to Warmond can probably be traced back to his contacts with Leiden Remonstrants who—because it was prohibited in Leiden—had founded a church in Warmond. This church was not only attended by Steen’s uncle and aunt, but also by his good friend, the artist Frans van Mieris (1635–81). This church was built with the permission of the Lord of Warmond, Jacob van Wassenaer van Duivevoorde (1627–86), a Catholic. Steen depicted the latter’s castle, called Lockhorst or Oud-Teylingen, in the background of his famous *Poultry Yard*, which he most likely painted in Warmond.<sup>[8]</sup>

Steen’s stay in Warmond, however, was also short-lived. In 1660 Steen and his family were suddenly back in Haarlem, where he joined the Guild of Saint Luke in 1661. The years that followed were the most productive of his career. However, when the Second Anglo-Dutch War broke out in March 1665, the art market was once more critically affected and Steen’s workshop faced stormy financial weather.<sup>[9]</sup> His situation worsened further when his wife died in 1669, leaving him to care for their many offspring. According to Houbraken and Weyerman, the painter never regained control of his household.

In 1670 Steen returned to Leiden for the third time. Both of his parents had recently died and the house on the Langebrug devolved to him. That same year he also rejoined the painters’ guild, this time as an established and well-respected artist; he was immediately appointed headman (a position he held three times) and subsequently dean. These (unpaid) positions, naturally, did not alleviate his dire financial problems and so in Leiden, too, creditors lined up at his door. When the art market experienced its worst crisis in 1672, the Year of Disaster, the city council licensed Steen to operate an inn called “The Peace” [De Vreede]. Steen regularly received other painters there, including his good friend Frans van Mieris, with whom he often had a drink too many.<sup>[10]</sup>

In the spring of 1673, Steen’s status as widower ended when he married Maria Dircksdr van Egmond in Leiderdorp. She was the widow of Nicolaes Hercules, a book dealer who had gone bankrupt in 1661. Maria also had a small business: she sold home-boiled sheep’s heads and feet at the market. The income she brought in was meager, thus Jan’s second wife, too, was unable to relieve the family’s financial problems. The painter died in 1679 and was buried in the family grave in the Pieterskerk in Leiden on 3 February. He left Maria van Egmond behind with a host of children and a debt-ridden estate.

-Piet Bakker

## Endnotes



1. The Leiden Catholic baptismal registers have been preserved only as of 1646. That Steen was most probably born in 1626 can be deduced from the only known document containing information about his age. He enrolled at Leiden University at the age of 20 in November 1646, which means that Steen was born in 1625 or 1626. Given that his parents married in November of 1625, Steen was most likely born in 1626. Incidentally, this does not mean that he actually studied there. His enrollment would have been prompted by certain advantages this entailed, such as exemption from taxes on beer and wine—a particularly lucrative privilege for the son of a brewer. Steen's enrollment does presuppose that he attended Latin school. See Marten J. Bok, "The Artist's Life," in H. Perry Chapman, Wouter Th. Kloek, and Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., *Jan Steen, painter and storyteller*, ed. Guido Jansen (Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) (New Haven and London, 1996), 25–37.

2. Seven of Jan's brothers and sisters are known by name. His brother Wijbrand (1638–1704) became a wine merchant and married Catharina de Vois, daughter of the wine merchant/organist Alewijn de Vois, and sister of the painter Ary de Vois (ca. 1632–80), like Jan Steen a pupil of Nicolaes Knüpfer.

2. His sister Margareta, too, entered into a marriage with an artistic side. In 1656 she married the Catholic goldsmith Vechter van Griecken, son of the painter Anthony van Griecken. In that same year the estate of Anthony's widow was inventoried (see RAL, NA 877, deed 29), and in 1657 that of Helena van Swanenburgh, widow of Anthony's cousin (or nephew) Jan van Griecken, likewise a goldsmith (see RAL, NA 762, deed 351). The former estate included "een stuckie van Steen in de keucken" (a work by Steen in the kitchen) and the latter a "boere kermis van Jan Steen" (peasant kermis by Jan Steen). These are the two earliest mentions of Steen's work in Leiden inventories.

3. Eric J. Sluijter, "Jan van Goyen als marktleider, virtuoos en vernieuwer," in *Jan van Goyen* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 1996), 38–59.

4. It is certain that Steen and Margriet van Goyen married in October 1649. A baptismal certificate of a child conceived before they were married is not to be found. This led Bredius to believe that Houbraken's account had to refer to the painter Jacques de Claeuw (1623–94). Like Steen, he also worked for Van Goyen, and married Van Goyen's daughter Maria in the spring of the same year. Both De Claeuw and Steen baptized daughters that summer. See: Marten J. Bok, "The Artist's Life," in H. Perry Chapman, Wouter Th. Kloek, and Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., *Jan Steen, Painter and Storyteller*, ed. Guido Jansen (Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) (New Haven and London, 1996), 28.

5. For example, in 1650 the Utrecht estate auctioneer Johan van Rhenen sent a picture of a peasant wedding by Steen to Denmark to be sold there. Furthermore, in July 1651 the commercial agent Harald Appelboom purchased four paintings by Steen at a Hague auction on behalf of the Swedish field marshal Wrangel. See: Marten J. Bok, "The Artist's Life," in H. Perry Chapman, Wouter Th. Kloek, and Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., *Jan Steen, Painter and Storyteller*, ed. Guido Jansen (Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) (New Haven and London, 1996), 28–29.

6. It should be noted that during his Hague years he remained active in Leiden, where he had maintained his guild membership. In the spring of 1653 he paid his dues for two years, and it was recorded in the guild accounts that he had: "de voorgaende jaren uijt dese stad gewoont" (resided out of town in the previous years).

7. Shortly after the Peace of 1654, the number of business bankruptcies rose substantially in cities such as Amsterdam and Utrecht, and this will have been the case for Delft as well. Aside from problems in the art and beer markets, Steen will also have been affected by the catastrophic impact on the local economy of the disastrous gunpowder explosion in the Delft arsenal on 12 October 1654. See: M. J. Bok, "The Artist's Life," in H. Perry Chapman, Wouter Th. Kloek, and Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., *Jan Steen, Painter and Storyteller*, ed. Guido Jansen (Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) (New Haven and London, 1996), 29–30. Moreover, see the biography of Carel Fabritius in this catalogue.

8. *The Poultry Yard*, oil on canvas, 107.4 x 81.4 cm., signed and dated 1660, The Hague, Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis.

9. Marten J. Bok, "The Artist's Life," in H. Perry Chapman, Wouter Th. Kloek, and Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., *Jan Steen, Painter and Storyteller*, ed. Guido Jansen (Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) (New Haven and London, 1996), 31.

10. See the biography of Frans van Mieris in this catalogue.

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