



## Sacrifice of Iphigenia

Jan Steen  
(Leiden 1626 –1679 Leiden)

1671

oil on canvas

134.6 x 172.7 cm

signed and dated: "Jan Steen / 1671"

JS-112

Currently on view at: The National Museum of  
China, Beijing

## How To Cite

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Jan Steen's late biblical and mythological paintings often surprise and bewilder the viewer, and none more so than this monumental work of 1671. Here the young, beautiful Iphigenia has been brought to an altar to be sacrificed to appease an angry goddess, yet the scene has little of the gravity one would expect from such a serious subject. Surrounding the demure heroine, dressed in virginal white, are an array of theatrical types that seem to overplay their parts: the blood-thirsty executioner, the old crone yelling at the crying child, the despairing father, a conniving priest, supercilious soldiers, and a crowd of curious onlookers awaiting the denouement of the action.

No one has expressed their bewilderment about this work more forcefully than Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–92), who could not restrain himself from railing that “the countenances are so familiar, and consequently so vulgar . . . that one would be almost tempted to doubt, whether the artist did not purposely intend to burlesque his subject.”<sup>[1]</sup> Indeed, Reynolds's comments raise questions about how one should approach this masterpiece, conceived in a manner totally contrary to classicizing pictorial traditions, not only ones to which Reynolds adhered in the eighteenth century, but also those current during Steen's own lifetime.

Not all of Steen's biblical and mythological scenes are humorous or satirical: see, for example, his *Supper at Emmaus* in the Rijksmuseum (**fig 1**).<sup>[2]</sup> So when Steen did opt to introduce humor to a serious subject such as the sacrifice of Iphigenia, one needs to ask why and for what intent? The question is particularly intriguing because Steen only depicted this story from the Trojan War once, in this large painting that he executed near the end of his career. To some extent the answer lies in Steen's fascination with the theater, but it also revolves around his awareness of the social, political, and religious disputes in the Dutch Republic. As discussed below, it is likely that Steen decided to depict this subject in a satirical manner as a means to comment critically on the complicated theological and political power struggles occurring in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic.

The dramatic scenario surrounding the sacrifice of Iphigenia was the focus of Euripides's influential play *Iphigenia at Aulis* (408–6 B.C.). The story unfolds at the very beginning of the Trojan War, shortly after Paris abducted Helen, the wife of Menelaus, and took her to Troy. Menelaus's

## Comparative Figures



**Fig 1.** Jan Steen, *Supper at Emmaus*, ca. 1665–66, oil on canvas, 134 x 104 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-1932



**Fig 2.** Jan Steen, *Moses Trampling Pharaoh's Crown*, ca. 1670, oil on canvas, 78 x 79 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague



**Fig 3.** Nicolas Beatrizet, presumably after Francesco Salviati, *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, ca. 1553–55, engraving, 320 x 445 mm, British Museum, London, 1951.0407.80, © The Trustees of the British Museum

brother, Agamemnon, was the leader of an expedition of Greek warriors who gathered at Aulis, a port in central Greece, to set sail for Troy to retrieve Helen. When unfavorable winds prevented his fleet from departing, the seer Calchas discovered that the goddess Diana was delaying the ships as an act of revenge against Agamemnon, who had previously killed a stag in her sacred woods. Calchas told Agamemnon that to appease the goddess, he would have to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia. Agamemnon thus summoned Iphigenia and his wife, Clytemnestra, to Aulis under the pretext that their daughter would be married to the young hero Achilles—a ruse devised by Ulysses. Achilles, initially ignorant of the deception, became incensed when Agamemnon's trickery came to light and attempted to prevent Iphigenia's death. Ultimately, however, Iphigenia volunteered to be sacrificed so that her father's ships might sail for Troy. When the noble maiden was led to the altar, Diana herself intervened and spared Iphigenia by allowing a stag to be slain in her stead.

Jan Steen could have read Euripides's play when he was at the Latin School in Leiden, probably in the form of Erasmus's Latin translation of the Greek text. Although Steen's painting reflects the essential narrative of the Greek author's play, his distinctive interpretation of the narrative indicates that Euripides's text was not his only source of inspiration. Also important for him was the 1617 play *Iphigenia* by the Dutch playwright Samuel Coster (1579–1665).<sup>[3]</sup>

Coster, a medical doctor, founder of the *Duytsche Academie* and a man of libertine ideas, satirized in his *Iphigenia* the extremism of the orthodox clergy. This was quite daring in these years of strong antagonism between two factions of the Dutch Reformed Church: the Remonstrants and the Counter-Remonstrants. The religious dispute became a political power struggle when Johan van Oldenbarnevelt (1547–1619), the most prominent Dutch politician of the era, sided with the first, more liberal group, while Prince Maurits of Orange (1567–1625), the commander in chief of the Dutch forces, opted for the orthodox Counter-Remonstrants. By 1617, Coster could not know that this dispute ended with the drama of the execution in 1619 of the old leader, Oldenbarnevelt, ordered by Prince Maurits. The dominance of the Counter-Remonstrants lasted during the following decades.



**Fig 4.** Jan de Baen, *The Syndics*, 1675, oil on canvas, 152 x 315 cm, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden, inv. S 12



In his play, Coster stressed the dilemma Agamemnon faced, a leader who did not know which advice to follow. In order to stress this antithesis, Coster introduced a second priest, the seer Euripylus, who demanded strict obedience to religious rules, in contrast with the priest Calchas who plays a moderate role. At the first performance of the play, it must have been evident to the public that in calling for the sacrifice of a young maiden, Euripylus mirrored the uncompromising attitude of the orthodox calvinist preachers of the time.

Coster deliberately confronted his audience with moral problems, worded in former times, but still topical. In the introduction to his play he stated that the poets of antiquity did not just leave the play to posterity as an invention, but that they meant it as:

a painting on the wall, in which observant people can measure the course of the World, and can determine how Hypocrisy, under the cloak of Religion, displays his character. How Hunger for political and financial power, under the guise of sincerity, even if it results in total upheaval, glorifies its knavery and makes it work to her benefit.<sup>[4]</sup>

In 1630, when Coster's play was put on the stage again, the Amsterdam clergymen forced the burgomasters to ban all public performances of Coster's *Iphigenia*. However, the issues that Coster raised had ongoing currency within the Dutch Republic throughout most of the seventeenth century.

In 1670–71 the young Prince Willem III of Orange (1650–1702) was about to come of age, and it was unclear what his role in the Republic should be; the debate over personal liberty, religious tolerance, and overbearing church interference in civic life had flared up again; and noted philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–77) had published his acclaimed *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in 1670, in which he attacked the Protestant church leadership's interference in secular society and argued for individual liberty. So it is hardly surprising that in 1671 Jan Steen turned to Coster's politicized version of *Iphigenia* as the basis for his pictorial message of caution. It is not so clear whether the two priests may be recognised in Steen's painting. Evidently, the man with the mitre is the bad guy, but is there—maybe the man with the fur cap to the right—a second priest? It is very well possible that Steen just followed Euripides' play, while at the



same time referring to the interpretations of Coster.

Jan Steen staged the scene across the canvas as though it were a theatrical performance. The young victim kneels with her eyes closed before an altar erected under a statue of Diana. Her executioner, the personification of evil, eagerly awaits the fateful command from a despondent Agamemnon who holds his head in despair while resting his right arm on his walking stick. A bearded priest wearing a bishop's miter, probably Calchas, possibly Euripylus, emphatically urges him to act. Behind Agamemnon stands a helmeted soldier looking askance toward Agamemnon, likely Ulysses, who conceived the plan to bring Iphigenia to Aulis. At left, mirroring Agamemnon, an old woman leaning on a stick may be Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, who accompanied Iphigenia to Aulis. Steen also added a number of figures not mentioned in literary sources to enhance his narrative. The crying youngster with a broken bow and arrow represents Cupid, disappointed that he was not able to kindle the flame of love between Iphigenia and Achilles. The young woman kneeling in front of the altar helps fulfill Diana's wish to sacrifice a stag rather than Iphigenia by draping laurel vines around its neck. Steen enriched the right foreground with a translucent bottle of oil and a basket of roses half-covered by a splendid piece of Indian chintz.<sup>[5]</sup>

Steen made use of a variety of visual sources, including his own work, in conceiving this painting. For example, the figures of the priest and Agamemnon derive from comparable figures in his *Moses Trampling Pharaoh's Crown*, ca. 1670 (**fig 2**).<sup>[6]</sup> Steen must also have consulted the print *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia* by Nicolas Beatrizet (1515–after 1565), then thought to have been based on a design by Michelangelo (1475–1564) (**fig 3**).<sup>[7]</sup> Steen not only took over the image of the stag from this print, but also the pose of Iphigenia with her crossed arms.<sup>[8]</sup>

Steen likely made this large painting for Willem van Heemskerck (1613–92), a leading cloth manufacturer in Leiden and a man of great erudition.<sup>[9]</sup> In 1675, Van Heemskerck, who appears as a cloth merchant and syndic in a group portrait by Jan de Baen (1633–1702) in Leiden's Lakenhal (**fig 4**), was also an accomplished glass calligrapher, poet, and the author of several plays.<sup>[10]</sup> It was in these latter capacities that his image was included in *Panpoëticon Batavum*, a collection of paintings of Dutch poets that Aernout van Halen (1673–1732) created in the early

eighteenth century. Steen's acquaintance with Van Heemskerck, his senior by 10 years, probably stemmed from his earlier childhood. The house belonging to Van Heemskerck's grandfather stood on the Nieuwe Rijn next to the house of the painter Isaac Claesz van Swanenburgh (1537–1614).<sup>[11]</sup> In 1647 Steen's family lived on the south side of the Nieuwe Rijn, diagonally opposite these houses. After Steen's return to Leiden in 1670, the two men would have likely reconnected because of their shared interest in the arts and theater.

Van Heemskerck is one of the few contemporary owners of Steen's work whose name is known. In his collection was not only *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* but also *Peasants Merrymaking Outside an Inn* (JS-108), both of which were inherited by Van Heemskerck's descendent, Leonard van Heemskerck. It is remarkable that that two of Steen's large paintings—both nearly two meters wide—were owned by one person and, centuries later, are again in the hands of a single owner.

Steen's dramatic figures, with their accentuated gestures and facial distortions, reflect his abiding interest in the theater. A number of his paintings have been connected to plays, and he repeatedly used stage props, such as curtains, in his works. *Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, in particular, resembles the spectacular tragicomedies of the playwright and director of the Amsterdam theatre Jan Vos (1612–67), whose works were performed in Amsterdam during the 1650s and 1660s. It seems probable that Steen's inherent theatrical inclinations led him to pursue an equivalent mode in painting in the 1670s, when Vos's extravagant productions had come under attack by classicists seeking a purer form of theater.<sup>[13]</sup> In the mid-1670s Amsterdam's theater, which had been rebuilt in 1665, had become subject to strict regulations by the church. It banned all kinds of pieces, particularly those referring to political and religious disputes, as had been the case with Coster's *Iphigenia*, which had not been performed in the theater since 1630.

Not all plays, however, were performed exclusively in public theaters. Plays were also read out loud in domestic settings. In the second half of the seventeenth century, Holland had small reading societies at which roles were allocated to the members and plays were read aloud in a group.<sup>[14]</sup> It is entirely possible that Steen and Van Heemskerck belonged to the same play-reading club and that they both participated in the

reading of a piece, such as Coster's *Iphigenia*. Steen, a Catholic, and Van Heemskerck, a Remonstrant, would certainly have sympathized with the mockery of the fanatical Reformed clergymen that had caused the play to be banned from the stage. This painting, with its array of theatrical poses and gestures, may well have been made with such a recitation in mind.

Steen's comic mode is greatly beloved the world over; however, historically he has not been without his critics. Sir Joshua Reynolds, in his *Sixth Discourse*, written for students of the Royal Academy in 1774, characterized Jan Steen as a master who, if he had lived in Rome and had received instruction from Michelangelo and Raphael instead of from Adriaen Brouwer and Jan van Goyen, could have become a great artist: "he would have ranged with the pillars and supporters of our Art."<sup>[15]</sup> As already noted, in his *Eighth Discourse* of 1786 Reynolds lashed out at the prime example of Steen's failings, *Sacrifice of Iphigenia*.<sup>[16]</sup> Reynold's criticisms have a ring of truth, particularly as seen from a classicist vantage point, but here the English painter and critic entirely misses Steen's cautionary political commentary. Steen, who loved to make viewers laugh, does not in any way ridicule the heroism of Iphigenia, but rather emphasizes the weaknesses and deceitful behavior of those surrounding her. His intent, almost certainly, was to mock the self-righteous behavior of seventeenth-century theologians, much as the playwright Samuel Coster had done earlier in the century.

*I am most grateful to Arthur Wheelock and Henriette Rahusen for thoughtful comments on the first draft of this entry.*

-Wouter Kloek



## Endnotes

1. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark, (New Haven, 1975), 236.
2. In this respect, the range of Steen's history paintings differs little from that of his genre scenes, in which he painted both quietly reflective images (JS-116) and raucous scenes that emphasize the foibles of human behavior (JS-103).
3. In 1671, the same year that Steen painted this work, the story of the sacrifice of Iphigenia was once again introduced in a text that Steen would have known, Joost van den Vondel's Dutch translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. However Ovid's text, which appears in book 12, only briefly mentions Iphigenia's sacrifice, so it is unlikely that his account affected Steen's interpretation of the story. It is unlikely that Steen referred to Joost van den Vondel's play *Ifigenie in Tauren*, 1666. Vondel's play, a translation of Euripides, deals with a later episode in the life of Iphigenia: the period in which she was entrusted, as a priestess in Tauris, with the task of sacrificing strangers to Diana. Vondel's play gives only a short summary of Iphigenia's earlier life, and there is no mention of the prophecy of Calchas, or of the dilemma faced by her father.
4. Samuel Coster, *Iphigenia–Treurspel* (1617) in R. A. Kollewijn, ed., *Samuel Coster's werken* (Haarlem, 1883); see pp. 223–24 for Coster's introduction, in which he outlines his play. On the importance of Samuel Coster, see Mieke B. Smits-Veld, *Samuel Coster, ethicus-didacticus* (Groningen 1986).
5. Around 1668 Steen discovered the possibilities offered by chintz in the rendering of colorful still-life details. See, for example, his *Samson and Delilah* of 1668 in Los Angeles and his *Marriage of Tobias and Sarah* in San Francisco (H. Perry Chapman, Wouter Th. Kloek, and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Jan Steen, Painter and Storyteller*, ed. Guido Jansen (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (New Haven and London, 1996), nos. 34, 45. Ebeltje Hartkamp-Jonxis has kindly identified the chintz. On the subject of chintz, see E. Hartkamp-Jonxis, *Sits: Oost-west relaties in textiel* (Zwolle, 1987).
6. Steen made a drawing of that subject and used it, with some adjustments, for the painting in the Mauritshuis in The Hague. The painting is generally dated to ca. 1670; the drawing was probably made slightly earlier. The authenticity of the drawing is not undisputed. It is assumed that it was produced under the master's supervision by a pupil in his studio; see Wouter Kloek, *Jan Steen 1626–1679* (Zwolle, 2005), 47–49. See also A. van Suchtelen, *In het Mauritshuis: Jan Steen* (The Hague, 2011), 18–21, where the drawing's authenticity is not doubted.
7. Today the design is attributed to Francesco Salviati. See Wouter Th. Kloek, *Jan Steen 1626–1679* (Zwolle, 2005), 65–66.
8. Steen often showed off his grounding in art by borrowing images from his illustrious

predecessors. See Mariët Westermann, *The Amusements of Jan Steen* (Zwolle, 1997), chap. 5, and Wouter Th. Kloek, *Jan Steen 1626–1679* (Zwolle, 2005), 67–73. In addition to Pieter Bruegel, Lucas van Leyden, Adriaen van Ostade, Rembrandt, and Raphael, Michelangelo, too, thus deserves a place in Steen's gallery of past masters who served as his role models.

9. Van Heemskerck's friends included Constantijn Huygens, who wrote several poems for him, presumably as a token of gratitude for engraved glasses. In 1677 Huygens honored him with a poem devoted to the painter Maria van Oosterwijck and her maidservant and pupil, Geertje Pieters (see 1677:027).
10. Ingrid Moerman, "Kalligrafie: echte nationale dilettantenkunst," *Nieuw Letterkundig Magazijn* 16 (1998): 23. For an assessment of his glass engravings, see: P. C. Ritsema van Eck and H. M. Zijlstra-Zweens, *Glass in the Rijksmuseum*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1993–95).
11. Van Heemskerck's grandfather was burgomaster of the city of Leiden and his wife was a granddaughter of the Leiden painter and burgomaster Isaac Claesz van Swanenburgh, who occupied a key position in the artistic life of Leiden around 1600. Nevertheless, it would seem that, for financial reasons, Van Heemskerck could not have played a role as a patron until relatively late in his life. As early as 1641, he declared bankruptcy as a cloth manufacturer, and even though he served at various times as dean or senior officer of the cloth finishers' guild from 1645 onward, he continued for a long time to be plagued by financial difficulties. By the 1670s, however, he seems to have put such troubles behind him.
12. See Mariët Westermann, "Steen's Comic Fictions," in H. Perry Chapman, Wouter Th. Kloek, and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Jan Steen, Painter and Storyteller*, ed. Guido Jansen (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (New Haven and London, 1996), 63, where she argues that by "casting his history paintings of the late 1660s and 1670s in deliberately *retardataire*, non-classicist modes, Steen created a comic mode of history that was consistent with his identity as a comic artist."
13. Only in 1702 was a playhouse opened in Leiden. It was the second permanent theater in Holland, after that of Amsterdam.
14. Anna de Haas, *De wetten van het treurspel: Over ernstig toneel in Nederland, 1700–1772* (Hilversum, 1998), 209–13.
15. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark (New Haven, 1975), 109–10. Although Reynolds might already have seen Steen's *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* by this time (after the sale in Leiden in 1771, it was sent to London, where it appeared at auction again in 1773), it is more likely that he did not see the piece until a later time.
16. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark (New Haven, 1975), 236.

## Provenance

- Willem Jacobsz. Van Heemskerk (1613–92), Leiden, until 1692; by descent to Willem Willemsz. Van Heemskerck (1648–95), Leiden, until 1695; by descent to Johanna van Sorgen (1646–1729), Leiden, until 1729; by descent to Leonard van Heemskerk (1689–1771), Leiden, until 1771 (his sale, Leiden, Delfos, 2 September 1771, no. 10 [to Fouquet]).
- Fouquet Collection (his sale, Langford's, London, 10 February 1773, no. 58).
- (Sale, Christie's, London, 16–17 February 1781, no. 94 [White]).
- Lady Cremorne, 1842.
- Rawdon Collection, 1854.
- A. Preyer Collection, Versailles, 1926 (sale, Amsterdam, Frederik Muller & Co., 8 November 1927 [Everh. Bakker for Vullinx, The Hague, for 115 guilders]).
- [Jacques Goudstikker, 1928–40].
- Confiscated by the Nazis, Hermann Göring, Carinhall, 13 July 1940; transported to Berchtesgaden, no. 5311, collecting point Munich, 1945, no. 5355.<sup>1</sup>
- Collection Dienst Voor's Rijks Verspreide Kunstvoorwerpen, The Hague, 1948–60, on loan to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1948–60, inv. SK-C-1399.
- Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1960–2006, inv. SK-A-3984.
- Restituted to Jacques Goudstikker's heir, Marei von Saher, Greenwich, Conn., 6 February 2006 [Simon Dickinson, New York, 2008].
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

## Provenance Notes

1. The painting was hung in the Carinhall Entry Hall after its confiscation by Göring. Extensive documentation of the painting while it was in Nazi hands is available on the Deutsches Historisches Museum website.

## Exhibition History

- London, The British Gallery, 1835.





- London, Barbizon House, 1922, no. 33
- Leiden, De Lakenhal, "Jan Steen," 1926, no. 60.
- Amsterdam, "Catalogue des Nouvelles Acquisitions de la Collection Goudstikker," May–June 1928, no. 34.
- Brussels, "Cinq siècle d'art: Exposition Universelle et Internationale," 1935, no. 782.
- The Hague, Mauritshuis, "Herwonnen Kunstbezit." March–May 1946, no. 60.
- Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, on loan with the permanent collection, 1948–1958 [lent by Collectie Dienst voor's Rijks Verspreide Kunstvoorwerpen].
- The Hague, Mauritshuis, "Jan Steen in het Mauritshuis," 1958–59.
- Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, exhibited with the permanent collection, 1960–2006.
- Athene, Nationale Pinakothek. "Griekse Goden en Helden in de tijd van Rubens en Rembrandt," 28 September 2000–8 January 2001; Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum 3 February–8 May 2001.
- Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum, "Reclaimed: Paintings from the Collection of Jacques Goudstikker," 9 May 2008–7 September 2008; New York, The Jewish Museum, 15 March–2 August 2009; San Antonio, The McNay Art Museum, 7 October 2009–10 January 2010.
- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, July 2012–April 2013 [lent by the present owner].
- Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, on loan with the permanent collection, January 2010–present.
- Paris, Musée du Louvre, "Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection: The Age of Rembrandt," 22 February–22 May 2017 [lent by the present owner].
- Beijing, National Museum of China, "Rembrandt and His Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 17 June–3 September 2017 [lent by the present owner].

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## Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of plain-weave canvas, has been wax-lined onto a similar secondary canvas and stretched onto a 7-member stretcher. X-radiography reveals cusping at all four edges, indicating that the original painted dimensions have not been altered. There is a modest amount of retouching densest in Iphigenia's sash and in several large patches left of the executioner and along the left edge.

A light gray ground has been applied, followed by a thin transparent brown underlayer, used to tone the gray. This double ground structure of brown over gray is evident at abraded areas of surface and is occasionally left visible between painted forms, such as between the executioner's profile and the sky. The paint has been applied in thin, opaque layers with a limited use of glazing and economic use of ground and underpainting. For example, the ground is left exposed surrounding the tip of the executioner's blade and acts as the background. Some areas also show localized underpaintings, for instance in the blue drape around the kneeling woman's shoulders, the form was first established with white paint and bands of blue and pink to create shadows, followed by a transparent blue glaze overall.

Infrared examination reveals two sketching campaigns beneath the final painted surface. First, a





dry medium was used to describe the general location of folds in the textile in the foreground. Second, there is a dark-colored fluid oil sketch of the entire composition in broad cursory strokes. Slight compositional changes visible as pentiments include changes the top of the king's chair, which was originally curved, minor alterations of various figures, and a widening of the tree trunk behind the executioner, which extends past the planned reserve detected in the sky.

The painting is signed and dated in dark paint along the lower left corner: 'JanSteen/1671'.

The painting was restored in 1995 while at the Rijksmuseum and examined by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 2011. It is in a good overall state of preservation.

### **Technical Summary Endnotes**