



Prayer Before the Meal

Jan Steen

(Leiden 1626 –1679 Leiden)

1660

oil on oak panel

54.3 x 46 cm

signed and dated in dark paint on last line of
large placard: "JAN STEEN 1660"

JS-116

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



How To Cite

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This serene painting of a family praying before beginning its meal is imbued with quiet spirituality.^[1] A stanza from Proverbs 30:7–9 inscribed on a placard hanging on the rear wall serves as the family’s creed: “Three things I desire and no more / Above all to love God the Father / Not to covet an abundance of riches / But to desire what the wisest prayed for / An honest life in this vale / In these three all is based.”^[2] The family’s plain clothes, simple furniture, bare walls, and modest meal of bread, cheese and ham indicate that they truly live by this creed. As the mother prays while cuddling her child, the father reverently holds his hat before his face.^[3] A key hanging behind the father symbolizes his trustworthiness.^[4]

Inscribed on the *belkroon* (a wooden chandelier with a bell hanging in the middle) are words from the Lord’s Prayer: “u wille moet geschieden” (thy will be done). The father and mother remind themselves of life’s transitory nature “in this vale” by placing on the shelf an extinguished candle, a large book (probably a Bible), and a skull.^[5] The paper hanging over the shelf reads “Gedenckt te sterven” (Think on Death). In their faith, however, death is followed by resurrection, for a wreath of wheat crowns the skull. Wheat, which must first die and be buried in the earth before growing into a new plant, is a symbol of hope. Like the grain, man must die and be buried to achieve eternal life.^[6]

The earliest of Jan Steen’s four representations of this subject, this scene belongs to a long-established iconographic tradition.^[7] Early seventeenth-century paintings and prints reflect the ideal of a pious, harmonious and fertile family life that had developed within Dutch society, an ideal also expressed in the writings of Jacob Cats (1577–1660). Protestant and Catholic families alike commissioned portraits of themselves praying before a meal.^[9] Artists frequently alluded to harmony and fertility by including biblical texts,^[10] especially the third verse of Psalm 128 (127 in the Catholic Bible): “Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house.”^[11] The grapevine climbing around the window above the mother indicates that Steen also consulted Psalms. Steen’s scene resembles earlier prayer-before-the-meal images in that it includes a religious text. However, in the depiction of a humble rather than wealthy family, it differs from such prototypes. Far closer in mood and character is Adriaen van Ostade’s (1610–84) intimate etching of 1653 (**fig 1**), which was probably Steen’s primary compositional source.^[12]

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Adriaen van Ostade, *Prayer before the Meal*, 1653, etching (state ii/iv), 15.3 x 13 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.8309



Fig 2. Infrared reflectogram of *The Prayer Before the Meal*, JS-116



Neither the biblical text nor the furnishings in this humble home identify the family's religious persuasion. While Steen's image transcends denomination, he originally conceived the painting as a Catholic image. As has been noted for some time, a large cross, seemingly a crucifix, vaguely visible through the overlying paint, once hung above the father's head. Steen eliminated the cross and replaced it with objects on the shelf that carry comparable symbolic associations with death and resurrection, such as the skull and its wreath of wheat, that would have been applicable to Catholics and Protestants alike.

Infrared reflectography has revealed much information about Steen's creative process in this work, including evidence that his compositional changes were far more extensive than previously realized (**fig 2**). It appears that Steen initially sketched in his compositional ideas with a searching line drawn in black chalk, which he then defined more carefully with broad brush strokes.^[13] He repositioned a number of elements, including the window and the pitcher on the bench under the window, and added others, such as the tablecloth under the cheese. He also enlarged the back of the father's head. Most significantly for the iconography of the painting, Steen initially conceived the composition with yet another figure: a young man situated at the back side of the table between the woman and her husband who looked up at a crucifix hanging on the wall above the praying father. Although Steen never fully worked up this figure and only blocked him in with a brush, the direction of his gaze is quite clear. The reflectogram, moreover, reveals that instead of one crucifix, as has long been thought, Steen actually painted two crucifixes, one above the other, both of which are visible in the reflectogram. The background figure would have been looking at the lower of these two crucifixes. Even though the sequence of these compositional changes is not possible to determine, the preponderance of evidence is that Steen opted to remove the explicit Catholic tenor of the scene to make it more acceptable to a Protestant buyer.

Aside from the careful thought process underlying these compositional and iconographic changes, the forcefulness of Steen's image results from the surety of his painting technique in this work. Rarely did he convey weight and texture so intently. He carefully modeled his figures with light and shade, endowing them with classical grandeur. He meticulously rendered the woven pattern of the frayed cloth over the barrel, and the crisp folds in



the clean white table cloth under the bread and cheese. Finally, he convincingly suggested the worn appearance of the father's chair and the rough wood of the window frame.

Steen's compositional focus on a few figures in a corner before an open window is unusual within his oeuvre, and may reflect his awareness of Delft artistic traditions. By 1660 both Johannes Vermeer (1632–75) and Pieter de Hooch (1629–84) placed their scenes of domestic life in similar settings. Steen, however, stands apart from his Delft colleagues in the way that he exploits this setting. The small vista through the open window suggests at once the family's bond to the community and the privacy of its devotions. Moreover, the opening is wide enough for air and light to enter freely into the room, heightening the sense of realism. Finally, Steen effectively uses the simple architecture of the room, particularly the open window framing the mother, to enhance the solemnity and dignity of this quiet masterpiece.^[14]

-Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

Endnotes

1. This text is based on the entry on the painting by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. 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), 139–41.
2. Translation adapted from Peter C. Sutton, *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting* (Exh. cat. Philadelphia Museum of Art) (Philadelphia, 1984), 307. The Dutch text on the placard reads: “Drie dingen wensch ick en niet meer / woor al te minnen Godt den heer / geen overvloed van Ryckdoms schat / maer wens om tgeen de wyste badt / Een eerlyck Leven op dit dal / in dese drie bestaet het al.”
3. Peter Hecht, “The Debate on Symbol and Meaning in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Art: An Appeal to Common Sense,” *Simiolus* (1986): 177, n. 15, notes that the saying “in den hoed kijken” (“to look in the hat”) is an expression indicating silent prayer. I would like to thank Guido Jansen for this reference.
4. See, for example, Roemer Visscher, *Sinnepoppen* (Amsterdam, 1614), emblem 66, “‘T Vertroude trouwelijck,” which equates trustworthiness with a key. The key also has religious associations that relate thematically to the tenor of this work. Christ said to Saint Peter: “And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven” (Matthew 16:19).
5. The *vanitas* connotations of the book are less certain than those of the extinguished candle and skull. It could be a Bible. Nevertheless, many *vanitas* still lifes with extinguished candles and skulls include books as well.
6. For the symbolism of wheat, see Ingvar Bergström, *Still Lifes of the Golden Age: Northern European Paintings from the Heinz Family Collection*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Washington D.C., 1989), 103–4.
7. For a full listing of other paintings by Steen representing this subject, see Peter C. Sutton, “The Life and Art of Jan Steen,” in “Jan Steen: Comedy and Admonition,” *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 78 (Winter/Spring, 1982–83), 29–31, particularly nn. 7 and 10.
8. See, in particular, Jacob Cats, *Houwelyck: Dat is de gansche gelegentheyt des echtenstaets* (Middelburg, 1625). For the relationship between Cats’s writings and such scenes, see Wayne Franits, “The Family Saying Grace: A Theme in Dutch Art of the Seventeenth Century,” *Simiolus* 16 (1986): 36–49; and idem, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 131–60.
9. See Eddy de Jongh, *Portretten van echt en trouw—Huwelijk en gezin in de nederlandse kunst van de zeventiende eeuw* (Exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum) (Zwolle, 1986), 292–310.

10. See Pieter J. J. van Thiel, "Poor Parents, Rich Children and Family Saying Grace: Two Related Aspects of the Iconography of Late Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Dutch Domestic Morality," *Simiolus* 17 (1987): 128–49.
11. Wayne Franits, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 82, notes that Petrus Baardt, *Deugden-spoor* (Leeuwarden, 1645), 373, associates the fruitful vine with a "een deugdelijcke huys-vrouwe van eerbaer Zeden" (virtuous and chaste wife).
12. Peter C. Sutton, *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting* (Exh. cat. Philadelphia Museum of Art) (Philadelphia, 1984), 308.
13. The infrared reflectogram also reveals a number of fingerprints in the wet paint along the painting's upper edge.
14. Wybrand Hendriks made a drawing after this painting in the late eighteenth century (now Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam). The painting was then probably in the collection of Johannes Enschede, Haarlem.

Provenance

- Johannes Enschede, Haarlem (his sale, Haarlem, Tako Jelgersma and Vincent Van der Vinne, 30 May 1786, no. 22 [for 175 florins]).
- (Anonymous sale, Alkmaar, H. Hartemink and J. P. Van Horstok, 17 November 1788, no. 1 [to Du Tour for 700 florins]).
- Ocke, Leiden (his sale, Leiden, 21 April 1817, no. 128 [to Ocke for 440 florins]; sale, E. Michael Engelberts, Amsterdam, Van der Schley, Roos and De Vries, 25 August 1817, no. 91 [to De Vries for 275 florins]).
- E. E. Baron Collot d'Escury, Leeuwarden (his sale, Leeuwarden, J. Proost, 17 October 1831, no. 33 [to Berg for 395 florins]); Mr. Chaplin, London, by 1831.
- James Morrison (1790–1857), Basildon Park, London, by 1848; by descent to his widow, Mary Anne Morrison (d. 1887); by descent to their son, Charles Morrison (d. 1909), by 1894; by inheritance to James Morrison's brother, Walter Morrison, Basildon Park; by inheritance to his nephew, Colonel James Archibald Morrison (1873–1943), Basildon Park, by 1910; by inheritance to his daughter, Mary Morrison, by 1934, who married John Henry Dent Bocklehurst of Sudeley Castle, Winchcombe, Gloucestershire in 1924; by inheritance to Geoffrey Mark Dent-Brocklehurst, Sudeley Castle (sale, Sotheby's, London, 5 December 2012, no. 9 [Otto Naumann, Ltd., New York]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2012.

Exhibition History

- London, British Institution, 1848 [lent by James Morrison].
- London, Royal Academy, "Winter Exhibition," 1879, no. 54 [lent by Mrs. Morrison].
- London, Royal Academy, "Winter Exhibition," 1894, no. 58 [lent by Charles Morrison].
- London, Royal Academy, "Winter Exhibition," 1907, no. 73 [lent by Charles Morrison].
- London, Grosvenor Gallery, 1914–18, no. 18 .
- London, Burlington Fine Arts Club, "Winter Exhibition," 1936–37, no. 61 [lent by Simon Morrison].
- London, Royal Academy (Gallery IX), "Exhibition of 17th-Century Art in Europe," 3 January – 12 March 1938, no. 268 [lent by Simon Morrison].
- London, Royal Academy of Arts, "Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting," 7 September–18 November 1984, no. 102 [lent by The Walter Morrison Collection, Sudeley Castle, Gloucestershire].
- Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art, "Jan Steen, Painter and Storyteller," 28 April–18 August 1996; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, 21 September–12 January 1997, no. 13 [lent by the Sudeley Castle Trustees, Gloucestershire, Walter Morrison Collection].
- Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, June 2013–June 2016 [lent by the present owner].
- 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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Versions

Versions and Copies

1. Wybrand Hendriks, *Prayer Before the Meal*, 1786, watercolor, pen in gray, on paper, 38 x 31.8 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, RP-T-FM-57.

Versions Notes

Technical Summary

The support is a rectangular composite panel comprising three vertically grained oak planks—a wide center plank between two narrow planks.^[1] The panel has bevels along the upper and lower edges. A brown coating applied to the entire panel reverse has inclusions and a gritty texture along the right plank. Machine tool marks along the lower right corner may be present along the entire panel and be obscured by the brown coating. The panel has four old paper labels, one new self-adhesive label, a white chalk and a pencil inscription, but no paper tape, wood shims, wax collection seals, stencils or panel maker's mark visible along the reverse. The panel has not been previously prepared for dendrochronology.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied and spills over onto the thickness of the left and right edges. The paint has been applied broadly wet-into-wet with refinements as the composition progressed. The contours of the foliage draped over the hanging wood chandelier, the mother's headscarf, and the child's blue garment have been applied with low rounded brushwork. The simple fabric draped over the barrel has been rendered with short delicate strokes.

A dark fingerprint, presumably the artist's, is located along the light gray wall near the nape of the father's neck. Infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers reveal additional fingerprints along the center of the upper edge.

A sketchy line underdrawing is revealed along the pitcher on the bench, the window frame, and leaded window in infrared images captured at 1100–1800 nanometers.^[2] The images also reveal one significant and a number of minor compositional changes during the paint stage. A male figure previously stood between the seated figures, looking off toward the viewer's right, with his head tilted slightly. The position of the figure's head and shoulders are located along the lower left quadrant of the wall placard, where the signature and date are in the final composition. The bell hanging in the center of the wood chandelier has been reduced in size. A large cross was

previously located along the upper right quadrant has been replaced by a wood shelf holding an extinguished candle, a book, which may be a bible, and a skull with the corner of a piece of paper hanging over it. A rectangular shape to the right of the key hanging on the wall has been painted out completely. The left half of the upper horizontal edge of the placard appears to have been raised slightly. A dark, horizontally oriented pentimento is located along the left side of the wheel of cheese below the bread on the table, and the angle of the table and white tablecloth facing the mother and child has been made steeper. The wood bands around the middle of the barrel have been raised. In addition, a chimney has been added to the sloped roofline of the house seen through the open window.

The painting is signed and dated in dark paint on the last line of the large placard hung from a nail on the rear wall, where a male figure previously stood.

The painting was varnished but has not undergone conservation treatment since acquisition and remains in an excellent state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on visual examination only.
2. Infrared imaging and X-radiography conducted in June 2013 by Douglas Lachance, painting conservation technician, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Infrared image capture, J and H filters configured from 1.1–1.8 microns, Santa Barbara Focal Plane Imager LC InSb camera. Infrared reflectogram composite, Adobe Photoshop assembly.