





Woman Counting Coins

Jan Steen
(Leiden 1626 – 1679 Leiden)

ca. 1665
oil on panel
33 x 21 cm
signed in dark paint, upper right
quadrant: “JSteen.” (JS in ligature)
JS-101

How to cite

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A seated woman counts the money lying before her next to an open purse on a table, and carefully records the result with a pen on a piece of paper. Casting a vague shadow on the tablecloth is a long stick propped up against the table. Although at first glance this appears to be a genre scene, the woman's face displays such compelling personal features that the painting may very well be a portrait—a hypothesis that is outlined below. Although the painting is untraceable in the previous literature on Jan Steen, the characteristic treatment of the hands, face, and still-life details, as well as the typical manner of rendering clothing, shows this painting to be a wholly characteristic work by this master.^[1]

There are unusual aspects about this painting, however, that require some explanation. To begin with, the nature of the panel support is odd in a number of ways. The panel is unusually tall with respect to its width, in addition to which the painter used a plank with a horizontal grain for a vertical support. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the oak panel did not come from the Baltic region, as was customary, but from Western Europe.^[2] The possibility that it was sawn off a larger panel can be rejected on the basis of technical research. Traces of ground are visible along the left edge, as well as along the top and bottom, which means that the original edges have been preserved on these three sides.^[3] Technical examination indicates that part of the right edge of the small panel has been cropped, perhaps so that it would fit into the frame. The position of the signature in the light area of the wall behind the woman also indicates that the painting has not been reduced at the right: more space on that side would cause the name to appear in the middle of the painting—a highly unusual place for this painter's signature.

Counting money is generally associated with the theme of avarice. In this case, however, there is none of the irony with which Jan Steen generally imbued the subject. For example, a painting of a man hanging over the lower part of the door of a humble dwelling and showing a coin from a money pouch bears the inscription “Dat heb je niet” (This you don't have), which neatly expresses a simple warning against avarice.^[4] A painting in Copenhagen shows an old miser whose delight in his treasures allows him to be led astray by Death, who appears behind the window.^[5] Here, too, the message is obvious. In the Leiden Collection painting, however, such associations do not apply. Rather, it seems that the woman is seriously weighing the possible uses to which she could put her savings.

Another striking element is the woman's clothing: her attire is simple but immaculate, as demonstrated by the lace cap she wears under her hood and the two carefully chosen shades of brown in the jacket and the hood and skirt. Comparison with depictions of seventeenth-century costumes suggests that this painting portrays a

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Wouter Crabeth, *Bernard of Clairvaux Converting William of Aquitaine* (detail), 1641, canvas, 143 x 239 cm, Museum Gouda, Gouda

“spiritual sister,” i. e., a beguine (*begijn*) or lay sister (*klopje*). The dress of these spiritual sisters, which did not differ much from the clothing of ordinary women, is, above all, modest. Nevertheless, these women were an arresting feature of the urban landscape, as evidenced by the depiction of an Amsterdam beguine ^[6]. Several lay sisters of Gouda, in Wouter Crabeth’s painting *Bernard of Clairvaux Converting William of Aquitaine* of 1641 (**fig 1**), wear clothing that corresponds to the attire of this woman counting coins.^[7] Beguines lived together in a community and their lifestyle was determined by biblical precepts. In contrast to women in monastic orders, these sisters did not take vows of allegiance. The many beguinages in Dutch cities testify to the desire for a life of piety and order without being weighed down by everlasting vows. In seventeenth-century Holland, which was predominantly Protestant, these communities generally existed in a clandestine manner.

These women, most of whom were extremely devout, were frequently the object of ridicule. The word *kwezel*, another name for a beguine, came to mean a sanctimonious nag. Derision also resounds in the well-known Dutch song “Zeg kwezelke wilde jij dansen” (Hey, self-righteous sister, would you like to dance).^[8] Because Steen often parodied these pious “quakers” in his paintings (e. g., *In Luxury Beware* in Vienna and *Merry Family* in the Rijksmuseum),^[9] one would expect him to have also cast beguines in a comic role, a prime example being the elderly woman singing in *As the Old Sing, So Pipe the Young* in the Mauritshuis in The Hague.^[10] Yet the mirth that characterizes that painting is entirely absent from the work discussed here.

The conjecture that *Woman Counting Coins* portrays a lay sister calls to mind Arnold Houbraken’s assertion that a sister of Jan Steen had a similar vocation.^[11] Houbraken relates that Steen, a widower out courting, had a drink with Maria van Egmond, the widow of Nicolaes Hercules. Their meeting had been arranged by a friend, who then advised Steen to discuss the matter with his sister, who was a lay sister: “een geestelycke dochter” (a spiritual daughter). It is not known which of Steen’s two unmarried sisters Houbraken had in mind: Swaentje (officially Agnes) or Catharina.^[12] It is usually assumed that Catharina, the younger sister, had the spiritual vocation,^[13] but this is not very likely. The incident supposedly took place not long before April 1673, at which time the youngest of Steen’s sisters must have been approximately 24 years old and the elder, who was born around 1636, about 37. It does not seem very likely that Steen would have asked his younger sister, who was his junior by 20 years, for advice about a courtship.^[14]

The possible identification of the woman portrayed in this work also raises questions of the painting’s date of origin. Dendrochronological research has shown that the panel was probably painted after 1658, while a dating around 1665 is the most



plausible for stylistic reasons. Dating this work requires one to examine not only Steen's portraits but also his genre scenes. Although the small portraits of Gerrit Schouten and his wife made in 1665 do not provide a useful basis of comparison, owing to the elegant presentation and the slightly nervous manner of painting, the somewhat simpler portraits of Schouten's parents corroborate this dating.^[15] If the assumption is correct that this is a portrait of Steen's "spiritual" sister, the chance that it portrays his youngest sister—who was around 17 in 1665—is very small indeed.

The combination of a few assumptions—such as the portrait-like nature of this small painting, its personal character, and the possibility that Steen portrayed a lay sister, possibly his own sibling—provides more than the usual material for debate. When the work surfaced in 2003, it did not attract much attention, yet it is a characteristic and intimate work by this master, one that is eye-catching because of its clear idiom and fine lighting effects. There is more than enough reason to showcase this work as a fascinating piece by this remarkable painter.

- Wouter Kloek, 2017

Endnotes

1. When the painting surfaced in 2003, it was described—with the hesitation customary in the case of a modest and wholly unknown work—as “Jan Steen and studio.” Preceding the auction in 2003, the painting was assessed by Guido Jansen and myself. In the sale catalogue the objects on the table were described as “the work of a less capable hand.” This was supposed to apply to the somewhat awkward pen in the inkpot, but that is hardly sufficient reason to add “and studio.”
2. Report by Peter Klein, Hamburg. Oak panels from Western Europe are generally considered to be of lesser quality than those from the Baltic region.
3. Technical research undertaken by Annette Rupprecht in 2012.
4. Karel Braun, *Alle tot nu toe bekende schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam, 1980), no. 55.
5. Karel Braun, *Alle tot nu toe bekende schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam, 1980), no. 69.
6. ‘Beggina Amstelaedamensis’ as illustrated in Adriaan Schoonebeek, *Nette Afbeeldingen Der Eygene Dragten van alle Geestelijke Vrouwen en Nonnen-orders* (Amsterdam, 1691) 38–39.
7. I thank Thijs Boers of the Museum Ons’ Lieve Heer op Solder, whose advice I sought in this matter.
8. This folk song was recorded in 1848 by J. F. Willems, *Oude Vlaemsche liederen* (Ghent, 1848), 290; for the words and melody, [click here](#).
9. Karel Braun, *Alle tot nu toe bekende schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam, 1980), 110, no. 179 and 36, no. 134, respectively. For the first painting, see also 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, 1996), no. 21.
10. Karel Braun, *Alle tot nu toe bekende schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam, 1980), no. 201; 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, 1996), no. 21.
11. Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam, 1718–21; revised edition published in The Hague, 1753; reprinted in Amsterdam, 1980), 3: 22–24; the story is retold in detail and embellished by Jacob Campo Weyerman in his *De levens-beschryvingen der Nederlantsche konstschilders en konstschilderessen* of 1729.
12. Yvonne Prins and Jan Smit, “De naaste verwanten van Jan Steen,” *Jaarboek van het Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie* 51 (1997): 172. Of Steen’s sisters, three lived well into adulthood. Steen’s sister Margaretha and her husband, Victor van Griecken, acted as witnesses to the reading of the *banns* of Steen’s marriage to Maria van Egmont on 6 April 1673. Agnes (Swaentje) and Catharina never married.
13. Yvonne Prins and Jan Smit, “De naaste verwanten van Jan Steen,” *Jaarboek van het Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie* 51 (1997): 172; Marten Jan 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. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (New Haven, 1996), 32, 36, n. 126.

14. It should also be noted that Swaentje paid to join Gouda's Leproos- en Proveniershuis (Home for Lepers and the Elderly), a fact that has led some to believe that she was not the lay sister. Her place in the Proveniershuis was not procured until 1682, however, and a change in the situation in Leiden could have made it necessary, even for a lay sister, to assure herself of a tranquil old age in Gouda.
15. 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, 1996), 193–96, nos. 29A, 29B, figs. 1 and 2. On the identification of Schouten's wife, see also Judith van Gent, "A New Identification for Bartholomeus van der Helst's Family Portrait in the Wallace Collection," *Burlington Magazine* 146 (2004): 167.

Provenance

- Mrs. N. E. Mol van Charente, The Hague.
- (Sale, Christie's, Amsterdam, 5 November 2003, no. 45, as by Jan Steen and studio [Salomon Lilian B. V., Amsterdam]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

Exhibition History

- Wellesley, Davis Museum at Wellesley College, on loan with the permanent collection, 1 August 2017–present [lent by the present owner].

Technical Summary

The support is a single plank of horizontally grained but vertically oriented, rectangular, western German or Netherlandish oak with a fell date after 1647 and a creation date possible after 1658.^[1] There are narrow remnants of bevels along the vertical edges and the left side of the upper edge, and the panel has been cradled. There are two paper labels but no wax seals, import stamps, stencils, panel maker's marks or machine tool marks.

A light-colored, radio-opaque ground has been thinly and evenly applied. The ground extends to the panel



edges and spills over onto the entire upper, left, and lower edges and the upper quarter of the right edge. The lower three-quarters of the right edge is chipped along the composition surface and no ground spills over onto the panel thickness, which suggests the irregularly cut panel edge was trimmed after the painting was executed.

The oil paint has been built up in successive layers and applied smoothly with no use of impasto. The entire background has been applied freely with ca. 1.5 cm-wide horizontal and diagonal brushstrokes. In the infrared images, the same loose brushwork can be seen in the application of the underlayers of the figure's garment. Slightly raised brushwork is located along the contours of the figure's garment, the tablecloth's sharp fold, and the area of highlights along the diagonally oriented stick in the lower right quadrant.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. There are no pentimenti or compositional changes visible in the images or X-radiography aside from a light-colored shape to the left of the figure's proper left pointer finger, which suggests the thumb may have originally extended perpendicularly rather than being tucked under her pointer finger.

The painting is signed in dark paint along the upper right quadrant but is undated.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2004 and remains in an excellent state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on Peter Klein's dendrochronology report.