





Country Doctor

Jan Steen
(Leiden 1626 – 1679 Leiden)

ca. 1653
oil on panel
38.6 x 30.5 cm
signed in dark paint, lower-left corner: “JSteen”
(JS in ligature) [heavily abraded]
JS-109

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With a facial expression bordering on demonic pleasure, a country doctor has grabbed his patient's hair to steady his head while aiming a small spatula toward the man's open mouth (**fig 1**).^[1] The farmer's physical and emotional anguish is evident in every aspect of his being, from his protruding tongue and open eyes, to his tight grip on the chair knob and the handle of his egg basket, to his raised right leg. Peering down at the patient's pained face is his deeply concerned wife, who clasps her hands close to her chest. Meanwhile, a young boy, clearly the doctor's accomplice, kneels near the chair to steal eggs from the farmer's basket and money from the leather pouch tied to his waist.^[2]

Unlike itinerant charlatans, or quacksalvers (from which the term “quack” derives), who frequented Dutch village fairs to hawk dubious medical remedies, Steen's country doctor works within his home. He would have been known to his community as the local barber-surgeon, which lent him a degree of respectability. He wears a soft red-brown cap comparable to those worn in Steen's other paintings of barber-surgeons (**fig 2**), as well as those by his contemporaries, including Rembrandt van Rijn, as seen in an early painting in The Leiden Collection that belongs to a series depicting the five senses: *Stone Operation (Allegory of Touch)* (**fig 3**).

The neighbors of Steen's country doctor would have come to this barber-surgeon in hopes that he could cure a wide range of ailments, real or imagined, through dental work, lockjaw treatment, bloodletting, and stone removal, in addition to performing various cosmetic procedures, shaves, and haircuts. The large brush lying on the floor in the left foreground, for example, reflects his role as a barber, and a variety of vessels and containers related to his multifaceted profession are stored on the wooden shelves at the left. Rembrandt's *Unconscious Patient (Allegory of Smell)* (**fig 4**) includes a similar cabinet filled with knives, scissors, razors, and other instruments that could be used for oral surgery.^[3]

The specific procedure that the barber-surgeon undertakes in Steen's small painting is not certain. Although the work is traditionally titled *The Tooth-Puller*, the barber-surgeon's forward-thrusting body language suggests that he is not extracting a tooth.^[4] Rather, he appears to be positioning his patient's open mouth to force-feed him a dose of medicine. Two white dabs of paint on the metal spatula aimed toward the farmer's mouth suggest that he is receiving some tablets (**fig 1**).^[5] The medicine was probably stored in one of the jars in the shelving unit and could have been heated in the earthenware brazier on the table. The patient may have had a medical condition—perhaps the dreaded tetanus, or lockjaw—that required forcing his mouth open for treatment or feeding.

Here, as is characteristic of Steen's numerous depictions of gullible patients being

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Detail of Jan Steen, *Country Doctor*, ca. 1653, oil on panel, The Leiden Collection, inv. no. JS-109.



Fig 2. Jan Steen, *The Village Doctor*, ca. 1668, oil on panel, 39 x 30.7 cm, present whereabouts unknown.



Fig 3. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Stone Operation (Allegory of Touch)*, ca. 1624–25, oil on panel, 21.5 x 17.7 cm, The Leiden Collection, inv. no. RR-102.

deceived by charlatans, the farmer and his wife are uneducated peasants. One can imagine that they have just arrived at the doctor's office in urgent need of help. The farmer's hat, walking stick, and clay pipe lie randomly on the floor, as though tossed aside in a hurry. The presence of the young thieving accomplice further indicates that this barber-surgeon preyed on the near-sightedness and distractions of his patients during times of crisis. Dentists had a particularly dismal reputation, as the saying "He lies like a tooth-puller" attests.^[6]

Judging by the finely crafted cittern hanging on the rear wall of his office and the well-maintained room beyond, with its leaded windows, this barber-surgeon seems to have been financially successful.^[7] Suspended from the ceiling of his office, which is separated from his living quarters by a blue cloth hanging from a rope, are three quite costly taxidermized animals: a small crocodile, an anteater, and a barely distinguishable turtle hanging in the arched passageway leading to the back room. While such exotic creatures are often found in Dutch representations of alchemists, apothecaries, and barber-surgeons, including Steen's *The Village Doctor* (fig 2), the Leiden Collection painting also includes a stuffed owl atop the cabinet at the left. Steen likely included the owl, which is visible to the viewer, though not to the patient, because of its visual and thematic connections to an emblem in a popular emblem book, *Sinnepoppen* (Amsterdam, 1614), by the Dutch poet Roemer Visscher (1547–1620).^[8] The owl emblem emphasizes the importance of being able to perceive reality and to distinguish between what is true and not true (fig 5).

In exploring the theme of the sham healer (dentist, surgeon, stonecutter, or quack) and the gullible patient, Steen drew on a tradition that began in the fifteenth century, exemplified by works such as *The Extraction of the Stone of Madness* by Hieronymus Bosch (ca. 1450–1516) (fig 6). As Paul Vandenbroeck noted, this painting "marks the beginning of sixteenth-century folly iconography."^[9] The earliest significant depiction of a dentist in Dutch visual arts is a 1523 engraving by Lucas van Leyden (1494–1533) (fig 7). The subject of sham dentists appealed to a number of Dutch and Flemish artists from the first half of the seventeenth century, particularly those who featured peasant genre scenes in their work, including Adriaen Brouwer (1605/6–38), Jan Miense Molenaer (1610–68), and the brothers Adriaen (1610–85) and Isaac van Ostade (1621–49).^[10] *Country Doctor* may not depict a tooth extraction, yet, as its traditional title suggests, it shares a close affinity with works depicting dental procedures. Visual motifs that specifically relate to Steen's *Country Doctor* also appear in paintings by other Dutch artists, including Gerrit Dou (1613–75), who, around 1635, depicted a dentist extracting a tooth from a seated peasant, beside whom lie a basket of eggs and a walking stick (fig 8).^[11]

Throughout his career, Steen adapted motifs from other artists' prints as well as their



Fig 4. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Unconscious Patient (Allegory of Smell)*, ca. 1624–25, oil on panel, 21.5 x 17.7 cm, The Leiden Collection, inv. no. RR-111.



Fig 5. Claes Jansz Visscher, *Weest dat ghy zijt*, 1614, etching from Roemer Visscher, *Sinnepoppen* (Amsterdam, 1614), British Museum, London, inv. no. 1991,0406.61.



Fig 6. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Extraction of the Stone of Madness*, ca. 1501–5, oil on panel, 48.5 x 34.5 cm, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, inv. no. P002056.

paintings in his own works. For example, he likely knew the etching of a tooth-puller by the printmaker Jan Gillisz van Vliet (1605–68), which includes a basket of eggs but also, deep in the shadows, a figure “inspecting” the farmer’s purse (fig 9). A particularly intriguing connection also exists with the slightly later print of a tooth-puller (*The Sense of Touch*, part of a series of the five senses) that Jan Both (ca. 1618–52) made after a painting by his brother Andries (ca. 1612–41) (fig 10). In this reversed image, one sees similarly posed figures of the patient and his hand-wringing wife.^[12]

Steen’s humor is remarkable in that the pictorial sources that he drew upon for his scenes of daily life often strike modern viewers as anything but funny, even though they would have been considered humorous in their time. Steen’s own imagery is never mean-spirited, and one smiles rather than grimaces at the human foibles he depicts. He had a unique ability to lighten the mood with exaggerated facial expressions, poses, and gestures that are brought to life through the fluidity of his painterly touch. Like the director of a small theatrical group, Steen carefully orchestrated his settings and props to reinforce the everyday dramas played out by his actors. In his paintings such as *Country Doctor*, where dim-witted rustics are tricked by barber-surgeons or quacksalvers, Steen clearly intended to amuse, but he did so in a way that evokes a certain sympathy for all involved, both deceiver and deceived.

- Wouter Th. Kloek and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., 2025



Fig 7. Lucas van Leyden, *The Dentist*, 1523, engraving, 116 x 75 mm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, inv. no. 1943.3.5681.



Fig 8. Gerrit Dou, *The Dentist*, ca. 1635, 32 x 26.5 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. 1220.



Fig 9. Jan Gillisz van Vliet, *The Dentist*, 1628–37, etching and engraving, 150 x 131 mm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. RP-P-OB-65.734.



Fig 10. Jan Both, after Andries Both, *The Sense of Touch*, etching, 1620–38, 222 x 175 mm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. RP-P-BI-4218.

Endnotes

1. We would like to thank Elizabeth Nogrady, Caroline van Cauwenberge, and Katherine Gobel from The Leiden Collection for their thoughtful comments on and edits to this entry.
2. This motif likely relates to the proverb “Opportunity makes a thief.” Motifs in Steen’s paintings often derive from proverbs. He occasionally even inscribed proverb texts in his scenes, as in *Wine Is a Mocker*, ca. 1668/70 (Norton Simon Art Foundation, Pasadena).
3. Wooden props and metal specula for oral use feature in Johannes Scultetus’s book *Armamentarium chirurgicum* (The Hague, 1656). Scultetus (1595–1645), a German physician and pioneering surgeon, illustrates several devices used for exploration, difficult extractions, inserting instruments, and forcibly administering food or medications.
4. Steen’s two known depictions of tooth-pullers, both of which he also painted in the early 1650s, show the barber-surgeon prying a tooth from his patient’s mouth: *The Tooth-Puller*, ca. 1650 (present whereabouts unknown; in Karel Braun, *Alle tot nu toe bekende schilderijen van Jan Steen* [Rotterdam, 1980], 164, no. B-40, ill. 171); and *The Tooth-Puller*, 1651 (Mauritshuis, The Hague). See Quentin Buvelot and Ariane van Suchtelen, *Genre Paintings in the Mauritshuis* (Zwolle, 2016), 230–35.

Karel Braun, *Alle tot nu toe bekende schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam, 1980), 164, under no. B-35, questioned the attribution of *The Country Doctor* (“Het is het werk van een navolger” [It is the work of a follower]), but his doubts are unwarranted because of the painting’s many connections with Steen’s other autograph works. The young egg thief in *The Village Doctor*, for example, also appears in Steen’s *The Death of Ananias*, 1651. See Karel Braun, *Alle tot nu toe bekende schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam, 1980), no. 33; and Ariane van Suchtelen and Wouter Th. Kloek, *Jan Steen’s Histories* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis) (Zwolle, 2018), 12–13, fig. 2. See also Steen’s *The Village Doctor* (fig 2), ca. 1668, which features many corresponding pictorial elements, including a blue curtain separating the doctor’s office from his living quarters and an identical trio of mounted creatures hanging from the ceiling.
5. F.E.R. de Maar, *Vijf eeuwen tandheelkunde in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse kunst* (Nieuwegein, 1993), 96, 98, no. II.43, ill.
6. *Die Sprache der Bilder: Realität und Bedeutung in der niederländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Braunschweig, 1978), 107.
7. The cittern is a flat-backed stringed musical instrument that is relatively easy to play. It was popular with people from all social classes during the seventeenth century.
8. Roemer Visscher, *Sinnepoppen* (Amsterdam, 1614), 74, no. 13.
9. Paul Vandenbroeck, “Hieronymus Bosch: The Wisdom of the Riddle,” in *Hieronymus Bosch: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, by Jos Koldeweij, Paul Vandenbroeck, and Bernard Vermet (Ghent, 2001), 149.

10. Several depictions of dental practices by Adriaen Brouwer, Adriaen van Ostade, and Jan Miense Molenaer have survived. See F.E.R. de Maar, *Vijf eeuwen tandheelkunde in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse kunst* (Nieuwegein, 1993).
11. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. 1220. The relationship between Dou and Steen was noted by Eddy Schavemaker on the RKD site, a note untraceable in 2024.
12. See also Eddy de Jongh and Ger Luijten, *Mirror of Everyday Life: Genreprints in the Netherlands, 1530–1700*, trans. Michael Hoyle (Ghent, 1997), 241–46, no. 48. Steen also adapted the owl from *The Sense of Smell* from this print series for his painting. A similar concerned female figure stands by the patient's side in Steen's 1651 painting *The Tooth-Puller* (Mauritshuis, The Hague). See Ariane van Suchtelen and Quentin Buvelot, *Genre Paintings in the Mauritshuis* (The Hague, 2016), 230–35.

Provenance

- Adolphe Schloss (1842–1910), Paris.
- Baron Léon Janssen (1849–1923), Brussels (his sale, Frederik Muller & Cie., Amsterdam, 26 April 1927, no. 113 [to D.A. Hoogendijk & Co.]).^[1]
- [D.A. Hoogendijk & Co., Amsterdam.]
- Dr. Hans Wetzlar (d. 1977), Amsterdam, 1952.
- [Julius Böhler, Munich, 1957.]
- Dr. Fred Kraft, Frankfurt.
- Private collection, Thuringia.
- (Sale, Van Ham Kunstauktionen, Cologne, 19 November 2004, no. 913, unsold; [to Kunsthandel Bijl-Van Urk B.V.]).
- (Sale, Dorotheum, Vienna, 17 October 2007, no. 221.)
- [Kunsthandel Bijl-Van Urk B.V., Alkmaar, 2007.]
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2007.

Provenance Notes

1. Rembrandt van Rijn's *Bust of a Bearded Old Man*, now in The Leiden Collection, was also formerly in the collection of Baron Léon Janssen.

References



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- Martin, Wilhelm. *Catalogue de la collection de peintures du Baron Janssen à Bruxelles*. Brussels, 1923, 178–79, no. 113.
- Friedländer, M.J. *Collection Dr. H. Wetzlar, Amsterdam*. Amsterdam, 1952, 21, no. 87.
- Braun, Karel. *Alle tot nu toe bekende schilderijen van Jan Steen*. Rotterdam, 1980, 164–65, no. B-35, as by a follower of Steen.
- De Maar, F.E.R. *Vijf eeuwen tandheelkunde in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse kunst*. Nieuwegein, 1993, 96, 98, no. II.43
- Buvelot, Quentin, and Ariane van Suchtelen. *Genre Paintings in the Mauritshuis*. Zwolle, 2016, 232, no. 41c.

Versions

1. After Jan Steen, *Tooth-Puller*, 17th century, 70 x 56 cm, oil on canvas, previously M. Minkowski (his sale, Lepke, Berlin, 12 May 1925, no. 626).