THE LEIDEN COLLECTION



Interior with Women Thrashing a Man ("Peasants Fighting")

Jan Steen
(Leiden 1626 – 1679 Leiden)

ca. 1670–73
oil on panel
37.8 x 30.5 cm
signed in dark paint, lower right corner: "JSteen."
(JS in ligature)
JS-103

© 2026 The Leiden Collection

How to cite

Kloek, Wouter. “Interior with Women Thrashing a Man (“Peasants Fighting”)” (2017). In *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, 4th ed. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Elizabeth Nogrady with Caroline Van Cauwenberge. New York, 2023–. https://theleidencollection.com/artwork/interior-with-women-thrashing-a-man/ (accessed November 01, 2026).

A PDF of every version of this entry is available in this Online Catalogue's Archive, and the Archive is managed by a permanent URL. New versions are added only when a substantive change to the narrative occurs.

© 2026 The Leiden Collection

Near a fireplace in a simple interior, three women flog a man who lies helpless before their onslaught. One of them has grabbed hold of his shirt and is about to whack him with a short broom while another woman laughingly pulls on his pants. A third woman tugs at his trousers, possibly in search of his purse, which, in fact, lies between his legs, with a key attached to its a clasp. The man’s only weapon in this struggle is a wooden spoon that he holds loosely and ineffectively in his right hand. With his other hand he grabs the white headscarf worn by the woman with the broom, but his efforts at defending himself are meager at best. As he lies on the floor, he gapes upward, his cap having fallen from his head, revealing his closely cropped red hair. Behind this tussling group a child reaches for the bread oven to the right of the fireplace, while on a raised landing accessible by ladder, a seated woman observes the scene and laughs behind her hands.

Mockery of the man who cannot live up to his role as the woman’s better half was the theme of numerous representations throughout the ages.[1] A brawl in which women beat up a man is an indication of an “upside-down world,” where the traditional roles of men and women have been reversed, a theme that Jan Steen often painted. A wooden spoon and a bunch of keys, for example, are objects typically carried by a housewife. Steen’s painting also is related to another popular subject, the so-called “Struggle for the Breeches.” A composition in a somewhat similar vein is Salomon Saverij’s 1610 etching after a print by Joos Goeimare (1578–1611) **(fig 1)**.[2] In that print, three women thrash a drunken man’s bare buttocks because he let his family suffer deprivation. In Steen’s painting, the child gesturing toward the bread oven probably also connotes that the family suffers from lack of food. The women, fed up with the man’s failure to rule the roost, have decided to punish him.

In the foreground Steen skillfully rendered a number of objects, including a kettle, bucket, knives, matchsticks, hatchet, a caged basket holding a chicken or a rooster and, most notably, a pair of scales. Even though these items presumably relate to the pictorial narrative, their meanings in this context are not entirely clear. However, the scales probably relate to the Dutch expression that things are “out of balance.” The chicken basket in the right foreground seemingly indicates that the man is a “hen-groper,” a bungling idiot who meddles in household affairs but is not worth a straw. It might also be a reference to the well-known metaphor of the hen who crows rather than the rooster.[3]

The painting’s allusion to a topsy-turvy world recalls the work of Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525–69) and Pieter Aertsen (1508–75), artists who were certainly important to Steen. The power of women over men plays a role in many of Steen’s paintings. However, among his scenes of brawling peasants, this painting is an exception, since

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Salomon Saverij after Joost Goeimaere, *Man Being Thrashed by Three Women*, 1610, etching, 15.7 x 21.1 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. RP-P-1882-A-6207

© 2026 The Leiden Collection

it does not portray the usual tussling card players or boozers.[4] The only direct connection that can be discerned between this painting and another of Steen’s works is a painting dated either 1671 or 1674 (present whereabouts unknown), in which a woman seen from the back lifts her arms upwards in a way comparable to the child (but in reverse).[5]

Dendrochronological examination has shown that this painting is likely to be one of Steen’s late works: the panel would not have been ready for use until after 1668.[6] A dating to around 1670–73 is most plausible. Cornelis Hofstede de Groot believed that the painting was in poor condition (“Genuine, but has suffered severely”).[7] That assessment, however, was not confirmed during restoration, at which time damage was observed only near one of the ladders.[8] It is also possible that Hofstede de Groot’s negative opinion was prompted by the signature, in which part of an original E had disappeared, causing it to look like “JStien.” His opinion might also have been influenced by the slightly flat character of the execution, which lacks Steen’s customary brilliance. This uniformity of brushwork can perhaps be explained by the involvement of a studio assistant, as is often the case in Steen’s late work. The composition, however, is intelligent and original, entirely in keeping with the master’s manner of painting. A few pentimenti discernible in the wooden spoon, the sleeve of the kneeling woman, and possibly the broom demonstrate Steen’s searching efforts to create a pleasing and compelling conception.

- Wouter Kloek, 2017

© 2026 The Leiden Collection

Endnotes

1. On this subject, see, among others, Martha Lynn Moffitt Peacock, *Harpies and Henpecked Husbands: Images of the Powerful Housewife in Netherlandish Art, 1550–1700* (Ann Arbor, 1989).
2. The etching is discussed at length in Eddy de Jongh and Ger Luijten, *Mirror of Everyday Life: Genre Prints in the Netherlands, 1550–1700,* trans. Michael Hoyle (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Ghent, 1997), 137–40, no. 23.
3. A similar text, accompanying a print by Hans Liefrinck, is quoted in Martha Lynn Moffitt Peacock, *Harpies and Henpecked Husbands: Images of the Powerful Housewife in Netherlandish Art, 1550–1700* (Ann Arbor, 1989), 125.
4. Examples include various representations of brawling card players: that of 1664 in Munich (Braun 1980, no. 205); of 1671, Rijksdienst Cultureel Erfgoed (Netherlands Cultural Heritage Agency), on loan to the Gemeentemuseum Arnhem (Braun 1980, no. 344); and of a subject such as "Wijn is een spotter" (Wine is a mocker) in Detroit. See Karel Braun, *Alle schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam, 1980), no. 233
5. Karel Braun, *Alle schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam, 1980), no. 344.
6. Report written by Peter Klein in 2011 indicates that the earliest felling date is after 1662.
7. Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith,* ed. and trans. Edward G. Hawke, 1: 211–12, no. 783, 8 vols. (London, 1907–28), originally published as *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten höllandischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts,* 10 vols. (Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28).
8. Restoration report, Annette Rupprecht, May 2012. This damage is barely noticeable in the painting's present condition.

Provenance

- Stork Collection (his sale, Roos, Amsterdam, 14 May 1839, no. 94 [for 56 florins to Woodin]).
- Baron van den Bogaerde, Châteaux of Heeswijk (his sale, 'S Hertogenbosch, 19 June 1900, no. 162; Amsterdam, 28 September 1902, no. 52).
- [Salomon Lilian, B.V., Amsterdam, by 2004].
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

© 2026 The Leiden Collection

References

- Hofstede de Groot, Cornelis. *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith.* Edited and translated by Edward G. Hawke, 5: 38–9, no. 95. 8 vols. London, 1907–28. Originally published *as Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten höllandischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts.* 10 vols. Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28.
- Braun, Karel. *Alle tot nu toe bekende schilderijen van Jan Steen.* Rotterdam, 1980, 158, no. A-617.
- Surh, Dominique. "Peasants Fighting." In *Old Masters.* Sales cat. Salomon Lilian B.V., Amsterdam, 2005, 42–43, no. 13.

Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of horizontally grained but vertically oriented, rectangular western German or Netherlandish oak with a fell date after 1662, has bevels on all four sides.[1] A pronounced horizontal grain line creates an indentation across the width of the lower half of the composition.[2] The unthinned and uncradled panel has two chalk inscriptions but no wax seals, import stamps, stencils, panel maker's marks or machine tool marks along the reverse.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied and extends to the panel edges and spills over onto the left and right panel edges but not over the upper and lower edges. The oil paint has been built up in successive layers and applied smoothly with no use of impasto, although with slightly raised brushwork along the figures and wicker chicken basket on the right.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. Compositional changes visible in the images and as pentimenti include slight shifts to the objects in the foreground, such as a shift to the right of the ladle held by the central figure.

The painting is signed in dark paint along the lower right corner, 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. The horizontal grain is oriented slightly diagonally. The bevel along right edge is extremely shallow.
2. 14.5 cm up from lower edge along the left side, 13 cm up from lower edge along the right side.

© 2026 The Leiden Collection