



**Old Woman with a Fur Cap Holding a Jug
and Singing**

Jan Steen
(Leiden 1626 – 1679 Leiden)

ca. 1660
oil on oval panel
22 x 17.3 cm
JS-100



How to cite

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Situated against a dark background the seated old woman in Jan Steen's painting joyously sings as she holds a sheet of music in her left hand, the promise of liquid pleasures in her earthenware jug adding to her festive mood. She wears a white cap surmounted by a fur-trimmed head covering, and a beautifully executed, pleated white lace collar. Otherwise, Steen has rendered the woman's simple clothing in broad areas of red, brown and blue.

In executing this work, Steen paid exceptional care to the rendering of the woman's fur head-covering, an article of clothing that also appears in paintings by Gerrit Dou (1613–75), for example in Dou's Rembrandtesque *Scholar Reading* in the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.^[1] The attention Steen paid to articulating this head covering and collar also owes much to Dou, as in that master's depictions of Rembrandt's mother from the early 1630s,^[2] and his *Old Woman Reading a Book*, ca. 1660, which is also in St. Petersburg (**fig 1**).^[3] Even the upright oval shape of the panel may owe its inspiration to Dou. Steen rarely painted on panels with this shape, but Dou often did. These similarities in costume, technique and panel shape, however, make all the more evident the differences in the behavior of Steen's slightly tipsy and earthy old crone and the more pious women seen in Dou's paintings. It is almost as though Steen intended to poke fun at that artist's virtuous old women.

Steen's oeuvre contains few points of reference for dating this work. Nevertheless, an approximate date for the Leiden Collection painting of around 1660 seems likely because of the careful rendering of the old woman's figure and her clothes, consistent with Steen's manner of painting at that time. One somewhat comparable work is *Drinker* at Smith College, c. 1660, which is also executed in a detailed manner, and where the drinker is similarly posed (**fig 2**).^[4] The way the old woman squints while reading the words of her song recalls figures in other of Steen's small undated paintings, such as *Man Sharpening a Quill Pen*.^[5] Thematically, it seems likely that this delightful painting once belonged to a series of the five senses, where it would have portrayed either the sense of sight or the sense of sound.^[6]

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Gerrit Dou, *Old Woman Reading a Book*, oil on panel, 26 x 20 cm, The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, ГЭ-885 Album / Art Resource, NY



Fig 2. Jan Steen, *Drinker*, oil on panel, 37.4 x 29.8 cm, Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts, Gift of Adeline Flint Wing, class of 1898 and Caroline Roberta Wing, class of 1896, SC 1957:36

Endnotes

1. Wilhelm Martin, *Gerard Dou, des Meisters Gemälde* (Stuttgart, 1913), 27; and Ronni Baer, “The Paintings of Gerrit Dou 1613–1675” (PhD diss. New York University, 1990), no. 1.
2. See, for example, *Rembrandt’s Mother Reading the Bible* in the Musée du Louvre in Paris. Wilhelm Martin, *Gerard Dou, des Meisters Gemälde* (Stuttgart, 1913), 39; Jacques Foucart, *Catalogue des peintures flamandes et hollandaises du musée du Louvre* (Paris, 2009), 122, inv. 1223; and Ronni Baer, “The Paintings of Gerrit Dou 1613–1675” (PhD diss. New York University, 1990), no. 3.
3. Wilhelm Martin, *Gerard Dou, des Meisters Gemälde* (Stuttgart, 1913), 100; and Ronni Baer, “The Paintings of Gerrit Dou 1613–1675” (PhD diss. New York University, 1990), no. 96a. The costume in this painting, however, displays less attention to detail.
4. Karel Braun, *Alle tot nu toe bekende schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam, 1980), no. 124.
5. Karel Braun, *Alle tot nu toe bekende schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam, 1980), no. B-58. Although its attribution is doubted, the work is part of a small series of simple paintings of a single figure, most of which belong to the series Five Senses.
6. In that case, its oval shape suggests that it is the only surviving piece of such a series.

Provenance

- Possibly Dr. H. Auersburg.
- Dr. Herman Neuerberg, Cologne-Marienburg, 1925.
- Antoon von Welie (1866–1956), The Hague, 1935 [Douwes Fine Art, Amsterdam, 1938, no. 97].
- Irmgard Rodenkirchen, Schwangau/Füssen, 1955.
- Private collection (sale, Sotheby’s, London, 12 December 2002, no. 33A [Salomon Lilian B. V., Amsterdam, 2003, no. 23]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

References

- Burgemeister, Wendela. “An Old Woman with a Fur Cap Holding a Jug.” In *Old Masters*. Sales cat. Salomon Lilian B. V. Amsterdam and New York, 2004, 68–69, no. 23.



Technical Summary

The support is a single oval plank of vertically grained oak.^[1] A horizontally oriented bevel across the midpoint of the lower edge indicates the oval support was cut from a beveled rectangular panel. The panel is unthinned and uncradled and does not have machine tool marks. There is one paper label but no wax collection seals, import stamps, stencils or panel maker's marks.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied. The ground does not spill over onto the panel edges and is chipped along the outer edges of the front of the panel, which further suggests the oval support was either trimmed or cut from a rectangular panel after the composition was executed. The oil paint has been built up in successive thin layers and smoothly applied with no use of impasto.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. A few compositional changes are visible in the images and as pentimenti. A diagonal line of raised light paint below the figure's proper left elbow and a raised shape similar to the shape of the paper in the figure's proper left hand suggests the paper was lowered and shifted towards the figure.^[2] In addition, the figure's proper right hand, shoulder and back have been shifted toward the right, and her elbow was lowered and covers a rounded form, upon which it presumably previously rested. The X-radiograph is extremely thin and only the paper in the figure's proper left hand and the diagonal line below the figure's proper left elbow are visible.

A light yellow pentimento showing through the figure's blue skirt indicates a change in position of the figure's knees and that the blue apron was added; these changes are confirmed by the infrared images. The vertically oriented apron folds obscure a diagonal line, which originally defined the figure's waist.

The painting is unsigned and undated.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2003 and remains in an excellent state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on visual examination only. The right panel edge as viewed from the front appears to have been prepared for dendrochronology sometime prior to the painting's acquisition.
2. Located ca. 1 cm above and ca. 1 cm to the left of the piece of paper's position in the final painted composition.