Self-Portrait with a Lute: Sense of Hearing

Jan Steen
(Leiden 1626 – 1679 Leiden)

ca. 1664
oil on canvas
23.8 x 19.3 cm
signed in dark paint, lower right corner: “JSteen” (“JS” in ligature)
JS-115

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In this painting Jan Steen has portrayed himself dressed informally, laughing, and playing the lute. He wears a large gray coat, with ample room for his shirt sleeves, and red leggings. A songbook, to which he pays no attention, lies on a table at the left, which is the only piece of furniture to be seen. Although this small self-portrait is difficult to date, it is probable that Steen executed it in Haarlem around 1664. The definition of the face is comparable to that of the fool in The Rhetoricians in Brussels, which dates from the same period.[1]

A comparison between the Leiden Collection painting and Self-Portrait Playing the Lute in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid (fig 1), painted around 1666–68, reveals two striking differences.[2] First, in the Madrid painting Steen presents himself decked out in early sixteenth-century attire emphasizing the theatricality of the scene,[3] whereas in the Leiden Collection work he is dressed in contemporary garb. Although Steen often posed in comic roles or addressed the viewer as a cynical commentator, there is not even a hint of self-mockery or foolish behavior in this piece. The second difference lies in the degree of the finish of the two works. Steen painted the Madrid Self-Portrait Playing the Lute quickly and skillfully, almost as though he conceived it as an oil sketch before working it up in more detail. However, Steen executed the Leiden Collection self-portrait with a great refinement, particularly noticeable in the elegant hands and at the ends of the lute’s strings. The gray area behind the head is characteristic of Steen’s manner of blocking in his forms before executing the final design.[4]

The basis for identifying the subject as Steen is his formal Self-Portrait in the Rijksmuseum (fig 2), which must date from about 1670.[5] Steen portrayed himself many times in his paintings, and the presence of the painter’s face must have been appealing for collectors, even in his own day.[6] Although it is important to exercise caution when identifying self-portraits in Steen’s paintings, his presence here is indisputable.[7]

This painting presumably belonged to a series depicting the five senses, as a representation of Hearing. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, portrayals of the five senses were popularized by series of prints by such artists as Cornelis Cort after Frans Floris (1561) and Jan Saenredam after Hendrick Goltzius (ca. 1595).[8] Jan Steen made several series of the five senses. Four pieces from one such a series are preserved at Upton House, Banbury (National Trust).[9] It was common for individual

Comparative Figures

Fig 1. Jan Steen, Self-Portrait Playing the Lute, ca. 1666–68, panel, 55.3 x 43.8 cm, Fondación Collección Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, © Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

Fig 2. Jan Steen, Self-Portrait, ca. 1670, canvas, 73 x 62 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-383
paintings from a five senses series to become dispersed over time, which is certainly the case in this instance.[10]

- Wouter Kloek
2017
Endnotes


5. 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. 40. Steen certainly worked on this piece three times, as evidenced by the alterations he made to the costume. The painting must have been completed in or after 1670. Given the complex genesis of this work, it cannot be ruled out that the artist portrayed himself younger than a man of about 45, the age that corresponds to the painting’s presumed year of completion.


7. Although the artist repeatedly assumes roles in his paintings, usually as a humorous commentator, the identification is not always self-evident. Anyone who studies the selection of so-called self-portraits given by Karel Braun (*Alle schilderijen van Jan Steen* [Rotterdam, 1980], no. 227) will find a different viewpoint.

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1980], 8–9), for example, must come to the conclusion that the identification, while often convincing, is sometimes merely wishful thinking. See also Wouter Kloek, *Jan Steen (1626–1679)* (Amsterdam, 2005), 22–27.


9. Formerly Viscount Bearsted collection (Karel Braun, *Alle schilderijen van Jan Steen* [Rotterdam, 1980], nos. 61–64); Braun adds to these a fifth now in the collection of the Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo (Karel Braun, *Alle schilderijen van Jan Steen* [Rotterdam, 1980], no. 65). That piece is somewhat different in facture and also slightly smaller. Hearing is portrayed in this series by a man singing. A series of the five senses was found in 1704 in the estate of the painter and art dealer Cornelis Dusart; see Irene van Thiel-Stroman in *Painting in Haarlem 1500–1800: The Collection of the Frans Hals Museum* (Haarlem, 2006), 313, note 37.

10. Another example of an incomplete series is that of Jacob van der Merck in Rotterdam; see Eddy de Jongh, *Tot lering en vermaak: betekenis van Hollandse genravoorstellingen uit de zeventiende eeuw* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Amsterdam, 1976), no. 38. Complete series by Dirck Hals and Jan Miense Molenaer are preserved in the Mauritshuis; see *Mauritshuis: Illustrated General Catalogue* (The Hague, 1977), 103 and 158. See also, for instance, the paintings by Dirck Hals and Isack Elyas in Eddy de Jongh, *Tot lering en vermaak: betekenis van Hollandse genravoorstellingen uit de zeventiende eeuw* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Amsterdam, 1976), nos. 26 and 23.

**Provenance**

- Johannes Caudri, Amsterdam (his sale, Amsterdam, Van der Schley, 6 September 1809, no. 63 [for 40 florins to Spaan]).
- J. B. Mettenbrinck, Amsterdam (his sale, Amsterdam, Roos, 16 April 1861, no. 36 [for 228 florins to Hollander]).
- H. E. ten Cate, Almelo, by 1926.
- [D. Katz, Dieren, by 1940].
- From whom purchased by A. Hofer in 1940–41 [for 20,000 reichsmarks, according to his statement on oath]; Munich Collecting Point no. 41016, 3 January 1947; restituted to Holland on 27 January 1947, inv. no. SNK 1550 (sale, Amsterdam, Frederick Muller, 11 March 1952, no. 761 [2,500 guilders]).
Dr. Hans Wetzlar, Amsterdam, 1961.
Mrs. M. A. ten Haaf-Wetzlar, Groenekan (near Utrecht).
(Sale, Sotheby’s, London, 9 July 2008, no. 51; [Johnny van Haeften, London, 2008]).
From whom acquired by the present owner.

Exhibition History

- Leiden, Stedelijk Museum, “Jan Steen,” 16 June–August 1926, no 75 [lent by H. E. ten Cate, Almelo].
- Beijing, National Museum of China, “Rembrandt and His Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 17 June–3 September 2017 [lent by the present owner].

References

Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of fine, plain-weave fabric with tacking margins removed and paper tape along the edges, has been lined. Neither the warp or weft threads run parallel to the stretcher edges. Extremely broad cusping along the lower edge suggests the support was cut from a larger stretched fabric. There are two paper labels and two numerical inscriptions on the stretcher and two numerical inscriptions on the lining, but no wax seals, import stamps or stencils along the lining or stretcher.

A light-colored ground with a granular texture has been thinly and evenly applied. The paint has been applied with loose fluid brushstrokes in thin, smooth, glazes. Under magnification, the tops of the granular ground remain exposed.

No underdrawing or compositional changes are readily apparent in infrared images captured at
780–1000 nanometers.

The painting is signed in dark paint along the lower right corner, but is undated.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2009 and remains in a good state of preservation.