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**Banquet of Anthony and Cleopatra**

Jan Steen  
(Leiden 1626 – 1679 Leiden)

ca. 1673–75  
oil on canvas  
82.1 x 107.8 cm  
signed in dark paint along lower left  
corner: “JSteen” (“JS” in ligature)  
JS-107



### How to cite

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When the Roman general Mark Antony (ca. 83–30 B.C.) met the Egyptian princess Cleopatra (Cleopatra VII Philopator, 69–30 B.C.) in the city of Tarsus in the year 41 B.C., he immediately succumbed to her charms. Cleopatra, who had previously been the lover of Julius Caesar, hoped that her relationship with Antony would strengthen her power in her own country. The couple spent a winter in Alexandria, wallowing in luxury and sensual pleasures, after which Mark Antony continued his military campaign. When they renewed their relationship several years later—Cleopatra had meanwhile given birth to twins—they assumed regal status. In 31 B.C. the true ruler of Rome, Octavian (later Emperor Augustus), defeated the armies of Mark Antony and Cleopatra at Actium on the west coast of Greece. After the battle Antony and Cleopatra returned to Alexandria, where Antony subsequently attempted to commit suicide, eventually dying in Cleopatra's lap. Cleopatra, who had shut herself into the tomb she had had built for herself, committed suicide by means of the poisonous snake she had hidden in a basket of figs. The story of these lovers, first recorded by Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia* (book 9, 58:119–21), inspired many paintings, plays, and poems by William Shakespeare, Jacob Cats, and George Bernard Shaw, among others, and of course the famous film starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton.

A favorite scene for artists was the legendary episode of the wager between the two lovers, who vied with each other to stage the most sumptuous banquet. After an extremely lavish meal at Mark Antony's expense, Cleopatra boasted that she could lay a banquet of much greater extravagance. On this occasion she dissolved one of her enormous pearl earrings in an acidic substance mixed with wine.<sup>[1]</sup> When she was on the point of dissolving the other earring too, Mark Antony managed to stop her, and it is this moment that Jan Steen has depicted in the Leiden Collection painting.

We see Cleopatra about to present her empty glass to a kneeling servant so that the second pearl, which she holds in her right hand, can be subjected to the same treatment as the first, and Mark Antony leaning across the table to intervene. The table is placed in the great hall of a palace: more rooms are visible at the left behind a high balustrade, while, at the right, an open arcade affords a view of a hilly landscape. The room has a splendid tiled floor, rendered in strict perspective with the vanishing point at the doorway beneath the balustrade. The silver dish of sumptuous fruit in the foreground possibly alludes to the death of Cleopatra—painters sometimes depicted the venomous snake (or snakes) emerging from a basket of assorted fruit rather than a basket of figs.<sup>[2]</sup>

Steen distributed the rest of the company across the entire breadth of the middle ground, but gave particular emphasis to a dwarf-like court jester and a child who tugs

## Comparative Figures



**Fig 1.** Jan Steen, *Card Players*, ca. 1660, panel, 45.5 x 60.5 cm, Sale, Sotheby's London 7 December 2011, Lot 17



**Fig 2.** Jan Steen, *Banquet of Antony and Cleopatra*, 1667, oil on canvas on panel, 67.5 x 58.5 cm, Georg-August-Universität, Göttingen



**Fig 3.** Pieter Quast, *Paris Shooting Achilles in the Heel*, 1645, graphite pencil, gray wash, on vellum, 302 x 396 mm, Albertina, Vienna, inv. no. 8711



**Fig 4.** Jan Steen, *Banquet of Antony and Cleopatra*, ca. 1667/70, oil on



at his white scarf. The jester holds a knife in his right hand and in his left a piece of roast meat, which he tries to keep out of reach of a small dog. As usual, the jester turns the world upside-down. By thrusting his knife forward he undoubtedly mocks Mark Antony's lecherous desires. In a more general sense, however, the fool is a reference to the absurdity of Antony and Cleopatra's extravagant wastefulness.<sup>[3]</sup> The ridiculous reversal is nicely expressed in the description of the painting in Jacobus Viet's 1774 sale catalogue, where the piece of roast meat in the fool's hand is called a *hammehieltje*.<sup>[4]</sup> This term undoubtedly alludes to the saying "hij kluift het hieltje van de ham" (he gnaws on the heel of the ham), meaning he tries to get every last piece of meat off the bone. In other words, he has run out of money and must savor every scrap.<sup>[5]</sup> The fool thus mocks the fickleness of fate.

Seated at the table on the right is a man who tries to catch the viewer's eye as he cleans his teeth with a knife. Across from him sits a man wearing a plumed cap who gestures toward the protagonists: he is presumably Lucius Munatius Plancus, proconsul of Asia and skillful survivor of political turmoil, whom the couple had chosen to adjudicate their wager. He decrees that Mark Antony has already lost his bet with the clever Cleopatra, and declares it unnecessary to dissolve the second pearl.

The story of Antony and Cleopatra was seen in the seventeenth century mainly as a cautionary tale, a warning against unnecessary extravagance. But another interpretation—and presumably the one Jan Steen sought to emphasize—is that of a powerful man (Mark Antony) who is led by a woman's sultry gaze to neglect his soldierly duties. In this respect the painting recalls the words of William Shakespeare, "and you shall see in him / The triple pillar of the world transform'd / Into a strumpet's fool."<sup>[6]</sup> No matter how apt these words, it is unlikely that Steen knew them.<sup>[7]</sup> Nor is it easy to demonstrate his familiarity with the two Dutch plays about these legendary lovers.<sup>[8]</sup>

The most probable literary source for Steen, however, was not a text specifically about these legendary lovers, but rather one that dwelt more broadly on the nature of human relationships: *Trouwingh*, which the popular author Jacob Cats (1577–1660) first published in 1637.<sup>[9]</sup> Near the beginning of this 800-line poem, Cats writes on the theme of a soldier who neglects his duties because of the allure of feminine beauty: "Then he whose work was so courageously begun / Was by a woman's wiles completely overcome"; and "He who is a soldier will one day, alas, be captured / Not in open battle, but by blushing cheeks enraptured, / Not in single combat, but by seeing a sweet visage, / Not by strong and mighty lords, but by seductive language."<sup>[10]</sup> The motif of the soldier who becomes distracted from his duties occurs in a number of Steen's paintings, including his genre scenes, as, for example, his *Card Players* (**fig 1**), where a soldier loses his sword to a cheating female player.<sup>[11]</sup> Indeed,

canvas, 113 x 102 cm, Rijksdienst  
voor Cultureel Erfgoed,  
Zeist/Rijswijk, inv. R 816



the theme of a soldier who disregards his duty by idling, sleeping, or wiling away his time in female company occurs frequently in seventeenth-century Dutch painting—in the work of such artists as Nicolaes Maes (1634–93), Gerard ter Borch (1617–81), and Pieter de Hooch (1629–84).<sup>[12]</sup>

Jan Steen portrayed the banquet of Anthony and Cleopatra four times. Two paintings display relatively simple compositions more or less mirror images of one another. Both show Cleopatra placing her left foot on a sphere, in all likelihood a reference to the vicissitudes of life. The sketchier of the two, a painting in a private collection, is probably Steen's first rendering of this subject.<sup>[13]</sup> The other piece, in Göttingen, followed soon after and is dated 1667 (**fig 2**).<sup>[14]</sup> The placement of the table in the Göttingen work is similar to that in the Leiden Collection painting, indicating that it was here that Steen developed his ideas for that composition. A further possible pictorial source for the Leiden Collection painting, as first noted by Alfred Heppner, is a composition by Pieter Quast (1606–47) portraying the dramatic moment in which Paris shoots Achilles in the heel, known today through a drawing dated 1645(**fig 3**).<sup>[15]</sup> Heppner noted the close correspondence between the figure of Achilles in Quast's drawing and that of Mark Antony in Steen's painting.

The artist's most detailed portrayal of the subject is his *Banquet of Antony and Cleopatra* of ca. 1667/70, a painting nearly two meters wide, in the possession of the Netherlands Cultural Heritage Agency (Rijksdienst voor Cultureel Erfgoed)(**fig 4**).<sup>[16]</sup> In that painting Steen strongly emphasizes the prodigality that characterizes the event. Jacob Cats's poem states that Cleopatra was in the habit of giving the precious decorations at her banquets to her guests. Even costly furnishings and tapestries were used only once.<sup>[17]</sup> Steen portrayed the scene in a way that affords a good view of earthenware, chairs, a chintz tablecloth, and a costly Persian rug. The role of the fool who mocks wasteful behavior is played here by Jan Steen himself, who glances laughingly at the viewer from his place at the right.

Chronologically, the rendering of the story in the Leiden Collection comes last in Steen's career. The somewhat round face of Cleopatra clearly places the painting among the master's late works. Moreover, in his later work Steen depicted fewer and fewer still life details, which may be one reason that his earlier works are generally more appreciated by art lovers. Yet the large dish of fruit in the foreground and the splendid depiction of the furniture and objects such as Antony's helmet ensure that this painting is not lacking in arresting details.

Baruch Kirschenbaum doubted the authenticity of this work, but there is no reason for doing so.<sup>[18]</sup> One or two background figures, particularly the soldier rushing onto the scene in the left background, seem not to be by Steen's hand, but his later



paintings generally include an occasional weak passage. With regard to other details, such as the bald, corpulent man to the right behind Cleopatra and the execution of the background, this is completely characteristic of the work of the master. In general the concentration on the essential elements of the story is an aspect that can be observed in other work from Steen's last years, such as *Lazarus and the Rich Man* (JS-106). Therefore, a date of around 1673–75 seems most likely for Steen's compelling image of this fascinating episode from Roman history.

- Wouter Kloek, 2017

## Endnotes

1. It is generally alleged that the pearl was dissolved in wine. Doubts have led to various experiments, which have shown that pearls can in fact be dissolved in a certain kind of vinegar. It is, however, a process that takes more than 24 hours.
2. Such a basket appears in the painting by Johann Liss in Munich; see Rüdiger Klessmann, *Johann Liss: A Monograph and Catalogue Raisonné* (Doornspijk, 1999), cat. 18, plate 15.
3. The motif of the fool was most pointedly portrayed by Jacob Jordaens in his 1653 rendering of this subject, a canvas now in St. Petersburg; Natalija Babina, Birgit Boelens, Beverley Jackson, et al., *Rubens, Van Dyck & Jordaens: Vlaamse schilders uit de Hermitage* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, The Hermitage Amsterdam) (Amsterdam, 2011), no. 36. On the significance of Jordaens to Jan Steen, see I. Nemeth, “Het spreekwoord “Zo d’ouden zongen, zo pijpen de jongen,” *Schilderijen van Jacob Jordaens en Jan Steen: Motieven en associaties*, Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen (1990): 271–86, and Mariët Westermann, *The Amusements of Jan Steen: Comic Painting in the Seventeenth Century* (Zwolle, 1997), 161. Jordaens’s influence on Dutch painting dates from his participation in the decoration of the Oranjezaal in Huis Ten Bosch. He had owned a house in Voorburg since 1659; in 1661 and 1662 he stayed in the provinces of Holland and Utrecht. Oddly enough, Jordaens was in turn inspired, when painting this composition, by the *Tavern Scene with a Fool* (“*Wacht hoet varen sal*”), a woodcut by Lucas van Leyden (Bhsn 20).
4. “Ter linker zyde ziet men een Hofnar met een hammehieltje in de hand” (On the left-hand side one sees a court jester with a heel of ham in his hand).
5. See J. H. van Dale, *Groot Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal* (’s-Gravenhage, 1961), s. v. “Hieltje.”
6. Quoted by Ewoud Mijnlief in *Hoogtepunten/Highlights: Musea Catharijne Gasthuis en Musea Moriaan Gouda* (Zwolle, 2003). The words quoted are uttered by Philo in the first scene of the play.
7. Apart from the story of Pyramus and Thisbe and a few of the sonnets, Shakespeare’s writings were not available in Dutch translation in the seventeenth century. It is extremely unlikely that Steen was familiar with the English text.
8. The two Dutch plays are by Willem van Nieuwelandt (1624) and Dieverina van Kouwenhoven (1669). On this subject, see Alfred Heppner, “The Popular Theatre of the Rederijkers in the Works of Jan Steen and His Contemporaries,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 3 (1939–40): 22–48.
9. Cats was the most popular author of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, and it is almost inconceivable that Jan Steen would not have had his verses in mind when producing this painting.
10. “Doen is hy, die het werck soo moedigh hadt begonnen, Doen is hy door een wyf ten vollen overwonnen;” 583: “Hy die een velt-heer is die wort, eylaes! Gevangen / Niet in een harden slagh, maer door gebloosde wangen: / Niet in een fel gevecht, maer door een soet gelaet: / Niet door een machtigh heir, maer door een hoofsche prate.” Jacob Cats, *Trouwingh* (Dordrecht, 1637), 576. [Click here for the](#)

online version.

11. 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. 14.
12. This theme, however, has seldom received attention in the literature. For example, the matter is not mentioned by M. Kersten in the chapter “Interieurstukken met soldaten,” in M. P. van Maarseveen et al., *Beelden van een strijd: Oorlog en kunst vóór de Vrede van Munster 1621–1648* (Zwolle, 1998), 337–58. Occasionally, a parallel is drawn to the theme of the Prodigal Son, but without suggesting any neglect of duty on the part of the soldiers portrayed. See, for instance, Elmer Kolfin, *Een geselschap jonge luyden: Productie, functie en betekenis van Noord-Nederlandse voorstellingen van vrolijke gezelschappen 1610–1645* (Leiden, 2002).
13. Karel Braun, *Alle schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam, 1980), no. 287
14. Karel Braun, *Alle schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam, 1980), no. 283
15. Alfred Heppner, “The Popular Theatre of the Rederijkers in the Works of Jan Steen and His Contemporaries,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 3 (1939–40): 36. Quast’s drawing, presumably relates to a lost painting, indicates that he based his composition on the play *Achilles and Polyxena* by Pieter Cornelisz Hooft (1581–1647), a work dated variously to 1597 and 1614.
16. Karel Braun, *Alle schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam, 1980), no. 306
17. “Maer al het aerdigh tuygh waer uyt men had gedroncken / Dat heeft het prachtigh wijf haer gasten wech-geschoncken, / Oock al het schoon tapijt, en menigh ander kleet, / Al wasset net gestickt en uytermaten breed” (After banqueting from vessels of the very best, / The dazzling woman gave it all away to every guest, / Even splendid tapestries and rugs that were her pride, / Although they were just newly woven and extremely wide). Jacob Cats, *Trouwingh* (Dordrecht, 1637). [Click here for the online version.](#)
18. Baruch Kirschenbaum, *The Religious and Historical Paintings of Jan Steen* (New York, 1977), 145.

## Provenance

- Jacobus Viet, Amsterdam (his sale, Amsterdam, 12 October 1774, no. 200 [to Witsen]).
- Jonas Witsen, Amsterdam (his sale, Amsterdam, 16 August 1790, no. 60 [to Ijver]).
- Leonard Pieter de Reus (1783–1860), The Hague.
- Baron Rothschild, Frankfurt am Main, ca. 1844.
- [D. Katz, Dieren, 1936–37].



- [Schaeffer Galleries, New York, 1938].
- [Rosenberg & Stiebel Gallery, New York].
- [S. Nijstad, The Hague].
- Mahmoud Rabbani, Wassenaar, The Netherlands (his sale, Sotheby's, London, 11 April 1990, no. 116, not sold; sale, Sotheby's, New York, 10 January 1991, no. 24).
- [Noortman Master Paintings, Maastricht, 1992].
- AEX–Amsterdam Exchanges NV, 1999–2006.
- [Haboltd & Co., Paris, 2007].
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

## Exhibition History

- Eindhoven, Stedelijk Van Abbe Museum, 22 December 1936–31 January 1937 [lent by D. Katz to Dieren].
- Poughkeepsie, New York, Vassar College Art Gallery, “Exhibition of Old Masters from the XVII and XVIII centuries,” 6 April–1 May 1938 [lent by Schaeffer Galleries, New York].
- Providence, Rhode Island, Rhode Island Museum, “Dutch Painting in the Seventeenth Century,” 1938 [lent by Schaeffer Galleries, New York].
- Delft, Het Prisenhof, “27ste oude kunst-en antiekbeurs,” 16 October–5 November 1975.
- Gouda, Stedelijk Museum van Gouda, “Oude bekenden en nieuwe gezichten,” 4 July–10 October 1999, no. 21.
- Gouda, Stedelijk Museum van Gouda, on loan with the permanent collection, 1999–2006 [lent by AEX–Amsterdam Exchanges NV].
- Kyoto, Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, “Communication: Visualizing the Human Connection in the Age of Vermeer,” 25 June–16 October 2011; Sendai, Miyagi Museum of Art, 27 October – 12 December 2011; Tokyo, Bunkamura Museum of Art, 23 December 2011–14 March 2012, no. 38 [lent by the present owner].
- Worcester, Mass., on loan with the permanent collection, August 2015–August 2016 [lent by the present owner].
- Paris, Musée du Louvre, “Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection: The Age of Rembrandt,” 22 February–22 May 2017 [lent by the present owner].
- Beijing, National Museum of China, “Rembrandt and His Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 17 June–3 September 2017 [lent by the present owner].
- Shanghai, Long Museum, West Bund, “Rembrandt, Vermeer and Hals in the Dutch Golden Age:



Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 23 September 2017–25 February 2018 [lent by the present owner].

- Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, “The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection,” 28 March 2018–22 July 2018 [lent by the present owner].
- St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, “The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection,” 5 September 2018–13 January 2019 [lent by the present owner].
- Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi, “Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age. Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre,” 14 February–18 May 2019 [lent by the present owner].
- Amsterdam, Hermitage Amsterdam, “Rembrandt and his Contemporaries: History Paintings from The Leiden Collection,” 4 February–27 August 2023, no. 34 [lent by the present owner].

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- Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. "Rembrandt and Dutch History Painting from The Leiden Collection. In *Rembrandt and his Contemporaries: History Paintings from The Leiden Collection*. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Caroline Van Cauwenberge, 19, no. 34. Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Hermitage Amsterdam. Zwolle, 2023. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]

## Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of medium-weight, plain-weave fabric with tacking margins removed, has been lined. Paper tape extends onto the front of the stretcher and butt joins of the support edges along all four sides. Broad cusping along the upper and lower edges and slight cusping along the vertical edges indicates that the support dimensions have not been significantly altered. There is a yellow chalk inscription and three paper labels, but no wax seals, import stamps or stencils along the stretcher or lining reverse.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied followed by a dark underlayer, which shows through the floor tiles in the foreground and the figures, including Cleopatra and Antony. The paint has been applied in thin, opaque layers of rich paste blended wet-into-wet with lively brushwork. Areas such as the fruit platter in the foreground resting on the tile, the lower portion of the white drapery of the proper right portion of Cleopatra's skirt, and the lower portion of the blue swag of fabric which falls between her knees have been applied wet-over-dry.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. Compositional changes visible in the images and X-radiograph include a slight change in the size and angle of the wine glass in Cleopatra's proper left hand and a shift in position of the page's proper left arm and the wine decanter between his proper left heel and proper right knee.

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

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition in 2007 and remains in a good state of preservation.