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Musical Folklore in Paintings by Jan Steen

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LOUIS PETER GRIJP · AMSTERDAM · NIEDERLANDE

MUSICAL FOLKLORE IN PAINTINGS
BY JAN STEEN

The Dutch painter Jan Steen (1626–1679) was a contemporary of Rembrandt and Vermeer, but he differed significantly from them in his subject matter and approach. Steen preferred laughing and drinking people in disarrayed rooms, scenes from the folk life, and little stories painted with a particular sense of humour. Often, in about one third of his paintings, he included music, whether singing or instrumental, depicting violins, bagpipes, lutes, citterns, virginals, recorders and so forth.

For the occasion of the exhibition devoted to Jan Steen in the Rijksmuseum at Amsterdam (1996) I recorded a CD with my early music ensemble, Camerata Trajectina: *The Musical World of Jan Steen*.¹ The idea was twofold. In some cases, Steen turned out to have painted scenes from popular burlesque songs. He made, for example, a painting inspired by two songs about unequal love by the famous poet, G. A. Bredero (1585–1618). In the first of these songs, a rich old man tries to persuade a young girl to marry him. In the other, an old woman tries the same with a young man. In both songs, the old croger and old hag fail, singing the same refrain as do their young intendeds: “What you seek, I am seeking, too” – that is, a young partner. The first stanza of the first song runs:

Een oudt Bestevaertje, met een jong Meysjen.

Stem: Pots hondert duysent slapperment, & c.

Lammert: O Jannetje, mijn soete beck!
Ey lieve, blijft wat staen.

Jannetje: Wat schortje, seght jy ouwe geck?
Ick raetje, laetme gaen.

L: Al 't gelt dat ghy hier leggen siet,
Dat is voor u al ree.
J: Wegh kael-kop, ick en soeck u niet,
Dat jy soeck, soeck ick mee (*Stuiveling* 67).

Old man: O Jannetje, my sweetest child
Darling, wait!

Girl: What do you want, you old fool?
I advise you, let me go!

Old man: All the money that you see here
Is for you, now.

Girl: Away, bald head! I don't want you.

[*Refrain:*] What you seek, I am seeking, too.

The songs are written in dialogue, using the same melody: ‘Potshonderd-duizend slapperment’ or ‘Pickle herring’. It is taken from the repertory of the so-called jigs, or sung comedies which English theatre groups used to play in Holland, Low Germany and Scandinavia, in the first decades of the seventeenth century. (For the jigs see Bolte. Also: Baskerville). These Dutch songs are, in a way, miniature jigs themselves. Jan Steen combined imagery taken from both songs in one painting, *Choice between age and youth* (ca 1662–1665; Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa; *fig. 1*). In the foreground we see old Lammert offering his money to young Jannetje, but she prefers her young lover – a point she makes clear by looking at the recorder he is holding on her knee – that is his masculine potency. The second song is alluded to by the old woman entering the room. In a moment, she is to ask young Herman. The common refrain “What you seek” can be read on the bell crown hanging from the ceiling. Steen’s composition is based on two engravings from Bredero’s *Great Songbook* (1622) illustrating each song separately. Thus, the artist worked in a pictorial tradition. Uniquely, however, he conflated the two episodes into one scene.



1. Jan Steen, *Choice between age and youth*, ca 1662–1665.

Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa.

(rechte Seite)

2. Jan Steen, *Twelfth Night*, 1662.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

There are more examples of themes from songs used for paintings by Steen and his contemporaries. Steen's *The doctor's visit* (ca 1661–1662, Wellington Museum, Apsley House, London) shows a doctor feeling the pulse of a girl; he diagnoses the pangs of love. At least, that is suggested by the presence of a little boy with arrows on the bottom left, who obviously symbolises Cupid. The mother or maidservant listens to the diagnosis whilst the father sits in the background. The same four characters appear in a dialogue song known from Gesina ter Borch's *Album of Verses*.² The joke is that the father, who in the beginning is extremely worried about his daughter, becomes furious when he understands that she is in love with the son of the neighbours, who are rather poor. Again, this is a miniature jig, as is confirmed by the English tune it was sung to, "Prince Robert's Masque". The relationship between song and painting is made the more plausible by the illustration Gesina, daughter of the painter Gerard ter Borch, added to the song in her manuscript book. Apparently, there existed a pictorial tradition around this song, as well. Other examples of artists painting song themes also make use of earlier pictures.³ Generally speaking, painters and songwriters selected their burlesque subjects from one common repertory of themes, stories, jokes etc.



The second manner by which seventeenth century Dutch music and painting can be connected concerns the reconstruction of the music that seems to be played or sung in the paintings. This method is particularly fruitful. By using the instruments depicted and voices suggested in the paintings we can provide appropriate music and thus contribute to the experience of pictorial reality and enhance its atmosphere. Of course, the problem is to find out which music is really appropriate, i.e. which songs or instrumentals could have been performed in the depicted situation, taking into account not only time and place, but also social and other contextual factors – if such musical pieces have survived at all.

To illustrate this problem I will give some examples related to folklore, which in many of Steen's paintings plays such a characteristic role. A feast he depicted several times is *Twelfth Night* (*Driekoningenavond*). In a painting in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, dated 1662, we see a merry family around the table (*fig. 2*). By pulling lots the roles for this night are assigned. The lot for the king has fallen to the youngest child.

In the doorway we see three children holding a star and singing a song. Twelfth Night was one of the feasts when children were allowed to go singing from door to door with the rumble-pot (a friction drum made of an earthenware pot covered with a pig's bladder to which a stick was affixed). In Germany, there was a famous song used for this occasion, the *Sterrenlied* (see for examples Grün; Kramer), and it is probable that this was sung in Holland, too. In the *Haerlemsch Oudt Liedtboeck* ('Old Song-book of Haarlem', ca 1630) there is an *Oudt drie Koninghen Liedt* ('Old Twelfth Night Song'), surprisingly not in Dutch but in German, with some Dutch words in it:

*"Hier kamen whir Hern, mit unsen Stern,
War isser Herodes? Whir sagen hem gern!"
Herodes die spracher mit valsen hertz:
"Hoe isser dem jungsten van drie so swerts?"
"Al is hy wat swart, hy is wolle bekant:
Das isser ein Keuning ausz Moorenlant,
Aldaer der Sunnen zu heetsten brant.
Whir kamen getreden in kurtsel weijl,
In viertien daghen vijf hondert meijl."*

*Whir kamen den hogen bargh op gehn.
Des bleeffter die Starre balt stille stehn.
Unt sagen ein Esel, und auch ein Rein
Maria, met haren kleyn Kindellein.
"Hab dyer das Kint sen offer ghebrocht,
Gott geeb dhir fiel tausent gutten lob."
Whir haben gesongen, das liet gaer wyt,
Das ongeluck far ihr ter deuren auch wyt.
(Haerlemsch Oudt Liedtboeck 107)*

*"Here we Lords come, with our star.
Where is Herodes? We would like to see him!"
Herodes said with false intensions:
"Why is the youngest of you three so black?"
"Though he might be a bit black, he is well known:
He is a king from the Land of the Moors,
where the sun is burning hottest.
We came walking in a short time,
in fourteen days five hundred miles.*

*When we climbed up the high mountain,
The star stood still.
And we saw a donkey and also a pure
Maria with her little child.
"You brought the king his offer,
God will praise you a thousand times".
We have sung this song to its end,
May fortune be with you.*

The shining star the children are holding, is affixed to a long stick in such a way – as we know from other sources – that the star can be turned round and round. But when, in their song, the three 'kings' arrive in Bethlehem, the star suddenly stands still – not only in the song, also in the hands of the children.

This traditional song was sung long into the twentieth century, by which time only Dutch lyrics were sung; however, the rhyme in "Hier treden wij, Heere, met onze Steere" [instead of 'ster'], or, in other versions, "O Erre [instead of 'Here'] wij komen met onze Sterre" still reveals its German provenance. Usage of German language in seventeenth century Dutch song is exceptional, especially in the town of Haarlem (where Steen lived for some years) which is situated in the West of the country, far from Germany. That it was no mistake is confirmed by Bredero's play *Moortje* (1615), where a few lines from the song are quoted, again in a mixture of German and Dutch, though considerably more



3. Jan Steen, *Twelfth Night*, 1668. Staatliche Museen, Kassel.

Dutch coloured than in the *Haarlem Song Book*.⁴ Unfortunately, neither Bredero or the *Haarlem Songbook* give music nor a tune indication. Whoever wants to sing the old song today, however might use one of the several tunes used for the lyrics over the last hundred years.

In the left foreground corner, we see some other children playing a game, jumping over three burning candles. It was usually accompanied by songs like *Keuningskaarsje* (King's Candle). No seventeenth-century text nor tune has survived, but we know the song and the game from notations from about 1900:

*Koning kaarsje,
Lik mijn laarsje,
Lik mijn laarsjes beentje.
Al die daar niet over en kan,
Die gooi ik met een steentje.[5]*

*King's candle (flame),
Lick my boot (I dare you),
Lick my leg,
All who cannot jump over it,
I will throw a stone at them.*

Adult's music can be seen in another *Twelfth Night* by Steen (1668; Staatliche Museen, Kassel; fig. 3). Again, a family celebrates it with a festive meal. The nun at the left shows that they are Roman Catholic – like Jan Steen himself. The king's lot has fallen to a little boy, again, and he is just drinking the first glass. According to the tradition the others shout at this point: “Long live the King, he is drinking!” The music is made by a carnivalesque figure, playing the rumble-pot, accompanied by a violin-player and a fellow with a funnel on his head, playing what we might call a 'grate-fiddle': a fireplace grate struck with tongs or, in this case, a skimmer. Traditional songs like “Pancake ho man ho” would be sung for the feast, but in the seventeenth century also special new songs were written. An example is “Drie koningen vreugd” (*Twelfth Night Joy*) from the songbook *Amsterdamse Vreughdestroom* (Amsterdam River of Joy, 1655):

*Tsa laet ons den Koningh trecken,
Wacker Zieltjes van de Min,
(Yder wil wat vreughts aentrecken)
Voeght daer by een Koningin,
Hey! van vreught nu singht en sprinckt,
Vive la den Koningh drinckt.[6]*

*Go ahead! let us pull the lot for the King,
Fired souls of Love,
(Everybody will be happy)
Add a Queen to him.
Hey! Now sing and jump with joy,
Hurray, the King is drinking!*



4. Jan Steen, *The Feast of Saint Nicholas*, ca 1665–1668. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



5. Jan Steen, *The little alms collector*, ca 1663–1665. Musée de Petit Palais, Paris.

A famous painting is Steen's *Feast of Saint Nicholas* (ca 1665–1668, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; fig. 4). The sweet little girl in the front has been given a doll, her weeping brother the birch – he has not been good. The little boy on the far right has his mouth opened: apparently he is singing a song for Saint Nicholas (Sinterklaas), hoping that he will bring him a present through the chimney. Though nowadays hundreds of Sinterklaas songs exist, it is very difficult to trace them back to the seventeenth century due to the oral tradition to which children's songs belonged. Thanks to Jacob Sceperus (1658) we know at least the text of one early Sinterklaas song. This protestant minister regarded the Catholic feast of Saint Nicholas as being silly and cited the song to prove his point. The words, which the children learnt from their parents, are shouted or prayed to Sinterklaas, according to Sceperus:

*Sinte Niclaes Bisschop,
 Goet heylich man;
 Wilje wat in mijn schoentje geeven,
 Godt loont u dan.*

*Geefft men een Beurs met bellen,
 Soo sal ick je niet meer quellen.
 Soo langhe als het Godt geliefft,
 Heb ick Sinte Niclaesjen lieff.
 (Sceperus 184).*

*Saint Nicholas bishop,
 Good holy man,
 Please give something in my shoe,
 God will bless you.
 Give me a purse with bells,
 Then I will ask no more.
 As long as it pleases God
 I love Sinterklaas.*

Again, for a melody we have to turn to recordings of the oral tradition around 1900, when the song was still sung.⁷

As a last example of Steen's depiction of children's folklore I will mention *The little alms collector* (ca 1663–1665; Musée de Petit Palais, Paris; fig. 5). The child in the white dress with a coronet on its head is the Whitsun Bride. Though Steen, humorous as always, depicted the Bride as a boy, it was usually a girl, of course. Beautifully dressed, she went at Whitsuntide with her youthful companions from door to door to collect money. This did not always proceed as peacefully as Steen here portrays; at times the singing from door to door was even forbidden, as it was in Amsterdam in 1612 because of "presumptuous liberties". A similar ban was issued in 1635 in Kennemerland, where Jan Steen was living when he made this painting. There was always singing and sometimes dancing as well on this feast day. The only song we know to have been sung for this ceremony in the seventeenth century is "Fiere Pinxter Blom". This time, we know an original melody, from the instrumental Boeren Lieties (Amsterdam ca 1700). Text variants are not recorded until the end of the nineteenth century. A rather cruel one is found in Friesland, 1895:

*Hier komt onze fiere pinksterblom
En hier komt zij haar gangen,
Met haar rode krans al om haar hoed,
En haar volbloeiende wangen.
Is dat dan geen fiere pinksterblom?
Zij wou 't zo graag ereis wezen.
Verloor zij dan haar fiere maagdeblom,
Zij kreeg 't van 't lange jaar niet weerom.*

*Doe 't lange jaar ten ende waar,
Mooi-Jansje most in de krame.
Van zo'n schone jonge dochter fijn,
Mooi-Jansje is haar name.
As Mooi-Jansje dan niet dogen wil,
Dan willen wij haar graag verkopen,
Brenge wij haar voor de vellemakersdeur,
De vellekens hoog opstropen.
As dat velleke hoog opstropen is,
Dan is zij nog niet verloren.
De hondetjes hebben dat vleeske zo lief,
Als de beenderkes uutverkoren.
(Cited in Jaap Kunst, Terschellinger Volksleven (1951) 204)*

*Here comes our proud Whitsun flower (i.e. the Whitsun bride),
she is going on her way,
with her red wreath around her hat
and her blossoming cheeks.
Isn't that a proud Whitsun flower?
She wanted to be it so eagerly,
Would she lose her proud maiden flower,
She would not get it back again for one long year.*

*When the long year was over,
Fair Jansje had to give birth*

*to a beautiful young daughter,
called Fair Jansje.
If Fair Jansje is good for nothing
then we will sell her;
we will bring her to the door of the skin flayer,
Her skin will be stripped off
And after her skin is stripped off
she is not yet wasted;
For the dogs like her flesh
as much as her delectible bones.*

In the case of these children's plays and ceremonies which Steen depicted, we have a reasonable idea what kind of songs must have been sung in similar situations in real life. In other paintings, we have to choose from amongst many possibilities. For instance, hundreds of drinking songs are available for merry company scenes, as are many *Songs of Praise for the Chamber of Rhetoricians*, singing out of the window, etcetera. In one case, however, Steen actually shows us the song which is sung in the painting itself. In *As the old sing, so pipe the young* (ca 1663–1665, Mauritshuis, The Hague; fig. 6) Grandma is holding a sheet from which she sings the song which paraphrases the proverb which is the subject of the painting. We can read the handwriting:

*Soo voer gesongen, soo na gepepen,
Dat is al lang gebleken.
Ick sing u voor, soo volcht ons naer,
Van een tot hondert jaer.*

*They pipe it as it has been sung to them,
that has proven true already a long time ago,
As I sing it to you, so imitate us,
you all, from one to hundred years old.*



6. Jan Steen, *As the old sing, so pipe the young*, ca 1663–1665. *Mauritshuis, The Hague*.

Grandma's singing is imitated by a grandchild, playing the tune on the bagpipes – which must be very loud in the living-room – while his little brother emphasizes the message of the proverb (i.e. that children imitate the actions of their parent) by taking a pull at his father's pipe. The text of this song is only known from the painting, where it can clearly be read. Unfortunately, the music notation on the sheet is covered by Grandma's hand.

These few examples hopefully make clear how much the unexpected combination of music and painting can add to our understanding of art as well as music and poetry, including popular ballads and children's songs.

(The help of Cynthia Kortenhorst in preparing the English version of this paper is gratefully acknowledged.)

Notes

- ¹ CD Camerata Trajectina: *De Muzikale Wereld van Jan Steen/The Musical World of Jan Steen*. Globe GLO 6040. 1996. See also the exhibition catalogue, *Jan Steen, Painter and Story-teller*, Amsterdam/Washington 1996.
- ² Ras Jan en loopt eens met een set, En haelt den Doctoer hier/Ick weedt niet wat ons Neeltien let, mij deert het jonge dier', Album of Verses fol. 24r, dated 1652. Edition Alice McNeil Kettering, *Drawings from the TER BORCH Studio Estate*, vol. 2. Amsterdam, 1981.
- ³ CD *The Musical World of Jan Steen*, nr. 6 (Bredero's 'Arent Pieter Gysen'), painted by J.M. Molenaer after the engraving in Bredero's Great Song book of 1622 and nr. 12 (J.J. Starter's 'Menistenzusje'), illustrated by two anonymous paintings, both inspired by one engraving in Starter's songbook *De Friesche Lusthof*, Amsterdam, 1621.
- ⁴ Hier komen wij Heeren mit onse steeren, Das kindeken Jesus willen wij lieben ond eeren. Der jungste kuningh ist wolle bekant, Dat ist de kuningh aus Greeckenlandt.' Cited after J. ter Gouw, *De volksvermaken*, Haarlem 1871, p. 181.
- ⁵ Meertens Instituut, Amsterdam, Dutch Folksong Archive nr. 13640, recorded in 1894 in Hilversum.
- ⁶ *Amsterdamse Vreughdestroom I* (Amsterdam 1655), p. 41.
- ⁷ For my reconstruction I chose the melody of 'Sinterklaasje bisschop, zet je hoge muts op' (Meertens Instituut, coll. D. Huigen, nr. 61).

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