





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 paintings from a five senses series to become dispersed over time, which is certainly the case in this instance.^[10]

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Jan Steen, *Self-Portrait Playing the Lute*, ca. 1666–68, panel, 55.3 x 43.8 cm, Fundación Colección 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



- Wouter Kloek, 2017

Endnotes

1. Karel Braun, *Alle schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam, 1980), no. 227.
2. Karel Braun, *Alle schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam, 1980), no. 136; 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. 25 as ca. 1663–65.
3. The relationship of *Self-Portrait Playing the Lute* in Madrid to an illustration of the sanguine temperament (“Blygeestige”) from Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia* suggests that the Madrid painting represents that high-spirited temperament. See 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), 182. The tradition of the lute player as “sanguine” is also represented in an engraving by Pieter de Jode after Maerten de Vos. See Eddy de Jongh, *Tot lering en vermaak: betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstellingen uit de zeventiende eeuw* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Amsterdam, 1976), 24, fig. 5.
4. Steen’s method is described in detail by Martin Bijl in his essay in 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), 89.
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.
6. For the appeal of Steen’s self-portraits, see H. Perry Chapman, “Jan Steen as Family Man: Self-Portrayal as an Experienced Mode of Painting,” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 46 (1995): 368–93; and H. Perry Chapman, “Jan Steen, Player in his Own Paintings,” in 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), 11–23.
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], 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.
8. See also 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), 241–45.

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: betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstellingen 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: betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstellingen 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]).
- John Lek, New York (his sale, New York, Parke Bernet, 29 November 1961, no. 14).
- 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].
- Raleigh, NC, North Carolina Museum of Art, “Small Treasures: Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, and Their Contemporaries,” 12 October 2014–4 January 2015; Birmingham, Birmingham Museum of Art, 1 February–26 April 2015, no. 39 [lent by the present owner].
- Dallas, Dallas Museum of Art, “Vermeer Suite: Music in 17th-Century Dutch Painting,” 17 January–21 August 2016 [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].
- Albany, Albany Institute of History & Art, “Delights of the Senses: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Life. Featuring Paintings from The Leiden Collection,” 14 September–31 December 2024, no. 17 [lent by the present owner].

References

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Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection. Edited by Lara Yeager-Crasselt, 130–31; 185, no. 55. Translated by Li Ying. Exh. cat. Beijing, National Museum of China. Beijing, 2017.

- Wang, Jia. “Dutch Painting in Golden Age.” In *Journal of National Museum of China* 169, no. 8 (2017): 38.
- Long Museum, West Bund. *Rembrandt, Vermeer and Hals in the Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection*. Exh. cat. Shanghai, Long Museum, West Bund. Shanghai, 2017, 140–41.
- Yeager-Crasselt, Lara. “Self-Portrait with a Lute: Sense of Hearing.” In *The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection*. Edited by Polina Lyubimova, 190–91; 244–45, no. 62. Translated by Daria Babich and Daria Kuzina. Exh. cat. Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts; St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum. Moscow, 2018.
- Veldhorst, Natascha. “A World of Sound: Voices and Music in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art.” In *Delights of the Senses: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Life. Featuring Paintings from The Leiden Collection*. Edited by Elizabeth Nogrady and Diane Shewchuk, 10–11. Exh. cat. Albany, Albany Institute of History & Art. Albany, 2024.
- Nogrady, Elizabeth and Diane Shewchuk, eds. *Delights of the Senses: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Life. Featuring Paintings from The Leiden Collection*. Exh. cat. Albany, Albany Institute of History & Art. Albany, 2024, 74–75, no. 17.

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.