

ADDRESS

Rubens' House
Wapper 9-11 / 2000 Antwerp / Belgium
tel. +32 3 232 42 37 / fax +32 3 231 93 87
Opening hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. (closed on Mondays)

Making & Meaning, a special exhibition of Rubens' landscapes,
runs at the National Gallery in London from 17 October 1996 until
19 January 1997.

Jan Steen's Comic Vision

To Dutch children, the painter Jan Steen (1626-1679) is as well known as his contemporaries Rembrandt and Vermeer, but for his reputation rather than his paintings. They learn that a Jan Steen household is nothing to covet: a home where Mother has fallen asleep in broad daylight, the children are up to no good, and Dad is planning a tryst with a buxom lass balancing a well-filled glass. In such a home the cat nibbles the ham, which has ended up on the floor along with a discarded bible, a backgammon game, and some broken glass. In other words, Steen's household is a topsy-turvy image of the polite, well-managed, cosy but clean home that has long been the ideal of Western middle-class living.

Steen is best known for these disintegrating homes, but his production was a good deal more varied, rivaling Rembrandt's in its coverage of the whole range of seventeenth-century themes, from portraits and landscapes to genre scenes and history paintings. In 1996, a major exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam demonstrated his talents as a comic storyteller and his versatility as a painter, in fifty of his most distinguished works. It also aimed to clarify the relationship between Steen's painted and actual households.

Steen's dissolute homes look so boisterously real that viewers soon after his death saw them as portraits of his family. In a biography of 1721, Arnold Houbraken gave an elaborate account of Steen's ill-fated enterprise as a brewer and innkeeper who was his own best customer. He reported many of Steen's practical jokes, claiming that he was as humorous in life as he was in his paintings. A cursory look at Steen's pictures of households, taverns and brothels shows that Houbraken derived many of his anecdotes from them. Steen repeatedly painted brides who look already pregnant, and this motif must have encouraged Houbraken to claim that Steen impregnated his first wife before their wedding. Houbraken presented Steen's courtship of his second wife as a scenario straight from his depictions of boors presenting improbably long cakes to their sweethearts.

Houbraken did have documentary reasons to present Steen as wastrel – he ran a brewery and a tavern, and his business was not always successful. But there is no evidence that he was a perpetual drunk unable to support his family. Rather, Houbraken and other early critics must have felt that a humorous biography was the most lively way of honouring the themes and nar-

rative style of a supremely comic painter. And Steen asked for such critical treatment, for he often portrayed himself feasting and laughing, as near the very centre of the *Dissolute Household* (1663-1665) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Why did Steen compromise himself in this manner? For one thing, his self-portraits makes his pictures look more 'real', since as a participant he seems to be an eyewitness to the scene. Steen may have borrowed this technique from comic theatre. In comedies, naughty actors often turned to the audience to tell them that what they were witnessing would probably soon be turned into a farce. As in such plays, Steen's laughing face addressing the beholder could make the moral content of his pictures more direct. Although he seems to be thumbing his nose at the civilised viewers who could afford his pictures, he also presents the mess as a laughable situation to be avoided. For this dissolute home, as well-appointed as those of his collectors, is the result of poor wealth management. None of the family sees what is hanging over their heads: a basket overflowing with the marks of beggary, illness, and a vagrant life – switches, crutch, and leper's rattle; tankard, cards, rake's rapier.

Besides driving home the moral, Steen's grinning self-portraits allowed him to advertise himself as a comic artist. Authors and actors in farces and jokes often called attention to their comic products in similar ways. The connections between Steen's self-portraiture and the actions of comic actors imply that Steen deliberately made himself into a humorous and theatrical painter. The makeshift drapes in the *Dissolute Household* hint at Steen's theatrical knowledge. His entire career suggests that an interest in farce and the traditions of comic painting structured much of his production.

Steen probably received his training in Haarlem, in the studio of Adriaen and Isaak van Ostade, the most prominent painters of peasant themes in the Dutch Republic. Steen started out painting such subjects, but his pictures more clearly fit the tradition of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, his famous comic predecessor. These early paintings, well-represented in the exhibition, included peasant fairs, fat and lean kitchens, quack doctors, and village weddings. In the 1650s, when Steen worked in Leiden and Delft, he also began to paint old-fashioned Netherlandish actors, known as rhetoricians, who were rapidly being replaced by professionals. He represented these amateurs as robust revelers, in keeping with their reputation for drunken mediocrity. Around 1660, Steen also painted several extremely refined, small pictures of young ladies, engaged in more or less seductive activities in brothels and homes. Like many of Steen's characters, these women laugh or at least smile.

Steen lived in Haarlem again from 1661 to 1670, and in this period made his most ambitious comic works. He invented the large-scale painting of the dissolute household, fusing earlier, more didactic prints of such homes with the tradition of large pictures of peasant revels. In Haarlem he also painted the

Jan Steen, *Marriage at Cana*, c.1670-1672. Panel,

63.5 x 82.5 cm. National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.



impressive canvases of traditional festivities, including the lying-in feast, Twelfth Night, and Saint Nicholas Day, at the heart of the exhibition. These types of celebrations had come under virulent attack from Dutch Reformed preachers, who tried to suppress them as old Catholic rites. They were not successful, although by and large they made those once public festivals retreat into the home, where Steen situated them. Steen was a Catholic, but it is not clear from these pictures where his sympathies, or those of his urban, well-off patrons lay. On the one hand, such big paintings celebrate traditional festive laughter, yet on the other, they seem to ridicule it, by representing the revellers as disorderly drunks, laughing open-mouthed and unbuttoned in ways polite citizens should not.

All of Steen's themes mentioned thus far, mostly about the pleasures and problems of love, sex, marriage, childbirth, and domestic management, were the stock-in-trade of comic literature, for which Steen created an equivalent in genre painting. But not all Steen's pictures are in this vein. He made several unusual portraits, in which sitters like the famous *Burgher of Delft* appear set in a little story that is difficult to spell out. Steen also painted numerous scenes from biblical and classical history, especially back in Leiden in the 1670s. While not obviously humorous, he treated them as partly comic, choosing themes that lend themselves to rambunctious, even adulterous or drunken activity, such as the seduction and mocking of Samson or the *Marriage at Cana*. In such history paintings Steen not only applied the principles of tragicomedy – a new theatrical genre in the Dutch Republic – but also demonstrated his knowledge of Italian painting. The *Marriage at Cana*, for example, is indebted to the grand conceptions of Paolo Veronese in its composition, elaboration, and specific motifs such as the court dwarf, but Steen painted it on

a minute scale, with his trademark variety of vignettes of individual people, milling about like ordinary mortals, paying little heed to the otherworldly miracle.

MARIËT WESTERMANN

FURTHER READING

H. Perry Chapman et al., *Jan Steen: Painter and Storyteller*. New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 1996; 256 pp. ISBN 0-300-06793-3.

The exhibition took place in the National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC) from April 28 until August 18, 1996. It will be at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam until January 12, 1997.

Vermeer and the Art of Optical Disillusion

In an eye-catching advertisement for its exhibition (1 March-2 June 1996) of twenty-two paintings by Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675), a photographic detail of the hands of Vermeer's *Lady Writing a Letter* crowned the Mauritshuis' proud announcement, '*Sraks schrijven we geschiedenis*' ('Soon we will be writing history'). Merely judging from the extraordinary success it enjoyed in Washington (12 November 1995-11 February 1996 – weather and government shutdowns notwithstanding), it seemed that the exhibition had already made history in more ways than its sponsors or organisers could have anticipated. For it is not simply the fact that two-thirds of Vermeer's notoriously small oeuvre had been assembled for view in one place for the first time in three hundred years, nor the fact that several pictures had been stunningly restored for the occasion, that makes this exhibition so historically significant. It is also the fact that it brought the art of the most reflective and least prolific of seventeenth-century Dutch painters to the attention of a larger and more receptive audience than ever before. The spare elegance of this show provided what for many museum-goers may be a once-in-a-lifetime luxury; namely, the opportunity to linger over a small cache of pictures whose optical riches and enigmas invite sustained reflection upon the curious links between visual experience and consummate representational artistry. Instead of quiet reverence, these pictures evoked much lively, if hushed, conversation; and those conversations which I overheard suggested that for most viewers, Vermeer's work posed more questions than it answered. The questions ranged from simple queries about the identification of particular figures, and the possible symbolic allusions of frequently depicted objects – letters, pitchers, musical instruments, maps, and empty chairs – to more fundamental questions about the visual anomalies so prevalent in Vermeer's pictures, especially in the figures. Why, for example, do the arms of the ladies playing the virginals appear so oddly unformed? How does one explain the startling contrast between the subtly described and smoothly modelled knob on the