The Merry Company on a Terrace, by Jan Steen (1622-1679). Height 55 1/2 inches.

Isaac D. Fletcher Fund, 1958

The illustrations on the cover are identified on page 143.
Jan Steen’s Merry Company

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Jan Steen’s own particular gift, rare among his numerous gifted contemporaries in the seventeenth century in Holland, has been described by the late Schmidt-Degener, who surely knew the Dutch national character well, as a “natural lightheartedness.” Hardly a solemn or lugubrious picture is to be found in his entire abundant body of works, nor a pretentious or pompous one. Traditional religious subjects like the Feast of Ahasuerus or the Marriage at Cana he sometimes painted, but usually in the midst of lavishness with a salutary jibe at his own conformity and temporarily assumed respectability. And usually with an exaggeration of the pictorial elements of the scene that turns the Biblical episode into an unparalleled vehicle for exuberance and high spirits.

In a period that has become famous for some of the greatest portraits ever painted, Steen seldom devoted his talents to making formal likenesses. But he may very truthfully be said to have painted a composite portrait of his fellow countrymen, revealing them in all their more cheerful and animal enjoyments. The subjects most congenial to him were all of the order of genre and showed Dutch men and women enjoying food and drink in the company of one another.

Many of Steen’s genre scenes are very small, containing only a few figures. Sometimes there is only one figure in a little gem that celebrates with brilliant technique and exquisite naturalness some everyday incident, like a young girl’s reluctant getting out of bed, or her healthy relish of a trayful of raw oysters. When he combines two figures in one of his inimitable little pictures, he usually makes them of the opposite sexes. The amorous content of such pictures is often masked as a music or drawing lesson, given by a man to a shyly decorous maiden whose mind would appear to be entirely on the notes or the drawing board were it not for the patent allegory of the erotic picture hanging above her head. Furthermore, the instructor’s attention is divided between pedagogy and his scarcely concealed admiration for his pupil. Another favorite

A Girl Eating Oysters. Height 8 ¼ inches.
The Mauritshuis, The Hague

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subject of Steen's is the lovesick maiden, in which he depicts a doctor's visit to an ailing girl, fussily cared for by a solicitous mother who has not the least suspicion of the psychosomatic nature of her daughter's illness, which is made clearly evident to the spectator by a statue or picture of a menacing cupid somewhere in the background.

Steen's ambitious scenes containing many figures include the Biblical subjects mentioned above, one or two fashionable pictures like the Garden Party of 1667, now in an American private collection, and a large number of merry-makings taking place either in a tavern or a private house. In one composition he has recorded for us the popular celebration of the birthday of young Prince William of Orange. Twelfth-night, a favorite festival in the Netherlands and the subject of splendid rowdy scenes by Steen's Flemish counterpart Jakob Jordaens, gave him the pretext for painting a fine family feast. The old Dutch proverb "As we lead you'll have to follow," inscribed on the manuscript...
held by the old woman in the great family festival scene in the Mauritshuis, formally entitled The Merry Company, provides a semiallegorical program for one of Steen's greatest works. In this picture three generations are grouped closely around a small table in varying degrees of joviality and contentment. The grandmother is happily absorbed in her rendition of the old song. Though its traditional lines include the assertion that as she leads "all follow suit, from baby to centenarian," only one of the company pays the slightest attention to her: the sober youth with the fur-trimmed cap and the bagpipes, in the background at the right. The granny's opposite, a bearded old man, sinks comfortably into a postprandial torpor and the nurse cradling a sleepy baby looks very sleepy too. Jan himself, whose appearance we know from the eminently respectable self-portrait in the Rijksmuseum and numerous appearances in group pictures, is seen here characteristically laughing gaily and letting one of his young sons sample his long clay pipe. The mistress of the house, lolling comfortably in her armchair, her foot cozily braced on a foot warmer, extends her glass to a servant who, with a high and flourish- ing gesture, pours her yet another goblet of ruby wine. Another of Steen's masterpieces in the great gallery in Vienna, a similar three-generation picture of indulgence and disorder, is sometimes known as Dissolute Life and sometimes, for reasons that are not difficult to fathom, as The World Upside Down. There is a good deal of moralizing here, concealed as well as overt, for some of the symbols, like the roses scattered on the ground in front of a pig, allude to long-familiar Low Country proverbs. The duck perched on the shoulder of the old man has surely some forgotten or little-known interpretation. But Jan Steen's moralizing, even in such a picture, does not proceed from the heart of a reformer, for he seems to say, "This is what


*Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna*
The Artist in a Jovial Mood. This and the following illustrations are details from the Museum’s newly acquired painting.

other people call misbehaving and dissolute, but for my part it is cheerful and all right.”

Steen began and ended his life in Leiden. He was born in 1626 and lived there up to 1648, when he is mentioned in a document as one of the founders of the painters’ guild, indicating that he must have acquired free mastery before he was twenty-two. The next five years he spent in The Hague, becoming a burgher of the city and working as a painter. He married at the beginning of this period and a son and daughter were baptized in the cathedral there. The sale of his paintings was not his only source of livelihood, for Steen had a second trade, the nature of which is neither surprising nor out of character. From 1654 until 1656 he operated breweries in Delft. A group portrait painted in 1655, however, gives evidence that his activities as a brewer did not keep him from the practice of his art. During the four years following he lived in Warmond on the outskirts of The Hague, apparently traveling frequently between there and nearby Leiden, where he had relatives and other connections. Steen and his family passed the decade of the sixties in Haarlem and it was in this city that his wife Margareta died in 1669. Her last illness was probably long and expensive, since a document of the year after her death records how some of the artist’s works were seized to pay a local apothecary for medicines he had provided.

In 1670 Jan Steen returned to his native town of Leiden to remain for nine years, until his death. He paid dues regularly in the Guild of Saint Luke and even received the honor of being made its deacon. But his functions as an artist apparently continued to be paralleled by operations in the liquor trade, for in 1672 he obtained a license to use a house inherited from his father as a tavern. The following year he married for the second time and a son was baptized in the Cathedral of Leiden in 1674. Dated pictures through the seventies show that he continued painting almost up to his death in 1679, at the early age of fifty-three.

The Merry Company on a Terrace, which the Museum has just acquired, after waiting many years for a big figure piece by Steen, is one of his largest works. Pictures of this scale are rare with him, but certainly not because of any inability on his part to handle a large composition and sustain his verve in every section of a big canvas. Shading the terrace and arching above the heads of the assembled household is an arbor of ripe grapes, from which a youth who has climbed on a ladder at the right severs a heavy cluster. Although a cut loaf of bread and half of a delectable ham are to be seen on the table, and a fat wedge of pie is held by the laughing servant girl at the left, the consumption of grape juice in a highly fermented state appears to be the preoccupation of most of the cheerful group. The occasion for the assemblage seems to be a kind of domestic festival of the vine. Three generations are assembled here just as they are in the
cheerful interior drinking scene of the Maurits-
huis. The happily tippling grandparents in the
center background, with an infant reaching pre-
ociously for a glass of wine, suggest that these
people in the Museum’s picture are members of
the same household, perhaps Jan Steen’s own.
Certainly the rollicking figure at the extreme
left, who holds a jug in his left hand and seems
to be on the verge of slipping under the table as
he turns his bibulous face to the spectator, is
still another representation of the artist himself.
The very charming blonde, who in exquisitely
painted costume and a still dainty stage of tipsi-
ness occupies the very center of the foreground,
has been traditionally identified with Steen’s
first wife Margareta, the daughter of the painter
Van Goyen. But we have no sure portrait of
Margareta van Goyen, and in any case the style
of our painting places it in the last decade of the
artist’s life, surely after her death in 1669. We
know no more about Maria van Egmont, whom
he took as his second wife in 1674. Although by
the time our picture was painted the eldest chil-
dren of his first marriage would be in their late
teens or early twenties, it is perfectly possible
that one of the offspring of his second, the son
who was baptized in 1674, is the baby in the
grandmother’s arms. If the painting comes from
the very end of the artist’s life, this child may
even have grown into the little boy in the fore-
ground brandishing a toy whip over the family
dog, which he has harnessed to his little toy horse.
on wheels by means of salmon-pink ribbons.

This brown and white dog with the pretty markings on his head and muzzle is one of several elements in the painting that Jan Steen economically included many other times in his pictures. The amiable creature is part of the Twelfth-night in Oslo, looks on while peasants play at ninepins in a painting in Vienna, and is present in the tavern scene in Wiesbaden. He sniffs at the food untidily strewn on the seat of a chair in the Van Beuningen canvas called Easy Come, Easy Go, and, somewhat reduced in size, adds to the dissoluteness of the World Upside Down by taking advantage of his mistress’s oblivion to climb up on the table. He was probably Jan’s own dog and the chances are he behaved just that way. Bird cages, often with parrots, also recur frequently in Steen’s works. The small sententious owl, peering out of a ruff of feathers, who has emerged from his cage to preside over the Museum’s painting seems, like the dog, to be merely a domestic pet, although elsewhere
he is included to illustrate the old Dutch adage
"Of what use are the candle and spectacles if
the owl refuses to see?"

As common as the household pets in Steen’s
merry companies is the fool behind the host at
the left, whose overtures to the servant provoke
from her amused and flattered giggles. He is
Hans Wurst, the entertainer of the Rederijkers,
or Chambers of Rhetoric, as the local popular
literary and dramatic societies were called. Their
picturesque festivals were still celebrated in Hol-
lund in Jan Steen’s day, usually in taverns where
he undoubtedly participated cheerfully, even
though his pictures of their performances poke
good-natured fun at their oratory and preten-
sions. In the Museum’s painting the fool’s pres-
ence is informal and spontaneous, contributing,
like the dog, the bird, and the musicians to the
general effect of domestic merriment.

The musical accompaniment to this family
drinking scene is provided by a flutist in a tall
hat, who without success tries to deflect the
blonde servant from Hans, and by a disheveled
young man perched on the balustrade at the
right near his hostess, who seems to direct to her
the tender melody plucked out of his cittern.
His costume, with feathered beret, knotted rib-
bons, and slashed doublet and trunk hose, is
more elegant than that of the others, but his
jacket is unbuttoned at the throat and his long
hair straggles down in an untidy fashion about
his blearily romantic head.

The elements of architecture in this setting
and the still life too, like so much else here, are
to be found in other paintings by Steen. A heavy
stone balustrade, very similar in form to the one
on which the cittern player sits, occurs more
than once, accompanied in the Garden Party of
1667 by a similar architectural base of stone
surmounted by a column and a sphere, with the
same elaborate moldings and in the background
the same triangular pediment pierced by a
bull’s-eye window.

The sunflower in the background, the sculp-
tured garden urn with the winged putto, and the
superbly painted polished pewter flagon lying
on the paving in the foreground are all part of
Steen’s regular stock in trade. It has been sug-
gested that the sunflower, which usually carries
the connotation of respectful adoration, may
here allude to the rapt admiration with which
the young snub-nosed girl observes the action of
the youth on the ladder. As for the pewter flagon,
it is a customary adjunct of drinking scenes by
this painter, who was too gregarious and fond
of human beings to employ his talents in the
creation of pure still life, preferring to demon-
strate his skill by casually including everyday
objects in his figure pieces. Except for the flagon,
discarded because it is empty, and a little earth-
eware brazier with glowing coals, the stone
pavement is singularly free from litter. In the
majority of Steen’s pictures of merrymaking
there is a good deal on the floor, flagons, brandy
jugs, broken crockery, oyster and egg shells, and
playing cards—the accessories of frivolity and
entertainment, discarded in a disorder that in-
creases the appearance of abandonment he seems
to have enjoyed so much.

The natural lightheartedness that distinguishes
Steen is accompanied by another salient and
highly personal characteristic: the union of lusty
earthy content with the most refined color and
the subtlest handling of paint and rendering of
pictorial detail. With other Dutch masters whose
skill and delicacy are notable—Terborch, Metsu,
Dou, and hosts of others—refinement of detail is
usually mated with decorous seriousness. On
Terborch’s young women the folds of velvet and
satin fall softly with a dignity befitting their
wearers. None of these refined women, however,
boasts a skirt more brilliantly painted than the
dazzling changeant taffeta belonging to the Mu-
seum’s blonde, or jackets of a more delicately lit
and shining cerulean. Steen’s palette, further-
more, is very much his own. His rose color,
verging on salmon or coral, as in the velvet shoe
of this heroine and the ribbons harnessing the
dog, is unusual, and so is his clear red, confined
in our painting to the brocaded coat of the babe
in arms but unforgettabley resplendent in the en-
tire costume of the girl in the center of the Haar-
lem masterpiece, A Peasants’ Party. The browns
are all splendid, shading to ochers at the left in
the sleeve of the self-portrait, and running the
gamut of gray-browns and russets in the wonder-
fully painted leather shoes and the stockings and
costume of the romantic musician. Like a virtu-
oso, the painter prodigally spreads before us a
whole range of textures—the stuffs shimmer or
glow, the leather creases softly, the dog is silky, the flagon is smooth and hard, the stone is cold and its nicked edges are alternately sharp and dull. The leaves and flowers of the hollyhocks in the urn are fresh and living, and the tendrils of the vine, silhouetted with the foliage of the trees in the background against a limpid sky, are light and gently moving in the air that bathes them.

This paradoxical refinement in the hearty Steen is not confined to his manner of rendering objects and their textures and forms. His work abounds in examples of his ability to express gentle moods and the softer feelings. His robust embrace of life and of all living creatures sharpened his native perceptions and his awareness of the ways in which gesture and the posture of the body indicate thought and emotion. Steen, it must be remembered, was a family man, and maternal gentleness and solicitude for little children were qualities he had evidently observed carefully. The Inn Garden belonging to the Kaiser Friedrich Museum shows a mother holding a cup to her child’s mouth with a gesture of infinite tenderness and patience and the beautiful Grace before Meat in the National Gallery, London, with a man and woman preparing food for their children and themselves, evokes a mood of modest domesticity and contentment recalling Chardin. On the few occasions when he tackled a mystical theme, as in the Supper at Emmaus of the Rijksmuseum, his success suggests that the rarity of such pictures was due not to any want of religious feeling but merely to a strong predilection for other subject matter. In the Supper at Emmaus it was like him to present the charged
atmosphere of the moment of revelation not with
drama, but with stillness, and to paint the tired
elderly disciples not in wide-eyed shock, but in
a reverent trance resembling sleep, their hands
clasped or limp upon the table.

Like his famous contemporary Jan Vermeer,
Steen was a master of the gestures of the hand,
which he painted with the greatest truth and
elocution. It is often occupied, as might be
expected, with the management of jugs and
pitchers, and is very frequently shown at its
loveliest in the delicate maneuvering of fine-
stemmed wineglasses. The numerous drinking
scenes in Dutch painting of the seventeenth
century, incidentally, suggest that good manners
in Holland at that time rigorously demanded
skillful handling of glasses, which are usually
held at the base by a practiced thumb and fore-
finger—surely a difficult feat after the second
libation has been poured. Our painting shows
many excellently rendered hands, all extraor-
dinary for the convincing way they perform
the various actions in which their owners employ
them. The little boy in the foreground clutches
the whip and lifts the reins with chubby childlish-
ness, the laughing servant raises her pie in the
air to protect it from the heedless fool, and how
beautifully the old man with loosened ruff holds
his furbanded cap, and the young man with the
tall hat fingers his flute.

Music, so traditionally the companion of wine,
seems to have given Jan Steen great pleasure.
Not only is the action in many of his paintings
performed to the accompaniment of flute or
viol; he also painted a number of pictures in
which music is the very subject of the work.
There is a delicious picture in the Mauritshuis
of a hooded girl, often said to be a portrait of
his first wife, mischievously eying the spectator
as she bends her head over her cittern. He once
painted himself as a young man surrounded by
musical instruments and also made a large por-
trait of himself singing to his own accompani-
ment on the lute. The hands of the young cittern
player on the balustrade in the Merry Company,
as they press the strings and pluck their melody
with grace and skill, constitute one of the best
passages of painting in this notably well painted
picture.

When the Museum had the good fortune to
acquire this work last summer it arrived in a
remarkably good state of preservation, though
obscured and perhaps even protected by a thick
coat of discolored varnish now removed. The
picture is no stranger to American admirers of
Steen, since it belonged during most of the first
quarter of this century to the Widener Collection
in Philadelphia. Its history is not known before
1819, when it appeared in the sale of the collec-
tion of Gerrit Schimmelpenninck in Amsterdam.
Around the middle of the century it evidently
crossed to England, where it was in the sale of
the Watkins collection in 1854. David P. Sellar
of London owned it until 1894 and soon after
that it must have come to Philadelphia, where it
remained until it returned to Holland about
1925. It was then acquired by A. J. M. Goudriaan
of Rotterdam, who lent it for a long time to the
Boymans Museum, whence it has come almost
directly to the Metropolitan. It brings to our
fine assemblage of Dutch pictures, so distin-
guished by the richness of its collection of works
by Rembrandt and Vermeer, an altogether new
element, an element of the utmost importance
for the understanding of Holland's Golden Age.