

EXHIBITS

Master Storyteller of the Dutch Golden Age

On April 28, the National Gallery of Art opened its second exhibition this year of a major Dutch artist of the Seventeenth century. After the brilliant success of “Johannes Vermeer” last winter, now it is the turn of an artist less known to the international public, but much beloved in his homeland, and acknowledged as one of the first-rate masters of the Dutch Golden Age: “Jan Steen: Painter and Storyteller.”

Steen, who was born in 1626 and died in 1679, was a contemporary of Vermeer; the two may have crossed paths during the years 1654-57, when Steen was running a brewery in Delft, where Vermeer spent his entire life. Both were consummate masters of the paintbrush, with a breathtaking ability to describe the textures of oriental carpets. Both were Catholics in a predominantly Calvinist country. But the two artistic personalities could hardly have been more distinct.

Where Vermeer was noted for his reticence and his pursuit of the transcendent in everyday scenes, Jan Steen can hardly resist including colorful—and often, bawdy—details. Where Vermeer seeks to express higher truths through metaphor, eluding any attempt to infer a narrative or a direct moral, Steen is the consummate storyteller and depicter, to the point of often illustrating platitudes, proverbs, and coarse jokes, in an old Dutch tradition that goes back to the Sixteenth-century master Pieter Brueghel.

Steen, born in Leiden, was a restless figure who moved to The Hague, then to Delft, back to Leiden, then to Haarlem. He finally ended his life in Leiden,



“*The Feast of Saint Nicholas*,” c.1665-68.

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

the nation’s second-largest city, with a famous university and robust industrial economy, where Rembrandt was also born. Steen painted some sixty religious scenes, but almost all of them contained the comic element which is a hallmark of his art. He was the first artist to include himself in his own paintings as a jester. Married first to the daughter of the eminent seascape painter Jan van Goyen, widowed and remarried, Steen had at least ten children; his wives and children are often also cast in comic roles in his pictures.

Like Rembrandt, Steen refused to specialize in a trademark (such as landscape, genre, portraiture, religious/history paintings, flower pictures, etc.), as most Dutch painters did do in that market-driven era.

In the “Card Players” exhibited in Washington (Cat. 14) [SEE inside Back

Cover, this issue], an attractive young woman covertly shows the viewer the ace of hearts in her left hand, a gesture that conveys the subterfuge she plays on her male opponent, a soldier who has apparently already lost his sword in the game. While her cohort plies the victim with wine, the doorway background reveals an obvious seduction scene. The meaning of the picture is quite clear: Some men, impressed by the ladies’ refinement and dress, and the elegant interior, have placed their trust in appearances, only to be deceived. The fine mansion is nothing but a brothel!

This Steen picture of c.1660 complements Vermeer’s “Girl with a Wine-glass” (Brunswick) of the same date, which was recently exhibited in Wash-

ington [SEE inside Back Cover, this issue]. The group of three central figures is strikingly similar, but Vermeer eschewed any comment on the young lady. Instead, he counterposed the virtue of temperance to the foolish state of the two men (one intoxicated on tobacco smoke, possibly laced with hashish, which was common at the time, and the other attempting to offer the girl wine), by including two visual references: the stained-glass window with a figure of Temperance, and the austere ancestor-portrait on the back wall, which serves as the “play within the play” in Shakespeare’s tragedies, to “catch the conscience” of the observer.

A Tumultuous Era

The Vermeer and Steen exhibits this season coincide with the publication at the end of 1995 of the *Dutch Paintings of*

the Seventeenth Century volume of the Systematic Catalogue of the National Gallery of Art, by curator Arthur Wheelock.

This book describes the unique moment in history, 1550-1650, when the Dutch Republic came into being, and simultaneously produced one of the greatest schools of painting in history. Wheelock's scholarship is painstaking but never narrow. He takes technical factors carefully into account, integrates recent studies of the emblematic meanings in Dutch art, and is especially sensitive about the intertwined issues of politics and religion in that tumultuous era.

The northern provinces of The Netherlands broke free from Spain under the leadership of William of Orange, who embraced Calvinism as his creed against which to rally resentment of the Catholic monarchs. The revolt of the Sixteenth century was followed by the Twelve Years War of the Seventeenth, a truce, and then the Thirty Years War in central Europe from 1618 to 1648, at the end of which the Treaty of Münster established The Netherlands' permanent independent status.

In the earlier period, Calvinism was strongly associated with Dutch nationalism, and one artist, Wytewael, converted from his Catholic origins to become a staunch supporter of William of Orange and a diehard Calvinist. But later, especially when peace came in the 1640's, the tide turned. Many Dutch artists, like Steen himself, and the flower painter de Heem, were lifelong Catholics—and this was also true of an estimated 40-50 percent of the Dutch population. The "Feast of St. Nicholas," represented in Steen's most popular picture, and the Kermis, or carnival feast, the subject of a large, beautiful Steen canvas which belongs to the National Gallery of Art, were two of the popular festivals which the ascetic Calvinists had denounced as "papist" and tried to stamp out,

but absolutely to no avail.

There are other examples, such as Johannes Vermeer, the national poet Vondel, and the famed genre painter Adriaen Von Ostade, of converts to Catholicism during the 1640's and 1650's. But Jacob Ruysdael, the premier Dutch landscapist of the era, also converted in the 1650's—from his upbringing in the Mennonite sect, to be baptized a Calvinist. These varied situations indicate the coming into being of the modern concept of freedom of confession for individuals within a sovereign nation-state.

Even official Calvinism was not able to keep uniformity on cultural issues, however, especially when it came to the Low Countries' rich musical and pictorial traditions. For example, the influential secretary to the Statholder, Constantijn Huyghens, won the battle during the 1630's for the use of organ music in the Reformed churches, against those who tried to impose John Calvin's ban on instrumental music in church.

Wheelock's catalogue has a detailed entry on another document of this checkered cultural landscape, the National Gallery's "Interior of Sint Jans Kerk in s'Hertogenbosh," dated 1646. That town, near the border between the northern and southern Netherlands, was viewed as a papist stronghold. It had been conquered by Prince Fredrick Henry in 1629 and its churches purged of religious art. Shortly thereafter, Pieter Sanraedam, the trademark Dutch artist of church interiors, was commissioned by someone to paint the church as it would have appeared in "Catholic" dress, complete with a colorful altarpiece on the high altar and banners of Philip II of Spain and his daughter, Netherlands Regent Isabella. Sanraedam took until 1646 to complete the work, a delay which might have had something to do with the loosening climate of religious toleration in the Netherlands as the end of the Thirty Years War approached.

Although many of Steen's religious works contain the kind of lowlife and even downright vulgarity that might have had a tough time getting past the Inquisition in Italy or Spain, his faith comes through in several paintings, not necessarily of religious themes. Among his many tender paintings of children is the famous "Poultry Yard," in which a ten-year-old girl, probably the orphaned Bernardina Margriet van Raesfelt, is depicted feeding milk to a lamb, accompanied by two servants and surrounded by many realistically depicted species of birds [SEE inside Back Cover, this issue]. The white dove hovering over the doorway is immediately recognizable as a "quote" from the way the Holy Spirit was shown in traditional religious paintings, such as those of the Baptism of Christ.

—Nora Hamerman



"Self-Portrait as a Lutenist," c.1663-65.