



Jan Steen, *The Dancing Couple* (detail), 1663, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection

who? what? how?



above: Jan Steen, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1670, oil on canvas, Collection Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



1

Painter and Storyteller

Jan Steen (1626–1679) painted stories of daily life in the Dutch Republic, showing merry scenes of family gatherings, rowdy parties, and people misbehaving. His lively, detailed images were meant to be funny and silly, but they also sent messages about how *not* to behave. A seventeenth-century audience would have laughed at Steen's humor and nodded in agreement with the messages. Paintings that captured everyday life—called genre scenes—were among the most popular subjects in Dutch art at this time.

These paintings were designed to delight the viewers' senses. Imagine that you could step into this festive scene. What might you hear? Taste? Smell? Feel? See? What do you think might happen next?





3 What a Mess

No one in this crowd seems concerned about the mess on the floor. Broken eggs, flowers strewn about, and the bubbles blown by the boy at right all symbolize the fragility of life. Steen often included such details to remind the viewer not to be too silly or wild and to remember what is important in life. Jan Steen was well known for paintings of disorder and disarray. Even today in Holland, a messy home is called a “Jan Steen household.”



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2 Join the Party!

Under the vine-covered trellis at this country inn, people are talking, laughing, flirting, and dancing. There is a clue to the reason why they are having fun. Look behind the dancing man. The tents in the background are probably part of a village festival—called a *kermis* in Dutch. People traveled from far away to meet up with friends, share news, shop, or marvel at things for sale at a kermis. Children are having fun, too—like the boy on the right, blowing a bubble. Can you spot the girl with a pinwheel? Pinwheels could be purchased at fairs, which were about the closest thing to a toy store most seventeenth-century children would

ever experience. On the left, standing on her mother’s lap, a baby holds a hammer toy—pull it and the little men go bang, bang, working together in harmony.

This painting celebrates a harmonious life, with people of all ages and from different social classes having a good time together. To highlight different relationships, Steen arranged many of the figures in pairs. Find the couple dancing, two musicians playing, two children talking together. Steen even included himself with his wife, Margriet van Goyen: he’s the man with long black hair seated at the table, tickling the chin of the woman next to him.

book nook

These books about Dutch art and culture can be found at your local library or bookstore.

The Cow That Fell in the Canal

Phyllis Krasilovsky, illustrated by Peter Spier | ages 4 – 8

The Hole in the Dike

Retold by Norma B. Green, illustrated by Eric Carle | ages 4 – 8

The Boy Who Held Back the Sea

By Thomas Locker | ages 4 – 8

Hana in the Time of the Tulips

By Deborah Noyes, illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline | ages 4 – 8

Rembrandt and the Boy Who Drew Dogs

By Molly Blaisdell | ages 4 – 8

Vermeer Interviews

By Bob Raczka | ages 9 – 12

Chasing Vermeer

By Blue Balliett, illustrated by Brett Helquist | ages 9 – 12

Rembrandt and Seventeenth-Century Dutch Holland: The Dutch Nation and Its Painters

By Claudio Pescio, Sergio Ricciardi, and Andrea Ricciardi | ages 9 – 14

Visit [NGAkids](http://NGAkids.org): Dutch Dollhouse, an interactive game based on Dutch house interiors: www.nga.gov/kids/zone/dollhouse.htm.

try this!

activity

Genre paintings provide a window on the way people lived in seventeenth-century Holland. We can learn about Dutch family life, town activities, how people dressed, what their homes were like, and what they did for work and play. Some serious, some comic, they depict in great detail the range of life and society.

Words that might describe Jan Steen's paintings are: **active**, **wild**, **festive**, **dramatic**, **loud**, **public**, **funny**, and **messy**. Other paintings showed another side of Dutch life: these by Pieter de Hooch and Adriaen van Ostade present pictures of daily life around the home. They could be described as **calm**, **ordinary**, **quiet**, **private**, **serious**, **clean**, and **orderly**.

Which type of genre scene do you prefer?



A mother folds bedclothes in an immaculate house as a young child with a ball in hand pauses at the door, apparently just returning from play.

Be a storyteller

- Choose one of the genre paintings from these pages: Jan Steen, Pieter de Hooch, or Adriaen van Ostade. If this work of art is the middle of a story, what might have happened before? What do you think might happen next? Share your story with a friend or family member.
- Make a drawing showing how the scene might look next . . . five minutes later, one hour later, or at the end of your story!



In a courtyard of a peasant home, a man enters to find his wife cleaning mussels for the family meal, an older sister attends to her youngest sibling, and two other children play with a dog.

above, left: Pieter de Hooch, *The Bedroom*, 1658/1660, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection

above, right: Adriaen van Ostade, *The Cottage Dooryard*, 1673, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection