



JAN STEEN
(1626 - Leiden - 1679)

"The Alchemist"

Oil on panel: 58 x 45 cm; signed (upper left).
inscribed on the piece of paper above the fire place:
"Goedendag broer.....mooi soo" (u.l.)



Literature and Expertise:

- John Smith "Catalogue Raisonné..." 1883, Vol. IV no. 128, p. 42;
- Dr. Waagen, "Galleries and cabinets of art in Great Britain", London, 1857, 'Jan Steen', no.375;
- Dr. C. Hofstede de Groot, "A Cat. Raisonné of the works of the most eminent Dutch Painters of the 17th Century", no. 232;
- Thieme Becker, 1937, Vol. 31:
- Dr. Ed. Trautschold, Düsseldorf, no. 232, p. 511;
- Jonkvrouw Dr. C. H. de Jonge "Jan Steen", Palet-serie, p. 36, 1960s, with ill;
- Karl Braun, "Jan Steen" Lekturama, Rotterdam 1980 no. B53 (wrongly rejected on the basis of a photograph);
- Expertise Dr. A Blankert, The Hague, dd. 17-8-1986;

Exhibition:

- Leiden, De Lakenhal "Jan Steen", June August 1926, cat. no.70, pp. 27-28;
- Enschede, on loan to the Rijksmuseum Twente from 1970 to 1977;
- New York, Exhibition of Six Dutch Dealers, Walldorf Astoria, November 1982

Provenance:

Estate Willem Jacobsz. van Heemskerck, Leiden, deceased 1692;
Grandson Leonard van Heemskerck, sale Leiden September 1771;
sale J. van Bergen van der Gijp a.o., Soeterwoude June 1784, to Van Aken;
sale Joh. Ph. de Monté, Utrecht, July 1825;
sale W. A. Verbrugge, The Hague, September 1831 bought by Hagens;
collection C.E. Viruly, Rotterdam, 1880;
coll. A. Waller, Utrecht, before 1926;
coll. H. Waller, Lunteren;
Douwes Fine Art, London, 1985;
private collection, USA;
Douwes Fine Art, Amsterdam 1996;
to a Dutch private collection;

Notes:

It is possible that Jan Steen inserted his self-portrait in the picture as the alchemist. We see the last pieces of jewelry and the last penny being put in the melting-pot. The emaciated mother is sitting to the right with her children, protesting. One of the gentlemen alchemists is endeavouring to convince her of the correctness of the recipe by pointing out a passage in the book. A little girl is scraping the last bits of food from the bowl.



Jan Steen was born in Leiden, where his father was a brewer and grain merchant. The date of his birth is not known, but the artist was twenty years old when he enrolled at the University of Leiden in 1646. Two years later he is recorded as one of the founding members of Leiden's newly formed Saint Luke's Guild. Arnold Houbraken states that Steen's artistic education came from Jan van Goyen (Dutch, 1596 - 1656), the Leiden-born landscape painter who had settled in The Hague. According to Jacob Campo Weyerman, Steen had previously studied with Nicolaes Knüpfer (c. 1603–1655) in Utrecht and with Adriaen van Ostade (Dutch, 1610 - 1685) in Haarlem.

Steen married Van Goyen's daughter Margaretha in September 1649, and he appears to have remained in The Hague until 1654. In that year he is recorded on several occasions back in Leiden. From 1654 until 1657 Steen's father leased a Delft brewery by the name of "The Snake" on his son's behalf, and it seems that the artist lived in Delft during those years. From 1656 to 1660 Steen lived at Warmond, a small town near Leiden. The increased interest in still life details and careful finish of the paintings he produced during this period suggest his contact with the work of the Leiden *fijnschilders* (fine painters).

By 1661 Steen had moved to Haarlem, where he entered the Saint Luke's Guild in that year. During the nine years he spent in Haarlem, Steen created many of his greatest paintings, including a number of large, complex scenes of families and merrymakers containing witty evocations of proverbs, emblems, or other moralizing messages. His pictures, which are marked by a sophisticated use of contemporary literature and popular theater, often depict characters from both the Italian *commedia dell'arte* and the native Dutch *rederijkerskamers* (rhetoricians' chambers), although Steen was not a rhetorician himself. In addition to genre subjects, he depicted historical and religious subjects during the 1660s and 1670s. He remained a Catholic all his life.

In 1670, one year after the death of his wife, Steen moved to Leiden, having inherited his father's house. Two years later, he received a license to open an inn, a fact that has contributed to his traditional reputation as a dissolute drunkard. Although he sometimes included his self-portrait in this guise in scenes of apparent immorality and chaos, there is no incriminating evidence—beyond his possession of an acute sense of humor—to suggest that his real life mirrored his art.

In 1673 Steen married Marije Herculens van Egmont, who survived him by eight years. In 1674 he was elected *deken* of the Leiden guild, having served as an officer at the rank of *hoofdman* for the previous three years. There is no record of his having had any pupils, although a number of artists, notably Richard Brakenburg (1650–1702), imitated his style.



Condition Report

The picture is a skilfully crafted 17th century old Dutch masterpiece made by a great artist: it is structurally sound, using excellent materials and painted in a technique of proven durability.

The panel is of an extraordinary radially split single plank of oak. Slightly thinner at the left (seen from the back) and beveled at the upper, lower and right sides. To the left and the right strips of wood are attached with the sole purpose of showing more of the picture to the viewer. The plank is in an excellent condition and shows no sign of warping or wormhole damage. Four owner seals are quite well preserved, there are remnants of another. Two museum stickers are present, the remnants of an old sticker at the lower right and an old Gebroeders Douwes Fine Art sticker.

Though **the panel is in an excellent** condition it once has been treated with a resin like substance, probably Bedacryl, which was very fashionable in the fifties and sixties. An obvious reason for such a treatment does not present itself readily. Apart from some scratch marks at the back edges of the picture made by nails used for framing, there are no signs of wear whatsoever.





The groundlayer is in an excellent condition and shows no sign of flaking or otherwise loosening of the paintlayer associated with structural weaknesses.

The paintlayer is in an overall good condition and well preserved. Though some abrasion due to cleaning is visible in the dark background, only scarce retouching is executed here. The notable exception: one of the planks of the spiraling stairs in the upper middle which was thinly strengthened. Some minor retouching is scattered across the picture, sometimes strengthening the outlines of a face, sometimes tempering slight abrasion due to cleaning: in the foreground some damage due to framing, stretching from the middle edge to the center of the funnel, has been restored.

During previous restoration obviously a decision was made to limit retouching to a minimum, the nature of the overall pigment loss being of such an undisturbing nature that no remedy was necessary.

The signature above the furnace at the upper left is slightly thin.

The varnish layer. The varnish appears a little yellowish under normal light, but is in a way only slightly disturbing to visual appreciation. Inspection under ultraviolet light shows an almost opaque, dullish grey layer of varnish, which hampers the observation of any retouching. This layer also shows traces of partial thinning, probably by mechanical abrasion. A complete cleaning of the picture can be considered and would greatly enhance the colouring.

A few superficial scratches are present in the varnish layer and are of little consequence for the condition of the picture.

The overall condition of the picture is of excellent quality. Though no restoration is necessary at present, cleaning of the picture should be considered because of the slightly yellow colour of the varnish.

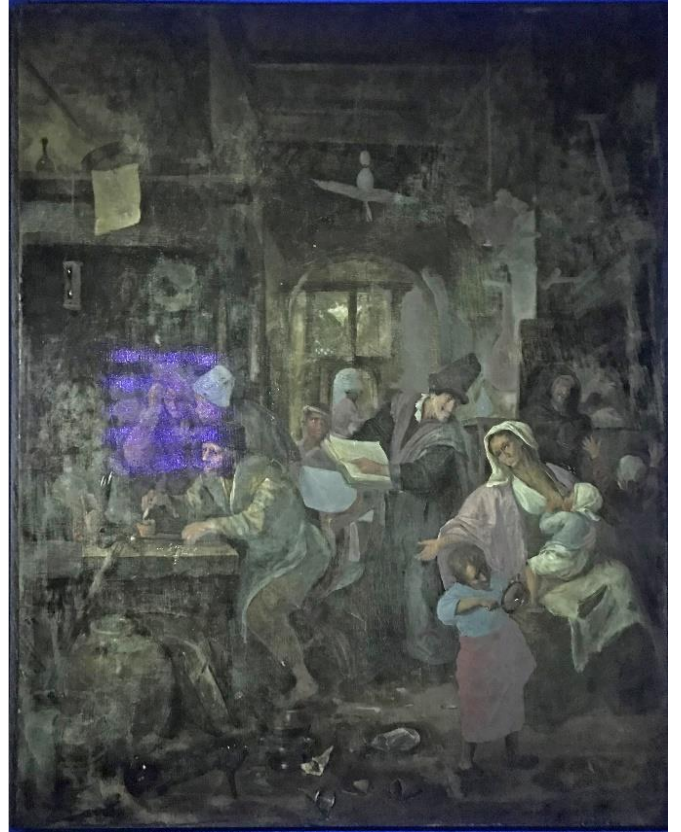
Drs. George Boellaard, Douwes Fine Art, November 2008



Condition report *2022*

Two older layers of varnish have been removed from this painting. One from approximately two decades ago and the other from perhaps half a century ago, or even longer. Only a few of the more recent retouches have been taken off. What is left - and can only be seen under UV light - are remnants of an even older varnish. Presumably these may be very old oil-like residues of a hundred or more years ago that have become insoluble over time. In any case, there exists a very real possibility that the use of stronger solvents to remove these old residues will also damage the original paint. A study of the pigment used could provide a definitive answer as to what kind of 'varnish' it is. When looking under a UV light, these remnants appear somewhat blotchy and irregular, like a whitish veil. Despite this, however, the painting remains clearly visible underneath. These remnants of oily varnish are virtually undetectable to the naked eye, and the painting looks crystal clear with the colours coming out beautifully again. Only a few brief and subtle strokes have been placed in areas that were showing a bit too much wear and tear. The full signature has remained completely intact. There is also a particular text on the piece of paper next to the signature. Despite some fading during the past the text is clearly decipherable, either pointing towards one of Steen's brothers or in context of a client who may have commissioned the painting. In summary, it can be said that this Jan Steen is in excellent condition and barely has any subsequent restoration additions to it. Furthermore, the most recent restoration is completely reversible. Only the remnants of the old oily-like varnish have remained after this latest restoration. It cannot be seen by the naked eye and is not detrimental to the overall condition of this important Jan Steen painting.

Abcoude, The Netherlands - 7 April 2022
Erick Douwes





Dr. A. Blankert
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*Copy of letter, Landed to Evert
 Douwes, Amsterdam, November 95*

TO: Mr Eric M. Wunsch
 New York.

Dr. A. Blankert
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 Tel. & Fax: 070 - 346 08

A. N. B.

The Hague, 17 August 1986

Dear Eric,

During my last visit to New York in November 1985 I studied your painting representing an Alchemist and his company in your apartment. My conclusion was that it is a beautiful and typical work of Jan Steen, belonging to his rich and elaborate compositions. Recently you sent me photographs and a transparency of the picture, enabling me to do some further research and to make comparisons. Now I can inform you that the painting has a long history. It is already described in full as a Steen in the catalogue of the sale of the collection L. van Heemskerck, on 2 September 1771, no. 11, where it was sold for the at that time considerable sum of Hfl. 460,-. It appeared again at the auction W.A. Verbruggen, The Hague, 27 September 1831 under no. 59. In the catalogue it was described in even more detail as one of Steen's best works and it was sold for Hfl. 1105,-. More data on the picture's provenance can be found in J. Smith, A catalogue raisonné..., vol. IV, London, 1833, nr. 128 and in Hofstede de Groot, Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis, vol. 4, 1907, no. 232. More recently the picture was at the Jan Steen exhibition held in Leiden in 1926 as cat. no. 70.

This means that my judgment is supported by an unbroken tradition of more than two centuries.

So it is strange that the picture is listed as "wrongly attributed to Jan Steen" in Karel Braun's book Jan Steen, Lecturama, Rotterdam, 1980, cat.no. B53. This book is a useful compilation, yet contains no new ideas or insights of any kind. To the best of my knowledge Mr. Braun never published any idea or finding in the field of Netherlandish art. I find it surprising and not correct that he ventures into publicly rejecting long established attributions to a major master in a picturebook for the massmarket. I do hope that it will not disturb you in enjoying this very typical and attractive Jan Steen. Experience teaches that in the longer run good pictures do not suffer from unjudicious opinions.

All the very best,

Yours sincerely,

Albert Rijk

I return the transparency and colorphotograph.

** without supplying any reason or argument*



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