

cat. no. 5

Jan Havicksz Steen

1626 – Leiden – 1679

Erysichthon Selling his Daughter Mestra

Signed lower right: JSteen (JS in ligature)

Oil on panel

34 x 29 cm.

Unidentified inventory number '100' in white, lower right

Provenance:

Amsterdam (?), collection d'Ablaing van Giessenburg family¹

The Hague, collection Coenraet baron Droste (1642-1734)

His sale, The Hague, 21 July 1734, lot 39²

Amsterdam / The Hague, collection Gerard II Bicker van Swieten (1687-1753)

His sale, The Hague, 12 April 1741, lot 215³

Russia, collection Golitsyn family, 19th century⁴

Germany, private collection, until 2023

Literature:

G. Hoet, *Catalogus of naamlyst van schilderyen met derzelver pryzen*, 2 vols., The Hague 1752, 1, p. 425, lot 39 (Droste sale); 2, p. 27, lot 207 (Bicker van Swieten sale)

T. van Westrheene, *Jan Steen : étude sur l'art en Hollande*, The Hague 1856, p. 164, cat. no. 409

C. Hofstede de Groot, *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke des hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 10 vols., Esslingen 1907-1928, 1 (1907), p. 19, under cat. no. 73 (present provenance mistakenly given to cat. no. 73) (English ed., 1908, p. 27, under cat. no. 73, idem.)

B.D. Kirschenbaum, *The religious and historical paintings of Jan Steen*, New York 1977, pp. 140-141, under cat. no. 72 (present provenance mistakenly given to cat. no. 72)

K. Braun, *Alle tot nu toe bekende schilderijen van Jan Steen*, Rotterdam 1980, p. 122, under cat. no. A-258 (present provenance mistakenly given to cat. no. A-258)

Jan Steen

Jan Havicksz Steen was born in Leiden in 1626. He was the son of the Catholic beer brewer Havick Jansz Steen (1602-1670) and his wife Elisabeth Capiteyn (d. 1669).⁵ The relative prosperity of his family allowed Steen to attend the Latin school and in 1646, aged twenty, he subscribed to the Leiden University.

Already in 1648, however, Steen left the university without a degree to become a master of the Leiden Guild of Saint Luke, implying that he was trained as a painter before that time. According to Steen's earliest biographer Arnold Houbraken he studied with Jan van Goyen (1596-1656) in The Hague. Jacob Campo Weyerman adds that the painters Nicolaus Knupfer



(1603-1655) in Utrecht and Adriaen van Ostade (1610-1684) in Haarlem were his teachers, respectively. Since Steen married Van Goyen's daughter Margriet in 1649 – thus after becoming a master painter – it seems likely that while in the Van Goyen workshop he didn't merely function as a pupil, but rather as the older master's assistant. Steen, although paying his yearly contribution to the Leiden Guild of Saint Luke, stayed at least six years in The Hague. In 1654 he moved to Delft, where his father leased a brewery for him. After 1657, however, Steen seems to have left the brewery business and headed back to Leiden, where he again paid contribution to the Guild in 1658. That same year he left town, probably to nearby Warmond, where he is documented in 1660. This sojourn was again short-lived, for in August 1660 a son Havick was baptised in Haarlem, where Steen joined the guild in 1661. The following years turned out to be his most productive. After the death of his wife Margriet in 1669, Steen moved back permanently to his native Leiden in 1670. His function as foreman and dean of the guild testifies to his privileged status in the last decade of his life. Steen's unique narrative talents, his witty, satirical social comment, his idiosyncratic style and technical mastery make him one of the quintessential painters of the Golden Age.

A newly discovered painting of a man who sells his daughter for bread

The present, newly discovered work by Jan Steen is a gem-like addition to his known oeuvre, which is estimated to number around 450 paintings. Of these, about 75 are history paintings – works depicting stories from the bible, history, literary sources and mythology – the category to which our work belongs.⁶ An unknown history painting by Steen surfacing is an extremely rare occasion. It last happened in 1987 and 1988, when *The Mocking of Ceres*, now in a private collection and *Bathsheba After the Bath*, in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, appeared in auction. While the composition of the *Bathsheba* had been known through the existence of an old copy, the *Ceres* had only been noted in old auction catalogues (lastly in 1838).⁷ As it turns out, the present work was likewise recorded in the

eighteenth century (see Provenance and below), but in this specific case these early entries have until now mistakenly been connected with another painting, a work to be discussed below. This longstanding error is resolved here.

Painted with arresting care for detail and narrative invention, the scene depicted on our small panel seems a rather peculiar one. On the doorstep of a shed, and situated against a forest landscape background, a rough bearded, sullen man in an open blue jacket receives money from another man, who wears a strange fur hat and fanciful clothes, and has a big purse hanging around his waist. A boy with a blue hat stands next to them, and holds an empty basket in his hand, presumably just until then filled with the loafs of bread now laying in the foreground. A young girl in a dishevelled dress with one breast naked, held by her hand by the bearded man, is weeping inconsolably. Somehow, she, too, seems part of the curious transaction. What is going on here?

Apparently, the painting's strange subject was forgotten early on. The work's earliest recorded appearance is in the deceased sale of the collection of the wealthy poet and art collector Coenraet Droste (1642-1734), held in The Hague in July 1734, where it is listed as lot 39, with measurements, but without determining description. Seven years later the painting is auctioned again, now part of the fabulous collection of the Amsterdam regent Gerard Bicker van Swieten (1687-1753). This time, the work is described as '207. Een Man die zyn Dogter verkoopt voor brood h. 13 d. br. 11 d. door denzelve [Jan Steen] 60- 0' ('A Man who sells his Daughter for bread [...] by the same'). Since the early twentieth century these entries were connected with a painting by Steen in the Rijksmuseum, which depicts the mythological fable of Erysichthon and his daughter Mestra (fig. 1), a rarely encountered subject, that Steen – until now – was thought to have depicted only once.⁸ However, the measurements given in both the Droste and the Bicker van Swieten sale catalogues (13 x 11 inch = c. 33 x c. 28 cm.) rule out the possibility that it could concern the large Rijksmuseum canvas,



Fig. 1 Jan Steen, *Erysichthon Selling his Daughter Mestra*, c. 1665, oil on canvas, 66 x 64 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

which measures 66 x 64 cm. Instead, they perfectly align with our much smaller panel, that with measurements 34 x 29 cm. must clearly be the work listed in both sales.

Mestra and Erysichthon, an Ovidian tale of sacrilege, looming slavery and shape-shifting deceit

A curious case of sacrilege and shift-shaping, the story of Mestra and her father Erysichthon is recounted by Hesiod (c. 750-650 BC)⁹, yet best known in the version recorded by Ovid (43 BC-17 AD) in his *Metamorphoses*, also called ‘The Painters’ Bible’ by Karel van Mander (1548-1606) in his *Wtleggingh* (Explanation on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*).¹⁰ Steen was no doubt familiar with Ovid’s text, which he could either have read in Latin or in Dutch as it was available in translation, and with Van Mander’s comments.¹¹ In the *Metamorphoses*’ eighth book we read how the Greek hero Theseus and his companions, on their way back to Athens following the infamous Calydonian boar hunt, were interrupted by the river Acheloüs having burst its banks following heavy rain. The river’s eponymous river god offered the travellers his house and hospitality, and in his moist atrium a banquet was served. Whereas Ovidian

themes are rare among Steen’s history paintings – he only painted a handful – he depicted this impromptu banquet, as one of the few Northern Netherlandish artists to do so, in a painting datable to around 1660 now in Phoenix (fig. 2).¹² As everyone enjoyed the food and the wine, Acheloüs entertained his guests with stories, one of them about Mestra (book 8, 738-877).

Mestra was the daughter of the rich, sacrilegious miser Erysichthon ‘a man scornful of the gods, who burnt no incense on their altars’.¹³ Erysichthon once violated with his axe a grove sacred to Ceres, the goddess of agriculture and grain. Even for a magnificent holy oak, beneath which the Dryads – tree nymphs – held their festive dances, he would not hold back his disdainful blade. While blood poured out of its damaged bark, the dying tree’s Dryad last outcry was that “punishment will follow blood!” Erysichthon remained unimpressed, but the Dryad’s horrified sisters went to Ceres, begging her for revenge. Infuriated, she immediately sent a messenger to Famine, ordering her to strike Erysichthon with boundless hunger. Thus, Famine travelled to the sleeping sinner ‘and breathed herself into him, covering his throat, and chest, and lips, with her exhalations, causing a lack of nourishment in his hollow veins.’

Erysichthon’s hunger was endless. The more he ate, the greater his desire. His wealth consumed yet his appetite still unappeased, he soon had nothing left. Destitute, he sold his only daughter Mestra, undeserving of such a father. As her buyer took her to the beach, she ran to the shore and shouted out to Neptune: “You god, who stole away the prize of my virginity” (indeed Neptune had taken it) “save me from slavery!” The sea god immediately conceded and turned Mestra into a fisherman. The girl’s buyer looked around puzzled and asked: “You angler, who hides a bronze hook in a little bait, may you have calm sea, and gullible fish, that feel nothing of the hook until they bite. Tell me where she is, the girl with shabby clothes and straggling hair, who stood here on this beach a moment ago!” Mestra – in the guise of the fisherman – replied to him: “Forgive me,



Fig. 2 Jan Steen, *The Banquet of Acheloüs with Theseus, Lelex and Pirithous*, c. 1660, oil on panel, 36 x 46.5 cm., Phoenix, Phoenix Art Museum

whoever you are: no man has been on this beach, except myself, for a long time, and no woman either.” After which the outplayed man backed off, and her true shape was restored. When Erysichthon realised that Mestra could change shape, he often sold her to others. That way she repeatedly obtained her price, dishonestly, for her gluttonous father, escaping her buyers minutes later in the form of a mare, or a bird, a heifer or a hind. In the end though, cursed and hungry Erysichthon tore his limbs apart ‘and fed his miserable body by eating it.’

The painting

Following this outrageous tale Acheloüs and his guests talked some more about shape-shifting (and Acheloüs’ own abilities in that field) until it was time for Theseus and his entourage to head back to Athens. Likewise, let us return to Steen’s painting. Steen, we recognise, depicted the moment of transaction

between the buyer and Erysichthon at his doorstep, who is about to hand over the sobbing Mestra. The firm loafs of bread in the foreground must be part of the trade-off, but their presence seems redundant with the financial transaction that simultaneously takes place. Steen will surely have looked at the sparse depictions of the subject, straightforward prints which invariably show the financial exchange, either with or without Mestra present (figs. 3-6). Food, though, is conspicuously absent from these earlier renderings, but with good reason Steen felt it to be a quintessential narrative element to the fable, as he included it prominently in both the Rijksmuseum painting and the present work.¹⁴

Other elements remain more oblique. Ovid does not mention an assistant to Mestra’s buyer, but in our painting the boy with his basket is an integral part of the scene.¹⁵ As more often, Steen seems to

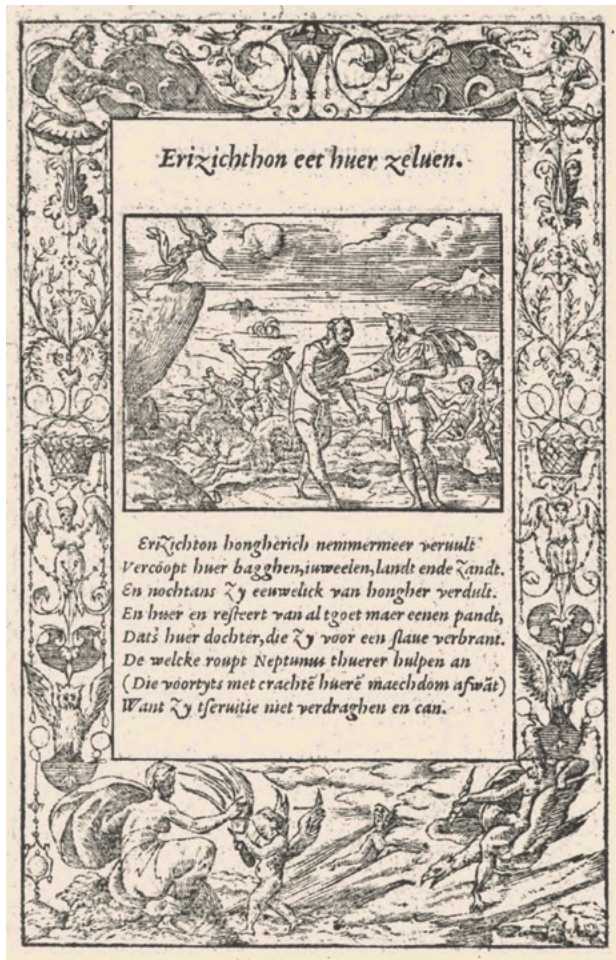


Fig. 3 Bernard Salomon, *Erysichthon Selling his Daughter Mestra*, woodcut, in: Guillaume Borluit, *Excellente figueren ghesneden vuyten vppersten poëte Ovidius vuyt vyfthien boucken der veranderinghen met huerlier bedietsele*, Lyon 1557 (illustrated Dutch edition of the *Metamorphoses*)

have taken inspiration from prints by Rembrandt (1606-1669).¹⁶ Two of these, the strongly related *Rat-Catcher* (1632) and *Beggars Receiving Alms at the Door* (1648) depict genre scenes concerning transactions on the doorstep. In the first, a man in a doorway dismisses a pedlar and his young assistant, who, in analogy with the present boy, stands in between these men while carrying a box. Seen in reverse, the print's visual alignment with Steen's painting, not only in the grouping of the figures, but also in the action taking place being directed towards one side of the picture plane, is striking (fig. 7). Just as Steen's buyer, Rembrandt's rat-catcher wears a grotesque fur hat, and although clearly a shabbier character, he likewise carries a firm purse around his waist.¹⁷



Fig. 5 Antonio Tempesta, *Erysichthon Selling his Daughter Mestra*, 1606, etching, 10.4 x 11.7 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



Fig. 4 Crispijn van de Passe, *Erysichthon Visited by Famine and Selling his Daughter Mestra*, 1602/07, engraving, 8.6 x 13 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



Fig. 6 Johann Wilhelm Baur, *Erysichthon Selling his Daughter Mestra*, 1641, etching, 13 x 20.7 cm., London, British Museum



Fig. 7 Rembrandt, *The Rat-Catcher*, 1632, etching, 14 x 12.5 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (image reversed)



Fig. 8 Rembrandt, *Beggars Receiving Alms at the Door*, 1648, etching, 16.6 x 12.9 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (image reversed)

The second etching, touching more explicitly on poverty, shows a pecuniary transaction similar to that in our painting (fig. 8).¹⁸ Steen was certainly aware of this etching, which he employed for his famous *Burgher of Delft* of 1655, a painting that likewise centres around a doorstep transaction between two adults, with a boy in between them and a girl to the side, and shows – in reverse – unexpected affinity with our painting (fig. 9).¹⁹ A third Rembrandt etching that resonates in our painting is his *Dismissal of Hagar* of 1637 (fig. 10), which Steen, as has been pointed out, harvested for his own rendition of the subject, the painting now in Dresden, and datable to c. 1662 (fig. 11).²⁰ A thematically related Old Testament subject involving a man and a crying woman having to leave the household involuntarily, Abraham is seen parting from the tearful Hagar and their son Ismael, while standing at his doorstep in a pose that is (again in reverse) surprisingly similar to Erysichthon's (figs. 12, 13). Steen's explicit indebtedness to this theme is evidenced once more by an engraving of the same



Fig. 9 Jan Steen, *A Burgomaster of Delft*, 1655, oil on canvas, 82.5 x 68.5 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (image reversed)



Fig. 10 J Rembrandt, *The Dismissal of Hagar*, 1637, etching and dry point, 12.6 x 9.5 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



Fig. 12 Detail of fig. 10, Abraham (image reversed)



Fig. 13 Detail of cat. no. 5, Erysichthon

subject by Rembrandt's and Steen's famous Leiden predecessor (and hero) Lucas van Leyden (1494-1533) (fig. 14). From her sad, upward gaze and her hand sweeping her tears, to the position and shape of her feet, Steen based his *Mestra* directly on Lucas's *Hagar* (figs. 15, 16).²¹



Fig. 11 Jan Steen, *The Dismissal of Hagar*, c. 1662, oil on canvas, 136 x 109 cm., Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister

Yet whereas the intense drama in Rembrandt's and Lucas's *Dismissal of Hagar* prints is palpable, we might call into question the nature of Steen's depiction. Which sale of *Mestra* are we actually witnessing? The first? If so, *Mestra*'s tears of despair are genuine, for in addition to the shivering realisation that her own father is selling her, she is about to be enslaved to a stranger. Unaware yet of the divine gift – shift-shaping – that Neptune has in store for her, this is a terrifying prospect. Yet, if on the other hand this is rather one of the many subsequent sales, the situation is entirely different. Once father and daughter realise the opportunities that *Mestra*'s new talent offers, the subsequent sales take on the form of theatrical melodrama, with corresponding crocodile tears! After all, mere minutes after the emotional transaction *Mestra* will simply shift-shape and return to her father for another performance. Ovid cleverly underlines deceit as central to the story, when he elaborates on the nature of the fisherman, who hides a hook in his bait, and thus deceives the 'gullible fish [...]



Fig. 14 Lucas van Leyden, *The Dismissal of Hagar*, 1516, engraving, 14.8 x 12.3 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



Fig. 15 Detail of fig. 14 Hagar (image reversed)

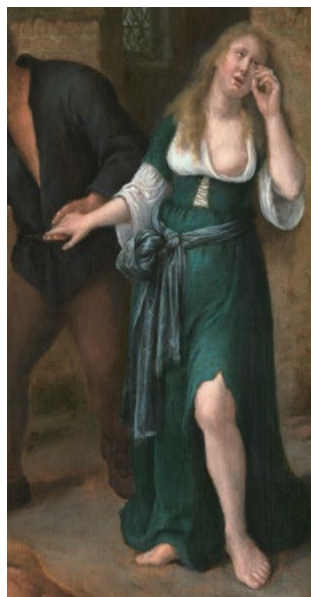


Fig. 16 Detail of cat. no. 5, Mestra

until they bite'. Indeed, Steen not only alludes to the unsavoury buyer's susceptibility – he thinks he is buying a bare-breasted girl but ends up empty-handed – by depicting him in a theatrical costume, he also references Mestra's deceit by depicting the angler, sitting at the shore with his fishing rod. The same character likewise appears at the right in the larger Rijksmuseum painting (figs. 17, 18). Still, Mestra's deceit results from her loyalty. Absent from Ovid's narrative but present in both of Steen's paintings is the dog. While its inclusion may well reference Mestra's many animal transformations, the fact that the dog wears a clearly visible collar will surely allude to the daughter's faithfulness towards her father's case, despite his appalling behaviour. Referencing Erysichthon's initial offense – the cause of his misery – Steen painted the cut-down oak in the middle background.

What, lastly, can be said about the Hollyhock, or Mallow, the plant with the white flowers depicted so prominently in the left foreground? Is it simply a pretty *repoussoir* for the composition? Probably not. The plant's Dutch seventeenth century name was Maluwe, and one is instructed about its medicinal use in several medical handbooks popular at the time, such as *Den schat der armen oft een medecijn-boeckken* from 1626, in which the author states that leaves of Maluwe (mixed with water, egg yolk and some violet oil) are 'well used for an enema, when experiencing intestinal pain.'²² Similarly, the Dutch doctor Johan van Beverwijck (1594-1647) discusses the plant's effects in his often-reprinted *Schat der gesontheit* (1636), offering several classical authors' opinions. Cicero (106-43 BC), he says, complained that Maluwe gave him 'den loop' (diarrhoea). Horace (65-8 BC) praised the plant 'saying that Maluwe is of service and healthy to the bloated, constipated, or heavy body' and the antique doctor Galen (129-216 AD) noticed that its sap 'makes the stomach weak, and gives easy bowel movement'.²³ Finally, Beverwijck quotes a satirical epigram by the Roman poet Martialis (c. 40-104 AD):

*'Add Maluwe and lettuce to your dish / That will cause a rapid squish / Never forget it, it's an old rut / For as your posture betrays, you have a bloated gut.'*²⁴



Fig. 17 Detail of cat. no. 5, the fisherman



Fig. 18 Detail of fig. 1, fisherman

The plant, in short, was well-known to be a laxative, and Steen's choice to include it so prominently in his depiction of this fable about a man who eats exorbitantly must surely be understood as fecal mockery. As such, and in keeping with our general understanding of Steen as a painter of the comic mode, it confirms Steen's specific angle. A strange and unusual subject choice to begin with – typically Steen – he highlighted those aspects that he recognised as humorous. Whereas Van Mander in his *Wyleggingh* confined himself to the story's moral warnings by addressing Erysichthon's gluttony, his intemperate greed and his sacrilege, and while the existing pictorial tradition merely provided lacklustre imagery, Steen took an original approach and focused on the comedy of Erysichthon's hysterical food consumption (the unloaded basket with huge breads), mocking its gastroenterological consequences (the laxative reference) and giving centre stage to the deceit (the crocodile tears, the shift-shaped fisherman and the misled buyer). He did so, among others, by infusing his history with genre imagery.

Humour cannot exist without a moral counterweight. After all, the idea that what goes around comes around is fundamentally at the base of the present narrative. It goes for the unsympathetic Erysichthon, who is gruesomely punished for his sacrilege, and

it applies to Mestra's unscrupulous buyers, who end up empty handed. Such duality fits in neatly with what Mariët Westermann, when discussing Steen's historical output, has described as 'history as tragicomedy'.²⁵ In the end, it all comes down to communicating emotions and superior storytelling, Steen's most outstanding quality. Beyond the mockery, our painting also centers around Mestra's compassion, another of the fable's key elements. Despite her father's ruinous gluttony and his maltreatment of her, she supports him in his self-inflicted misery, even if it means she will have to pull a scam for it, over and over again. Yet rather than a victim, Mestra is really the hero of this dark comedy. While she, without any wrongdoing, faces terrible misfortune – rape, a despicable father, deep poverty, and looming enslavement – she refuses to give in. She proactively demands her payback from Neptune when push comes to shove, and chooses to save the day, to give her performance, employ her divine talent, help her cursed father and cleverly lead her buyers astray.

Dating

With only about 45 dated paintings (c. 10% of his oeuvre) the chronology of Jan Steen's work from his earliest output in the late 1640s to his death in 1679 is a notoriously complicated affair.²⁶ A point in case is the Rijksmuseum *Erysichthon*, which

has been variously dated between c. 1655 until the late 1670s, most recently around 1665-1667.²⁷ Dendrochronological research has provided a plausible date for the creation of the present painting from 1640 upwards.²⁸ Essentially a *terminus post quem* and thus not a valid argument against a later date, the idea of a relatively early dating (Steen's earliest works date from the later 1640s) aligns with the art historical context provided above. However, our painting's neat execution and refined technique do not seem to match Steen's earliest phase. Steen's active involvement with Rembrandt's doorstep etchings took place between 1655, the year Steen painted his *Burgher of Delft* and c. 1662, the proposed date of *The Dismissal of Hagar*, for which Steen likewise looked at Lucas van Leyden's *Hagar* engraving, as demonstrated the basis for the figure of Mestra. Moreover, the present painting's composition remains closer to the subject's then-existent pictorial tradition than the Rijksmuseum work, which tentatively suggests a preceding, rather than a subsequent effort. Then again, Steen expert Wouter Kloek has alertly pointed out the strong parallels between Mestra and the figure of Tobias in Steen's *Marriage of Tobias and Sarah* in San Francisco, datable to c. 1671-1673 (fig. 19).²⁹ While a later dating cannot be ruled out, an earlier dating c. 1655-1662, following the arguments presented, seems plausible.

JH



Fig. 19 Jan Steen, *The Marriage of Tobias and Sarah*, c. 1671-1673, oil on canvas, 104.1 x 127.6 cm., San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Legion of Honour, detail of Tobias

Notes

- 1 The d'Ablaing van Giessenburg provenance follows from the black wax seal with the family's coat of arms on the reverse of the panel. I thank Olivier Mertens (Artmorial) for his identification and further discussions (report available on request). The seal is very old, possibly seventeenth century, reason why the d'Ablaing van Giessenburg provenance is here tentatively listed before the Droste and Bicker van Swieten provenance. The only 17th century family member with a demonstrable art collection was Jan d'Ablaing (d'Ableing, D'Ablijn) (1601-in or before 1657) from Amsterdam. His inventory of 25 June 1644 lists some 50 paintings, among them a large *Venus* by Rembrandt, estimated at 400 guilders (Montias Database: <https://research.frick.org/montias/details/491>, website accessed January 2024). Theoretically he could have been the owner of our painting, provided it was executed before 1657, the year Jan's 'sterfhuijs' is referenced in the inventory of his mother Anna Heldewier (see <https://archieff.amsterdam/archief/5075/2408>, fol. 61, no. 8, website accessed January 2024). Motivations for drawing up the 1644 inventory remain unclear, possibly Jan went bankrupt (in which case maintaining an art collection would have been less likely). His name has not been found in the Amsterdam burial registers, possibly implying a move elsewhere. Of course, the present wax seal could belong to other – possibly later – family members.
- 2 Lugt no. 442; Hoet 1752, I, pp. 423-430, p. 425: '39 Een fraei Stuk zeer konstig en uytvoerig geschildert door Jan Steen, h. 13 d. br. 11 d.' ('A fine Piece very artful and elaborately painted by Jan Steen, 13 x 11 inch'). While the measurements (13 x 11 inch = c. 33 x c. 28 cm.) equal those of the present work, an identifying description lacks. However, the same work was again auctioned in the 1741 Bicker van Swieten sale with identical measurements and fitting description (see Provenance and following note). The identification of the Droste sale painting with Steen's work in the Bicker van Swieten sale is strongly supported by the fact that many other works from the Droste sale likewise reappear in the Bicker van Swieten sale: D 31 (Van der Werff) = BvS 73; D 38 (Metsu) = BvS 143; D 40 (Dou) = BvS 64; D 77 (Willem van Mieris) = BvS 191; D 83 (Wouwerman) = BvS 125; D 86 (Frans van Mieris the Elder) = BvS 51; D 94 (Van Baalen) = BvS 47; D 100 (Asselijn) = BvS 218; D 103 (Rottenhammer) = BvS 44, D 108 (Spranger) = BvS 247.
- 3 Lugt no. 537; Hoet 1752, 2, pp. 10-30, p. 27 (mistakenly as 12 April 1731, mistakenly as lot 207): "Een Man die zyn Dogter verkoopt voor brood h. 13 d. br. 11 d. door denzelve [Jan Steen] 60- o' ('A Man who sells his Daughter for bread 13 x 11 inch by the same [Jan Steen] 60-o'). This is undoubtedly the present painting. The only other work that fits the description (but not the measurements) is Steen's much larger picture with the same subject in the Rijksmuseum. Since Hofstede de Groot 1907, cat. no. 72, it has been incorrectly assumed that the Rijksmuseum painting was the work auctioned in the Droste and Bicker van Swieten sales (see the text for a broader discussion).
- 4 The Golitsyn provenance follows from the red wax seal with the family's coat of arms on the reverse of the panel. I thank Olivier Mertens (Artmorial) for his identification. Mertens identifies the seal as 19th century, and tentatively suggests two possible owners: Prince Mikhail Alexandrovich Golitsyn (1804-1860) a.k.a. Michel Galitzine, a prominent Russian diplomat in Madrid and a.o. "écuyer de la cour" and "conseiller privé" (Geheimrat) of the Tsar, a writer and bibliophile known as a "connoisseur of fine arts"; or his son, Prince Sergey Mikhailovich Golitsyn (1843-1915). Report available on request.
- 5 For an extensive biography, see: M.J. Bok, 'The Life of Jan Steen', in: H.P. Chapman, W.Th. Kloek, A.K. Wheelock, Jr., *Jan Steen : painter and storyteller*, exh. cat. Washington, National Gallery of Art, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum 1996-1997, pp. 25-37.
- 6 See A. van Suchtelen, 'A Storyteller of Genius: Jan Steen and the Art of History Painting', in: A. van Suchtelen et al., *Jan Steen's Histories*, exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis 2018, p. 11.
- 7 *The Mocking of Ceres*, c. 1665/70, oil on canvas, 73.2 x 61.2 cm., private collection, surfaced in a sale, London, Christie's, 10 April 1987, lot 4. It had last been recorded in a sale, London, Christie's, 8 June 1839, lot 56. See Kirschenbaum 1977, cat. no. 72; Braun 1980, cat. no. A.30; A. van Suchtelen, in: The Hague 2018, pp. 150-153, cat. no. 17. Steen's *Bathsheba after the Bath*, signed, c. 1670/75, oil on panel, 58 x 45 cm., Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, surfaced in an auction in Paris, Hotel George V, Paris, 28 June 1988, lot 50. For the copy in the Museum der bildenden Künste, Leipzig, see: Kirschenbaum 1977, addendum, no. 12; Braun 1980, cat. no. B.51. I wish to thank Steen expert Ariane van Suchtelen, curator of the *Jan Steen's Histories* exhibition in the Mauritshuis, The Hague, for sharing her information with me.
- 8 Tellingly, the subject of the Rijksmuseum painting was not recognized either until 1907. See N.N., *Catalogus van schilderijen van Oud-Hollandsche meesters : collectie C. Hoogendijk*, exh. cat. The Hague, Pulchri Studio 1899, p. 10, cat. no. 69, as *De ruil* ('The exchange'). Hofstede de Groot 1907, cat. no. 72 was the first to identify the subject, but mistakenly connected the work to the Droste and Bicker van Swieten sales. See further: C.W. de Groot, *Jan Steen : beeld en woord*, Utrecht/Nijmegen 1952, pp. 68-70 (1670s); L. de Vries, *Jan Steen : de schilderende Uilenspiegel*, Amsterdam 1976, pp. 26, 40, fig. 8 (c. 1655); Kirschenbaum 1977, cat. no. 73 (c. 1667); Braun 1980, cat. no. 258

- (c. 1665-1667); M. Westermann, *The Amusements of Jan Steen : Comic Painting in the Seventeenth Century*, Zwolle 1997, pp. 20-21 (fig. 4), 279, 285 (c. 1658-1661); W. Kloek, *Jan Steen (1626-1679)*, Zwolle/Amsterdam 2005, pp. 28, 30, fig. 21; Van Suchtelen 2018, pp. 10-31, pp. 24-25, fig. 24 (c. 1665-1667). For an overview of the subject's modest pictorial tradition, see J. van Tatenhove, 'Een episode uit de fabel van Erysichthon getekend door Maarten de Vos', in: *Oud Holland* 97 (1983), pp. 53-58, with further references.
- 9 See for an interesting take on Hesiod's version of the myth K. Ormand, 'Marriage, Identity, and the Tale of Mestra in the Hesiodic Catalogue of Women Author(s)', in: *The American Journal of Philology* 125/3 (2004), pp. 303-338.
 - 10 The following makes use of the translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* by A.S. Kline (2000). See <https://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Ovhome.htm#askline> (website accessed December 2023). In addition, I consulted the Dutch translation by M. d'Hane-Scheltema, Amsterdam 1993. For Van Mander's well-known comments on the *Metamorphoses*, see his 'Wtleghingh op den Metamorphosis Pub. Ouidij Nasonis', in: K. van Mander, *Het Schilder-Boeck*, Haarlem 1604, esp. 'Voor-reden', fol. 4v ('t'Schilders Bybel'), and book 8, fol. 72v-73r, for comments on the story of Mestra and Erysichthon.
 - 11 For a careful analysis of the advancement of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in writing and in art during the sixteenth and seventeenth century, see E.J. Sluijter, 'Ovidius' Herschepingen herschapen : Over de popularisering van mythologische thematiek in beeld en woord' in: J. Bloemendal, A.A. Sneller (eds.), *Bronnen van inspiratie : Receptie van de klassieken in de vroegmoderne Nederlanden in muziek, literatuur en beeldende kunst (De Zeventiende Eeuw 32 (2007))*, pp. 45-76.
 - 12 Kirschenbaum 1977, cat. no. 69b; Braun 1980, cat. no. 116; Van Suchtelen 2018, pp. 16-17, fig. 8. See also J.B.F. van Gils, 'Theseus bij Acheloüs van Jan Steen', in: *Oud Holland* 57 (1940), pp. 145-148. In addition to (1) the present work; (2) the Rijksmuseum *Erysichthon*; and (3) *The Banquet of Acheloüs*, the remaining paintings by Steen with Ovidian themes are: (4) *Vertumnus and Pomona*, last mentioned in a sale in Dordrecht, J.A. van Dam, 1 June 1829, lot 120; (5) *The Mocking of Ceres* in a private collection (see above, note 7); and (6) *The Sacrifice of Ephigenia*, New York, The Leiden Collection. See Kirschenbaum 1977, cat. nos. 71, 72, 74. Kirschenbaum's cat. no. 75, 'Fabel van Mitra, uit Naso', as mentioned by Houbraken with reference to pickled herrings, must be the *Erysichthon* in the Rijksmuseum (Mitra = Mestra), as rightly observed by Westermann 1997, p. 21.
 - 13 Erysichthon is traditionally known to be the king of Thas-saly, but this is not mentioned by Ovid, nor by Van Man-der, Steen's most likely sources. Ovid mentions his wealth (book 8, 846), and it likewise follows from the fact that he has workers, one of whom he kills with his axe.
 - 14 De Groot 1952, p. 70 cleverly connects the bread and herring in the Rijksmuseum painting with the food traditionally eaten in Leiden at the yearly celebration of the city's liberation from the Spanish siege, the so-called 'Leids ontzet' (3 October 1574), when the Watergeuzen brought white bread and herring to Leiden's starving population. This would be a most appropriate and funny reference, both regarding Erysichthon's permanent starvation and Steen's (and possibly the commissioner of the painting's) Leiden origins.
 - 15 The boy with his blue hat and wicker basket recalls fisher boys, such as those painted by Frans Hals. That Steen here alluded to the fisherman in the fable seems, however, unlikely. The boy's function here is to carry along the breads now laying on the ground. Moreover, in Steen's *Erysichthon* in the Rijksmuseum a similar boy carrying a basket full of bread can be seen in the background.
 - 16 See Westermann 1997, pp. 209-211; J. Hillegers, in: J. Hillegers, W. Wagenaar-Burgemeester, *Salomon Lilian Old Masters 2012*, Amsterdam 2012, pp. 62-71, cat. no. 14, p. 70; W. Kloek, 'Jan Steen, His Repertoire of Motifs and History Painting', in: The Hague 2018, pp. 32-53, pp. 42-44.
 - 17 See, among others, G. Luijten, in: E. Hinterding, G. Luijten, M. Royalton-Kisch, *Rembrandt the Printmaker*, exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, London, British Museum 2000-2001, pp. 122-125, cat. no. 18.
 - 18 For a discussion of this print and related works dealing with poverty and charity, see G. Luijten, in: E. de Jongh, G. Luijten, *Mirror of everyday life : genreprints in the Netherlands 1550-1700*, exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum 1997, pp. 276-280, cat. no. 56; see also G. Luijten, in: Amsterdam/London 2000-2001, pp. 250-253, cat. no. 60.
 - 19 See P.H. Chapman, in: Washington/Amsterdam 1996-1997, pp. 119-121, cat. no. 7; E.J. Sluijter, 'Jan Steen en de milddadigheid van de Delftse burger', in: *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 56 (2008), pp. 312-331, esp. pp. 317-319, fig. 6.
 - 20 Westermann 1997, pp. 294-295, figs. 175, 176; Kloek 2018, pp. 41-43, figs. 18, 20.
 - 21 Kloek 2018, pp. 41-43, fig. 19 likewise connects Lucas's engraving to Steen's *Dismissal of Hagar* in Dresden.
 - 22 H. Jacobs, *Den schat der armen oft een medecijn-boecxken*, Antwerp 1626, p. 66: 'Neemt Maluwe sietse in water en doeter by een doyer van een eye met een lepel vol olye van Violetten, is goet ghebruyckt voor een Clisteri, in pijn der Dermen.'
 - 23 J. van Beverwijck, *Schat der gesontheit* (first published 1636), in: *Alle de wercken*, Amsterdam 1660, pp. 95-96: 'Soo klaegt Cicero dat hy van veel Beet en Maluwe te eten

den loop ghekregeen heeft [...] met den welcken de Lati-
jnsche Poët Horatius oock stemt, wanneer hy seyt dat de
Maluwe het verladen en verstoppt ofte swaer lichaem dien-
stigh en gesont is. [...] seyt Galenus [...] dan het sap ofte
bloedt dat daer van komt, is wat dickachtig. Sy maect
den buyck week, en doet lichten kamerganck hebben.’

- 24 Ibidem.: ‘Laet Maluw en Lattouw tot uwen dis genaken,
/ Dat sal u door het lijf een rassen af-gangh maken: /
Vergeet dit nimmermeer, het is een out gebruyck; / Want
naer u wesen toont, ghy hebt een harden buyck
- 25 Westermann 1997, chapter 7, ‘History as Tragicomedy’;
M. Westermann, ‘Jan Steens historische parade’, in: *The
Hague* 2018, pp. 54-72.
- 26 See Kloek 2018, pp. 36-40. For an overview of dated
paintings, see Braun 1980, p. 83.
- 27 See note 8.
- 28 The panel exists of one plank of Baltic oak. A total of 223
heartwood rings were counted, the last one dating from
1623. To this can be added a minimum of nine years of
sapwood rings, and a minimum of two years seasoning of
the wood, resulting in an earliest date for the panel to be
ready to be painted on from 1634. Under the assumption
of a median of 15 sapwood rings a creation is plausible
from 1640 upwards. I thank Sjoerd van Daalen (Van
Daalen Dendrochronologie) for his dendrochronological
research, January 2024. Report available on request.
- 29 Kloek tentatively suggests a late dating for the painting,
following a first-hand inspection, together with Ariane
van Suchtelen, Amsterdam, November 2023.