

Jan Steen's *The Worship of the Golden Calf*

M. Therese Southgate, MD

Jan Steen (1626-1679),
*The Worship of the
Golden Calf*, c. 1671-
1672, Dutch. Oil on
canvas. 178.4 x 155.6
cm.



More than 300 years after his death, Jan Steen (1626-1679) is still identified primarily as a genre painter of Dutch middle- and lower-class life. In sharp contrast to the calm, ordered interiors of his contemporaries, Pieter de Hooch, for example, or Jan Vermeer, Steen's pictures show the tidy Dutch life gone awry: messy kitchens, drunken scullery maids, lazy housewives, unruly children, even the bedlam of tavern interiors. Indeed, when the Dutch wished to describe a disordered household, they used the phrase "a Jan Steen household." Moreover, because Steen's father had been a brewer and Steen himself was an innkeeper, biographers assumed the paintings were autobiographical, that Steen himself was often drunk. Matters were not helped when Steen sometimes included his own likeness in the paintings. Whatever the facts may be, the picture Steen's early biographers painted of him is not entirely accurate. Among the 800 or so works he painted (more than half of which remained in his possession, unsold, at his death) were a sizable number of history, religious, and mythological subjects—enough, certainly, to establish, in addition to his reputation for genre, a respectable reputation as a history painter.

Early in his career Steen's history paintings concentrated mainly on stories from the New Testament. Later, he turned to Greek and Roman history and to the Old Testament, with dramatic narratives of figures such as Iphigenia, Scipio, Anthony and Cleopatra, Tobias and Sarah, David and Goliath, Bathsheba, Laban, Moses, Esther, Tamar, and Samson, among them. *The Worship of the Golden Calf* is one of these.

If it was painted sometime around 1671 or 1672 as is believed, Steen would have been in the midst of major disruptions in his life, including, within a short period, the loss of his wife of 20 years and his father as well as the removal of his household from Haarlem, where he had worked for almost 10 years, to his native Leiden and into his father's house. The country, meanwhile, was being marked by political and economic upheaval. In a surprise attack, Louis XIV (with the tacit support of the English monarch) invaded the Dutch Republic. The

country was saved from the French only when the newly created Willem III of Orange, apparently considering the sea the lesser of two evils, opened the sluice gates and flooded the countryside. It was about this time, probably as a result of the ensuing economic hardship, that Steen opened a tavern in his father's house. It is also probably this action that provided so much grist for his early biographers.

At first glance, *The Worship of the Golden Calf* looks as confused and disordered as a "Steen household." Such is not the case, however. The journey through the picture is well marked, allowing the spectator to "read" it quite easily. Using Chapter 32 of Exodus, Steen has set up the narrative loosely in quadrants. The lower half of the work consists of a solid wall of people, more or less contemporary, more or less life size, while the upper half, clearly depicting a far distant time, consists of tiny figures dancing in a circle around a column. (Their serpentine grace brings to mind the dancing figures of Matisse at the Hermitage.) The figures of the golden calf and of Aaron offering incense are clearly visible in the right upper quadrant. Behind them is Mount Sinai, where Moses has been delayed. In the left upper quadrant, the figure of a young boy hangs precariously from a tree branch, Steen's nod, perhaps, to the putti of Renaissance paintings. The left lower quadrant is the men's section. They are soldiers, drummers, musicians, each intent on wooing one of the women. The right lower quadrant, by contrast, is almost exclusively women, engaged in the activities of women: at the far right, cooking, toward the center nursing, singing, and, prominently on the right, an old woman offering a coin to a young girl bedecked with fresh flowers, a symbol of what the Dutch refer to as *de flouerien*.

All of this is, however, but a prop for the two figures in the center of the foreground. Enclosed in a roughly inverted triangle they are engaged in a transaction whose outcome cannot be doubted. If Steen's viewers needed further confirmation of the intent, he obliged them with the triangle and baton held by the man and the cup of wine and urn held by the woman. And, if doubtful viewers still needed prompting, Steen has painted a still life—worthy of a frame to itself—in the lower right corner. The half eaten loaf of bread, the overturned pitcher, the split melon, the Pipes of Pan, and, at the very bottom edge of the canvas, a gourd (on which Steen signed his name). Steen's likeness is also on the face of the man with the triangle. Like other Dutch painting of the 17th century, Steen's work pointed a moral. Sometimes he spelled out the letters of a Dutch motto on the canvas; sometimes there was no need for words. Here, for example, over at the left margin of the canvas, the moral takes the form of a tiny, curly-headed child with a parrot on his wrist. Nearly lost in the wilderness of figures, it serves as a *vanitas* symbol, warning the viewer of the insatiability of lust, the brevity of gratification. In addition, the viewer's own background would also make Steen's admonition explicit. For example, in a kind of time warp, he places the behavior of his own countrymen against the background of a scripture scene that is well known to them. But even for those who do not care about the moral, Steen has a message of beauty. For them he provides a lush, brilliantly colored scene of music and dance, food, flowers, and glitter, truly "an embarrassment of riches."

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