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## **The Humor of Jan Steen**

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The work of seventeenth century Dutch painter Jan Steen is a breath of fresh air divergent to the work of his colleagues. His farcical style coalesced with the wit and irony of his subjects produced a vast collection of interesting work. Over the course of his very productive life, Jan Steen produced over 800 paintings using various styles and themes. One piece in particular embodies Steen's style and is superbly characteristic of many of his works. Currently on display at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, *The Doctor's Visit* is one from many of Steen's paintings depicting doctors' visits to young women suffering from the sickness of love. *The Doctor's Visit* personifies the work of Jan Steen and is a seamless example of his originality in seventeenth century Dutch art.

In a good portion of Steen's work, he includes a very prominent element of farce. Similar to *The Doctor's Visit*, *The Love-Sick Woman* has much irony and humor. In both pieces, a sickly looking woman is being aided by an oddly dressed and humorous looking doctor. This was one of many ways Steen attempted to lighten the mood of his work and add to the overall theme. Other comical elements of the painting include an erotic painting that hangs above the woman's bed, in which a reclined couple embraces each other. There is also a statue of cupid in the bottom right hand corner which hints to the fact that the woman is not sick with a genuine disease, but she is sick from love. Returning to *The Doctor's Visit*, these paintings "are not commentaries of on the social conditions of the times, but are meant to be illustrations of the kind of sickness which medicine can never cure" (Rosenberg 173). The reoccurring theme of lovesick women in Steen's work once again is present in *The Doctor's Visit*. The painting itself dates from 1660-1665 and the medium is oil on panel. A relatively small piece, sizing 18 1/8 x 14 1/2 inches, the focus of the painting is a woman seated on a bed looking depressed and ill. A doctor lingers over her apparently attempting to take her pulse. The Doctor expression implies that he is

shocked by perhaps the speed of her pulse. The cause of her pounding pulse is presumably the man standing in the doorway, who is safe to say the reason for her illness (Burgler, 141). To the right of the love-sick woman, a maid is smiling and seems to be amused with the woman's situation and clearly understands that she is in love. Although Steen does paint non humor filled themes such as Bible and landscape scenes, his works that include his coin comedic aspect are what differentiates him from other seventeenth century Dutch artists.

Throughout his career, Steen's sharp wit and good humor fail to expire; his outstanding sense of humor, among other things, separates him from the crowd of artists during his era. Aside from this, Steen enjoyed exhibiting a wide range of themes that included mythological, historical, religious, and out-of-doors based paintings. It was his lightheartedness and attention to humor that defines him. In *The Doctor's Visit*, the comical vibe is very strong. In most of Steen's paintings, he liked to include entertaining, satirizing, and moralizing motifs (Rosenberg 169). This was uncommon amongst the artists of his time. Unlike his famous contemporary Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, Jan Steen brought humor and lightheartedness to the forefront of some of his painting. *The Doctor's Visit* is an ideal example of this. The amused expression on the maid's face in addition to the humor behind the whole concept of the painting is a perfect example of Jan Steen's style.

A copious amount art came out of the Netherlands during the seventeenth century, and during that time there were many styles. Much of Dutch art, however, shared similar themes. Jan Steen was very original and this was apparent through his painting *The Doctor's Visit*. His humorous themes made him stand out as an artist and distinguished him from the artists of his age. *The Doctor's Visit*, in particular displayed all of the characteristics of Steen's work that

made him stand. The lighthearted motif, the implicit sense of humor, and the irony of the painting really embodied Jan Steen's style.

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