



Jan Steen
Dutch, 1625/1626 - 1679

Ascagnes and Lucelle (The Music Lesson)

1667

oil on canvas

overall: 62.1 × 52 cm (24 7/16 × 20 1/2 in.)

framed: 86.04 × 75.57 × 10.16 cm (33 7/8 × 29 3/4 × 4 in.)

Inscription: lower right, on music book, J and S entwined: JSteen / 1667

Corcoran Collection (William A. Clark Collection) 2014.136.45

ENTRY

Jan Steen's delightfully suggestive painting about love and desire is played out in a courtship ritual that is both universal in its human dynamics and distinctive in the way it unfolds. [1] Music serves here as a metaphor for love, as an infatuated young woman strumming her lute looks imploringly at her companion while he reaches over to pluck the strings of her instrument. The sexual meaning of his gesture is reinforced not only by the recorder protruding from his pocket but also by the gesture of his left hand, which forms a circle between thumb and index finger as he holds his hat in his lap. That this encounter takes place within the elegant confines of the woman's private chamber is evident from the bed, its curtains pulled back to reveal two pillows, one above the other. The small sculpture of Cupid above the doorway reinforces the amorous nature of the scene.

Steen's painting has traditionally been called *The Music Lesson*, and the young man perched on the table has been seen as a music instructor teaching the woman how to play her lute. [2] A music lesson, however, is not the couple's main concern, as is clear from the music book that lies unattended and forgotten on the wooden bench next to the man's foot. The presence of an older woman standing behind them and a man peering in mischievously from the half-opened door indicates that Steen's painting is not a generic genre scene but is based on a literary source: Bredero's tragicomedy *Over-gesette Lucelle* (translated as *Lucelle*), first published in Amsterdam in 1616 and reprinted frequently throughout the 17th century. [3]

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*

Gerbrand Adriaensz Bredero (1585–1618) was the first important Dutch poet, songwriter, and playwright to focus upon everyday reality, matching his insights about human nature with a gentle warmth and humor. With a keen eye for detail and a sharp ear for language, Bredero enlivened his poetry and plays with words drawn from local dialects rather than from classical prototypes. As he explained in the preface to his widely read *Groot lied-boeck (Large Songbook)*, published posthumously in 1622, “The only book from which I learned is the book of use.” [4] Bredero, who was a painter as well as writer, also wrote, “The best painters are those who come closest to life.” [5]

Lucelle belongs to the genre of tragicomic plays that developed in Italy and France in the 16th century. [6] A subplot generally encountered in these plays features lovers from different social classes trying to overcome the restrictions placed on their love through ruse and deceit. Inevitably, the lovers are betrayed, leading to a dramatic denouement, but things always work out well in the end. It frequently turns out that the protagonist from the lower social class actually has a royal or princely heritage, a startling development that solves all of the lovers’ problems in a delightful and engaging way.

Steen greatly admired Bredero’s humor and pictorial language, and the thematic content of his paintings, as in *Ascagnes and Lucelle (The Music Lesson)*, often reflects the playwright’s influence. [7] In this painting, Steen focused on the most intimate and transformative moment in Bredero’s play, which occurs in act 3, when the two lovers try to overcome the obstacles they face in pursuit of their happiness. The heroine, Lucelle, and her lover, Ascagnes, have come together in the privacy of her room on the pretext that he will give her a music lesson. [8] This ruse is necessary because Lucelle’s wealthy father has forbidden her to associate with Ascagnes, his clerk, owing to the young man’s humble background. The gilded leather wall covering and expensive oriental carpet on the table in Steen’s painting clearly indicate that the elegant bedchamber in which they meet is that of a wealthy young woman. Undoubtedly taking a cue from theatrical productions, Steen also contrasted the difference in the social status of the lovers through their wardrobes, juxtaposing Lucelle’s shimmering white satin dress with Ascagnes’s plain ochre-colored jerkin, baggy red trunk hose, and floppy white socks. [9] The ploy is the brainchild of Lucelle’s maid, Margriet, who, looking somewhat like a procuress, is the older woman staring at the lovers in the painting. Music lessons were a common occurrence in upper-class Dutch homes, where musical proficiency for a young woman was highly valued and indicative of social status.

[10]

The key to identifying the scene's literary source as Bredero's *Lucelle* is the man peering through the half-opened door. He is the comic character Lecker-Beetje (Juicy Bit), the servant of Lucelle's father who spies on the lovers and overhears them as they vow eternal love. [11] Steen depicts Lecker-Beetje with his finger resting on his cheek, a gesture often associated with troublemaking fools in his paintings. [12] Indeed, Lecker-Beetje betrays the lovers to Lucelle's father, who, in order to avoid a scandal, promptly arranges for his daughter and Ascagnes to be poisoned. Just as the couple is about to die, however, a messenger arrives to announce that Ascagnes is actually the son of the king of Poland. Fortunately, the poison turns out to be merely a sleeping potion, and the lovers are revived. Bredero's play ends, fittingly, with the celebration of their marriage.

Steen's vignette from *Lucelle* is filled with light-hearted sexual innuendo that only a master storyteller like him could convey. Gestures and body language seem carefully observed from life and, were it not for the presence of Margriet and Lecker-Beetje, one would never guess that Steen derived this narrative from a literary source. Many of the painting's pictorial components are comparable to those that appear in Steen's genre scenes with musical subjects. For example, in *Acta Virum Probant (Actions Prove the Man)* of 1659 in the National Gallery, London (there titled *A Young Woman Playing a Harpsichord to a Young Man*), music similarly serves as a device for exploring complex human relationships of love and harmony. [13] As in *Ascagnes and Lucelle (The Music Lesson)*, Steen depicted two main protagonists around a musical instrument, an elegant interior, and a figure peering through a doorway in the back of the room.

Eight years separate *Acta Virum Probant (Actions Prove the Man)* and *Ascagnes and Lucelle (The Music Lesson)*. By 1667, Steen's compositions had become more organic and his brushwork had loosened, as seen, for example, in *Lucelle's* shimmering white satin dress. The fact that Steen had by then moved to Haarlem from Leiden, thereby leaving the orbit of the *fijnschilder* (fine painting) techniques of his friend Frans van Mieris (Dutch, 1635 - 1681), partly accounts for these differences. Also important for Steen's stylistic evolution was his renowned contemporary Gerard ter Borch the Younger (Dutch, 1617 - 1681). Steen not only responded to the subtle brushwork with which Ter Borch rendered fabrics but also to the informal character of his intimate genre scenes, including those featuring music. One particularly compelling comparison is between *Ascagnes and Lucelle (The Music Lesson)* and Ter Borch's *A Woman Playing the Theorbo-Lute and a*

Ascagnes and Lucelle (The Music Lesson)

Cavalier (c. 1658, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), where a young admirer similarly sits on a table as he listens to a love-struck woman playing a stringed instrument.

Only a few drawings by Steen have survived, yet it seems likely that he made many figure drawings that are now lost. He probably adapted the poses and gestures of these figure drawings to accord with the different narratives he wanted to express. Ascagnes's gesture of reaching out with bent wrist, for example, is akin to that of Cleopatra in Steen's *The Banquet of Antony and Cleopatra* (Georg-August-Universität, Göttingen), which he also executed in 1667. [14] Similar associations can be made between Lucelle's pose and other figures in Steen's oeuvre. [15]

Steen returned to the subject of Lucelle and Ascagnes in a painting in the Bute Collection (Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute), this time with a more theatrical approach, not only in terms of the anachronistic costumes of the figures but also the ample drapes hanging from a fanciful architectural setting. [16] In this latter version, however, Steen radically rethought his narrative and moved away from the scene described in Bredero's play. Lecker-Beetje, dressed as a fool and with finger raised to his cheek, looks on while Ascagnes rather than Lucelle plays the lute. She, with hand on cheek, gazes adoringly at him, as though any pretense of a lesson had disappeared. Steen envisioned a different moment than even Bredero had anticipated, an indication of how freely and imaginatively this great master could reinterpret renowned literary sources.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

December 9, 2019

NOTES

- [1] I would like to thank Henriette Rahusen for her thoughtful comments about this entry.
- [2] The current title was adopted by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1997 at the recommendation of Mariët Westermann (see correspondence in the NGA curatorial files).
- [3] The first scholar to associate this painting with Bredero's play was S. J. Gudlaugsson in his article "Bredero's Lucelle door eenige zeventiende-eeuwsche meesters uitgebeeld," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek 1* (1947): 177–195. Bredero's plays were performed regularly at the Amsterdam

Schouwburg (Theater), and it is possible that Steen would have traveled from nearby Haarlem to Amsterdam in the mid-1660s to see a production of *Lucelle*. Other Dutch artists were also inspired by Bredero's play, although none chose the scenario that Steen depicted in this work.

- [4] "Ick heb anders geen Boeck geleert als het boeck des gebruycx." G. A. Bredero, *Groot Lied-boeck* (Amsterdam, 1622), 17, http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/bred001groo01_01/bred001groo01_01_0005.php (accessed March 18, 2018).
- [5] "Het zijn de beste Schilders die 't leven naast komen." G. A. Bredero, *Groot Lied-boeck* (Amsterdam, 1622), 18, http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/bred001groo01_01/bred001groo01_01_0005.php (accessed March 18, 2018).
- [6] Bredero based his play on a French text written by Louis Le Jars, which was first published in Paris in 1576. This text was frequently reprinted, and C. A. Zaalberg has determined that Bredero likely consulted the version published in Paris in 1600. For an excellent overview of Bredero's text and the ways in which it differs from the French edition, see Zaalberg's introduction in G. A. Bredero, *Lucelle*, ed. C. A. Zaalberg (Culemborg, 1972), 7–49, http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/bred001luce01_01/index.php (accessed March 18, 2018).
- [7] See Baruch D. Kirschenbaum, *The Religious and Historical Paintings of Jan Steen* (New York, 1977); and Ariane van Suchtelen, *Jan Steen's Histories* (The Hague, 2018).
- [8] G. A. Bredero, *Lucelle*, ed. C. A. Zaalberg (Culemborg, 1972), 131–141, http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/bred001luce01_01/index.php (accessed March 18, 2018).
- [9] C. A. Zaalberg notes that Bredero's play was frequently performed throughout the 17th century in Amsterdam. G. A. Bredero, *Lucelle*, ed. C. A. Zaalberg (Culemborg, 1972), 46–47, http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/bred001luce01_01/index.php (accessed March 18, 2018).
- [10] See Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Vermeer and Music: The Art of Love and Leisure* (London, 2013), particularly 14–17.
- [11] C. A. Zaalberg notes that one of the ways in which Bredero added humor to the original French text was to have the protagonists, particularly Lecker-Beetje, speak in dialects. Bredero, in fact, changed the French name for this character, Philippin, to Lecker-Beetje, a name with far more humorous connotations. G. A. Bredero, *Lucelle*, ed. C. A. Zaalberg (Culemborg, 1972), 23, http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/bred001luce01_01/index.php (accessed March 18, 2018).
- [12] See, for example, the gesture of the fool at the right in Steen's *Esther*,

Ahasuerus, and Haman (c. 1668, Cleveland Museum of Art). For this painting, see Ariane van Suchtelen, *Jan Steen's Histories* (The Hague, 2018), 114–119, no. 9.

- [13] For a discussion of this painting, see H. Perry Chapman, Wouter Th. Kloek, and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Jan Steen, Painter and Storyteller*, ed. Guido Jansen (Washington, DC, 1996), 129–131, no. 10.
- [14] See Ariane van Suchtelen, *Jan Steen's Histories* (The Hague, 2018), 154–157, no. 18.
- [15] For a discussion of Steen's probable adaptation of drawn models, see Wouter Th. Kloek, "Jan Steen, His Repertoire of Motifs and History Painting," in Ariane van Suchtelen, *Jan Steen's Histories* (The Hague, 2018), 33–54.
- [16] For a discussion of this painting in the Bute Collection at Mount Stuart, see Ariane van Suchtelen, *Jan Steen's Histories* (The Hague, 2018), 166–169, no. 21.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The primary support is a medium-weight plain-weave canvas that was wax-resin lined to plain-weave linen. The original canvas threads are visible in x-radiographs of the painting, and the canvas has approximately 12 threads per centimeter in the vertical direction and 14 threads per centimeter in the horizontal direction. [1] The original tacking margins have been cut away, but original cusping along the canvas edges suggest that the image dimensions were not significantly reduced when the tacking margins were removed. The lining canvas is secured along the tacking edges with tacks and on the reverse by heating the excess wax-resin-infused canvas to the stretcher.

There is a double ground that consists of an upper, warm tan layer over a thinner, red-toned layer. [2] Infrared reflectography did not reveal an underdrawing, but Steen blocked out the composition using a monochrome sketch in brownish-black paint, which serves as shadows in the final composition. [3] The paint medium is estimated to be oil, and paint was generally applied thinly and wet-into-wet. Typical of Steen's technique, he painted from the back of the composition toward the front, though there are a few instances in this composition where that does not hold true. [4]

The painting is in good condition. It is taut and, due to the lining, rigid and has some weave enhancement. The painting was last treated in 1954, and there are

tiny scattered brushstrokes of retouching and old varnish residues. The largest areas of retouching are in the upper right, above Lucelle's proper right shoe, and in the proper left arm of each of the two main figures. There are also tiny scattered losses and areas of mild abrasion. The overall synthetic varnish is even and saturates the paint.

Dina Anchin, based on the examination report by Sarah Gowen and the technical entry by Melanie Gifford in *Antiquities to Impressionism: The William A. Clark Collection*, Corcoran Gallery of Art (Washington, DC, 2001).

December 9, 2019

TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] X-radiography was carried out with a Comet Technologies XRP-75MXR-75HP tube, and the images were digitally captured using a Carestream Industrex Blue Digital Imaging Plate 5537 (14 in. × 17 in.). The parameters were 25 kV, 5 mA, 40 seconds, and 40 in. distance (from source to plate). The resulting digital images were composited and processed using Adobe Photoshop CS5.
 - [2] The ground coloring on this painting is rare in Steen's oeuvre, but the canvas may have been prepared by a professional primer, which was suggested by Melanie Gifford in an examination report from September 2008. A commercially prepared canvas would also explain the lack of strong cusping along the right and left edges: a professional primer would have stretched and applied the ground to a wider canvas that was later cut into smaller sections. Also see Michael Palmer and E. Melanie Gifford, "Jan Steen's Painting Practice: *The Dancing Couple* in the Context of the Artist's Career," *Studies in the History of Art* 57 (1996/1997): 127–155.
 - [3] Infrared reflectography was carried out using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera filtered to 1.1–1.4 microns (J filter).
 - [4] Michael Palmer and E. Melanie Gifford, "Jan Steen's Painting Practice: *The Dancing Couple* in the Context of the Artist's Career," *Studies in the History of Art* 57 (1996/1997): 127–155.
-

PROVENANCE

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Possibly (sale, Willem Fabricius, Haarlem, 19 August 1749, no. 26).^[1]Richard M. Foster, Clewer Manor, near Windsor, Berkshire;^[2] his son, Edmund Benson Foster [1830-1862], Clewer Manor; (Richard Foster's estate sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 3 June 1876, no. 1, as *The Guitar Lesson*); Samuel Addington [1806-1886], London; (his estate sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 22 May 1886, no. 107, as *The Guitar Lesson*); Davis.^[3] Sir Julian Goldsmid [1838-1896]; (his sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 13 June 1896, no. 82, as *The Guitar Lesson*). (Charles Sedelmeyer, Paris). Baron Michael Ephrussi [1845-1914], Paris; purchased 1900 by William A. Clark [1839-1925], New York; bequest 1926 to the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; acquired 2014 by the National Gallery of Art.

[1] Mariët Westermann, *The Amusements of Jan Steen: Comic Painting in the Seventeenth Century*, Zwolle, 1997: 98-99, 127 n. 47.

[2] According to William Roberts (*Memorials of Christie's: A Record of Art Sales from 1766 to 1896, Volume 1*, London, 1897: 253), the Clewer Manor collection was "formed by three generations of the Foster family."

[3] Samuel Addington to Davis is recorded by C. Hofstede de Groot, *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII Jahrhunderts*, Esslingen am Neckar, 1907: 96, no. 415. A copy of the sale catalogue in the NGA Library is annotated with the name "Davis" (copy in NGA curatorial files).

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1880 Exhibition of Works by the Old Masters and by Deceased Masters of the British School. Winter Exhibition, Royal Academy, London, 1880, no. 71, as *The Guitar Lesson*.

1959 Loan Exhibition. Masterpieces of the Corcoran Gallery of Art: A Benefit Exhibition in Honor of the Gallery's Centenary, Corcoran Gallery of Art, unnumbered catalogue, repro., as *The Music Lesson*.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS


Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

1989 The William A. Clark Collection: Treasures of a Copper King, Yellowstone Art Center, Billings; Montana Historical Society, Helena, 1989, unnumbered checklist, as Music Lesson.

2001 Antiquities to Impressionism: The William A. Clark Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 2001-2002, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1898 Sedelmeyer, Charles. *Illustrated Catalogue of 300 Paintings by Old Masters of the Dutch, Flemish, Italian, French, and English schools, being some of the principal pictures which have at various time formed part of the Sedelmeyer Gallery*. Paris, 1898: 56, no. 42.
- 1907 Hofstede de Groot, Cornelis. *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century*. 8 vols. Translated by Edward G. Hawke. London, 1907-1927: 1:108, no. 415.
- 1907 Hofstede de Groot, Cornelis. *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*. 10 vols. Esslingen and Paris, 1907-1928: 1:96-97, no. 415.
- 1907 Trautscholdt, E., "Jan Steen." In *Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*. Edited by Ulrich Thieme and Felix Becker. 37 vols. Leipzig, 1907-1950: 31(1937):512, no. 415.
- 1909 Valentiner, Wilhelm R. *Catalogue of a collection of paintings by Dutch masters of the seventeenth century*. The Hudson-Fulton Celebration 1. Exh. cat. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1909: 20, no. 19, repro.
- 1913 Graves, Algernon. *A Century of Loan Exhibitions, 1813-1912*. 5 vols. London, 1913-1915: 3(1914):1258.
- 1925 Carroll, Dana H. *Catalogue of Objects of Fine Art and Other Properties at the Home of William Andrews Clark, 962 Fifth Avenue*. Part I. Unpublished manuscript, n.d. (1925): 130, no. 66.
- 1928 Corcoran Gallery of Art. *Illustrated Handbook of the W.A. Clark Collection*. Washington, 1928: 53.
- 1932 Corcoran Gallery of Art. *Illustrated Handbook of the W.A. Clark Collection*. Washington, 1932: 56.
- 1947 Gudlaugsson, S.J. "Bredero's Lucelle door eenige zeventiende-eeuwsche meesters uitgebeeld." *Nederlandsch Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek I (1947)*: 177-195, 191, fig. 5, 195, fig. 15.
- 1955 Breckenridge, James D. *A handbook of Dutch and Flemish paintings in the William Andrews Clark collection*. Washington, 1955: 46 repro., 47.
- 1977 Lyckle de Vries. *Jan Steen "de kluchtschilder."* Ph.D. dissertation, University of Groningen, 1977: 62-63, 165, no. 136.
- 1978 Corcoran Gallery of Art. *The William A. Clark Collection: An Exhibition*

 NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Marking the 50th Anniversary of the Installation of the Clark Collection at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington. Exh. cat. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 1978: 51-59, no. 45, repro.

- 1980 Braun, Karel. *Alle tot nu toe bekende schilderijen van Jan Steen*. Rotterdam, 1980: repro. 125, no. 279, 125.
- 1986 Sutton, Peter C. *A Guide to Dutch Art in America*. Washington and Grand Rapids, 1986: 300 (repro.)-301, no. 453.
- 2001 Coyle, Laura, and Dare Myers Hartwell, eds. *Antiquities to Impressionism: The William A. Clark Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art*. Washington, DC, 2001: 23, 68, repro.
- 2004 Eberhart, Marlene L. "Amorous Intentions? The Mythological Flute: A Cultural and Iconographical Study Inspired by the Dayton C. Miller Collection, Library of Congress." Ph.D. Dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington, 2004: 136, fig. 25, as *Ascagnes and Lucelle, The Music Lesson*.
-

To cite: Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Jan Steen/*Ascagnes and Lucelle (The Music Lesson)*/1667," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/195366> (accessed April 11, 2025).