

WILLEM STEUR, WINNIPEG

Burghers of Delft: An analysis of a painting by Jan Steen

The burgher sits on the stoop in front of his house in the best neighbourhood of Delft, on the Oude Delft canal (see our cover picture).¹ A beggar woman holds out her hand, but the man seems to have difficulty deciding whether to be charitable or not. His daughter is ready to walk away from the scene, while the beggar woman's little boy looks up in awe at the imposing man towering above him. A fifth person, standing on a bridge to the rear, observes the scene with interest.

So do we, viewers of the twenty-first century, and the more we look, the more puzzled we are by the intriguing scene. This enigmatic painting (enigmatic for us, but not for Steen's contemporaries, as will be demonstrated later) is not only a singular work in the total of Steen's oeuvre, but it is also one of the few paintings of this era that shows a beggar. When we think of Dutch painting in the Golden Age we see the well-dressed men of the militia companies, we come face to face with regents in linen ruffs and lace collars, we admire interiors with oriental rugs on the table and an expensive virginal against the wall, and we look at the mouth-watering still-lives overflowing with fowl, fish, venison and other rich foods. Judging by the subjects depicted by seventeenth-century Dutch painters it must indeed have been a golden age.

Were there no poor then? There certainly were: it is estimated that for about half of the population of the Seven United Provinces the age was not golden.² Dutch painting may be known for its realism, but it was the kind of realism that pleased only the well-to-do, those who had enough money to buy paintings. These burghers wanted to feel good about themselves and they certainly would not be inclined to adorn their living room walls with a painting whose subject was disagreeable to them. Nor did they want to be made uncomfortable by the presence of the poor outside their houses and they certainly did not want to be accosted by beggars in the street or in the town square. Vagrancy was a social threat, vagrants were demonized and feared.³ Art was supported by the wealth of society and it served, as John Berger notes, the ideological interest of the ruling class.⁴ Towns in seventeenth-century Holland, as will be shown later, had an effective policy in place to keep beggars out of sight, and the paintings of that time reflect that policy. James Howell, who visited Holland in the 1620s, was struck by the absence of beggars in the Dutch towns, certainly when compared to other European cities. "It is as rare a thing to meet with a beggar here as to see a horse ... in the streets of Venice," the English author-diplomat observed.⁴ The statement rings true and is indeed supported by the notable absence of

beggars in Dutch painting of the period. Only a few of the thousands of paintings produced in Holland's Golden Age depict beggars and in many cases they are disguised as itinerant musicians, as in some Rembrandt etchings, for example.

The beggar woman in Jan Steen's *The Burgher of Delft and his Daughter* is a real beggar, whose submissive pose shows just the degree of humility the Dutch wanted to see in their beggars, but whether the burgher will practice charity remains to be seen. The man is at the center of the picture, sitting there on his stoop with a letter in his hand, seemingly lost in thought, while the beggar woman stands waiting with outstretched hand. The modern viewer's first reaction is one of impatience: why can't the man hurry up, why doesn't he put a hand in his pocket and fish out a coin or two for a destitute woman and her child? However, time seems to be frozen; the man enjoys his moment of power, while the woman's fate is held in abeyance.

Dating from 1655 when Steen, aged about 30, lived or at least worked in Delft, the painting is a relatively early work; the artist's mature period would start only four or five years later, in Haarlem. That is when Steen painted the type of boisterous scenes for which he is famous, paintings that illustrate proverbs like *Soo gewonne Soo verteert* (Easy come, easy go) and *Soo de ouden zongen, Soo piepen de jongen* (As the Old Sing, So Pipe the Young, or as we would say today: like father, like son). Steen had a predilection for emphasizing human foibles and perhaps, if one interprets the burgher's hesitation as a struggle between avarice and charity, the painting under discussion already falls into this category. Will the burgher give something or does he

have a heart of stone, *een hart van steen*? If this was a commissioned portrait, why did the sitter accept the ambiguity inherent in his pose? The only possible answer to that question is that we, burghers of the twenty-first century, see as ambiguity what was for the seventeenth-century viewers a confirmation that they were living in an orderly society and that all was well with the world, because this burgher or possibly (as some critics have suggested) burgomaster of Delft was seen to wield his power for the good of his community. The opulent Dutch, whose main goal in life was making money, were clearly insensitive to the inequality of the situation. For them, the emphasis in this painting fell on power, not on charity. Chapman, arguing from the seventeenth-century viewpoint, sees in the same work a celebration of the sitter's civic virtue.⁶ The seventeenth-century viewer clearly identified with the burgher (as the title of the painting indicates), but most modern observers, with their fully developed social conscience, would be unreservedly on the side of the dispossessed. The Dutch of the time saw an orderly society; those living almost four centuries later see social inequality.

Steen's painting does not seem to illustrate a proverb or an aphorism, as do so many of his later paintings. If the burgher would only be seen handing a coin or two to the beggar woman, if he would only look a little bit less severe, an apt title would be: *Het is zaliger te geven dan te ontvangen* (It is more blessed to give than to receive), but we cannot be sure if the man is going to give something or not. There is no matching proverb here and what is lacking as well are the kind of symbols that abound in Steen's later work. There are only the flowers in the window sill which not only testify to the

burgher's luxurious way of life but also, being close to the young girl's head, to the evanescence of youth and beauty, a fact of which the beggar woman's outward appearance gives silent testimony.

Many of Steen's paintings are crowded with people whose activities are intended to provoke moral outrage as well as titillation. This painting, with its restrained and tight structure, has the feeling of a quiet Sunday morning after church: the clock on the tower of the Old Church shows the time as close to 10:30. It must be Sunday, for the burgher is not working and there is no traffic or commercial activity, which one might expect on weekdays on this busy old Delft canal. The brewery that Steen operated at the time was located diagonally across from the burgher's home.

There are only five people⁷ in the painting and each of them has a definite role. The unidentified sitter, who may have commissioned this portrait of himself and his daughter (there is no wife in sight; perhaps he was a widower) wanted his likeness depicted, but unknowingly he received more than he bargained for. Schama writes that painters of that time strove for a likeness, but not necessarily a facsimile. They sought in their portraiture "a visual distillation of the essential personality of the sitter." Schama further points out that before the romantic era the persona was a social, not a psychological construct.⁸ It could be argued, however, that Steen is already using psychology here, for in the absence of emblemata (the flowers excepted) the action, or rather the inaction (will or won't he give?), clearly takes place in the sitter himself, in his innermost soul.

The five persons visible in the painting are

remarkably isolated from each other. They are locked in their own world, except for the beggar woman whose gesture sends a wordless message to the burgher, and for her little boy who stares silently, hat in hand, at the big man in the expensive suit.

That man, a solid black mass, unresponsive to the request that is being made of him, sits there on his stoop in front of what we may assume to be his house. He is the only one of the five people present who is sitting, yet his head attains the highest position of the five. He sits squarely and securely on his bench, his legs apart. He dominates the picture: he is up high, he is a man, he is rich and he is in control. He represents the status quo: some people are rich, some are poor, and that is the way it is ordained. The burgher may have decided to sit outside for a while and relax, but he holds none of the attributes (a pipe, a glass of wine), that in a Steen painting would indicate that he is having a good time. He sits on his private stoop, powerful and godlike, but he sits at the same time in the public domain. We may conclude from this that the painting is meant to be read as a public statement, a conclusion that is reinforced by the fact that the coat of arms appearing on the bridge at right is that of the town of Delft and not that of the burgher.

The beggar woman has three strokes against her: she is poor, she is a woman and she is (for that time at least) old. Her outstretched hand stays just outside the railing that keeps the burgher fenced inside his domain and that keeps the beggars at a distance. The empty hand of poverty counterbalances the open window behind which is wealth. The woman's little boy (assuming that he is her son), hat in hand, looks up timidly and almost reverently at the big man on the

stoop. Does the child have a father? If not, he may be seeing a father figure in the solid burgher to whom he looks up in awe. His intense involvement stands in strong contrast to the burgher's daughter, who acts aloof as she walks away from the scene, possibly muttering under her breath an indignant question like: why don't they lock these people up? She walks in the direction of the flowers that are still in bloom, but that sooner or later will wilt and die, as will she. The girl is dressed in her Sunday finery; her clothing is made of rich fabric and she wears two bracelets and a necklace, all of pearls. But her (too small) face wears an unhappy expression and the careful viewer, detecting a frail body underneath the rich clothing, wonders if she, despite her father's wealth, could be anorexic; starving in the midst of plenty, just like the beggar woman. She depends on her father for her sustenance: her dependent position, albeit at a more affluent level, echoes the dependency of the beggar woman and bestows still more power on the burgher. Like the beggar woman, the young girl will grow old, but her father's money or a good marriage will at least keep her from being destitute.

The fifth person in the painting, the man on the bridge, seems at first view a rather unimportant appearance. However, he is definitely not engaged in the traditional Dutch *baliekluiver* (loafer) custom of *kringetjes spugen* (spitting circles in the water), for he is clearly observing the scene in the foreground. *Hij loert als een havik* (he is watching like a hawk), but why?

It would be far-fetched to imagine that the painter Jan Havickszoon Steen is paying a silent tribute to his father, the brewer Havick (hawk) Steen. The pointed hat of the silent observer, similar to the one worn by the

Quakers, may indicate that he could be a preacher, someone presumably with a direct line to God, a secret agent who could report to the heavenly authorities whether charity (a Christian virtue after all) was shown or not. His presence reminds us that man is mortal and that he will be judged. Steen's generation was preoccupied with the mortality of man and the belief in a last judgment.⁹

The possible connection of the event in this painting to heaven is reinforced by the numerous verticals, all pointing heavenward: the people themselves, the gables of the houses, the trees and, most important, the spire of the *Oude Kerk* (the Old Church), whose tower is exactly in line with the beggar woman's body.

An imaginary line continuing upwards along the line of the girl's right arm and a similar line continuing from the beggar woman's back would meet at the top of the tree behind the four people in the foreground and a form a triangle pointing towards heaven with its base at the bottom of the picture. The letter that the burgher holds in his left hand is exactly at the center of this triangle. The arc formed by his spread legs is repeated by the arc of the bridge and the position of the letter above his left knee mirrors the placement of the silent observer on the bridge.

The letter, and the observer in the background, must therefore be of prime importance in this painting. Commentators generally agree that the letter is the beggar woman's permit to beg, a licence issued by the town. In order to keep control of the begging problem, Dutch towns at the time distinguished between two kinds of beggars: those who were from outside town and those who were indigenous. Those in the first

category were immediately sent packing to wherever they came from. The second category was divided in two: those who could work were set to work, usually in special institutions like the *rasphuis* for the men (where they sawed wood) and the *spinhuis* for the women (where they were set to weaving and spinning). The local residents who could not work were given a permit to beg which usually stipulated a certain time and place.¹⁰

It is in this policy that must be sought the explanation of the absence of beggars in the Dutch paintings of the Golden Age. Administrative efficiency combines here with the Dutch reputation for stinginess, well known all across Europe and parts of Asia. As the English Tory statesman George Canning would put it, a century and a half later:

*In matters of commerce
The fault of the Dutch
Is giving too little
And asking too much.*

We can be certain that the burgher in Steen's painting (in all likelihood a merchant, trading in spices? ammunition? slaves?), got where he is by giving too little and asking too much. Therefore, from our twenty-first century viewpoint the scene in Steen's painting may make us uneasy, but seventeenth-century viewers looked at the painting with none of that unease. In Schama's interpretation the burgher of Delft is caught at the moment that he responds to the embarrassment of his riches (*vide*: house, daughter, rich apparel) by being a judge in the sight (literally) of the church, an arbiter of the deserving poor, the figure for whom they may stand at the gate. The poor need the rich, certainly, but the rich need the

poor for the quiet of their souls.¹¹

The beggar woman in Steen's painting, one of the *Rechte Armen* or the honest poor,¹² has just given her begging permit to the burgher on his stoop. The fact that she has such a letter indicates that she too is a burgher of Delft and for this reason the painting should perhaps be called *The Burghers of Delft and Their Children*. And indeed, the female burgher of Delft is at least as important as her fellow citizen, for is she not giving him the opportunity to gain the Kingdom of Heaven? *The Burgher of Delft and her Son* would be as valid a title for this unnerving work as the present one with the emphasis on the rich man and his offspring. However, at the time of its painting the man (possibly the one who commissioned the picture) was seen as the central character in this little drama and Steen's picture will indubitably continue to be known by its present name. Actually, the painting is known under two titles, for it is sometimes called *A Burgomaster of Delft*.¹³ A popular Dutch term for burgomaster is *burgervader*, the father of all citizens, and therefore by implication responsible for their well-being. But instead of opening his door to welcome a prodigal daughter, this father (if the unknown sitter is indeed a burgomaster) is less than spontaneous in his attempt to be charitable. Is this just what Jacob Cats, the epitome of Dutch small-mindedness, calls a case of careful decision making,¹⁴ or could the burgher's hesitation be due to the fact that there is something wrong with the letter? Is the woman begging at a location or at a time not mentioned in the permit? A natural location to beg would be at the church doors, but, as we see by the clock, church is over. Is she forced to go begging all over town because she did not receive enough at her allotted location? Will

she now get into trouble with the burgomaster himself? Or is there something else wrong with the permit and is the burgomaster thinking of firing the person who filled it out incorrectly or who was not authorized to sign it?

The third reason for the burgher's (or burgomaster's) hesitation, although the most likely, may also be the most distasteful. The man's dour and pained expression seems to us unwarranted for a simple decision as to whether to give a beggar woman and her child a coin or two. So what is keeping the man? Is he just stingy? Does he not have any money on him? Is he thinking of sending his daughter inside or of going himself to fetch some coins out of a drawer somewhere? Is he going to ask the beggars to come back later? Would he move faster if, sitting under God's open sky and in the shadow of the church tower as well, he knew that he was being watched by a spy from God on the bridge behind him? Perhaps Steen's painting illustrates a proverb after all: *Doe wel en zie niet om* (Do good and don't look back).

In conclusion then, it appears that there are two ways of looking at *The Burgher of Delft and His Daughter* (and those other two citizens, the beggar woman and her son):

1. The seventeenth-century view, as outlined by Chapman and Schama, where the burgher is seen to be exercising his civic duty as well as his power over others. Beggars are kept out of sight and only a few, the honest poor, are tolerated. The status quo is maintained.

2. The modern view, in which the viewer remains puzzled by the indecision of the protagonist and becomes indignant when considering the beggar woman's fate. The status quo ought to be subverted.

The two viewpoints seem to be mutually exclusive but, by stepping outside the socio-economic framework, the dichotomy can be transcended. As we put ourselves alternately in the elegant shoes of the burgher and the worn-out sandals of the beggar woman, we finally come to realize that we ourselves, at least sometime during our life span, have been or will be forced to go begging, if not for money, than perhaps for acceptance, for understanding, for happiness, for love even. Yet, at other times, we will be in a position to give, freely and whole-heartedly, but sometimes perhaps also grudgingly and niggardly. As we play our alternating roles of beggar and giver, we come to understand that we all need each other and that begging and giving seem to be part of the human condition. In that sense we are all *Burghers of Delft*.

NOTES

¹ Jan Steen, *The Burgher of Delft and his Daughter*, oil on canvas, 82.5 x 68.6 cm., Penrhyn Castle, Wales. Reproduced from: H. Perry Chapman et al.: *Jan Steen, Painter and Storyteller*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1996, p.120. The title of this and other works, in Dutch and in English, are quoted according to Chapman.

² Hans Koningsberger et al., *The World of Vermeer 1632-1675*, Time Incorporated, New York 1967, p. 39.

³ Simon Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, Random House of Canada, Toronto, 1999, p. 303.

⁴ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin Books, London, 1972, Chapter 5.

⁵ Schama, p. 303 and p. 713, n. 70.

⁶ Chapman, p. 119.

⁷ Sheila D. Muller, who has studied the original painting, describes a sixth person: a farmer with a sack slung over his shoulder who has just passed over the bridge and is shown moving off the edge of the panel at right. On most reproductions however only the hindmost part of the sack can be seen. (Sheila D. Muller, *Jan Steen's Burgher of Delft and His Daughter: A Painting and Politics in Seventeenth-Century Holland*, in: *Art History*, Vol. 12 No. 3, September 1989, p. 268).

⁸ Schama, p. 330.

⁹ Madlyn Millner Kahr, *Dutch Painting in the Seventeenth Century*, Icon Editions, Westview Press, Boulder, 1978, p. 188. Another Steen painting, *In Weelde Siet Toe* (In Luxury Beware), shows a man in the same kind of hat, reading his Bible in licentious company. He has a duck on his shoulder, which is a visual pun on "quack" and "Quaker" (pronounced "Quacker" in Dutch).

¹⁰ Schama, p. 303.

¹¹ Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches, An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1987, p. 575.

¹² In the literature on this subject the term *rechte armen* is usually translated by *deserving poor*. In my opinion the word *rechte* (literally: *right*) should be rendered by words like: *upright, real, justifiable* or *honest*. I have opted for *honest*.

¹³ Baruch D. Kirschenbaum gives the painting the title of *The Burgomaster of Delft* in: Baruch D. Kirschenbaum, *The Religious and Historical Paintings of Jan Steen*, Allanheld and Schram, New York, 1977, p. 39. So do Jakob Rosenberg and Seymour Slive in: Jakob Rosenberg et al., *Dutch Art and Architecture 1600 to 1800*, Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1966, p. 134.

¹⁴ "Jacob Cats describes the proper distribution of charity as the outcome of careful decision making" (Chapman, p. 119).