



Merrymakers in an Inn

1674

Adriaen van Ostade

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Department of Museum Education
Division of Student and Teacher Programs
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Adriaen van Ostade (Dutch, 1610–1685)

Merrymakers in an Inn, 1674

Oil on panel

18 3/8 in. x 16 1/8 in. (46.7 cm x 41 cm)

George B. and Mary R. Harris Fund, 1894.1028

Adriaen van Ostade's *Merrymakers in an Inn*, 1674, illustrates peasants of multi-generations celebrating a joyous event in a spacious and picturesque interior. The artist has carefully arranged all the elements to focus attention on the center of the painting, despite the various poses of the numerous figures and the disordered space.

In first considering the subject of the painting, one can imagine various meanings behind the depiction of families gathering in a tavern setting. In the 17th century, the inn served as a humble center for peasant revelry in the Dutch Republic. Ostade took special interest in the colorful, compelling human activities shared in these establishments.

Ostade used various elements throughout *Merrymakers in an Inn* to enliven the scene. Although many figures are engrossed in their wine or beer, they all seem to gaze towards, or at least acknowledge, the dancing couple. A violinist stands on a wooden bench alongside the dancers as he creates music for the festivities. The seated man in the foreground, adorned in a bright crimson hat, plays along with a set of tongs. To the right, a couple stands in quiet contentment, adding a feeling of calmness to the setting. Objects of nature are also visible in this interior, including scattered branches and a small tree beside the **hutch**. Behind the violinist an open doorway leads to a darkened staircase. Skillfully detailed leaded glass windows and a curved doorway provide the framework for a pastoral outdoor view to complete the picturesque setting. Elements picked out by light and color and by attentive observation to facial expression give the scene an air of simplicity.

Perhaps one of the most profound aspects of this painting is represented by the three prominent female figures who exemplify three stages of life. A young girl sitting on the floor to the far left represents youth, hope, and renewal. To the right of the painting, a middle-aged woman stands, gazing towards the elderly woman, possibly contemplating her future. At the center of the painting, an elderly woman in a bright white headscarf dances while her male partner respectfully bows toward her.

In conjunction with the three stages of life, another thematic element in this painting brings **humanistic** components to the picture. Depictions of children imitating adult behavior—common in Dutch painting of the period—may serve a variety of purposes. The boy mimicks the couple by dancing with his dog. The young girl, absorbed with her doll, seemingly is unaffected by the juvenile behavior of the boy. And in the background, a small child to the left of the male dancer drinks out of a beer stein. Perhaps the message is that children are products of their environment and adults should monitor their own behavior to act as proper role models. Or maybe Ostade included these activities to show the uncomplicated enjoyment of youth, as if they were taken out of a simple snapshot of life. Ostade brilliantly drew out characteristics of these individuals through their respective activities and by utilizing visual or formal elements.

Formal analysis of *Merrymakers in an Inn* reveals traits that are characteristic of many Dutch works of the **Baroque** period, such as the use of diagonal lines, meticulous detail, and **chiaroscuro** shading. Under the influence of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), he used a warm palette and high-contrast chiaroscuro effects (Millner Kahr, 1978, 11). The use of diagonal lines directs the viewer to take in incidental details of the painting and almost always brings attention back to the center of the room. Examples of this continuity or continuous movement towards the axis are found in the bow sweeping across the violin, the feathered hat resting in the dancer's hand, and placement of the abandoned bench in the foreground. Scrupulous attention to detail is found in Ostade's descriptive marks on the peasants' garments and the random still-life objects (the jug, the wooden clogs, and the tree branches) around the room. The illusion of texture is achieved in the various grainy patterns throughout the rustic interior. Ostade employed the technique of chiaroscuro to emphasize the emotional and dynamic elements of this scene. The contrasts of deeply shadowed and highlighted areas are especially noticeable on the clothing of the three female figures, further bringing them together.

Ostade's use of color is also significant to the overall mood created in this painting. Warm (reds, yellows, oranges) and cool (blues, greens, lavenders) tones weave together on the color palette and complete the amiable and inviting scene. Variations of rich brown and green dominate the canvas. Bursts of cool hues, mostly seen on the clothing of the figures, complement and intensify this work of art. The three female figures are connected and draw the viewer's eye around the painting by their stark-white clothing set against the dominant earth tones.

The **harmony** of colors, skillful use of light and shadow to reveal **form** and **shape**, and highly organized **composition** make an impressive, cohesive scene. **Linear perspective** is effectively illustrated in the rough floorboards, which appear wide at the foreground and narrow slightly as they recede. The path of the boards flows through the crowd of figures and directs the eye to a doorway that frames people depicted much smaller than those inside. This variation in size and overlapping of figures contribute to the illusion of depth.

The Dutch Republic: Historical Context

The Dutch Republic of the 17th century was a new society born of religious conflict and a war for independence. It was a society of large-scale immigration and rapid **urbanization**. The people of the mainly Protestant northern provinces of the Low Country rebelled against and overcame the repressive rule of Catholic and **monarchical** Spain in the 17th century.

Along with causing this dramatic shift of religious affiliation in the Netherlands, the newly founded Dutch Republic began to experience an unprecedented economic boom as a result of aggressive international trading and solid domestic policies. Until the mid-17th century, Amsterdam came to dominate

world trade and establish many important colonies, naturally resulting in a population explosion. Great engineering feats, such as canals and bridges, around the city center also contributed to the urban expansion. The population explosion also served to revive urban centers. One such center, **Haarlem**, a relatively small town (population of about 40,000 in 1622) whose principal industries were weaving and brewing, produced a prosperous community (Brown, 1999, 11).

This economic boom created a new art market. Artists were encouraged to broaden subject matter not from history or religion, but from life experience. Religious art was discouraged in the predominantly Protestant northern Netherlands. This mandate compelled artists to explore other topics, including landscape, still life, and **genre** scenes.

Holland's newfound political freedom, healthy economy, and religious independence expanded the art market and therefore new patrons emerged. It is not surprising that the birthplace of new art, which was largely non-religious, celebrated the physical appearance of the country and its inhabitants, delighting in the details of their everyday lives. Clients, in turn, delighted in the familiarity of the subject matter, which certainly contributed to the flourishing art market in the northern provinces (Price, 1974, 137). Genre scenes that illustrated peasant life became extremely popular with Dutch citizens. These scenes showed ordinary people engaged in routine activity in the home, at work, and at play.

A sub-category of the genre scene in **Dutch Baroque** art is the **"merry company" scene**. Haarlem is particularly associated in the 17th century with the "merry company" scene. Typical thematic elements of "merry company" paintings include multi-generations in a festive setting engaged in pleasures of self-indulgences. Mischievous behavior, smoking, drinking, gambling, and dancing are commonly found in merrymaking scenes spanning from the wealthy to the lower classes. Regardless of social standing, these scenes are almost always related to a moral lesson. Overindulgence appears to be the overriding message and anything in excess was viewed as morally dangerous. In Haarlem, Ostade worked with Adriaen Brouwer (1605–1638) and painted rowdy tavern scenes, "merry company" scenes, as well as playful genre paintings of the townsfolk (Godefroy, 1990, 13-15).

Adriaen van Ostade lived his entire life in Haarlem and enjoyed a prolific career as an artist. He created good-natured depictions of village and peasant life in which figures remain lively in expression and action. His ability to portray ordinary life with grace and dignity became a trademark unique to Ostade. *Merrymakers in an Inn* is an excellent example of a type of genre painting the public eagerly purchased and artists enjoyed producing in the Dutch provinces during the 17th century.

Biography of the Artist

Adriaen van Ostade was born in Haarlem, located in modern-day Holland, in December of 1610. He was one of several children born to his father, Jan Hendrix, a weaver, and Janneke Hendriksen. Ostade married Machtelgen Pietersen, who died in 1642. He remarried soon after and had one child, Maria Johanna. He and his second wife, whose full name is not known, remained together until her death in 1666. Ostade died in 1685.

Ostade worked with a number of artists early in his career and learned various techniques of painting, etching, and drawing. Ostade's youngest sibling, Isack, who studied under Adriaen, was also a talented artist, known for his outstanding winter landscape paintings. Adriaen van Ostade enjoyed a prolific artistic career; over 800 paintings, 50 etchings, and several hundred watercolors and drawings of his exist.

Glossary

Baroque: The original meaning of Baroque (irregular, contorted, grotesque) was an uncomplimentary description of a broad style that evolved in Europe in the 1600s. The Baroque style flowered in Europe and Latin America from about 1600 to 1750. Baroque paintings are alive with bright and contrasting colors and filled with activity and motion.

chiaroscuro: Italian in origin, the term *chiaroscuro* combines the words “bright” and “dark” and refers to the artistic device of contrasting light, bright areas of a picture with dark or shaded ones nearby. Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669) was a leading artist to use this device.

composition: Arrangement of elements in a work of art that is essential to the structure but unseen. The composition is the organizing principle or plan of the work.

Dutch Baroque: Around 1600, Baroque art emerged in Europe. This new style of painting was a reaction against the intricate and formulaic Mannerist style which dominated the late Renaissance. Dutch Baroque artists painted real people in real situations and their brightness and lively scenarios helped capture the excitement of a particular moment.

form: This word is often interchanged with **shape**. One way to distinguish between them is to think of shapes as only the outline or contours of something, flat like a silhouette, while forms have, or appear to have, *volume*.

genre: French in origin, the word *genre*, which means *kind, sort, or variety*, categorizes the type of painting that depicts scenes of everyday life. The word *genre* was not used to describe this wide range of paintings that depicted scenes from the ordinary until the end of the 18th century.

Haarlem: During the 16th and 17th centuries, Haarlem was a center of Dutch painting. Brewing and weaving were leading industries in this area at the time. Haarlem was a relatively small town until the mid-17th century when the population reached 40,000.

harmony: Term borrowed from music to suggest a satisfactory or pleasant arrangement of elements.

humanistic: Devotion to human interests and values.

hutch: Cupboard usually surmounted by open shelves.

linear perspective: Scientific method used by artists since the Renaissance to represent three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional plane, so that they appear as in nature. Linear perspective involves a system of lines that converge at one or two vanishing points in the distance at which objects seem to disappear.

“merry company” scene: Scenes capturing everyday activities of all socio-economic backgrounds—men, women, and children in an interior eating, drinking, and playing instruments. In Haarlem, “merry company” images of the well-to-do lower class were especially popular.

monarchical: Characteristic of monarchy, undivided rule, or absolute sovereignty by a single person, such as a king or emperor.

shape: Outline of a form, including recognizable objects, animals, or people; can also be geometric (circles, squares, triangles, etc.).

urbanization: Migration of people from the countryside to the city, increasing the proportion of the population that lives in the city.

Classroom Activities & Discussion Questions

• Illustrate a Festive Scene Using the Five Senses

17th-century Dutch painters often depicted scenes illustrating the five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. Identify the elements in Ostade's painting that would require the use of the senses.

For example: the sense of touch is shown throughout this picture, especially with the couple dancing. The joining of hands is also a significant sign of togetherness and peace. The rhythm of the painting flows through each character and one could imagine the music from the violin flooding the interior. The sense of taste is represented by many figures, including a young boy drinking beer—an important commodity for the Dutch. This genre painting represents the human experience of peasant life in the 17th century. Write a story describing a festive occasion with family and friends. You can write about your experience using all five senses or focusing on one.

• Geography and Navigation

Geography provides a good example of the interrelation of mathematics and social sciences. Ostade was born in Haarlem and remained there his entire life. His family roots were from the town of Eyndhoven (Eindhoven). Ostade and his siblings were given the name of the birthplace of their father, a small town located just outside Eyndhoven. Have students locate Eyndhoven and Haarlem on the map below and determine the distance between the two cities. Now locate Amsterdam, the capital of Holland. Next, determine how many miles Ostade would have to travel if he visited his relatives in Eyndhoven and, upon his return to Haarlem, stopped by an art gallery in Amsterdam. Discuss methods of travel that may have been used in the 17th century—walking, horseback, horse-drawn vehicle. If the average speed of walking is three miles an hour, how long would it take Ostade to walk to visit his relatives from Haarlem?

• Looking for Details

Dutch genre scenes depict ordinary subjects from everyday life, usually containing a moral. Throughout the 17th century, Dutch artists included small details that often contributed to the overall message or lesson. The details in paintings also provide an understanding of daily living during this time.

Discuss and create a list of the details from this “merry company” scene. Divide the list into two categories, those activities that promote a healthy lifestyle and those that do not. Discuss why these various activities are beneficial or damaging to healthy living. Write a defense to support your position and present it to the class.

• Analyzing Works of Art

Ostade, like other artists, paid attention to the formal elements (see below) when creating *Merrymakers in an Inn*. **Composition** is the arrangement of the formal elements in a work. Many of these elements contribute significantly to understanding the meaning of a work of art. We can analyze this painting by examining some of its formal elements: **color:** Three primary, or pure, colors (red, blue, yellow) combine to create all other secondary (purple, green, orange) and complementary (opposite on the color wheel; blue and orange, purple and yellow, red and green, etc.) colors. Warm colors are derived from red and yellow (like fire). Cool colors are blues and greens (like cold).

light: Natural or illusionary, from a depicted source or outside the composition. Often highlights important areas of the composition.

texture: The look or feel of a surface. Also can refer to the tactile sense of materials depicted in an image (the “nap” of cloth or the roughness or hardness of wood).

line: Mark created by an artist with a writing tool to show the outline or contour of a form. Or an implied line that occurs, for example, from seeing several trees in a row.

space: Artists work to create the illusion of space and depth on a two-dimensional surface. Sense of space is achieved by the placement of objects with each other in the composition, the size of objects, and the interaction of colors.

All of these formal elements add to the overall mood or emotion expressed by a work of art and to the viewer's response. What is your response to this painting? Talk about the formal elements you discover in it. From your analysis, what mood or feeling do you think Ostade was trying to express? If the colors were altered, the light brighter, the composition more spread out, etc., how would the painting look different?

Adriaen van Ostade. *Merrymakers in an Inn*, 1674.

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