
Book Reviews

How Dutch artists were trained is a lesson for education today

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Jan Steen: The Drawing Lesson

by John Walsh

Getty Museum Studies on Art, Los Angeles, 1996
88 pages, paperbound, \$16.95

The Drawing Lesson is of interest for anyone who ever thought of becoming an artist, or who wondered why we no longer see artists in the tradition of Rembrandt, Leonardo, Brunelleschi, or Vermeer, to name a few, whose work has kept them alive forever. Even though this book, named for Jan Steen's famous work, is small, it is well worthwhile for any teacher or student of art, architecture, or sculpture, or, for that matter, anyone interested in learning about the two main themes that Mr. Walsh develops: Steen's painting *The Drawing Lesson*, and the education of an artist in the 17th century.

John Walsh, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum, in Malibu, California, manages to teach us not only about Jan Steen and his beautiful work of art, but also about what was important in the education of the child who was to become such a prominent artist in the 17th century. Today's schools should go back to the method of teaching that Mr. Walsh describes here, and use it as part of the training of art students today.

Walsh explains the difference between a Classical art education and modern art education very well: "Twentieth-century ideas of art education will not be of much help, for these are based on modern assumptions: for instance, that the painter's job is more to communicate his personal subjective states than to transmit traditional values. . . . These would have seemed strange ideas to Steen and his contemporaries. In our time painting has become primarily an intellectual or spiritual activity that is no longer constrained by the labor and discipline of imitating nature or expected to embody learning."

In 17th-century Europe, there were two components to the education of the artist: spirit (*ingenio*) and desire (*inclinatio*).

"Talent alone was not enough; talent would have to be reined by discipline and harnessed to difficult tasks," says Walsh. As the reader will learn upon reading his monograph, the education of the artist in 17th-century Europe aimed to develop certain talents in a human being and make him an instrument in the teaching of others, through his art, about what is transcendental in life.

The book, which was published at the same time as a major Jan Steen exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., gives a slightly different view of Steen's character than the one presented by the NGA. Walsh vigorously defends Steen as a scholarly artist, whereas the catalogue of the NGA suggests that there was probably some truth to the gossip that Steen was a bit of a reprobate.

Walsh portrays Steen as a serious painter with an extraordinary sense of humor and ability to depict humor in his paintings. Steen obviously understood that the best way of teaching is through metaphor and laughter. Oftentimes he would portray himself in his paintings (an idea he picked up from Rembrandt, who was from the previous generation), as the one making the moral point of the painting's tale, by means of a gesture or glance. Walsh says, "There is no question that Steen's comedy, at least, served a serious purpose." In no way was Steen the uneducated drunkard that some have portrayed him, in an effort to present him as a forerunner of today's "modern artists."

Methods of teaching

In his second and third chapters, "Picturing the Workshop" and "The Training of a Painter," Walsh takes the reader along the pathway of what it took in those days to be a painter, and the ins and outs of the profession. His work is pedagogically effective and beautiful. With the aid of color and duotone reproductions which depict, in one way or the other, the training of a painter or an artist's studio, he describes both the court painters in their elegant studios, and the not-so-well-to-do painters in modest studios. However, in almost all of them, we see pupils learning from their master, since, as Walsh says,

Steen's painting shows us an "artist in the art of teaching," which, according to Walsh, is something "many Dutch artists spent a lot of time doing," although it was rarely used as a subject in the thousands of Dutch paintings of daily life.

In Steen's times, children were accepted from a very young age, as apprentices in a master's studio, Rembrandt's being one of the most popular. Pupils began their training, by helping to clean the studio, the brushes, or preparing the paints, and only after a few years, could they start painting.

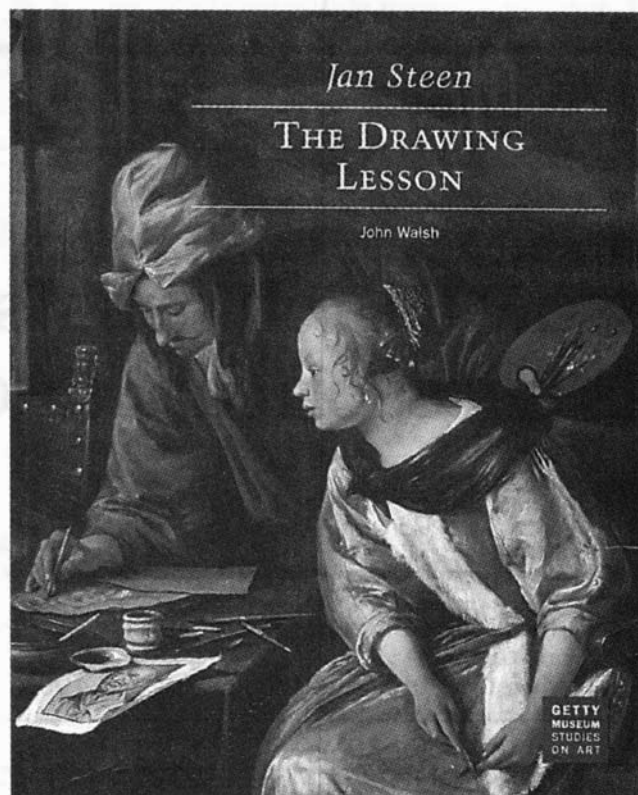
In *The Drawing Lesson*, Steen shows us how painting was taught in his day: We see a very young boy and a very elegant young lady, learning from the master. Steen evokes two of three prescribed stages in which drawing was taught, copying prints and drawings, and drawing from plaster casts of admired Classical models. In Steen's work, the final stage, drawing from a live model, has not yet been reached. Even though there are many "objects" in the painting, the lesson itself is the painting, and in this, Steen is absolutely clear. In Steen's time, as we would like to see it again today, drawing was considered the foundation of art. Walsh quotes Steen contemporary Gerard de Lairese: "Just as drawing . . . ought to be the foundation which furnishes a firm basis for the art of painting, so it is beyond contention that perspective is the fundamental principle of the art of drawing, and that lacking it one cannot become an assured draftsman, just as it is impossible to fly without wings."

Later on, Walsh elaborates this idea, that it was impossible to become an artist, without "the study of the fundamental elements of art—geometry, perspective, anatomy and so on—and the best examples of the ancient and modern past. Drawing was the key to this study. The master was expected to be the young artist's guide to this higher realm of learning." As the reader can realize, the "spontaneous generation" theory, as applied to art these days, where modern art is the product of personal passions, would never even have been considered in Steen's time.

Even though profit was a motive in those days, it was not a sure thing. However, parents who saw a certain inclination for drawing in their children, tried to obtain a good master for them. Training had a traditional sequence of phases, but any good master knew that "the core of a painter's training at any time and in any country in Europe, however, was drawing." A good master would have good works of art in the workshop, such as books, prints, drawings, plaster casts. The pupil would stay from dawn till dusk, and his education would last at least three years, "governed by a contract between master and child." The first three to four years were spent "working for the master as journeyman. In Steen's times, the most prestigious ones were Rembrandt in Amsterdam, Gerard Dou in Leiden and Gerard Honthorst in The Hague and Utrecht."

A little masterpiece

Walsh himself takes us on a voyage of discovery through every corner of Steen's *Drawing Lesson*, uncovering many



of the metaphors represented by the artist. As the title tells us, the painting shows us an "artist in the art of teaching."

The Drawing Lesson is quite different from many of Steen's other works, both in composition, the which is much more focussed, and in finish, which is small and refined. Steen is an artist who becomes, often, too anecdotal, but in this particular painting, he rises above that to create a true, little masterpiece.

In his study of the painting, Walsh makes a thorough analysis of almost every item in the depicted studio, which is rather impressive, telling us, as it does, about what sort of items the artist collects to use in his paintings. Walsh writes: "On the floor in the left foreground is a trunk that very likely contained miscellaneous studio properties, especially costumes for models in historical scenes. On top is a piece of lustrous plum-colored silk with gold borders, the sort of oriental cloth used for costumes in Steen's own historical paintings." Walsh adds that this was a common practice, and that Rembrandt's inventory included costumes and a "collection of antique stuffs of various colors."

Again, in detailing the objects in the painting, Walsh points to a thick album placed on top of the trunk, which probably contained more prints and drawings, "the most useful and often most valuable possessions in an artist's studio." These, too, he says, were an aspect of teaching. Walsh explains, "Prints were important for what they could teach a pupil about the art of the past. The majority were what we today call 'reproductive' prints made from the designs of the

great masters. . . . For painters at all stages of their careers, whether or not they ever had the chance to travel to see the original works, these prints were an introduction to the styles and forms of countless artists, as well as a ready source of pictorial ideas and solutions to problems of pose, composition, historical costume and decor, and more besides." His description of such a 17th-century "dialogue with the past," as it were, is very much contrary to the concept of "originality" as understood today in modern art. Then, it was absolutely lawful that an artist "quoted" other artists in his paintings. One example of many is Johannes Vermeer, whose "paintings inside the painting," are paintings he "quoted" to give full meaning to his own ideas.

Illustrative is the beautiful still life in the lower right of Steen's painting, which Walsh rightly describes as "one of the delights of Steen's picture." The still life is comprised of objects that are part of the familiar repertoire of *vanitas*, reminding us that life is short, that excessive pleasure is dangerous, that human achievements are fleeting, and that even fame, symbolized by the wreath, will perish. In addition, each

object alludes to one of the five senses: the fur muff for touch, the pipe for smell, the wine for taste, the book for sight, and the lute for hearing. Walsh observes, "In making a seductive painting out of these temptations, the painter is both repeating the warning and creating yet another enticement for the senses," and adds, "paradoxes like this were grist for the mill of 17th-century meditation."

The musical metaphor in art

Walsh accomplishes, in a beautiful way, as he says he intends to do in his introduction to the book: "My role will be that of a conductor—to switch to a musical metaphor—looking at the individual passages, rehearsing the parts, then trying to restore overall sense to the composition by playing the whole thing. By sense I mean historical sense: not merely a pleasing contemporary rendition but a reasonably consistent and well-supported account of the associations or meanings the picture would have had for the artist and his audience."

As one closes his book after reading the last page, one can say with satisfaction: It was certainly a good lesson.

Leonardo, Rembrandt exhibits in New York

The American Museum of Natural History is hosting an exhibition, titled "Leonardo's Codex Leicester, A Masterpiece of Science," running through Jan. 1, 1997. This exhibition of the only Leonardo manuscript in the United States, offers a unique view of the scientific thinking of one of history's greatest geniuses.

Composed on loose, double-sided sheets of linen paper, comprising 72 pages in all, the Codex Leicester embraces topics ranging from astronomy to hydrodynamics, and includes Leonardo's observations and theories related to rivers and seas; the properties of water, rocks and fossils; air, and celestial light. The Codex includes more than 300 of his pen-and-ink sketches, drawings, and diagrams, many of which illustrate experiments.

Although the primary subject of the Codex Leicester is water, a secondary subject is light. Leonardo held the conviction that, in order to learn how to paint, students needed to learn about the ways in which light is reflected, and about the importance of the infusion of

water vapor and smoke into the air. One of his most brilliant discoveries, described in the manuscript, is that the dimmer, secondary light of the crescent Moon—that which appears to be cradled within the crescent—is the reflection of light from the Earth and its oceans. A century later, and before Leonardo's own work in this field had come to light, Johannes Kepler arrived at the same discovery.

The Pierpont Morgan Library is hosting "A Fine Line: Rembrandt as Etcher," an exhibit of over 100 of the master's finest etchings, running through Jan. 5, 1997. The exhibit offers fascinating comparisons of different states of the same etching, allowing the visitor to trace the artist's development. Rembrandt created etchings of a broad range of subjects, all of which—themes from Scripture, portraits, allegorical and genre scenes, and landscapes—are represented in this exhibit. The Morgan Library is also hosting a complementary exhibition of "Seventeenth-Century Dutch Drawings" from the library's collection.

