Introduction
Jan Steen was a Dutch artist so infamous that a common Dutch proverb was based off of his work in the saying “een huishouden van Jan Steen” or “Jan Steen household”. His pieces, such as The Dancing Couple (Figure 1) and Beware of Luxury (Figure 2), depict dissolute behavior, chaotic households, luxurious lifestyles, and moral dilemmas, giving him this notoriety. Steen is regarded as a comedic artist giving his work a sense of humor and enjoyment. However, beneath the facade of humor and merriment, Steen was a moralist conveying warnings against indulgence in luxurious ways of living.

Dutch art historian E. de Jongh argues that genre paintings provided a moral education in the 17th century, particularly in pieces where promiscuous, beautiful women were depicted seducing “innocent” men to engage in immoral behavior. This was a warning to the upper class men of society against the dangers they may encounter when in the presence of lascivious women and their charms. Steen’s use of women as a vehicle to convey his moral messages is an important aspect of his art. Beyond seduction, women were also depicted as the iconographic idea of vanity (or vanitas), one of the seven deadly sins. Intertwined with the idea of vanity, women were depicted as the personification of the vice of Luxury in which many men indulged but were warned against. These are ideas that are ever present in Jan Steen’s work, particularly in the dissolute households and the luxurious chaos he so regularly depicted. However, one cannot fully understand the work of Jan Steen, and the moral teachings he wished to convey, without also turning their attention to the historical renderings he created later in his career.
History painting was considered the highest and most demanding form of art and was a true mark of talent. It was considered as such beginning in the Renaissance and carried on into the Dutch Republic of the 17th century. Steen’s desire to convey moral messages allowed him to portray historical scenes quite effectively. Gerard Lairesse’s *Groot schilderboek* and Samuel Van Hoogstratens *Inleyding* were two books that defined various rules, emblems, and traditions in painting in the Dutch Republic. In both, history painting is regarded as a prestigious form of art, a true test of a knowledgeable artist, where the work must both be beautiful but educational at the same time. In the hierarchy of painting, historical works sat atop the pyramid. If a painter wanted to stand the test of time, they created historical works to exemplify their skillset as well as their knowledge on classical literature, religion, and other topics. Where Lairesse felt it was best to educate one's audience through an acute perfection of skill creating, above all, a beautiful piece of art, van Hoogstraten believed it was most important to depict a very specific movement to express the most fundamental action in the story. Steen’s historical works satisfy the latter.

His historical works strayed from typical depictions of the time as the figures in the piece had outrageous facial expressions and contained elements of humor. However, the pieces certainly depicted edifying stories focused on avoidance of luxury and how one should not live their life as well as the affects of love and lust on powerful men.

Of the many historical paintings he created, *Banquet of Anthony and Cleopatra* (Figure 3)
housed in the Leiden Collection deserves the most recognition. The work depicts the infamous moment at Cleopatra’s banquet just after she has dissolved her extravagant pearl earring in a chalice of vinegar. It is pristine and elegant and exudes the highest level of quality that Steen had to offer. He depicted this scene at least two other times, one located at the Georg-August-Universität in Göttingen (Figure 4) and the other in the Rijksdienst voor Cultureel Erfgoed in Zeist/Rijswijk known (Figure 5), suggesting a personal interest in the subject matter.

The Leiden Collection work depicts Antony in the most appealing manner where the others suggest his indulgences in luxury have turned him gluttonous. Cleopatra is the ultimate personification of luxury, as she was attractive, seductive, and lecherous. Women of this type are a common theme in Steen’s work. A pearl is a central part of the story, and pearls had both economic and iconographic significance in the Dutch republic, giving the story a place within the Dutch republic and its culture. Antony, a well-known soldier, becoming infatuated with the charms of Cleopatra and engaging in immoral behavior relates directly to the warning against an innocent man falling for a seductive woman that was so common in Dutch genre painting.

*Banquet of Antony and Cleopatra* may have come later in Steen’s career, but the story is at the forefront of many of his works. The vast majority of art historians would disagree, focusing instead on *Beware of Luxury* which has been a focal point of analysis for art historians, but this work is the pinnacle of Steen’s career and the story itself clearly provided inspiration for Steen.

**The Story of Antony and Cleopatra and Its Context in the Dutch Republic** The infamous story of Roman general Marc Antony and Egyptian queen Cleopatra’s complex relationship became a parable in the Dutch Republic. For example, Jacob Cats, a

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"Rosalie van Gulick. "Jan Steen's History Paintings and Dutch Art Theory: Comments and Corrections by Gerard De Lairesse." p. 395"
famous poet of the time, includes the story of Antony and Cleopatra in his poem *Houwelijk (On Marriage)*, to display how a marriage should not look. This poem was widely disseminated in the Dutch Republic and was well known among artists. Antony had a reputation for indulging in a luxurious lifestyle, attending many parties, holding lavish banquets, and having a short temper. Upon meeting Cleopatra, Antony became infatuated with her and was subsequently distracted from all of his important duties. Antony sent several letters to Cleopatra requesting her to visit

him in Cilicia. She made the journey in a golden barge and according to Plutarch’s *Life of Antony*, “She herself lay all along under a canopy of cloth of gold, dressed as Venus in a picture, and beautiful young boys, like painted Cupids, stood on each side to fan her.” It is clear that Antony was continuing his indulgences by falling for the charms of the beautiful Cleopatra.

Cleopatra has always been seen as the embodiment of luxury. Her palace was the most opulent with ivory and emerald details and a dining room larger than many temples of the time. She became synonymous with luxury due to her reputation of wearing the most elegant clothing, having access to the best spices and flowers in the land, constantly being adorned with pearls and other jewels, having servants to attend to her every need, and even bathing in donkey’s milk for its anti-aging properties.

The two held a ridiculous competition for who could throw the most expensive banquet, which is detailed in Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia*. Cleopatra promised a banquet so lavish that her meal alone would cost 10,000,000 sesterces. Taking one of the pearl earrings from her ear, pearls that were described as the two biggest “in the whole of history”, she dropped it in a glass
of vinegar. Once the pearl dissolved, she drank the mixture, leaving Antony and the other attendees astonished. She was declared the clear winner. This particular story became a cautionary tale in the seventeenth century Dutch Republic against luxurious pleasures and extravagance as it was seen as wasteful and sinful. The story also served as one of the earliest examples of a man becoming seduced by a beautiful woman and falling into a trap of immoral behavior. Marc Antony was known to hasten wars, perform sloppily in battle, and forget about his political duties all to be in Cleopatra’s company more often.

The Personification of Luxury as a Woman Throughout History and In Jan Steen’s Art

In Banquet of Anthony and Cleopatra, the viewer cannot help but focus their gaze on Cleopatra’s beauty. She wears a dress with a white, almost pearl colored bodice, puffed sleeves, and an orange gold skirt. Her auburn hair is adorned with jewels and blue silk that falls down to her waist and rests on her lap. Cleopatra dangles her second pearl earring in her hand while giving Marc Antony a teasing look, beckoning his affection. Steen has depicted her in a way that appeals to the male gaze, accentuating her figure and facial features. Cleopatra is the very personification of luxury, in her beauty, wealth, and clothing.

Luxury was considered unnecessary and sinful even in the time of Antony and Cleopatra and has been depicted in various ways. The most common representation is through personification as a woman who has been given the name Luxuria, Latin for luxury. Caesare
Ripa’s emblem book *Iconologia* (Moral Emblems) (Figure 6) is one of the most well-known depictions of luxury as a woman originating in the Renaissance. Luxury is described as “A young Damsel, with her hair finely curl’d; in a manner naked; fits on a crocodile and makes much of a partridge.” It goes on to say that she is naked because luxury “quanders away the Goods of Fortune and destroys those of the Soul” implying a negative and sinful connotation associated with *luxuria*. This particular description is only one of many ways that luxury was personified. Ellen Kosmer, expert on medieval depictions, describes luxury as “… a seductive, fashionable, and richly-dressed woman who sometimes looks into a mirror - concerned only with the fleeting quality of physical beauty - and who is sometimes approached by a man with lustful intent.” Considering this description and Cleopatra’s appearance in *Banquet of Anthony and Cleopatra*, she is the perfect example of *Luxuria*. She is beautiful, richly-dressed, and is approached by Marc Antony who undoubtedly has lustful intent. Though the theme of personifying luxury as a woman came far after Cleopatra’s time, she certainly served as an inspiration for the depiction. Being compared to Venus is enough evidence to prove she was the original luxurious woman. People who indulged in the “sin” of luxury, were called followers of the Greek goddess Venus, the goddess of love, prosperity, desire. Cleopatra was a tangible representation of all of those things.

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11Caesare Ripa, *Iconologia* (Rome, 1603) p. 50
12Caesare Ripa *Iconologia* p. 50

This personification of luxury as a richly dressed, beautiful woman originates from *La Somme le Roi*, a handbook on virtue in terms of the Christian faith, written for the children of Phillip III of France in 1279. In this book, the image of the virtue of Chastity is contrasted by the vice Luxury (Luxure) and below each are biblical references to the characteristic. This specific leaf is entitled *Chastity, Luxury, Judith and Holofernes, Joseph and Potiphar's wife* (Figure 7). Luxury is portrayed as an elegantly dressed woman in a blue gown carrying in one hand a “chemise blanche” and in the other linked chains. In Jan Steen’s banquet scene, Cleopatra has a fabric of blue silk that trails down from her hair to her lap, referencing the blue dress of Luxure in the *Somme le roi*. Interpretations of the “chemise blanche” or white cloth have varied over time, but in this context it is supposed to represent a soul cloth, a popular garment worn by church figures to represent the purity of one's soul. *Luxuria* only carries the chemise blanche symbolically to show how it will become stained from her sins. A “chemise blanche” is evident in Steen’s *The Dancing Couple*. The woman in the piece sports a dress that has a white piece of fabric hanging down from the front. The woman clutches this piece of fabric in her hand and holds it at her side, resembling the chemise blanche in the depiction of luxury in the *Somme le Roi*. In *Banquet of Anthony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra’s white dress also hints at the idea of the chemise blanche as her virtue became stained from her indulgence and lasciviousness.

Another personification of luxury was in the form of a sexually unrestrained woman, often nude or not fully clothed, and accompanied by a pig or goat. We see this depiction come...
to life in the woman in *Beware of Luxury* where she wears a dress that accentuates her features as she holds a glass of wine in front of a man’s crotch who drapes his leg over her lap. There is also a pig present in this piece in the corner, exemplifying luxury and the dangers that accompany it. Cleopatra was compared to Venus who was also often seen as sexually unrestrained, showing clear comparisons to this woman in Jan Steen’s work and the lore of Cleopatra. The women in all three of these pieces look very similar in their dress, facial structure, and expression (Figure 8), further exemplifying the connection between Cleopatra, and Jan Steen’s other depictions of luxury.

Hence, the personification of luxury as a woman is not only present in the visual arts over many centuries but specifically in Jan Steen’s works. *Banquet of Anthony and Cleopatra* perfectly displays Cleopatra as this personification and shows how she became the blueprint for Jan Steen’s other luxurious women. It makes sense that he depicted this later in his career, as if he wanted Cleopatra to be the ultimate culmination of his many luxurious women. **Pearls and Their Economic and Iconographic Importance in the Dutch Republic**

Arguably the most important part of this piece is the pearl earring that Cleopatra holds. In the story of the banquet, her pearl earrings, along with her wit, made her victorious over Antony. \(^{17}\text{Ibid p.4}\)

in the frivolous competition. Pearls were a luxury good in the Dutch Republic particularly due to the economic prosperity the country experienced in its “Golden Age”, and pearls still carry that connotation around the world today. Women would often wear bow jewels adorned with pearls as a symbol of status and wealth. In Gerrit van Honthorst’s *Double Portrait of Fredrick Henry* \(^{18}\)
and Amalia of Solms-Braunfols (Figure 9), a portrait of the Prince and Princess of Orange, Amalia of Solms-Braunfols wears a dress adorned with at least 108 pearls that the viewer can count, and possibly many more that wrap around her back. It is estimated that her collection of pearls in this one outfit would be worth 33,000 Holland pounds, which would have been significant in the 17th century. If a woman of such esteemed social status and power as the Princess of Orange in the Dutch Republic chose to be depicted with pearls, the gemstones were dear to the Dutch Republic and a status symbol to strive for. Cleopatra was also a woman of high status and her jewelry of choice was a set of pearl earrings larger than anyone had ever seen before. Jan Steen certainly saw the connections between pearls in the Dutch republic and Cleopatra’s pearls and took inspiration from the story.

Pearls were also used in building the Dutch Republic as a trade empire. The city of Amsterdam became an international trading center and oriental pearls were one of the most popular commodities sold in the markets. The Dutch also used pearls in establishing trade and diplomatic relations as they expanded their trade and imports through the Dutch East India Company (VOC). In an excerpt from “The Aduise from Sir Thomas Roe of Goodes and Presents for Surratt ”, Sir Thomas Roe of Britain was serving in the court of the Mughal empire on behalf of the East India Companies and discussed the gifts that were well received by their king: “If you can send yerely in great stones of theis kindes or pearles ... it would vent [sell] to proffitt and make you highly requested.” Here he is expressing how well received pearls were as gifts to

foreign empires, and how they were used in establishing a trade network and expanding the power of the Dutch Republic. Cleopatra indulged in a relationship with Marc Antony with the hope that it would strengthen the power she had over Egypt. She used her pearls to prove to Antony she could throw a bigger banquet, impressing him, and causing him to become even more infatuated with her. Ultimately, this heightened her position of power and status in Egypt. In some ways, Cleopatra used pearls in a similar fashion as the Dutch Republic, as a means of extending the grips of her power. Pearls and their purposes in relation to status and economic power were not lost Jan Steen, and the story of Cleopatra was a vehicle of showcasing pearls and their importance.

Gerard Lairesse wrote his *Groot schilderboek* which discusses iconographic traditions and etiquette. In the book pearls were symbolic of vanity in the depiction of *Vanitas* (Figure 10) where a woman places pearls around her neck and looks into a mirror as she does so. Pearls went hand in hand with vanity and obsession with beauty. This symbolism is also present in Clara Peeters’ *Vanitas Portrait of a Woman* (Figure 11) where the woman sports many jewels and most notably a string of pearls around her neck as she beautifies herself and looks into a mirror. Cleopatra’s pearls fit this interpretation as she is the personification of luxury, often portrayed as a beautiful woman looking into a mirror, and the pearls, in Cleopatra’s case, were the ultimate example of luxury and extravagance which was deemed sinful at the time. Therefore, due to the economic, iconographic, and cultural importance of pearls in the 17th century Dutch Republic one can see how the pearl as a central element in *Banquet of Anthony*

22Ibid p. 81

*and Cleopatra* made the story more appealing to Jan Steen and perhaps served as inspiration
for him.

**Soldiers in Dutch Society and The Distraction of Women**

Considering the many military endeavors of the Dutch Republic, such as the Eighty Years War and Anglo-Dutch Wars, soldiers became a common presence in society. As these wars came to an end, and soldiers returned home, the idea of soldiers as a separate group in society began to change as they were integrated with the masses again. Soldiers also brought home with them practices they learned overseas, as well as goods they acquired, and were often times blamed for the proliferating culture of prostitution and adultery in the Dutch Republic. Amsterdam also became a flourishing center for prostitution and adultery, some of which has flowed over into modern times seen in the Red Light District there. The theme of soldiers falling for the charms of women and engaging in these promiscuous behaviors was also present in literature. Jacob Cats, author of *Houweljik*, wrote in another famous poem, *Trouiningh*, of soldiers becoming seduced by women:

“He who is a soldier will one day, alas, be captured / Not in open battle, but by blushing cheeks enraptured, / Not in single combat, but by seeing a sweet visage, / Not by strong and mighty lords, but by seductive language.”

Therefore, genre paintings depicting soldiers passing their time in the company of beautiful women, intruding on households, and indulging in luxurious activities became very popular. Artists like Gerard ter Borch, Nicolas Maes, and even Jan Steen depicted these types of scenes. Overtime, women began to take a more central role in these works. Rather than being items to support the wanton nature of soldiers, they were the ones inviting the men in and

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24Jacob Cats *Trouiningh*. Translated by Wouter Kloek, 1637.
deciding whether or not they stayed. Steen depicted many prostitution scenes, many of which hinged upon the role of the woman in the piece. Though they had undertones of humor, their overarching messages were warning against the dangers of indulgence in promiscuous activities and luxury. In many ways, Steen depicted these women as a luxury item themselves and in indulging sex and women, the men were indulging in the vice of luxury. One of Steen’s prostitution scenes was *Robbery in a Brothel* (Figure 12), where a man has fallen asleep on the lap of a prostitute while the other steals a pocketwatch from him. Both of these women are dressed in luxurious clothes and depicted in a very similar way to Cleopatra. Steen’s well-known guardroom work *Card Players in an Interior* (Figure 13) again shows a soldier who has become too enthralled in alcohol and the women he is surrounded by that he loses his sword in a game of cards to his female opponent.  

The idea of a soldier becoming distracted by the charms of a beautiful, luxurious female is tantamount to Antony and Cleopatra’s story. Marc Antony was a successful soldier, as well as political figure, who fell for the charms of a beautiful woman, Cleopatra, and undoubtedly the promiscuous behavior they engaged in. According to Plutarch’s account of Antony’s life, Antony began to hasten wars and perform sloppily as a soldier just to be able to return to Cleopatra sooner, falling for the exact trap Steen has warned against both in this work and many of his others. Cleopatra took advantage of Antony’s obvious obsession with her by ignoring his invitations to visit him until the very last one that was sent, just to tease him, and upon her arrival in Cilicia, she told him he had to come meet her for dinner and not the other way around.  

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25Richard Helgerson. "Soldiers and Enigmatic Girls: The Politics of Dutch Domestic Realism,


Additionally, Steen was undoubtedly familiar with Jacob Cats’ work and most likely used his poem as a reference when creating this piece. Therefore, Marc Antony’s distraction with Cleopatra fits with other depictions of the time period in terms of soldiers engaging in promiscuous behavior with women, showing the context of the story within the Dutch Republic and also how it inspired Steen’s other creations.

**Conclusion**

*Banquet of Antony and Cleopatra*’s various connections to Dutch culture and the typical subject matter that Jan Steen depicted suggest that this story was of the utmost importance to Steen. Women, luxury, pearls, and soldiers were common themes not only in Steen’s work but in the Dutch Republic as a whole. In the two earlier renditions created between 1667 and 1670, Antony is depicted much more gluttonously, and much less attractively, as if the effects of luxury are affecting his appearance. Cleopatra is still the picture of beauty and luxury and dangles her pearl tauntingly in front of Antony. The Leiden Collection version is arguably the most attractive, not only in the way the lovers are portrayed, but in the colors, brush strokes, and surrounding crowd. The fact that Steen approached the subject from different angles, with different color palettes, and even made the characters look different exhibits the way this story occupied his thoughts. The way it inspired him was so important, he wanted to depict it as perfectly as possible and attempted it in many ways.

For the piece to have come so late in his career truly exemplifies that this was the pinnacle of his career. He created his works of dissolution, of luxury, of chaos just to have them all ultimately
compared to the *Banquet of Antony and Cleopatra*. If historical paintings were the sign of someone's skill and fame as an artist, it is clear that Jan Steen wanted this piece to be the mark he left on the art scene of the seventeenth century, and remembered into the future.

Appendix of Images

Figure 1
Jan Steen
*The Dancing Couple* (c. 1663)

Medium: Oil on canvas

Overall: 102.5 cm x 142.5 cm

Framed: 131.4 cm x 171.8 cm

Location: The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Figure 2
Jan Steen
*Beware of Luxury* (c. 1663)

Medium: oil on canvas

Overall: 105 cm x 145 cm

Framed: 135.5 cm × 177.5 cm × 12 cm

Location: Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien Vienna, Austria
Figure 3
Jan Steen
Banquet of Anthony and Cleopatra (c.1673-1675)

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 82.1 cm x 107.8 cm

Location: The Leiden Collection

Figure 4
Banquet of Antony and Cleopatra c.1667
Medium: oil on canvas on panel

Dimensions: 67.5 x 58.5 cm

Location: Georg-August-Universität, Göttingen

Figure 5
Jan Steen
Banquet of Antony and Cleopatra c. 1667/70

Medium: oil on canvas

Dimensions: 13 x 102 cm

Location: Rijksdienst voor Cultureel Erfgoed, Zeist/Rijswijk
Figure 6
Caesare Ripa
Luxury (Lussuria)
From Iconologia, Rome 1603

Figure 7
Master Honoré
Chastity, Luxury, Judith and Holofernes, Joseph and Potiphar's wife ca. 1285

Location: Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge UK
Figure 8
Details from *Banquet of Anthony and Cleopatra* (c.1673-1675), *Beware of Luxury* (c. 1663), *The Dancing Couple* (c. 1663)

Figure 9
Gerrit van Honthorst

*Double Portrait of Fredrick Henry and Amalia of Solms-Braunfols* c. 1637

Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 213.2 cm x 201.7 cm

Location: The Hague, Mauritshuis

Figure 10
Gerard Lairesse
*Vanitas*
*Groot schilderboek, Amsterdam 1707*

Figure 11
Clara Peeters
*Vanitas Portrait of a Woman* (c. early 17th century)
Medium: Oil on canvas

Overall: 37 x 50 cm (14.75 x 19.75 in)

Unknown location

Figure 12
Jan Steen
*Robby in a Brothel* c. 1665-1668

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 410 cm x 350 cm

Musée du Louvre, Paris, France
Figure 13
Jan Steen
*Card Players in an Interior* c. 1660
Medium: Oil on panel
Dimensions: 45.5 cm x 60.5 cm
Sold at Sotheby’s London, December 2011

Bibliography


