

LAWRENCE STEIGRAD FINE ARTS



Portrait of a Family at Midday Meal

oil on unlined canvas
31 ½ x 82 ¼ inches (80 x 209 cm.)

PROVENANCE

Private Collection, Pennsylvania

Lawrence Steigrad Fine Arts, New York, 2012, from whom acquired by

Private Collection, Pennsylvania, 2012 until the present time

EXHIBITED

The Netherlands, Maastricht, The European Fine Art Fair, March 16 – 25, 2012 (with Lawrence Steigrad Fine Arts)

LITERATURE

Lawrence Steigrad Fine Arts, New York, Recent Acquisitions, 2012, no. 1, unpaginated, illustrated

Lawrence Steigrad Fine Arts in The European Fine Art Fair Maastricht 12, The European Fine Art Foundation, 2012, p. 152, illustrated

Constance Scholten & Sabine Craft-Giepmans, “ Geliefde afwezigen, afwezige geliefden. Herinneren en koesteren rond het ‘portret in portret’” in Portret in portret in de Nederlandse kunst 1550 – 2012, DordrechtS Museum, 2012, p. 34, illustrated

“Study of a 17th century Dutch Family portrait” at Churchmouse Campanologist on churchmouse.wordpress.com, March 23, 2012, illustrated

Monumental family portraits became fashionable in the Netherlands during the first half of the seventeenth century. The main center for production of these portraits was based in Antwerp.[1] The placement of the sitters within these works was based on altarpiece wings that were painted with donor portraits. Typically, fathers and sons were shown to the left side of the altarpiece and mothers and daughters on the right. This type of arrangement for integrated family portraits remained standard in Flanders for decades.[2]

In this painting a family of ten are viewed at a table laid with a sumptuous feast. To the left of the family is a maid accompanied by a large dog sporting an ornate collar. Behind the maid is a kitchen showing on the left-hand side a cloth covered sideboard with assorted platters, breads, knife and wine glass. Above the sideboard is a rack with hanging jugs and steins. To the right of the rack are two ropes of sausages. The rest of the kitchen is filled by the hearth in which a pot hangs from an iron pothook over a roaring fire. Fire tongs and a golden-colored wafer iron protruding from a tinned brass pot are also discernible. [3] On its mantelpiece are two apples and a candle. On the floor in the middle of the kitchen is a cat. In the center of the background is a wide expanse of draped brownish-green curtain. To the right of the curtain is an area covered by gilt leather wall hangings above which are two portraits of deceased children. In the far right is an open wooden door crowned by a broken pediment displaying a central roundel, which looks out upon a tree. As is typical in seventeenth century Netherlandish painting so much more is represented than what is immediately obvious.

Addressing the viewer the gaze of all the sitters, with the exception of the small child in front of the table, are cast directly outwards. The painting of this family at table afforded the artist an opportunity to display a realistic domestic setting[4] filled with all that was meaningful to the patron who had commissioned the work. Undoubtedly regarded as the most valuable asset of the family was its children. Children at this time were universally perceived as gifts from God and one of the joys of marriage.

Much weight was attached to proper child rearing as it was felt that if one's offspring grew into pious and virtuous adults it ultimately served to preserve the morality and stability of the state. The Dutchman Bartholomew Batty, who wrote a treatise on child rearing in 1581 entitled *The Christian Man's Closet*, stated "Thou hast begot children not only for thy selfe, but also for thy countrie. Which should not only be to thy selfe a joy and pleasure, but also profitable and commodious afterward unto the commonwealth." [5] The young boy who stands in front of the table is a testimony to these beliefs. His right-hand points to a goldfinch sitting on a perch fitted with bells. This particular attribute was a staple in portraits painted in Antwerp that featured children. A goldfinch (emblematic of a virtuous life) was an easy bird to train and a common pet. The lessons of guidance, perseverance and repetition for proper training were felt to apply to children, birds and animals alike.[6] The ringing of the bells was intended to ward off evil spirits.[7]

The matriarch of the family is seated in a Spanish chair at her designated end of the table with the youngest member of the family on her lap. Her sole ornament is a coral bracelet which matches those worn by her two daughters nearest the center of the table.

Coral was believed to ward off disease and evil spirits, and just as coral once removed from reefs could be transformed into precious stones hopefully so too did a child develop.[8] The infant on her lap holds a large bunch of grapes. A bunch of grapes was the traditional symbol for fruitfulness. Its meaning conveys not only a wish for a happy full life for the child but is also emblematic of the success of his parent's union. The perfection of the raised grapes is further reflective of the concept that the child should be well bred. It was believed of central importance to a fruitful marriage, not so much the quantity, but the quality of the children produced.[9]

The two daughters seated closest to the center are in the act of saying grace before the meal, prior to which no one was allowed to eat. This was considered an important part of a child's spiritual training which clearly demonstrated their godliness and obedience. It was further felt that the midday meal when the entire family was present provided the perfect opportunity to devote attention to child-rearing as it afforded a structured setting for training on a daily basis.[10]

The patriarch is seated in a Spanish chair at the head of the table with a large napkin on his lap. His right hand is extended towards the bounty spread before him, while his left hand displays crossed fingers. Although today crossed fingers is interpreted as a wish for good luck, at the time it was meant to ward off evil spirits.[11] The son standing behind his father is viewed doffing his hat. This was a common courtesy in the seventeenth century and was meant as a show of respect for and obedience to authority. When it was represented in family portraits the further intention was as a display of proper breeding.[12]

The juxtaposition of the dog in the foreground and the cat lurking in the background represents the eternal fight of good versus evil. The dog is a metaphor often found in children's portraits of the period, symbolic of docility, and the need to reign in natural tendencies. Such tendencies in animal and child alike could be curbed by instruction and learning. The quality of docility was also intended to mean the development of characteristics that would form decent and honorable citizens.[13] Cats were viewed as filthy and the embodiment of evil, symbolic of worldly temptations particularly the sin of lust.[14]

The passage of the open door and glimpsed tree in the right rear background is a common motif found in family groups shown gathered around a laid table dating back to the late sixteenth century. It serves to underline the message of the painting and derives from Psalms 1 and 128 which declare that those who lived an observant life would be rewarded with happiness, prosperity and progeny. From Psalm 1, "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper." From Psalm 128, "Blessed is every one that feareth the Lord, that walketh in his ways. For though shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy shalt though be, and it shall be well with thee. They wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house: thy children like olive plants round about thy table." [15]

Perhaps the most interesting feature in regards to the overall conservative costuming of the family is the mix of collar types. Falling collars come into style in the 1610s making the millstone ruff worn by the mother relatively old fashioned at this point. The father wears a finely pleated ruff that is unstarched and edged with lace, the three sons and two daughters in the center have collars bordered with needle lace, making them more in keeping with the times. Most up-to-date are the oldest daughter and the maid shown in standing flat collars of very thin cambric linen edged with lace. The most transparent fabrics were also the most costly. Just as today fashion trends are not uniformly adapted so too was this true in the 1610s. [16]

Two portraits of deceased children on their deathbeds hang in the background. The subject was treated quite openly in the sixteenth and seventeenth century and portraits of this type are among the most moving, reflective of the children's cherished status within the family. The wreaths around their heads are flecked with gold and their coverings sprinkled with flowers and herbs are all meant to ward off evil spirits. [17]

On the left side of the composition a young maid, wearing the traditional red associated with her station, topped by an expensive collar and wearing an oorijzer of precious metal under her outer cap (tightly fitted metal bands meant to keep both caps in place) [18], brings butter and a jug of beer to the table. Peripheral to the main scene her inclusion and fine dress intentionally reflects her master's status but also suggests more than just servitude. Servants were expected to fulfill their obligations within the household but likewise the master held the responsibility to protect and look out for his charge's interests and as such the individual was regarded as an extended member of the family. [19]

The amount, variety and quality of the food displayed in this painting reflects what the family could afford and what they felt to be appropriate for members of their class. [20] Silver beakers accompanied by pewter tableware display a rich array of eggs, ham, plump sausages, pork knuckles, a large roasted waterfowl and a raised pie. Portions have been cut from the ham and pie to reveal their inner quality. The fowl was traditionally brought to the table whole and carved by the host or an honored guest. The decapitated egg upright in a salt dish is either raw and stirred or just lightly cooked. Two loafs of bread lay on the tablecloth. [21] The pronounced center crease of the linen tablecloth shows it to be freshly laundered. The projection of the knives (including the one on the kitchen sideboard), bread and plate over the edge of the table is intended to add to the three dimensionality of the scene. [22]

The draped curtain with deep folds in the center of the background is meant to recall the dynastic tradition of the curtained structures under which royals sat on ceremonial occasions. [23]

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[1] Jan Baptist Bedaux, "Introduction", in *Pride and Joy, Children's Portraits in the Netherlands 1500 – 1700*, exhibition catalogue Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem, October 7 – December 31, 2000, p. 36.

[2] Saskia Kuus, "Jan Mijtens", in *Pride and Joy*, op.cit., p. 221

[3] Taken from commentary by Peter G. Rose upon viewing the painting on November 15, 2011

- [4] Adolph Staring, *De Hollanders thuis, gezelschapstukken uit drie eeuwen*, M. Nijhoff, 's-Gravenhage, 1956, p. 60.
- [5] Wayne E. Frantis, *Paragons of Virtue, Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 112, 143.
- [6] Katlijne Van der Stighelen, "Justus van Egmont" in *Pride and Joy*, op.cit., pp 249-250, fn. 1.
- [7] William H. Wilson, "Adriaen van der Linde" in *Dutch Seventeenth Century Portraiture, The Golden Age*, exhibition catalogue, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida, December 4, 1980 – February 8, 1981, unpaginated.
- [8] Katlijne Van der Stighelen, "Peter Paul Rubens", in *Pride and Joy*, op.cit., p. 124.
- [9] Jan Baptist Bedaux, *The Reality of Symbols*, Gary Schwartz ISDU Publishers, The Hague, 1990, pp. 103, 132.
- [10] Wayne Frantis, "The Family Saying Grace: A Theme in Dutch Art of the Seventeenth Century" in *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, Stichting voor Nederlandse Kunsthistorische Publicaties, no. 16, 1986, pp. 36-37 and Frantis, *Paragons of Virtue*, op. cit., pp. 144-146.
- [11] Donald Tyson, *Soul Flight, Astral Projection and The Magical Universe*, Llewellyn Publications, Woodbury, Minnesota, 2007, p. 261.
- [12] Frantis, *Paragons of Virtue*, op.cit., p. 158.
- [13] Bedaux, *The Reality of Symbols*, op.cit., pp. 113, 119, 120.
- [14] E. de Jongh, *Questions of Meaning, Theme and Motif in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Painting*, Primavera Press, Leiden, 2000, pp. 76, 211.
- [15] Bedaux, *The Reality of Symbols*, op.cit., pp. 84 – 85, 106, fn. 15.
- [16] Written communication from Bianca M. du Mortier, Curator of Costumes, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam dated December 9, 2011.
- [17] Jan Baptist Bedaux, "Anonymous", p. 130; Bedaux "Bartholomeus van der Helst", p. 192; and Bedaux "Nicholes Maes", p. 276 all in *Pride and Joy*, op.cit..
- [18] Bianca M. du Mortier, op.cit..
- [19] Anne French "Stewards to Scullery-Maids", p. 55 and Anne French and Giles Waterfield, "Loyal Servants", p. 57 both in *Below Stairs, 400 years of servants portraits*, exhibition catalogue, National Portrait Gallery, London, October 16, 2003 – January 11, 2004.
- [20] Klaske Muizekar and Derek Phillips, *Picturing Men and Women in the Dutch Golden Age*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2003, p. 41.
- [21] Written communication from Peter G. Rose dated September 28, 2011 and November 23, 2011. For information on serving and carving fowl in the seventeenth century see *De Cierlijke Voorsnijdinge Aller Tafelgerechten* (Graceful Carving of all Table Dishes).
- [22] Peter C. Sutton, *Dutch and Flemish Paintings, The Collection of Willem Baron van Dedem*, Frances Lincoln Limited, London, 2002, p. 147.
- [23] Lorne Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1990, pp. 109, 115.