Jan Steen as family man:
Self-portrayal as an experiential mode of painting*

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Eavesdropping in the Rijksmuseum, I overheard a Dutchman and his American guests, a father and his adolescent son and daughter, reacting to Jan Steen’s *As the old sing, so pipe the young* (fig. 1). The father excitedly inserted himself and his family into the picture: ‘Look kids, that’s me at the head of the table. (The father did indeed have a beard.) And, John, that’s you on the table. Sarah, you’re the girl smoking a pipe. Oh, and there’s mom....’ Meanwhile their Dutch host, though it took him three tries to get a word in edgewise, eagerly explained the painting’s proverb. And he pointed out Steen himself playing the bagpipes, which delighted the father all the more. Steen’s *Self-Portrait* in the Rijksmuseum (fig. 2) confirms that this man, who appears as a fool, profligate, or merrymaker in many of Steen’s paintings, is indeed the artist himself.¹

These viewers’ response was strikingly empathic. Who knows how often a father, especially a seventeenth-century father, would so readily identify his family with that in the picture or so fondly attribute their comic antics to his own children. Still, that a viewer’s immediate impulse can be to thrust himself into this *gezellig* picture suggests that its capacity to prompt protean emotional engagement merits examination. That *As the old sing, so pipe the young* invites such a connection between image and viewer is surely due in part to its combination of familiality and familiarity. What could be more real and more accessible than the family? Which is not necessarily to say that Steen’s notion of the family reproduces reality. While Dutch genre painting is by nature selective and convention bound, Steen’s households, whether dissolute or pious, are especially artificial and theatrical. They represent a contrived and fictional notion of family life, an accessible semi-reality, a world of possibilities. In seventeenth-century Holland, it was rare to have relatives beyond the nuclear family living at home.² Steen’s extended family, with children, grandparents, aunts, and uncles feasting in a kind of eternal holiday celebration, must have represented, and subverted, an ideal, like a farcical Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving dinner with moralizing overtones.³

Generally speaking, Steen’s representations of the family engage us in an experiential mode of viewing by presenting comic narratives to flesh out, lessons to explain, consequences to imagine, puzzles to challenge our wit, and situations real enough to prompt our participation. The moral of *As the