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4 November 2019

The Dissolute Household and *The Death of Socrates*

Dealing with Death

Jan Steen's *The Dissolute Household* is surrounded by other Dutch paintings that portray happy families in a joyous manner. Paintings by Frans Hals showcase a gleeful couple and people enjoying a festival. *The Dissolute Household* compared to these other paintings has a more ominous tone while also portraying a happy family. At first glance, the painting seems to blend in with the others around it. However, a closer look reveals a more troubling, darker undertone making the painting stick out amongst the rest. Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Socrates* is situated much differently from Steen's work. *The Death of Socrates* is hung in the middle of the gallery on a white-colored wall. The space is more opened and the gallery is brightly lit. The painting demands the attention of anybody who passes it by its size and position within the gallery. The museum lighting and walls are contrasted by the painting and its theme of death. Steen was a Dutch painter who painted *The Dissolute Household* in 1664. The painting is an oil on canvas and is 42 ½ x 35 ½ inches. David's *The Death of Socrates* was painted in 1787 in Paris. It is also an oil on canvas and is 55 x 77 ¼ inches. Both paintings, despite being from different centuries and geographical location, depict death in their own styles and techniques.

The Dissolute Household depicts a family reveling and enjoying their time together. The painting is representational and shows identifiable objects and people within the work. Steen's brush strokes are flat and are hardly noticeable by the viewer. However flat, the lines are fine and realistic. This is easily seen within the folds and creases of the table cloth and drapery on the

ceiling. Even though Steen uses this technique of painting, he creates a lot of depth of the use of foreground and background. He paints various still life images, such as the broken instrument and glass bottle, on the floor next to a cat eating some meat. This gives the room a foreground and space between the viewer and the family. He also utilizes a window to depict a background. Through the window, one can see a house, trees, and the sky giving the illusion of an outside world from that of the household. All these little details culminate in the main family that is being depicted in the house that seems to have gone awry. There is a mess on the floor and drapes carelessly hanging. Despite this, everyone has a smile on their face and is not affected by the disarray of the house. There are five adults and two boys in the house. The main focus is on the woman, presumably the mother, in the chair having a glass of wine. She can be speculated as the main figure by the casting of light in the painting. The light source is coming from the left of the painting which can be seen by the shadows cast by the chair and instrument. She is also the only figure to be fully painted from head to toe and she is in a stretched, sprawled out position. The family is close-knit which can be told by the two boys having fun with each other and playing with the sleeping older woman and the main hold hands with the woman pouring the wine. The mood that Steen portrays is in stark difference with the mood of the family. He uses dark colors in the wood and clothing to create an eerie feeling. Also, everyone in the painting is looking at each, making the viewer seem like an eavesdropper looking in on the family having fun. The object that adds the most to the dark undertone is the hanging basket over the family. From the Met Museum plaque next to the painting, the basket contains “a beggar’s crutch and can, as well as clappers, then used to warn of leprosy or the plague, and the jack of spades, signifying misfortune”. All of these objects loom over the family as they enjoy each others’

company. They are oblivious to the basket as each is distracted by some other force, like wine or another person. The house is unkempt which could also be a reason why they do not notice the basket; they do not care to clean or tidy the house and let it get to this stage. The basket hangs over the family, unaware of it, waiting to disrupt their good time. Steen is saying that in the midst of happiness, bad things can happen and death could come at any time.

The Death of Socrates shows the moments leading up to the death of Socrates. David paints a historical depiction of Socrates and his last moments. From the Met Museum plaque next to the painting, Socrates was convicted of heresy and a lack of acknowledgment of the gods. Socrates had the chance to recant his statements but eventually chose to willingly die. David uses flat brush strokes to create a fine and smooth painting. The focus is all on Socrates. He has nine people, presumably his followers, by his death bed. David has painted the light source coming from the top left of the painting, shining down on Socrates, making him the brightest part of the work. The opposite corners of the painting are darker which makes the viewer draw their attention to the middle of the painting where all of the action is taking place. Socrates is sitting up straight with his hand pointing to the sky. He is showing strength in the face of death. However, the rest of the people are all in agony over losing Socrates as they are curled over and in sorrow. Both Socrates and others are painted full-bodied and wearing flowy robes which gives the painting a more realistic outlook. Socrates has a stoic expression on his face and is not backing down. Socrates is wearing a white robe while the man holding the poison is wearing red. The white could symbolize clarity and wisdom which Socrates was teaching his followers and the red could represent blood and death which is what Socrates will shortly become. David also adds depth to the painting. The wall behind Socrates and the others is flat which makes the

people stand out more almost like a frieze. David also adds a long hallway to the left with people going up the stairs to make the room much larger. Death is prominent in David's work. It is the name of the painting and is the basis for all the action within the painting. As Socrates is about to sacrifice himself, he endows his followers with the lesson to not fear death but go proudly with your morals intact.

Both paintings convey the message of death, however, they go about it in different ways. In *The Dissolute Household* and *The Death of Socrates*, death is a prominent force. The first being in the form of a basket that contains many symbols or allusions to death and the latter being very direct in a cup of poison. Both artists use flat brush strokes and depth to make the figures in each painting stand out. Steen portrays a happy family enjoying their time together in a house that is a mess. All the while, death hangs above them waiting to drop. The focus is on the family and it is only with a close examination that the viewer then sees the basket, changing how the painting looks. The family is unaware of death and their facial expressions reflect the foreboding nature. However, David is more upfront about death. The focus may be on Socrates but the Death is front and center of the painting as seen by the interplay between Socrates' hand and the man giving the poison. All the action in *The Death of Socrates* stems from this object and emanates throughout the painting, affecting how everyone reacts to death; unafraid like Socrates or in agony like the rest. Steen blends the basket in with the ceiling to try to conceal it. By Steen hiding death he is saying that it lurks in the shadows but one should be wary of death even in times of happiness. David is forthright with showing death and does not hide it. However, unlike the family, Socrates is aware of death and accepts it with grace. Death is inevitable, but it is up to the person to acknowledge it and decide how they respond to death.