THE KING DRINKS BY JACQUES JORDAENS: WHEN THE FESTIVITIES ARE CONDENSED

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Abstract: The King Drinks *is an iconographic theme known for depicting the common people in their homes or taverns. Around 1640, Jacques Jordaens innovated:* The King Drinks *is now bourgeois. The hearing, the smell and the touch are right in front of us, while the taste remains shyly concealed in the delicate still life on the table. In the end, the table plays a central position: it unites and directs our gaze. It even determines the nature of the feast. The gradual emergence of a new social category, the bourgeoisie, brought with it the tableware's development. This* King Drinks *is a new social representativeness thanks to this innovative framing, and the economic emancipation of the Antwerp bourgeois by means of this still life's presence. The objects on the table are a manifestation of the festive reversal and determine its nature. This table bears witness of capsizing and the beginning of a perpetual cycle.*

Keywords: *Jordaens; still life;* The King Drinks*;* Le Roi Boit*; festivities.*

Resumo: O Rei Bebe *é um tema iconográfico conhecido por retratar o povo comum em suas casas ou tabernas. Por volta de 1640, Jacques Jordaens introduziu uma inovação:* O Rei Bebe *torna-se burguês. A audição, o olfato e o tato estão diante de nós, enquanto o paladar permanece timidamente oculto na delicada natureza-morta sobre a mesa. No fim, a mesa assume uma posição central: ela une e orienta o nosso olhar. Determina até a própria natureza do banquete. O surgimento gradual de uma nova categoria social — a burguesia — trouxe consigo o desenvolvimento da baixela. Este* Rei Bebe *adquire uma nova representatividade social graças a este enquadramento inovador e à emancipação económica da burguesia de Antuérpia, expressa pela presença desta natureza-morta. Os objetos sobre a mesa são uma manifestação da inversão festiva e determinam a sua natureza. Esta mesa é testemunho de um mundo em transição e do início de um ciclo perpétuo.*

Palavras-chave: *Jordaens; natureza-morta;* The King Drinks*;* Le Roi Boit*; festividades.*

PRELIMINARY NOTE

These lines are the project's result devoted to the Antwerp painter Jacques Jordaens (1593-1678). The article is an in-depth analysis of the theme of the Epiphany in the 17th century, based on the work *The King Drinks*, painted around 1640 and exhibited in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Brussels. Specifically, we will look at how the painter cherished this iconography and brought the genre to its social zenith. In particular, we will look at the origin and choice of the foodstuffs that lie at the centre of the still life: a key element that has been sidelined for too long. We will try

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to understand how these table objects manifest a festive reversal, linked to hunger, and how they determine its origin as the beginning of a perpetual cycle.

1. HISTORIOGRAPHY[1]

In the 1630s, Jacques Jordaens realized himself through the iconographic theme of the king drinks. He produced several examples that can be found in various European museums like Cassel, Vienna, Valenciennes, Paris, Saint Petersburg and Brussels.

For the art historians, it leaves space for various iconographic questions. In 1906, Max Rooses presented the theme of the Feast of the Kings or the celebration of the Epiphany, celebrated on 6th January. He suggested that Jordaens had been influenced by the manners and customs of the Flemish bourgeoisie from which he had been a member since 1638 in Antwerp. Rooses gave the painting various titles: *Le Roi boit, La Veillée des Rois, Fête des Rois* or *Banquet de la fève*. He justified the iconographic theme by the presence of the cake on the table and the crowned figure, as well as by the vociferations and exuberance of the figures (Rooses 1906, pp. 62-63). In 1984, Martin Royalton-Kisch added to Max Rooses' theory by saying that the representation evoked a specific moment in the celebration of the Epiphany. When the person designated as king of the assembly raised his glass to his mouth, the revellers began to shout and sing. It was customary to sing in honour of the king when he drank (Royalton-Kisch 1984, pp. 43-46). Another author, Roger--Adolf d'Hulst (1993), also asserted that this was the representation of the Epiphany celebrated in Jordaens' time. According to him, the Epiphany was the occasion for a joyous evening with friends and family to drink, eat and sing after electing a king (d'Hulst 1993, pp. 196-199).

However, another debate may take place on the recognition of the iconographic theme via linguistic analysis and no longer on the representation of the king. In 2016, Léonie Marquaille interpreted Jordaens' representations as illustrations of the proverbs of his time. In *The King Drinks*, the viewer can read on a cartouche at the top of the painting the sentence «In een vrij gelag is't goed gast zijn», which means «It is good to be invited when the drink is free». According to Léonie Marquaille, this painting represents the celebration of the Epiphany. In those days, once the king had been chosen thanks to the bean, the guests enjoyed the feast without spending a penny: tradition dictated that everything should be paid for by the king-elect (Marquaille 2013, pp. 20-21). In 1992, Herman Pleij explained the origin of the word «vastenavond», the old word used to describe Mardi Gras. He describes how pagan festivals were annexed by the Church in the early Middle Ages, such as Candlemas,

[1] This part is common with a production for the lecture *Méthode scientifique de travail I* in 2020-2021 at the UCLouvain and a paper in preparation for the symposium *L'expérience de la faim* at the University of Caen.

which developed at that time as a festival of lights. They consisted of reversing roles: for example, a woman could become queen for a day on that day. People dressed up for the occasion and these festivals always preceded the fasting period. Herman Pleij believes that the origins of these pagan celebrations are directly linked to Mardi Gras, for which Epiphany (the Feast of Three Kings) was a sort of introduction to the whole period of festivities before the penitence and repentance of Lent (Pleij 1992, pp. 10-44).

Paul Vandenbroeck reinforces this hypothesis by analysing the fact that since the 16th century, culture has been treated through representations of popular rites and customs. He takes as examples the feasts of Three Kings (Epiphany), Saint Martin's bonfire and Mardi Gras. These were seen as just one aspect of folklore in words and images (Vandenbroeck 1992, pp. 29-36).

In 2012, Irène Schaudies explained that Carnival and the Feast of Kings were united by the word «bacchanalia», which encompassed both festivals in the same sense. From the first half of the 17th century onwards, Samuel Van Hoogstraten argued that bacchanals were representations of the god of wine, Bacchus, with his escort in connection with ancient art and literature. However, Irène Schaudies argued that in the second half of the 17th century the meaning of the word «bacchanalia» was increasingly extended to include vernacular subjects. The latter refers to a set of representations ranging from mythological scenes to Epiphany and Mardi Gras (Schaudies 2013, pp. 193-229).

In terms of the painting's historiography, the iconographic identification of those hangs by a thread. For over a century, two hypotheses have been put forward. According to the first one, it is a representation of the Epiphany celebrations, and according to the second one, it is the coronation of the King of Carnival. But why are we persisting in trying to distinguish them when we can suggest that these two themes are united by the still life's presence?

In fact, we shall see that this genre scene holds a few secrets, and that it mixes codes. It crosses as much on narrative as on symbolism. In particular, the composition contains a still life at its center: a key element which has been left on the margins for too long. These days, it's important to break down the barriers between genres. Failure to take account of these exchanges between pictorial genres would reduce the range of possible interpretations. To confine a composition to a single type of painting could limit current analyses. This is why this article is open to the idea of illustrating genre scenes and still lives as genres that communicate with each other. Jordaens played with the porosity of the different pictorial genres: he placed a still life at the center of his composition, as an element towards which the eye was drawn, and just below the main character, the king. The genre scene actually surrounds another composition, which is just as important and decisive in the interpretation of the painting.



Fig. 1
Jacques Jordaens, *The King Drinks*, vers 1640, details. Oil on canvas, 156 x 210 cm. Bruxelles, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, no. inv. 3545
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Koningdrinkt.jpg

2. CONTEXT

This mix of genres bears witness to the troubled times Antwerp was going through in the first half of the 17th century. The city had been under the Catholics laws a few years earlier, and the Archdukes Albert and Isabella had settled there and put the art at the center to their propaganda.

Therefore, the Protestants were driven out of Antwerp. For almost twenty years, the city tended to become impoverished: the United Provinces of the Netherlands, not recognised independently of the Holy Roman Empire, developed their maritime power and weakened the naval and commercial power of cities like Antwerp. The Thirty Years' War was tugging at Europe, and this territorial disorder was reflected in art. There was a tendency towards a two-speed economic society: either impoverishment and certain famine — we should remember that the gabelle was applied in 1638 — or enrichment through trade, forming a new economy and the emancipation of a social category: the merchant bourgeoisie. The Thirty Years' War was initially a conflict with a denominational bent, and would evolve from the 1620s until 1635 into a purely political conflict. During these same years, Jordaens took the plunge and painted *The King Drinks*. Before Jordaens, this iconographic theme had simply represented the festivities of Epiphany in a village tavern. Jordaens was the first to depict the bourgeoisie of his time.

Indeed, festivities are moving from the public to the private sphere. The domestic aspect was increasingly important, as Jordaens' genre scenes show: this attested fact of social life imbued the representations with greater freedom. Two trends emerged

around the festivities: those taking place in a domestic setting, and those representing court ceremonies.

On the one hand, we can note certain parameters of the epiphanic celebration. Jordaens leaves only one clue to this festivity in this painting. When the king puts the glass to his mouth and the guests begin to shout and sin. According to Royalton-Kisch, this quatrain was shouted: «When the king starts to drink/If someone didn't say a word/His face would be blacker/Than the bottom of our pot» (Royalton-Kisch 1984, p. 51). Perhaps this is the proof that the assembly had to take part to the ritual, at the risk of being excluded.

Moreover, the presence of the jester exerts this pressure: historically, it was his role to smear black pigment on the face of anyone who didn't shout or sing. These practices confirm that we are dealing with the iconographic theme of the king drinks. But except the crown and the glass brought to the mouth: nothing else exclusively indicates the Epiphany's celebration, whereas for his other *The King Drinks* Jordaens adds and amplifies the epiphanic customs.

In the 17th century, Epiphany celebrated the Three Wise Men, but also marked the start of carnival festivities. The week following Christmas until 6th January marks a time of transition, a passage from light to darkness: we move from a solar cycle to a lunar cycle that sets the date for Easter on the full moon the Sunday following the vernal equinox. Easter therefore oscillated between 22nd March and 25th April.



Fig. 2
Pieter Brueghel the Elder, 1562. *The Triumph of Death*. Oil on canvas, 117 x 162 cm. Madrid, Musée du Prado, no. inv. P001393
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Triumph_of_Death_by_Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder.jpg

After Epiphany, everything tends to prepare Mardi Gras, and by implication the Lent too. The population prepares this period and is aware of the penitence's period to come; there's witnesses in the count of the battle between Carnival and Lent's representations at this time. Engravings were circulating, perpetuating this conflict, duality and struggle. However, it cannot be said at first glance that Jordaens depicts this struggle, as you can know as much appreciated at this time. Instead, Jordaens depicts a bourgeois family, joyfully celebrating, in an apparent cohesion.

3. ANALYSIS

Let's analyze first with the central figure in this painting. We can say that the figure of the king is linked to the carnival: here we have an explicit role-playing. He wears a crown and assumes his role like a new identity. The singing and shouting of the guests ensure and affirm this change of identity. Claude Gaignebet lists the election of kings for various winter celebrations, such as St Thomas's Day, St Nicholas's Day, Epiphany, the Monday after Epiphany, commonly known as Perjured Monday, Shrove Thursday and Mardi Gras. We can extend the painting's theme and temporality from Epiphany to Mardi Gras (Gaignebet 1972, pp. 313-345).

The king is mixed in with his crowd: there is no longer distinction between the guests. They become one. The crown adds to grotesque nature of the situation: the king is mingling and sharing the same meal as a child having his bottom wiped. He is the equal of his subjects, even the laughing stock of the table. And that's the very essence of carnival society: it's structured around the opposites. It mixes ages and genders, royalty and commoners, the real and the symbolic, and includes the usual outcasts. The mingling of the guests is reminiscent of the Nef des Fous. The mingling and merging of bodies in motion offer a glimpse of the ridiculous. Moreover, the king represented here is Adam van Noort. He was Jordaens' father-in-law. By using real people, Jordaens seasoned his painting with comedy: as Cicero said, the whole stratagem of comedy is to represent characters as they are. All the ingredients of comedy are to be found in the use of reality. By drawing his inspiration from reality, Jordaens therefore made the royal figure a character that could be laughed at. By making him accessible, he parodied royalty itself. The presence of the jester, from this role-playing perspective, can increase the carnivalesque dimension. He is the product of nature, and his presence testifies to the fact that he inhabits an upside--down world.

The jester was seen as a being deprived of rationality in a world where dress and respect for manners were the watchwords. He didn't respect the order intended by God, and he was far from being the only one. This play of ambiguity continues, and is also transposed in the cartouche above the scene: «In een vrij gelag is't goeg gast zijn». *Gelach* is as much about laughter as it is about the grand tour. It's good to be

a guest when it's good to laugh or good to live. The verbal play is also carnivalesque and accentuates the masks: everything is a game, everything is deception and joking, right down to the words (Schaudies 2013, p. 242).

On the other hand, we have other elements that can confirm the election of the King of Carnival, such as: the presence of waffles, pancakes, alcohol, vomiting, flesh and bombast, the jester, *roemer* and jugs, wind instruments, and above all the monopolization of the five senses. Almost all the representations of the fight between Carnival and Lent include, like *The King Drinks*, the presence of cooked food, the consequences' representation of excess, etc.; but also this synthesis of the five senses, which certainly tends to denounce the sin of gluttony.

It's true that the king personifies trouble: he seems greedy, well-fleshed out, enjoying the excesses of drink. And he is constantly accompanied by food, but cooked dishes.

Thus, the waffle seems typical of carnival celebrations, it represents fatty cooking with meat. At the other end of the spectrum is lean cooking, with fish, empty shells and earthy vegetables. The waffle is therefore the festive dish par excellence. While there should be a cake on the table, divided and shared with the guests, here we find waffles and pancakes. These were typical and permanent carnival foods in the 17th century, particularly in the Netherlands. Just for the information, the doughnuts were more common at the same time in Germany. Food was also a key element in the carnival economy. Waffles are a good illustration of carnival. But pancakes are also a direct reference to another lunar festival, Candlemas. Like waffles, pancakes are cooked and therefore favoured during the carnival period (unlike a loaf of bread, which is considered as a simple dish).

Bread was eaten every day, and we find it again during Lent. It was one of the only foods allowed during the fast. In his painting *The Triumph of Death*, Bruegel likes to depict a table at which only loaves of bread are laid out. But it's not just the food that evokes carnival. The expression and position of the bodies also make reference to it. The «drinking» and «eating» allude to Bacchus, like a call to the body. Their cries and songs give their faces a mask, their bodies move and offer a real spectacle.

As for the other figures, let's rely on our sensitivity: the entry and exit of the organism. They are arranged according to the Western reading from left to right. We have a man vomiting, while on the other side a child is being wiped. According to Léonie Marquaille, the man vomiting represents the doctor: abusing libations, he is unable to treat himself. Note that the role-play continues. This relationship and this representation of the body can also refer to Rabelais, which brings us back to the essence of the grotesque (Marquaille 2013, pp. 20-21). Until the second half of the 17th century, he was the source of everything to do with the carnivalesque, debauchery, drinking and all kinds of excesses. He also explains in his 5th book that

doctors opposed and condemned Lent. Jordaens illustrates this bourgeois assembly in monumental excess. The doctor wears a mask, the mask of drunkenness. He disguises his identity. He transforms his mouth into an anal orifice. We find him in symmetry with the child's buttocks being fondled by a woman, perhaps his mother. Now, as they sing, all the guests are using their mouths to refer to the anal orifice, wearing the natural mask of drunkenness and revelry.

This opposition between entry and exit makes the spectator go round in circles, involving him too in the whirlwind of drunkenness. Jordaens is painting here the festive excess associated with drunkenness. The two bodies are dictated by impulse and movement. Drink is a pharmakon: it can console the poor, but it can also lead to the ruin of the rich. We find ourselves between the two worlds of the time: the poverty of some and the enrichment of others. The physiology of the two characters is grotesque. It invites us to understand the ingestion and therefore the depth of these bodies. The reverse side merges with the right side, just as the internal mixes with the external. All our senses also merge in these two actions: we can hear the man vomiting, the child crying; the mother's hand wiping her child's bottom is more inviting to the sensations of touch; while the smell of these two sides intoxicate us and finally the taste left by the food. These two bodies help us to understand the immensity of emptiness: the implosion of hunger after intoxication. For Laetitia Tabard, any form of flow or withdrawal of matter from a body is linked to hunger. It is characteristic of bodies that empty themselves. The emptiness could also be taken into account for all the guests. By singing, they are expressing something.

But this reversal is a balance that is as fragile as it is futile. The emancipation of the bourgeoisie led to a new economy and new objects, such as roemer. The Thirty Years' War encouraged these exchanges between artists and craftsmen, many of whom had to flee their homelands because of their faith. The intoxication we have just experienced leads us to hunger, the central part of the painting: a calm space to which the viewer can relate at every transition of gaze. We find this balance again in the utensils. Once again, Jordaens did not use utensils by chance. Already in the first half of the 16th century, exchanges were taking place at the archducal court: Antwerp was making glasses in the style of Venice. It was virtually impossible to distinguish between Italian and Flemish glass. The roemer depicted here was a common sight at the time: it could be found in both amateur collections and in the hands of the bourgeoisie. It was customary to separate the containers for beer and wine: it was a sign of distinction to be able to drink one's wine in a roemer and one's beer in a sort of hanap.

This type of glass is associated with fragility, and is certainly another reference to the political fragility of the 17th century. The hustle and bustle and untimely uproar accentuate the fragility of the glass. We can see this clearly in this engraving: it is at



Fig. 3
Jacques Jordaens,
detail of *The King Drinks*
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Koning-drinkt.jpg

the end of the carnival lance. At the junction between the two parts, at the centre of the representation, as in Jordaens' work. It bears witness to the vulnerability of the struggle. Anne Lenders sees this glass in relation to the life — the culture — of the period: by painting this type of glass Jordaens was showing the transience of life. The roemer is the centre of the microcosm, the centre of the still life is the temporal marker and reminds the viewer of a certain vanity. The roemer synthesises and condenses a festive explosion around him.

As we have seen, Carnival-Lent and *The King Drinks* have much in common: they all feature roemers, brocades, waffles and pancakes. As well as reversing time, he condenses a multiple time: he reuses the everyday in the service of a parody of the bourgeoisie of his time. The division of the still life into two parts illustrates a temporal separation. The symmetry of the empty bodies is reversed at the roemer. From this point, a kind of cycle or circular time can be established.

This still life thus serves as a pivotal point in the composition. It seduces our senses, inviting us to participate and showing off the pleasurable celebration. On the other hand, it also warns us morally of the brevity of happiness or glory. In this uncertain politico-religious climate, Antwerp's bourgeoisie is subject to inner turmoil. This painting depicts this race after life as if it were slipping away from the diners: it provokes strong sensations and intense, violent feelings. The composition as a whole is in the grip of intoxication: the fleshy, even sensual bodies are relaxed. The painting oscillates between ambiguity and the complexity of the transition from joy to daze. On the one hand, the crown calls to mind the promise of eternity, or is the pagan attribute; on the other, the guests allow themselves to be tempted by their senses in exchange for their salvation. Jordaens' soul was almost free of its bodily

bonds, whereas the society of his time advocated restraint and appearance, and was imbued with a moralizing spirit.

Unlike the previous period, which favoured representations of fights between Carnival and Lent, Jordaens played on finesse and innovation. He overturned the codes and played freely with the disorderly movement of the bodies. He placed the roemer at the centre of the painting and made this utensil the hand of the watch. Around him, the king gathers: the king, the leading figure in various winter celebrations. He alone represents the many festivities that follow Christmas. We then move on to Candlemas, then Carnival and finally Lent, before returning to the king. The still life marks a temporal cycle that is as perpetual as it is futile.

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