
HISTORY

‘A Man Dancing with his Dog’

In 1640, François Verwilt (ca. 1620-1691) of Rotterdam painted a man dancing with his dog. Although dancing is a merry subject, it was painted in shades of brown. It’s more-or-less an odd painting, and one can only imagine why the painter depicted a man dancing with his dog. For the most part, François Verwilt made serious mythical, biblical and religious images, interiors, landscapes and couples in romantic settings. His paintings are

Judging by his simple clothes, this man was not a wealthy Dutch merchant or an important citizen. Is it perhaps the painter himself? Maybe he wanted to paint a light-hearted and merry scene, as a welcome change to his usual work. Who took the initiative and why were they dancing? There are no answers to these many questions, but we can be certain that there was a bond between this man and his dog.

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN A MAN DANCING WITH HIS DOG - 1640

text and illustrations by RIA HÖRTER

in many museums including in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Budapest, Leningrad, Paris and Vienna. A man dancing with his dog hangs in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

Many Questions



In the absence of female passengers, a member of Amundsen’s crew dances with a sled dog (1911).

Was the dancing man happy? Was he a little tipsy? Was he dancing on the street in front of his house? In front of the pub? The beret, set a little obliquely on his head, could indicate that master and dog were dancing outside. Was the dog imitating his master or the other way round? The expression on the man’s face is one of concentration and he is looking at his dog.

Spioen

The little dog shows all the characteristics of the red-and-white or brown-and-white so-called Spioen, a Spaniel-type of dog in 17th- and 18th-century western Europe. Famous Dutch painters - such as Jan Steen, Gerard Dou and Gabriël Metsu - depicted this type of dog in many of their paintings together with eating, drinking and dancing people. But they never painted a dancing dog. As far as I know, François Verwilt is still the only artist who painted, without knowing it, the fore-runner of a now very popular dog sport.

An old photograph, dating from 1911 and taken during Roald Amundsen’s expedition to the Antarctic, also shows a man dancing with a dog. The journey with the three-master schooner Fram lasted more than a year and now and then the crew needed a break. There were no ladies on board to dance with, so a member of the crew took one of the sled dogs as a dancing partner. The dog cooperated, but

Few people know who invented the sport, but today, many dog fanciers all over the world are involved in and love dancing with dogs, a dog sport based on mutual respect and trust.

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'A Man dancing with his Dog' by François Verwilt (circa 1620-1691)

his teammate on the left seems to be a little embarrassed by the behavior of his companion. As you can see, one of the members of the expedition played the violin, so music was provided.

Popular Dog Sport

There is a strong link between the 17th and the 21st century when it comes to being captivated by dogs. Dancing with Dogs is now a popular sport with thousands of fanciers. It came into being when dog owners wanted to do something different from showing or working their dogs. It's a symbol of a strong relationship be-



The best ambassador of Dog Dancing or Heelwork to Music is Mary Ray from the UK

tween owner and dog. Today, the concentration shown by the man in the old painting is still part of Dog Dancing.

The name of the sport varies: Dog Dancing, Dancing with Dogs, Canine Dancing, Heelwork to Music, Canine Freestyle. When performing, the emphasis can be on obedience, on heelwork, or on tricks.

Mary Ray of the United Kingdom is world famous for her Heelwork to Music performances at the Crufts Dog Show in Birmingham. Mary is featured on British television on a regular basis and has instructed and/or judged throughout the world. Information about and videos of dog dancing are on her website: <http://www.maryray.co.uk/>

Today, dog dancing is on the program of many dog exhibitions, large or small. New elements were added, the colorful costumes became spectacular, but respect and trust are still the keywords.

It's a short step from the 17th-century painting, via an old photograph, to the videos of Mary Ray. *And indeed, there is nothing new under the sun.*



Dog Dancing today is based on mutual respect and trust. The Welsh Springer Spaniel is a member of the old Spioen family. (Photo: Ron Baltus)

