



Carel Fabritius

(Middenbeemster 1622 – 1654
Delft)

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In studying the life and work of Carel Fabritius, one soon notices that scholarly interest in his artistry focuses on two different “periods”: a real one and an imagined one. Naturally, the most attention is given to Carel’s actual career, which began around 1641 and ended in 1654. Then there is the great speculation regarding the period that never existed, but which could have, had his life not been cut short by the devastating explosion of the powder magazine in Delft in 1654. Only thirteen paintings have been firmly attributed to him, and his limited artistic legacy is sorely lamented. Famous paintings like *The Goldfinch*^[1] and *The Sentry*^[2] bespeak such originality and artistic quality that we can only regret all the works he never painted. Unfortunately, his untimely death has made it virtually impossible to determine whether his talent would have eventually been great enough to equal, if not surpass, that of his teacher, Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69).

Fabritius’s parents were Pieter Carelsz and Barbertje van der Maes. He was baptized in Middenbeemster, a village just north of Amsterdam, on 27 February 1622.^[3] His father worked there as a sexton, a schoolteacher and, in “the spare time outside school,” also as a painter.^[4] Thus Carel, like his brothers Barent (1624–73) and Johannes, must have received his first painting lessons from his father. Carel became a member of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1641, and on 1 September of that same year married Aeltge Velthuys, the sister of Pastor Tobias Velthusius, with whom she lived in the parsonage next to Carel’s house. At some unknown point soon thereafter Carel left for Amsterdam, where he completed his training under Rembrandt—Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627–78) called him “mijn medeleerling” (“fellow pupil”)^[5]—and may have subsequently worked as a full-fledged assistant for some time. His stay in Rembrandt’s workshop, however, could not have lasted very long. Aeltge died, probably in childbirth, in the spring of 1643. On 24 April an inventory was drawn up of her possessions in their home on the Runstraat and in the house of her brother, the draper Abraham Velthuys, and were appraised in July of that same year at 1,800 guilders, reflecting a certain level of financial comfort. The listed *tronies*, including two that were “ruw raengesmeerd” (roughly painted or sketchy), were probably the work of her husband.^[6]

Following the death of his wife Fabritius returned to Middenbeemster, where he was once again living with



his parents in June 1643. Ultimately, he spent at most 20 months in Rembrandt's vicinity. Whether his return was a deliberate choice or informed by financial considerations cannot be said. Neither do we know how long he lived in Middenbeemster, nor do we have any idea of what his stay there was like. His earliest known painting, *The Raising of Lazarus*, which is still closely related to the work of Rembrandt, dates from around 1643 and thus could have been painted either in Amsterdam or Middenbeemster.^[7] His name surfaces again only in 1646 in a document certifying that he stood as godfather to his youngest sister Cornelia, who lived in Middenbeemster.^[8] Around this year he painted his *Mercury and Argus*^[9] and *Mercury and Aglauros*,^[10] the color scheme and illumination of which reveal that he was moving away from Rembrandt's style. Whether these works originated in Middenbeemster or in Amsterdam is unclear. It is difficult to imagine that sparsely populated Middenbeemster afforded him sufficient clientele, and it is therefore tempting to assume that he traveled back and forth to Amsterdam periodically in the years after his wife's death but before his departure for Delft in 1650.^[11]

The state of affairs outlined above finds some support in the biographies of a few of his patrons. For example, in 1649 he painted the portrait of the Amsterdam silk merchant Abraham de Potter (1592–1650), a family friend and owner of an estate in Middenbeemster.^[12] In that same year he also produced work for Balthasar Deutz (1626–61), for which he was paid 78 guilders. Like De Potter, Balthasar and his brothers were Amsterdam silk merchants and renowned art lovers.^[13] One year later Balthasar, who also owned an estate in Middenbeemster, paid Fabritius 25 guilders for painting his portrait.^[14] Also dating from his time in Middenbeemster is an (unverified) self-portrait, which he painted for the Amsterdam thread-twister Cornelis Smout and his wife Catharina Scharckens. It hung in their house on the Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal, together with a picture by Rembrandt, in 1654.^[15] Contact between the couple and the painter, however, would have taken place in Middenbeemster, for Smout and his family regularly spent time at his estate there.

Fabritius moved to Delft in 1650. On 14 August he married his second wife, the widow Agatha van Pruysen, in Middenbeemster, yet the marriage certificate gives their place of residence as the Oude Delft in Delft; their betrothal was recorded there one week later. It was in Delft that the master painted the majority of the approximately thirteen pictures that can be attributed to him, including *The Goldfinch* and *The Sentry* mentioned above as well as his famous self-portrait.^[16] Perhaps he doubted whether he would settle there for good after he married, for he did not join the Guild of Saint Luke until two years later, in 1652. His hesitation is understandable. The profound crisis affecting the art market, which elsewhere in the Dutch Republic was felt strongly only as of the 1660s, had already begun to impact Delft in the 1640s.^[17] That he paid the 12 guilder registration fee to the painters' guild in two installments suggests that he was experiencing financial difficulties. The same could apply to the promise he made in 1653 to Jasper de Potter (the son of Abraham, whose likeness he painted in 1649) to pay off a loan of 620 guilders dating from 1647, which in the meantime had mounted to close to 730 guilders. Any and all work seemed welcome, even the kind usually avoided by fine painters. For instance, the Delft town council paid him 12 guilders for two painted city coats of arms.

However, Fabritius simply cannot have been lacking important commissions. Samuel van Hoogstraten lauds the artist's talent for "wegwijkende doorzigten" (receding through-views [or perspectives]), noting that

he produced various large-scale perspectives in Delft, including one in the home of Theodorus Vallensis (1612–73), dean of the Delft surgeons' guild and court physician to Stadholder Frederick Henry.^[18] If Fabritius were granted many such commissions, this could explain in part the modest scope of his oeuvre, given that, according to Van Hoogstraten, "this kind of painting depends enormously on the place to which it is applied."^[19] This is why so few works have been preserved; every time new residents moved into a house there was a chance that—driven by taste or fashion—they would replace the wall painting with another kind of decoration. That Fabritius had remarkable illusionistic skills is more than evident in his 1652 *View in Delft*, which was probably intended for a perspective box or peepshow.^[20]

As mentioned above, the notorious powder magazine explosion on 12 October 1654 that reduced a third of Delft to rubble also made a sudden and terrible end to Fabritius's life. He was buried in the Oude Kerk two days after the disaster. When his widow Agatha van Pruysen signed an acknowledgment of debt on 25 February, she called her deceased husband "painter to His Highness, the Prince of Orange."^[21] This is a fascinating description, however to date there is not a shred of evidence for any commission executed for either Stadholder Frederick Henry or his son William II.^[22] Despite the lack of evidence, it seems inconceivable that Fabritius's widow would call him a "court painter" without good reason, and we must entertain the possibility that at the time of the explosion some paintings destined for Amalia von Solms, the widow of Stadholder Frederick Hendrick, were among the works in his studio.

-Piet Bakker

Endnotes

1. *The Goldfinch*, 1654, oil on panel, 33.5 x 22.8 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague; Christopher Brown, *Carel Fabritius: Complete Edition with a "Catalogue raisonné"* (Oxford, 1981), 126, cat. no. 7; Wermer Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau, 1983–95), 2:987, cat. no. 610; Frederik J. Duparc, *Carel Fabritius 1622–1654* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Schwerin, Staatliches Museum) (Zwolle, 2005), 133–40, cat. no. 11.

2. *The Sentry*, 1654, oil on canvas, 68 x 58 cm, Staatliches Museum, Schwerin; Christopher Brown, *Carel Fabritius: Complete Edition with a "Catalogue raisonné"* (Oxford, 1981), 127–28, cat. no. 8; Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau, 1983–95), 2:986, cat. no. 607; Frederik J. Duparc, *Carel Fabritius 1622–1654* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Schwerin, Staatliches Museum) (Zwolle, 2005), 141–46, cat. no. 12.

3. When no source is mentioned, the biographical information is taken from H. F. Wijnman, "De schilder Carel Fabritius (1622–1654): Een reconstructie van zijn leven en werken," *Oud-Holland* 48 (1931): 100–41.

4. "Den leedigen tijd buyten den schooltijt." Abraham Bredius, "Nieuwe gegevens omtrent de schilders Fabritius," *Oud-Holland* 38 (1920): 130.



5. Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst. Anders de Zichtbaere Werelt* (Rotterdam, 1678; reprint Doornspijk, 1969), 11. In addition to the inventory mentioned in note 6, Fabritius's stay in Amsterdam is recorded in the document of the baptism of Fabritius's daughter Catrina in the Nieuwe Kerk on 29 January 1643. Christopher Brown, *Carel Fabritius: Complete Edition with a "Catalogue raisonné"* (Oxford 1981), Appendix A, Doc. 5.
6. For this inventory, see: Abraham Bredius, "Het schilderregister van Jan Sysmus (II)," *Oud-Holland* 5 (1890): 226–27; and C. Brown, *Carel Fabritius: Complete Edition with a "Catalogue raisonné"* (Oxford, 1981), 17–18.
7. *The Raising of Lazarus*, oil on canvas, 210.5 x 140 cm, Muzeum Narodowe, Warsaw; Christopher Brown, *Carel Fabritius: Complete Edition with a "Catalogue raisonné"* (Oxford, 1981), 121–22, cat. no. 1; Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau, 1983–95), 2: 984, cat. no. 601; and Frederik J. Duparc, *Carel Fabritius 1622–1654* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Schwerin, Staatliches Museum) (Zwolle, 2005), 80–84, cat. no. 1.
8. Christopher Brown, *Carel Fabritius: Complete Edition with a "Catalogue raisonné"* (Oxford, 1981), Appendix A, Doc. 10.
9. Oil on canvas, 73.5 x 104 cm, Los Angeles County Museum of Arts. Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau, 1983–95), 5:cat. no. 2072; Frederik J. Duparc, *Carel Fabritius 1622–1654* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Schwerin, Staatliches Museum) (Zwolle, 2005), 100–105, cat. no. 5. See also Christopher Brown, "'Mercury and Argus' by Carel Fabritius: A Newly Discovered Painting," *Burlington Magazine* 128 (1986): 797–98.
10. Oil on canvas, 72.4 x 91 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau, 1983–95), cat. no. 626, as Govaert Flinck; Frederik J. Duparc, *Carel Fabritius 1622–1654* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Schwerin, Staatliches Museum) (Zwolle, 2005), 106–10, cat. no. 6.
11. Christopher Brown, *Carel Fabritius: Complete Edition with a "Catalogue raisonné"* (Oxford, 1981), 22.
12. *Portrait of Abraham de Potter*, 1649, oil on canvas, 68.5 x 57 cm., Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Christopher Brown, *Carel Fabritius: Complete Edition with a "Catalogue raisonné"* (Oxford, 1981), 122, cat. no. 2; Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau, 1983–95), 2:984, cat. no. 602; Frederik J. Duparc, *Carel Fabritius 1622–1654* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Schwerin, Staatliches Museum) (Zwolle, 2005), 116–20, cat. no. 8.

13. Jonathan Bikker, "The Deutz Brothers, Italian Painting and Michael Sweerts: New Information from Elisabeth Coymans's 'Journael,'" *Simiolus* 26 (1998): 291–92, 311, *Journael*, 126, 22 October 1649; Frederik J. Duparc, *Carel Fabritius 1622–1654* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Schwerin, Staatliches Museum) (Zwolle, 2005), 41–42.

14. Jonathan Bikker, "The Deutz Brothers, Italian Painting and Michael Sweerts: New Information from Elisabeth Coymans's 'Journael,'" *Simiolus* 26 (1998): 311, *Journael*, 262, 11 July 1650; F. J. Duparc, *Carel Fabritius 1622–1654* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Schwerin, Staatliches Museum) (Zwolle, 2005), 41–42.

15. Abraham Bredius, "Het schilderregister van Jan Sysmus (II)," *Oud-Holland* 5 (1890): 229. For Cornelis Smout, see Sebastian A. C. Dudok van Heel, "'Éen stuck van Rembrandt gedaen genamt de stilte,'" *Maandblad Amstelodamum* 69 (1982): 28–31.

16. *Self-Portrait*, 1654, oil on canvas, 70.5 x 61.5 cm, National Gallery, London; Christopher Brown, *Carel Fabritius: Complete Edition with a "Catalogue raisonné"* (Oxford, 1981), 126, cat. no. 6; Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau, 1983–95), 2: 987, cat. no. 609; and Frederik J. Duparc, *Carel Fabritius 1622–1654* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Schwerin, Staatliches Museum) (Zwolle, 2005), 129–32, cat. no. 10.

17. Piet Bakker, "Crisis? Welke crisis? Kanttekeningen bij het economisch verval van de schilderkunst in Leiden na 1660," *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 27 (2011): 232–70, esp. 237–40.

18. Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst. Anders de Zichtbaere Werelt* (Rotterdam, 1678; reprint Doornspijk, 1969), 274; and F. J. Duparc, *Carel Fabritius 1622–1654* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Schwerin, Staatliches Museum) (Zwolle, 2005), 54.

19. "Deezen aert van Schildeyen zich geweldig [bint] aen de plaets, daer men ze toe maekt." Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst. Anders de Zichtbaere Werelt* (Rotterdam, 1678; reprint Doornspijk, 1969), 274.

20. *View in Delft*, 1652, oil on canvas, 15.4 x 31.6 cm, National Gallery, London; Christopher Brown, *Carel Fabritius: Complete Edition with a "Catalogue raisonné"* (Oxford, 1981), 123–26, cat. no. 5; Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau, 1983–95), 2 : 986, cat. no. 605; Frederik J. Duparc, *Carel Fabritius 1622–1654* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Schwerin, Staatliches Museum) (Zwolle, 2005), 121–28, cat. no. 9.

21. "Schilder van syn hoocheyt den prince van oranien."

22. Abraham Bredius, "Het schilderregister van Jan Sysmus (II)," *Oud-Holland* 5 (1890): 228; and C. Brown, *Carel Fabritius: Complete Edition with a "Catalogue raisonné"* (Oxford, 1981), 152, Doc. 23. No references to works by Fabritius have been found in the inventories of the House of Orange. Should Fabritius have painted a wall-size "perspective" view, Van Hoogstraten would surely have mentioned it. To his great regret, he was forced to note "dat zijn werken niet ergens in een vast Koninklijk gebouw of Kerke geplaetst zijn" (that his work was never placed somewhere permanently in a royal building or church). S. van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst. Anders de Zichtbaere Werelt* (Rotterdam, 1678; reprint Doornspijk, 1969), 274.

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