



Pieter de Grebber

(Haarlem ca. 1603 – 1652/53
Haarlem)

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Many Catholic artists worked in the Northern Netherlands in the seventeenth century, but only a few of them expressed their faith in their art. Among them was Pieter de Grebber, much of whose work is Catholic in character, in terms of both his outspoken Catholic subject matter and his use of light and staging. Most of these works had a devotional function or played a role during Mass. Even though Catholicism had officially been forbidden in the Dutch Republic since the *Alteratie* (Alteration) in 1578, this did not prevent worshippers from gathering clandestinely. The Catholic Church thus remained active, especially in Haarlem, which had an extremely energetic chapter that awarded many major commissions primarily between 1590 and 1640.

No Haarlem painter profited more from this patronage than De Grebber who, in addition to great artistic talent, had close family ties with the clergy. He received numerous commissions from many clandestine churches outside of Haarlem as well, and painted some altarpieces for churches in Bruges and Ghent.^[1] De Grebber became the leading representative of a style of history painting now known as Haarlem Classicism, which was inspired by the classicizing Baroque style that Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) had introduced into Southern Netherlandish painting. Stadholder Frederik Hendrik, whose taste reflected that of other European rulers, favored this classicism. This may explain why he gave De Grebber major commissions for his royal palaces of Honselaarsdijk (1638), Noordeinde (1646), and Huis ten Bosch (1648–50) from the late 1630s on, just as the Catholic community in Haarlem was losing momentum and local patronage was dwindling.^[2]

Pieter de Grebber was born in Haarlem around 1603, the eldest son of the devout Catholic history and portrait painter Frans Pietersz de Grebber (1572/73–1649) and Hillegart van Lijnhoven. His sister Maria, whose daughter would later marry Gabriel Metsu (1629–67), and his brother Albert also became painters; another brother, Maurits, took up silversmithing. In his *Harlemias* of 1648, Theodorus Schrevelius (1572–1649) noted that Pieter's first teacher was his father, "but Pieter de Grebber far surpassed his father."^[4] According to Schrevelius, he went on to study with the renowned history painter, draughtsman



and engraver Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1617), and with success, “for this Pieter de Grebber is as skilled in devising inventions as neat in painting, and so deserves to be counted among the best painters of our century.”^[5]

Pieter’s father acted as an intermediary in a transaction between Rubens and the English envoy Sir Dudley Carleton in The Hague in 1618.^[6] Later that year, Pieter accompanied his father to Antwerp, where he became acquainted with the famed Flemish master whose work he thus saw firsthand. Pieter’s earliest paintings date from 1622, but he must have already been well known in Haarlem given that Samuel Ampzing had praised the “de Grebbers” in a preliminary version of his famous city chronicle in 1621.^[7] Seven years later, in the definitive version of his *Beschrijvinge ende lof der stad Haerlem*, Ampzing again expressed his admiration of Pieter de Grebber as a history painter, mentioning not only his father, but also his sister Maria, “Now I must mention Grebber and praise the father and son as well as the daughter.”^[8] According to Schrevelius, Pieter worked for some time in Denmark, although such a sojourn abroad is undocumented.

Besides the Catholic Church, secular institutions also sought out De Grebber. In 1628 he painted the magisterial *Acts of Mercy* for the Old Men’s Home in Haarlem,^[9] and two years later the city council ordered a tapestry design and a painting illustrating the conferring of the sword on the coat of arms of Haarlem. Given these official commissions, it is curious that he did not enter the Haarlem Guild of Saint Luke until 1632, and then, unlike his father, was never appointed to a guild position.

De Grebber was honored both in his native city and elsewhere. In Leiden (home of the painter Claes Lourisz van Egmond, a first cousin of Pieter’s father) Philips Angel extolled De Grebber in his *Lof der Schilder-Konst* (1642) for his mastery of human anatomy, especially his “manifold investigations and marvelously close observations” of the changes the body displays when in motion.^[11] De Grebber was also an art theorist. In 1649 the Haarlem printer Casteleyn published De Grebber’s pamphlet outlining eleven rules of art, which were taken largely from Karel van Mander (1548–1606).^[12]

De Grebber never married. He died sometime between 24 September 1652 and 29 January 1653, the day when his house in the Beguinage, which he bought in 1634, was sold. The will he had drawn up has been lost, and no inventory of his estate has come down to us. In addition to paintings, De Grebber left behind many drawings and a few etchings. Approximately seventy pictures are now attributed to him with certainty, including about twenty portraits, a number of which feature prominent Catholic priests.

-Piet Bakker

Endnotes



1. Paul Dirkse, "Pieter de Grebber: Haarlems schilder tussen begijnen, kloppen en pastors," in Paul Dirkse, *Begijnen, pastoors en predikanten. Religie en kunst in de Gouden Eeuw* (Leiden, 2001), 116–27; Xander van Eck, "Resuscitating a Languishing Bishopric: Pieter de Grebber and the Haarlem Chapter," *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 52 (2004): 371–78; Xander van Eck, "The Haarlem Painters and Their Patrons," *Clandestine Splendor: Paintings for the Catholic Church in the Dutch Republic* (Zwolle, 2007), 81–109.

2. The work that De Grebber provided for Honselaarsdijk and Noordeinde palaces has not been preserved. For De Grebber and the commissions granted him by Frederik Hendrik and Amalia van Solms, see D. F. Slothouwer, *De Paleizen van Frederik Hendrik* (Leiden, 1945), passim; D. P. Snoep, "Honselaarsdijk: restauraties op papier," *Oud Holland* 84 (1969): 282–83; R. Meischke, "De grote trap van het huis Honselaarsdijk, 1633–1638," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 31 (1980): 86–104; J. G. van Gelder, "De schilders van de Oranjezaal," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 2 (1948–49): 151–52, 154; M. van Eikema Hommes, "Pieter de Grebber and the Oranjezaal in Huis ten Bosch. Part I: The Regulen (1649)," *Art Matters* 3 (2005): 20–36; M. van Eikema Hommes and Lidwien Speleers, "Pieter de Grebber and the Oranjezaal in Huis ten Bosch. Part II: Variations in Painting Technique," *Art Matters* 3 (2005): 37–46.

3. Unless otherwise noted, the biographical information on Pieter de Grebber is taken from Irene van Thiel-Stroman, "Pieter Fransz de Grebber," in Neeltje Köhler et al., *Painting in Haarlem 1500–1850: The Collection of the Frans Hals Museum* (Ghent/Haarlem, 2006), 168–72.

4. "Maer Pieter Grebber heeft zijn Vader Grebber verde over-treft." Theodorus Schrevelius, *Harlemias...* (Haarlem, 1648), 382.

5. "[W]ant dese Pieter de Grebber is soo geluckigh in inventie als suyver in 't schilderen dat hy by de beste Schilders onser eeuwe meriteert gestelt te worden." Theodorus Schrevelius, *Harlemias...* (Haarlem, 1648), 382.

6. De Grebber met Rubens in June 1612 during his first visit to the Northern Netherlands. R. de Smet, "Een nauwkeurige datering van Rubens' eerste reis naar Holland in 1612," *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten* (1977), 199–218. For the transaction, see the biography of Peter Paul Rubens in this catalogue.



7. Irene van Thiel-Stroman, "Pieter Fransz de Grebber," in Neeltje Köhler et al., *Painting in Haarlem 1500–1850: The Collection of the Frans Hals Museum* (Ghent/Haarlem, 2006), 168, refers to [Samuel Ampzing], *Het lof der stad Haerlem in Hollandt* (Haarlem, 1621), unpaginated.
8. "Nu moet ik Grebber noemen / Den Vader, ende Soon en ook de Dochter roemen." Samuel Ampzing, *Beschryvinge ende lof der stad Haerlem* (Haarlem, 1628; reprint, Amsterdam, 1974), 370.
9. *The Acts of Mercy* (Matthew 25:31–46), monogrammed and dated 1628, oil on canvas, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem.
10. *The German Emperor Frederick II Conferring on Haarlem the Sword and the Patriarch of Jerusalem Conferring the Silver Cross and the Augmentation of Coat of Arms after the Conquest of Damiate (1219)*, monogrammed and dated 1630, oil on canvas, Town Hall, Haarlem.
11. "[M]enichfuldighe ondersoeckinge en wonder naeuwe waerneminghe." Philips Angel, *Lof der Schilder-Konst* (Leiden, 1642; reprint, Utrecht, 1969), 52–53.
12. P.J.J. van Thiel, "De Grebbers regels van de kunst," *Oud Holland* 80 (1965): 126–31.

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