



**Guardroom Interior with Soldiers Smoking
and Playing Cards**

Gerard ter Borch the Younger
(Zwolle 1617 – 1681 Deventer)

ca. 1640
oil on panel
34.9 x 49.5 cm
GB-101

How to cite

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In style and subject matter, Gerard ter Borch the Younger's early genre paintings differ markedly from the rarified domestic interiors of his mature career. In the late 1630s and early 1640s, after his return to the Netherlands from travels first in England and then in southern Europe, he painted a number of scenes featuring soldiers relaxing or playing cards in the humble surroundings of a barn or rustic tavern. Although women are occasionally present, these dim, untidy spaces are decidedly masculine, strewn with the utilitarian paraphernalia that signifies the nomadic existence of a professional soldier (**fig 1**).

Formulated and initially popularized by the Amsterdam painters Pieter Codde (1599–1678) and Willem Duyster (1598/99–1635), Dutch guardroom scenes (depictions of soldiers at their leisure) came into vogue in the 1620s and remained popular throughout the century.^[1] The appetite for the subject was linked to the Dutch Republic's ongoing war for independence from Spain; indeed, the years between the resumption of hostilities at the end of the Twelve Year Truce (1621) and the Peace of Münster (1648) coincided with the theme's heyday. Unlike many of the artists who explored the theme, Ter Borch was intimately familiar with the everyday lives of soldiers, as his native city of Zwolle was a garrison town that played a strategic role in defending the eastern part of the Dutch Republic against invasion during the war with Spain.

Personal experience aside, Ter Borch may have been inspired in his choice of subject matter by the guardroom scenes of Duyster and Codde, which he could have seen during visits to Amsterdam in the early 1630s. Ter Borch's soldiers also resemble the travelers who populate the landscapes of the Haarlem painter Pieter Molijn (1595–1661), with whom he studied in 1634. Finally, his guardroom scenes recall the work of the Flemish painters Adriaen Brouwer (1605/6–38) and David Teniers the Younger (1610–90), who, during the 1630s in Antwerp, painted comparable scenes of soldiers and card players in rustic interiors (**fig 2**). Although there is no documentary proof that Ter Borch visited Antwerp, he could easily have stopped there on his return from England in late 1635 or early 1636 and been inspired by the vivid spontaneity and uncompromising subject matter of the Flemish masters' work.^[2]

Guardroom Interior with Soldiers Smoking and Playing Cards depicts three soldiers seated around a large drum that has been pressed into service as a makeshift table. The man at the back smokes a long clay pipe, while his companions play a game of cards. The soldier at the right is dressed in drab and rumpled garments; one stocking has pooled around his ankle to reveal a bare and bony leg. He holds a playing card in each of his outstretched arms, thrusting them toward the better-dressed cavalryman with palpable urgency. A fourth soldier stands in the doorway at left and turns to look

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Gerard ter Borch, *Guardroom with Soldiers Playing Cards*, ca. 1644, oil on panel, 29.4 x 37.5 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Zwolle, inv. NK2741 (on loan from the Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed)



Fig 2. Adriaen Brouwer, *Peasants and Soldiers Playing Cards*, ca. 1631–32, oil on panel, 33 x 43 cm, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, inv. 218, bpk, Berlin / Alte Pinakothek / Art Resource, NY



Fig 3. Gerard ter Borch, *An Encampment of Soldiers Playing Cards*, ca. 1640–45, oil on panel, 41.6 x 51 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin–Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, inv. 2081, bpk Bildagentur / Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany / Jörg P. Anders / Art Resource, NY

back at the card players. In the left foreground is a heap of objects associated with a soldier's life: a hide-covered trunk, a coat and hat, a cuirass and almain collar, a bandolier with containers for gunpowder and fuses, and various bundles and bags. The purpose of the curious tapering cylinder protruding from the lid of the trunk is unclear; it may have accommodated the crown of a hat packed inside. On the rear wall of the room is a rack with matchlock muskets, a pike, and furkets for supporting the muskets while shooting.^[3]

Guardroom Interior with Soldiers Smoking and Playing Cards was probably painted around 1640 or slightly later, after Ter Borch had returned to the Netherlands from his visit to Spain. Where exactly he might have been living when he painted this work is not certain, but the concentrated flurry of guardroom scenes that Ter Borch painted during the early 1640s suggests that he might have settled in Amsterdam, where the tradition of such scenes by Duyster and Codde would have been most strongly felt.^[4] Works closely related to *Guardroom Interior*, such as the *Guardroom with Soldiers Playing Cards* (**fig 1**) and *An Encampment of Soldiers Playing Cards* (**fig 3**), dated about 1644 and 1640–45 respectively, show that even at this early stage of his career Ter Borch was experimenting with ways of modifying the interpretation of a given theme.^[5] All three paintings show a trio of players observed by a figure standing to the side; all are executed in a restricted palette dominated by browns and grays and accentuated with just a few touches of red and brilliant white. The occasionally summary treatment of figures and background elements in these paintings is contrasted by the beautifully detailed still lifes of military accoutrements in the foreground.

Playing cards was a popular pastime in the seventeenth century, despite (or perhaps because of) its being considered disreputable; equated with cheating, gambling, drinking and sex, it aroused censure from civic and religious authorities, even as it offered fertile ground for artists. Countless Dutch guardroom scenes depict soldiers playing cards or other games of chance. Not only did this realistically portray how soldiers relaxed while awaiting the next call to arms, but it also alluded to the risky, unpredictable nature of a soldier's life on and off the battlefield.^[6] Smoking tobacco was another dubious pastime and a subject of great public debate. From the time of tobacco's introduction into Europe at the end of the fifteenth century, its physical and psychological advantages and disadvantages were vociferously disputed.^[7] In a military context, however, smoking could be considered restorative, and its use justified among soldiers and sailors who labored under stressful conditions.^[8]

Ter Borch continued to incorporate soldiers into his elegant domestic genre paintings of the 1650s and 1660s, but by and large the polished officers and flamboyant trumpeters seen in these later paintings are little more than a picturesque military



presence, their actions more suited to the drawing room than to a rough military encampment.^[9]

Several copies of *Guardroom Interior* are known; some situate identical figures in a landscape setting (**fig 3**), a variation that Gudlaugsson felt reflected more the Flemish tradition of depicting military themes.^[10] From photographic evidence, none of these copies is of sufficient quality to indicate that Ter Borch had a role in its making.

- Marjorie E. Wieseman, 2017

Endnotes

1. On the Dutch guardroom scene, see Carol Bigler Playter, *Willem Duyster and Pieter Codde: The “Duyster Weereldt” of Dutch Genre Painting, c. 1625–1635* (Cambridge, 1972); Ellen Borger, *De Hollandse kortegaard: Geschilderde wachtlocalen uit de Gouden Eeuw* (Exh. cat. Vestingmuseum, Naarden, 1996) (Zwolle 1996); Nanette Salomon, *Jacob Duck and the Gentrification of Dutch Genre Painting* (Doornspijk, 1998), 33–68; David Kunzle, *From Criminal to Courtier: The Soldier in Netherlandish Art, 1550–1672* (Leiden, 2002), passim; and Jochai Rosen, *Soldiers at Leisure: The Guardroom Scene in Dutch Genre Painting of the Golden Age* (Amsterdam, 2008).
2. Ter Borch's *Consultation*, dated 1635 (oil on panel, 34.5 x 45.7 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, inv. 791C), is based on a contemporary painting by David Teniers the Younger (oil on panel, 28 x 37 cm, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels, inv. 1459). See Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 1: 30–31; 2: 55–56, no. 4. It is also possible that Ter Borch became aware of Brouwer's work while still in the Netherlands, as the Flemish painter stayed briefly in Amsterdam and Haarlem in about 1626–27 and works by him might have been in circulation.
3. I am grateful to Jos Hilkhuijsen, curator at Het Legermuseum, Delft, for help in identifying the militaria depicted in this painting.
4. See Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., “The Artistic Development of Gerard ter Borch,” in Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., ed., *Gerard ter Borch* (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Zwolle, 2004), 9.
5. Other guardroom scenes by Ter Borch include: *Interior of an Inn*, 1636(?), oil on panel, 30.6 x 36.8 cm (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen, inv. 818.1.10); *Cavaliers*, 1638(?), oil on panel, 33.4 x 42.5 cm (Victoria and Albert Museum, London, inv. CAI.84); *Tric-trac Players*, ca. 1640, oil on panel, 42 x 56 cm (Kunsthalle, Bremen, inv. 135-1856); *Guardroom with Soldiers Playing Cards*, ca. 1644, oil on panel, 29.4 x 37.5 cm (Stedelijk Museum, Zwolle, inv. NK2741 [on loan from the Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed]); *Soldiers Playing Cards*, ca. 1640–45, oil on panel, 41.6 x 51 cm (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, inv. 2081); and *Soldiers Playing Cards before a Ruin*, ca. 1643, oil on panel, 42 x 61.5 cm (collection Dr. H. Schaeffer, Berlin, 1929). See Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2: 56–57, 59–60, and 64–66, nos. 6, 11, 12, 21, 24, and 25, respectively.
6. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 1:45.
7. See Ivan Gaskell, “Tobacco, Social Deviance, and Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Holländische Genremalerei im 17. Jahrhundert: Symposium Berlin 1984*. Edited by Henning Bock and Thomas W. Gaehtgens, special issue no. 4, *Jahrbuch Preussischer Kulturbesitz* (1987): 117–37.
8. As noted by Nanette Salomon, *Jacob Duck and the Gentrification of Dutch Genre Painting* (Doornspijk,

1998), 42.

9. On the interpretation of Ter Borch's later paintings with military subjects specifically, see Alison McNeil Kettering, "Gerard ter Borch's Military Men: Masculinity Transformed," in *The Public and Private in Dutch Culture of the Golden Age*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Adele Seeff (Newark, Del., 2000), 100–22.
10. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 1:44.

Provenance

- Possibly Émile Péreire (1800–75), Paris.^[1]
- Barron James Grahame, F. S. A., of Morphie (1792–1877), Kincardineshire (his sale, Sotheby's, London, 8 February 1878, no. 91 ["Dutch School, The Guard Room, four men playing at cards, armour in the foreground"]; for £3, to Grego).
- Joseph Grego (1843–1908)^[2], London (his sale, Puttick and Simson, London, 11 June 1908, no. 96, as by Jacob Duck; for £10.10, to McLean).
- [F. Kleinberger, Paris, by 1912].
- (Sale, Musée Galliera, Paris, 28 November 1972, no. 16, as by Jacob Duck, for 38,000 francs).
- (Sale, Christie's, London, 5 July 1985, no. 25).
- (Sale, Christie's, Amsterdam, 11 May 2005, no. 63 [Johnny van Haften, Ltd., London, 2005]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2005.

Provenance Notes

1. The painting was described in the 1972 Musée Galliera sale catalogue as from the collection of Émile Péreire. However, no paintings by Ter Borch (or of this description) are listed in sales of paintings from the Péreire collection held in 1868 or 1872; nor is there mention of a painting fitting this description in T. Thoré, "Les cabinets d'amateurs à Paris: Galerie de MM. Péreire," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 6 (1864): 193–213, 297–317.
2. Joseph Grego was a noted writer on art. His collecting interests centered on English caricatures and European arms and armor.

Exhibition History

- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, January 2011–August 2015, on loan with the permanent collection [lent

by the present owner].

- Beijing, National Museum of China, “Rembrandt and His Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 17 June–3 September 2017 [lent by the present owner].
- Shanghai, Long Museum, West Bund, “Rembrandt, Vermeer and Hals in the Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 23 September 2017–25 February 2018 [lent by the present owner].

References

- Hofstede de Groot, Cornelis. *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith*. Edited and translated by Edward G. Hawke, 5: 21, no. 42. 8 vols. London, 1907–28. Originally published as *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*. 10 vols. Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28.
- Gudlaugsson, Sturla J. *Geraert ter Borch*. 2 vols. The Hague, 1959–60, 1:44, pl. 20; 2:63, no. 20.
- Yeager-Crasselt, Lara. “Guardroom Interior with Soldiers Smoking and Playing Cards.” In *Rembrandt and His Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection*. Edited by Lara Yeager-Crasselt, 124, no. 52, 184, no. 52. Translated by Li Ying. Exh. cat. Beijing, National Museum of China. Beijing, 2017.
- Long Museum, West Bund. *Rembrandt, Vermeer and Hals in the Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection*. Exh. cat. Shanghai, Long Museum, West Bund. Shanghai, 2017, 132, 134–35.

Versions

Versions and Copies

1. After Gerard ter Borch, *Cardplaying Soldiers*, support and measurements unknown, formerly dealer Guido Arnot, London, 1920 (as by Jan van Huchtenberg). Locates the figures in an outdoor setting. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:63, no. 20.a.
2. After Gerard ter Borch, *A Guardroom Interior with Soldiers Smoking and Playing Cards*, support and measurements unknown, untraceable. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:63, no. 20.b.
3. After Gerard ter Borch, *A Guardroom Interior with Soldiers Smoking and Playing Cards*, oil on panel, 47 x 63 cm, formerly dealer K. Hermsen, The Hague, 1930; sale, Paris, 5 May 1947, no. 72. Costumes updated to 1650s. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:63, no. 20.c.

4. After Gerard ter Borch, *Cardplaying Soldiers*, oil on panel, 64 x 72 cm, formerly dealer J. Goudstikker, Amsterdam, 1914–17; collection Cremers, The Hague, 1918. Numerous variations in details, including translating the cylindrical protrusion of the trunk lid in the left foreground into a hat resting on top of the trunk, relocating the hearth to the right, and replacing the doorway at left with an arched opening. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:63, no. 20.d.
5. After Gerard ter Borch, *A Guardroom Interior with Soldiers Smoking and Playing Cards*, oil on canvas, 37 x 49 cm, formerly dealer J. Böhler, Munich, 1955. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:63, no. 20.e.
6. After Gerard ter Borch, *A Guardroom Interior with Soldiers Smoking and Playing Cards*, oil on panel, 35 x 48 cm, formerly sale, Brussels, 22/23 December 1950, lot 243. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:63–64, no. 20.f.
7. After Gerard ter Borch, *A Guardroom Interior with Soldiers Smoking and Playing Cards*, support and measurements unknown, formerly E. Bolton, London, 1927.

Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of horizontally grained, rectangular-shaped oak with a narrow wood addition along the lower edge, has no bevels. The thinned panel has had narrow wood shims attached to all four sides, and the enlarged support has been cradled. A horizontal split along the center of the right half of the composition has been repaired. There are no wax collection seals, import stamps, stencils, paper labels, inscriptions, or panel maker's marks along the panel or cradle reverse.

A ground has been thinly and evenly applied. Areas of less opaque paint reveal a red-orange underlayer that is indicative of a light red ground. The paint has been applied with transparent glazes through the red-orange jacket and trousers, and more thickly, with no obvious brushmarks or impasto, through the flesh tones and white highlights.

The painting is unsigned and undated.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 720 nanometers. In the X-radiograph, a radio-opaque area above the barrel on the left suggests an object such as a container of liquid was painted out during the paint stage.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2005 and remains in an excellent state of preservation.^[1]

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. Entry based on a 2012 examination report by Jevon Thistlewood, paintings conservator, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.