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**Woman Cleaning Fish**

Gabriel Metsu  
(Leiden 1629 – 1667 Amsterdam)

ca. 1657–58  
oil on canvas  
30.5 x 27.3 cm  
signed in brown paint along table edge, lower  
left: “G Metsu”  
GM-100



### How to cite

Waiboer, Adriaan. "Woman Cleaning Fish" (2017). In *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, 2nd ed. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. New York, 2017–20. <https://theleidencollection.com/artwork/a-woman-cleaning-fish/> (archived May 2020).

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In the mid-1650s, soon after he moved to Amsterdam, Gabriel Metsu painted four works in which an attractive young woman is shown handling fish or vegetables in front of a brick house.<sup>[1]</sup> In *Woman Cleaning Fish*, the woman smiles sensually toward the viewer as she displays a plaice (flatfish) that she is about to clean with her knife. Judging from the other plaice in the wicker basket on her wooden table, the two large fish displayed on a large earthenware platter, and the set of scales hanging from a brick wall, the woman must be a fish vendor, even though she is respectably outfitted in a black dress with a large white linen collar.<sup>[2]</sup>

*Woman Cleaning Fish* belongs to a long tradition of images of female food sellers and maids at work that stretches back to the market and kitchen scenes that Pieter Aertsen (1507/08–75) and his pupil Joachim Beuckelaer (ca. 1534–ca. 1574) painted in the mid-sixteenth century. These artists represented attractive young women in the presence of a cornucopia of meat, fowl, fish, and vegetables, usually with a small biblical episode in the background. The seductively displayed foods in the foreground in Aertsen's and Beuckelaer's works symbolize the *voluptas carnis* and function as an antithesis to the scriptural narrative of the background scene.<sup>[3]</sup> When Metsu depicted food vendors, he omitted the biblical narratives, but through pose and gesture he often alluded to the sexual connotations of women and food found in these earlier prototypes.<sup>[4]</sup>

A number of Dutch artists depicted female vendors of food, and it is instructive to compare their varied approaches to the subject. The most prolific painter of outdoor market scenes was Hendrick Martensz Sorgh (1609/11–70) from Rotterdam, who generally represented the hustle and bustle of urban markets in which female vendors and shoppers haggle over the price of fish and vegetables.<sup>[5]</sup> More direct visual prototypes for Metsu's female food vendors are to be found in the work of artists from Metsu's native Leiden, particularly Gerrit Dou (1613–75) and Frans van Mieris (1635–81). For example, Dou's *The Pancake Baker* (**fig 1**) from the early 1650s (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) and Van Mieris's *Fruit Seller* of ca. 1655 (British Royal Collection) both focus on a single vendor in a quiet, rustic location.<sup>[6]</sup> Much like Metsu, Dou and Van Mieris placed their female vendors before an open door of a rustic brick house overgrown with vines. Nevertheless, a different relationship exists between the viewer and these scenes than in *Woman Cleaning Fish*. In the paintings by Dou and Van Mieris, the viewer merely observes the financial transaction between the vendor and her customer, whereas in Metsu's painting the viewer is the

## Comparative Figures



**Fig 1.** Gerrit Dou, *The Pancake Baker*, ca. 1650–55, oil on panel, 44.2 x 34 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, P553, Bridgeman Images



**Fig 2.** Gerrit Dou, *A Maid and Boy Enframed*, 1652, oil on panel, 33 x 23.8 cm, Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe, 266

object of the vendor's attention.

The direct gaze and attractive appearance of the woman in the Leiden Collection painting relates to other subject types that Dou painted during the late 1640s and early 1650s that Metsu would have known, since he was still living in Leiden at that time. For example, Dou depicted young kitchen maids and shop vendors at open windows enticing the viewer to purchase their wares. As if their bare arms and visible cleavage were not enough to make them look desirable, Dou usually also included hares, poultry, carrots, or other objects to emphasize their sexuality. In one such painting, *A Maid and Boy Enframed* (Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe) (fig 2), the woman vendor lifts up a fish in a manner similar to that seen in Metsu's painting.<sup>[7]</sup> Another of Dou's paintings of a seductive young kitchen maid that Metsu may have known (now lost but known through a copy by Van Mieris) is *A Young Woman Gathering Water from a Well* (fig 3).<sup>[8]</sup> Not only is the setting, including a brick wall attached to the house, similar to that of *Woman Cleaning Fish*, but the fruit on the makeshift table similarly alludes to the woman's fertility.<sup>[9]</sup> In each of these works the woman has directed her attention to the viewer.

Metsu's *Woman Cleaning Fish* draws upon Dou's and Van Mieris's market scenes and their images of seductive kitchen maids, but he conceived this work in a direct and appealing manner uniquely his own. Although the woman in Metsu's painting has a warm and inviting smile that suggests that her fish are not the only thing on offer, the sexual allure is understated because of the woman's respectable attire. Metsu must have enjoyed commercial success with this approach, given that he painted variations of the subject four different times soon after he moved to Amsterdam. Only one Dutch artist from later generations followed Metsu in this approach: Godefridus Schalcken (1643–1706), whose *Woman Holding a Herring* from 1685–90 seems indebted to Metsu's vendors.<sup>[10]</sup> Eighteenth-century watercolorists also took an interest in Metsu's market scenes. The Amsterdam artist Anna de Frey (ca. 1775–1808), for example, copied *Woman Cleaning Fish* in 1804.<sup>[11]</sup>



**Fig 3.** Frans van Mieris after Gerrit Dou, *A Young Woman Gathering Water from a Well*, ca. 1650–55, oil on panel, 24.2 x 19.1 cm, present location unknown (last recorded sale, Christie's, London, April 2, 1976, no. 37, photograph at RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History)



## Endnotes

1. For the other three paintings, see Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 189–92, nos. A-41, A-43, A-44, all ill. (No. A-41, *Woman Cleaning Carrots*, is also in The Leiden Collection.)
2. Linda Stone-Ferrier, “Gabriel Metsu’s Street Vendors: Shopping for Values in the Dutch Neighbourhood,” in *Gabriel Metsu*, ed. Adriaan E. Waiboer (Exh. cat. Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (New Haven, 2010), 78.
3. Keith P. F. Moxey, “Pieter Aertsen, Joachim Beuckelaer, and the Rise of Secular Painting in the Context of the Reformation” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1977), 26–53, 98–102.
4. On the sexual connotation of mid-seventeenth-century genre paintings featuring women handling fish, see Eric Jan Sluijter, *Seductress of Sight: Studies in Dutch Art of the Golden Age* (Zwolle, 2000), 275–76.
5. In Sorgh’s paintings the seller is usually an attractive young woman, but in some of his works a good-looking female customer is the focal point.
6. For Dou’s painting, see Wilhelm Martin, *Gerard Dou: Des Meisters Gemälde in 247 Abbildungen* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1913), 136; for Van Mieris’s painting, see Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2:14–15, no. 10, pl. 10.
7. In other works, Dou depicted young women holding up dead roosters or baskets with fruit in this same way. See Wilhelm Martin, *Gerard Dou: Des Meisters Gemälde in 247 Abbildungen* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1913), 113 (right), 120, both ill.
8. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1:43; 2:11–13, no. 7, fig. 7. Quentin Buvelot, “Frans van Mieris’ Reputation,” in *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681*, ed. Quentin Buvelot (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (New Haven, 2005), 15, fig. 1. Katharina Schmidt et al., *Die Sammlung Max Geldner im Kunstmuseum Basel: Vermächtnis und Ankäufe der Stiftung* (Basel, 2000), 103–5, no. 21.
9. Jean-Baptiste Bedaux, “Fruit and Fertility: Fruit Symbolism in Netherlandish Portraiture of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” *Simiolus* 17 (1987): passim.
10. Thierry Beherman, *Godfried Schalcken* (Paris, 1988), 241, no. 147, ill.
11. Anna de Frey’s watercolor was recorded at the sale of J. C. Puysseenaar, Amsterdam (Van der Schley... Vinkeles), 27 February 27 1804, folder B, no. 8.

## Provenance

- (Sale, Paillet and Delaroche, Paris, 18–25 April 1803, no. 143 [sold to Sigismund Ehrenreich, Graf von Redern, for 1510 francs]).
- Marquis Marialva, by 1825 [bought by John Smith for £80 before 1833].
- Hérís, Brussels, by 1833.
- Désiré van den Schrieck, Leuven (her sale, Le Roy, Brussels, 8–11 April, 1861, no. 52 [sold to Allard in Douai for 6,400 francs]).
- Private collection, France (sale, Drouot, Paris, 22 June 1990, no. 22, [sold for 2,000,000 francs]; [Agnew's, London, 1992; Agnew's / Salomon Lilian B. V., Amsterdam, 2001]).
- Private collection, The Hague, by 2001 [Salomon Lilian B. V., Amsterdam, 2004].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2004.

## Exhibition History

- Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum of Arts and Science, “Pleasures of Collecting: Part I, Renaissance to Impressionist Masterpieces,” 21 September 2002–5 January 2003, [no number, lent by private collection].
- New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, September 2009–April 2013 [lent by the present owner].

## References

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- 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, 1: 288, no. 121. 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.
- Edwards, JoLynn. *Expert et marchand de tableaux à la fin du XVIIIe siècle: Alexandre-Joseph Paillet*. Paris, 1984, 53, 313.
- Fredericksen, Burton B., and Benjamin Peronnet et al., eds. *Répertoire des tableaux vendus*



*en France au XIXe siècle*. Los Angeles, 1998, 686.

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- Stone-Ferrier, Linda. “Gabriel Metsu’s Street Vendors Shopping for Values in the Dutch Neighbourhood.” In *Gabriel Metsu*. Edited by Adriaan Waiboer, 78. Exh. cat. Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; Washington, National Gallery of Art. New Haven, 2010.
- Waiboer, Adriaan E. *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné*. New Haven and London, 2012, 52, 190, no. A-42.

## Versions

### Versions and Copies

1. *Woman Cleaning Fish*, oil on panel, arched top, 32.5 x 24.4 cm (Abbé de Gévigney, his sale, Paillet, Paris, 1–29 December 1779, no. 225), presumably a copy of GM-100.
2. Aletta de Freij (1768–1808), *Woman Cleaning Fish*, watercolor (sale, Van der Schley... Vinkeles, Amsterdam, 27 February 1804, “Kunstboek B,” no. 8).

## Technical Summary

The support is a lined, fine plain-weave fabric. The left, right, and upper tacking margins have been removed and remnants of the lower tacking margin remain. Viewed left to right, the horizontal threads slope upward across the width of the painting approximately 5 cm. Pronounced cusping along the left vertical edge, but not along the right, suggests the support was cut from a larger stretched fabric. There are no wax collection seals, stencils or import stamps along the lining canvas. A maker’s mark is embossed along the left stretcher member.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied followed by a buff-colored underlayer. The paint has been thinly and smoothly applied with no visible brushwork or use of impasto. Details such as the vines have been applied in thin transparent glazes.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images at 900–1700 nanometers.<sup>[1]</sup> Pentimenti along the figure’s proper left arm indicate the upper arm has been widened, and pentimenti along the pot indicate the chains have been shifted to the left.



The painting is signed in dark paint along the table edge in the lower left quadrant but undated.

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition in 2004. It remains in a good state of preservation despite small areas of restored paint loss along the brickwork in the upper right quadrant.

### **Technical Summary Endnotes**

1. The painting was examined at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, with infrared reflectography using an Indigo Systems Merlin Near Infrared (NIR) camera.