



Public Notary

Gabriel Metsu
(Leiden 1629 – 1667 Amsterdam)

ca. 165(3?)

oil on panel

41 x 32.5 cm

inscribed and dated in light-colored paint on
sign, lower left: “openbaer Notarus / 165[3?]”

GM-101

Currently on view at: Sterling and Francine
Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA

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An old man with a full gray beard and wearing a red cloak stares directly at the viewer as he leans out of an arched window set into a brownish-gray stone building. His large, boney hands hold open a folio containing a number of loose sheets of paper, as well as an official document with attached wax seals. On the wooden sign hanging below the open shutter is an inscription that reads *openbaer Notarus* (public notary). The sign also bears the year in which Gabriel Metsu completed the picture, one of only fourteen extant paintings that are dated.^[1] Unfortunately, the last digit is almost illegible and cannot be clearly read.

Given the painting's stylistic similarities to *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* in the Musée du Louvre, 1653 (**fig 1**), it seems probable that Metsu executed this work in the same year.^[2] The Louvre painting is a large biblical scene on canvas, rather than a single-figure painting on panel, but it has a comparable palette consisting of brownish-gray colors combined with distinct areas of red and white. Moreover, the facial type and posture of the notary with his raised shoulders is identical to that of the central Pharisee. Finally, the two paintings include finely executed large folios, documents and seals similar to those that appear in other of Metsu's works from around 1653–54, including another depiction of the same notary and *Woman Reading a Book by a Window* (GM-105).^[3]

Public Notary dates from the early period of Metsu's career when he was active in his native Leiden. During these years he painted mostly on large canvases, depicting subjects drawn from the bible and mythology such as in the Louvre painting, or from farcical literature and popular culture. The small scale and panel support of *Public Notary* are quite exceptional, and this work seems to be the first instance in which Metsu responded to the work of Gerrit Dou (1613–75).

Metsu's prime source of inspiration seems to have been Dou's *A Painter with a Pipe and a Book*, ca. 1645, where a man, holding an open book, similarly leans out of an open window and stares at the viewer (**fig 2**). In each work, moreover, the artist has provided textual information on an object illusionistically nailed to the architecture surrounding the window opening: Dou inscribed his signature on a piece of paper nailed to the stone frame, while Metsu identified the man's profession and date on the wooden board.

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Gabriel Metsu, *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, 1653, oil on canvas, 134 x 165 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. 1459, Photo: Jean-Gilles Beirizzi, © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY



Fig 2. Gerrit Dou, *A Painter with a Pipe and a Book*, ca. 1645–50, oil on panel, 48 x 37 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-86



The subject of a notary or lawyer appears occasionally in Dutch genre paintings of the seventeenth century, but most of these works are somewhat comical in character. Rooted in a tradition stretching back to mid-sixteenth-century peasant scenes, they depict arrogant lawyers cheating their gullible rural clients.^[4] Other paintings, including a number of works by Adriaen van Ostade (1610–85) from the end of his career, portray lawyers and notaries in a more dignified manner, often studying documents alone in their offices.^[5] Metsu also rendered his notary respectably, but in a different manner, almost as though he were soliciting business from the window of his office.

Whether or not Metsu portrayed an actual individual is not known; however, he did have a personal relationship with a notary in the early 1650s. In January 1654 the young artist asked the notary Jan Jansz van Griecken to relieve his guardians of responsibilities that had been given them after his mother's death in 1651.^[6] The fact that Van Griecken's father, a renowned goldsmith in Leiden, owned one of the artist's works indicates that the notary's family collected Metsu's work. The painting in question, "a large picture by Metsu," which was listed in the father's posthumous inventory, was in all likelihood also from the early years of Metsu's career, either one of his sizable history paintings, such as *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* (see **(fig 1)**), or a large genre scene, such as *Woman Selling Game from a Stall* (GM-114).^[7] However, *Public Notary* could not have been a portrait of Jan Jansz van Griecken, as the notary was too young to be the individual represented in this painting.^[8]

-Adriaan Waiboer

Endnotes

1. See Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 161, for a list of Metsu's extant dated works.
2. Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 168, under A-8. The auction catalogue of the Van Hoeken sale (see Provenance) lists the date as 1665. In the copy of this catalogue, preserved at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, this year has been crossed out and substituted by 1651. Neither of these dates, however, is likely when the style of the painting in relation to Metsu's chronology is taken into account.
3. For Metsu's *A Notary Sharpening his Pen*, c. 1653, oil on panel, 40 x 32.5 cm., in the Kila collection, Switzerland, see Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 21, 168, no. A-9, ill. The same model is depicted in this work.
4. Peter C. Sutton, "Love Letters: Dutch Genre Painting in the Age of Vermeer," in *Love Letters: Dutch Genre Paintings in the Age of Vermeer*, ed. Peter C. Sutton (Exh. cat. Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland; Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum of Arts and Sciences) (New Haven, 2003), 23–24.
5. See, for instance, *Love Letters: Dutch Genre Paintings in the Age of Vermeer*, ed. Peter C. Sutton (Exh. cat. Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland; Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum of Arts and Sciences) (New Haven, 2003), 154–61, nos. 28–30, all ill.
6. Regional Archives Leiden, notarial archives A 892, record no. 27 (first published by Abraham Bredius, "Iets over de jeugd van Gabriel Metsu," *Oud-Holland* 25 [1907]: 201). See also Adriaan E. Waiboer, "The Early Years of Gabriel Metsu," *Burlington Magazine* 147 (2005): 90.
7. Regional Archives Leiden, notarial archives 762, no. 351. For more on the Van Grieckens and their relationship with Metsu, see Pieter Roelofs, "Early Owners of Paintings by Metsu in Leiden and Amsterdam," 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), 99.
8. Van Griecken was born after 1613; see Pieter Roelofs, "Early Owners of Paintings by Metsu in Leiden and Amsterdam," 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), 99.

Provenance

- [Daniel Katz, The Hague, by 1940].
- M. L. van Hoeken, Wassenaar (his sale, Paul Brandt, Amsterdam, 25 June 1959, no. 194 [for 14,000 florins]).
- [R. Lamm, Paris, by 1960].
- Adelaide Stein Miller, New York (her sale, Sotheby's, New York, 11 April 1991, no. 59, as by Quiringh Gerritsz van Brekelenkam [to Richard P. Boncza]).
- Richard P. Boncza, Fair Lawn, New Jersey (sale, Tajan, Paris, 14 December 1998, no. 223, bought in; sale, Tajan, Paris, 9 December 1999, no. 40, bought in [Otto Naumann, 2004]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2004.

Exhibition History

- Williamstown, The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, "An Inner World: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting," 5 March–17 September 2017 [lent by the present owner].

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Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained and vertically oriented rectangular oak, has bevels along all four edges.^[1] The panel is unthinned and uncradled, and has machine toolmarks and one paper label but no wax collection seals, import stamps, stencils or panel maker's marks.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied. A gently curved arch incised into the ground along the upper right quadrant may indicate that the upper arch of the window was originally intended to be farther to the right. Additional diagonally oriented incised lines along the stonework are oriented parallel to the lower book edge. The ground appears to be followed by a brown to brown-black sketch.^[2]

The paint has been applied in successive thin layers with transparent glazing, light over dark. In raking light the outer contours and highlights of the figure's proper right sleeve, the contour of the brown triangular corner of fabric along his chest, and the edge of the book are slightly raised with low visible brushmarking. Fine traction cracks in thin dark areas, such as the shadows below the book and hand, may be due to the sketch.^[3]

No underdrawing or compositional changes are readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers or in the X-radiograph.

The painting is unsigned but inscribed and dated in light-colored paint on a sign depicted in the lower left corner. The final digit of the date is ambiguous.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2004 and remains in a good state of preservation despite areas of thinness along the stonework.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on visual examination only.

2. According to 2009 examination notes by E. Melanie Gifford from the National Gallery of Art, Washington.



3. According to 2009 examination notes by E. Melanie Gifford from the National Gallery of Art, Washington.