



Old Woman at Her Meal in an Interior

Gabriel Metsu
(Leiden 1629 – 1667 Amsterdam)

ca. 1654–57

oil on canvas

82.6 x 68.7 cm

indistinctly signed in light paint on wall mirror,
center: “___ETSU”

GM-102

Currently on view at: The National Museum of
China, Beijing



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Gabriel Metsu's move from his native Leiden to Amsterdam in the mid-1650s had a considerable impact on the character of his paintings.^[1] In Amsterdam he shifted his attention from biblical, mythological, and literary subjects to scenes of domestic life. Moreover, instead of large-scale canvas supports, he started using panels of modest dimensions, which he painted with a softer and more delicate touch than the broad and fluid brushwork of his Leiden period. These changes, however, evolved gradually and did not occur overnight. *Old Woman at Her Meal in an Interior* is a fascinating painting that shares stylistic and thematic qualities of both his Leiden and Amsterdam periods, which indicates that he likely executed it soon after he arrived in Amsterdam.

Much as with his early Leiden-period history paintings, Metsu has here used a canvas support. The painting's size (81.9 x 69.2 cm) does not match the scale of his most ambitious works (see, for example, GM-101, fig. 1), but it is the largest of his early Amsterdam-period paintings. Its broad and fluid brushwork shares qualities with works by Jan Baptist Weenix (1621–60/61), an artist Metsu seems to have known when he was in Utrecht in the early 1650s.^[2] *Old Woman at Her Meal in an Interior* is one of the last works Metsu painted in which Weenix's influence still reverberates, but the painting also includes a number of carefully rendered areas, including the old woman's hands, the earthenware plate, the half-cut bread, and the glass on the floor, all indicating an evolution in his manner of painting.

Interestingly, *Old Woman at Her Meal in an Interior* relates to the types of interior genre scenes that Gerrit Dou (1613–75) depicted in the second half of the 1640s, subjects that were of no interest to Metsu when he was in Leiden. Only after he moved to Amsterdam did Metsu begin painting scenes with themes inspired by Dou, either on his own initiative, having spotted a gap in the Amsterdam art market, or to meet explicit demands from local collectors for paintings with a "Leiden" character.^[3] The present painting, for example, is thematically and compositionally related to Dou's *An Old Woman at Prayer before Her Meal* from the early 1640s (fig 1). In these two paintings an elderly female, accompanied by her pet, is shown seated at a tripod table laden with food. Both scenes are set in a modest interior filled with an array of household items lying on the floor or hanging on the wall. The wooden panel support that Dou used for his painting, however, is about one-seventh the size of Metsu's canvas, and Dou

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Gerrit Dou, *An Old Woman at Prayer before Her Meal*, ca. 1645–50, oil on panel, 27.7 x 28.3 cm, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, inv. 588, bpk, Berlin / Alte Pinakothek / Art Resource, NY



Fig 2. Gabriel Metsu, *Twelfth Night*, 1653–55, oil on canvas, 80.9 x 97.9 cm, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, inv. 871, bpk, Berlin / Alte Pinakothek / Art Resource, NY

executed his picture in a meticulous technique that is fundamentally different from Metsu's fluid brushwork.

Metsu's and Dou's paintings differ in the artists' use of light and color. Even though Dou's work has a relatively strong light and dark contrast, Metsu deepened this effect to a near-chiaroscuro with a spotlighted circle on the wooden floor. Moreover, he reduced the number and the intensity of bright color areas. The result is a more tranquil image with a stronger focus on the center of the composition. The same combination of more evocative lighting and monochrome coloring can be seen in some early works by Nicolaes Maes (1634–93). This artist began painting old women and kitchen maids soon after he returned to his native Dordrecht after training with Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69) in Amsterdam. These similarities in style suggest that Metsu traveled to Dordrecht to study some of Maes's paintings, although the chronology of their works from the mid-1650s is uncertain.^[4] It may be that both artists independently transformed Dou's work in a slightly Rembrandtesque manner. Though not a student of Rembrandt, Metsu had incorporated stylistic and thematic borrowings from paintings by the Amsterdam master as early as 1653.^[5]

Metsu was not the only painter that followed Dou in depicting old women in humble interiors. Various artists from Leiden and surrounding areas repeatedly painted this figure type—with dark, penetrating eyes, prominent cheekbones, and pouting lips—in modest interiors.^[6] Metsu first depicted this particular model in his *Twelfth Night* of 1653–55 (**fig 2**), and she reappears a number of times in Metsu's works of his early Amsterdam period—selling pancakes, reading a book, feeding a dog, eating porridge, and combing a young woman's hair.^[7] All these latter works are smaller and slightly more refined in execution than *Old Woman at Her Meal in an Interior*, suggesting that Metsu completed them slightly later. Remarkably, he continued representing this same old woman into the mid-1660s.^[8]

Metsu's image of an old woman eating by herself indicates that she was a widow. Elderly women who had outlived their husbands were popular subjects in both the visual arts and contemporary literature. In the last chapter of his *Houwelyck* (1625), entitled "Weduwe" (Widow), Jacob Cats (1577–1660) discussed widows as exemplars of life's transience and encouraged them to concentrate on spiritual matters rather than earthly ones.^[9] Cats also associated widows with sobriety and modesty, and

advised them to refrain from extravagance, even with regard to food. A passage from *Consolation Letter of Widows* (1630) by Pieter Iansz Twisck (1565–1636), originally a letter the Mennonite author had sent to his recently widowed sister-in-law, also reflects such expectations:

The greatest honor and praise for widows is moderation in all her doings: moderation not only in food, in the care of her body, in her clothing, demeanor, and behavior but also with regard to her family, when she is in the presence of other people, in front of authorities and her familiar friends.^[10]

Contemporary viewers would have associated the widow's meal of meat, cheese and bread with sobriety and moderation, a notion reinforced by the modest interior and the way she tilts her head slightly forward to suggest a humble demeanor.

Metsu gave the scene a religious undertone by including a glass of red wine on the floor and a piece of bread on the tripod table, Eucharistic associations that accord with Metsu's Catholic religious beliefs.^[11] Metsu's most overt Catholic painting, *Saint Dorothy*, from the mid-1660s, depicts the saint expressing her loyalty to Christ at an altar surrounded by an abundance of Catholic paraphernalia, including a *ciborium*, a large covered cup designed to hold the Host for the celebration of the Eucharist.^[12] The reference to the Christian sacrament in Metsu's *Old Woman at Her Meal in an Interior* is subtle by comparison.

-Adriaan Waiboer

Endnotes

1. On the date of Metsu's move from Leiden to Amsterdam, see Adriaan E. Waiboer, "The Early Years of Gabriel Metsu," *Burlington Magazine* 147 (2005): 90, and Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 7–8.
2. On Metsu's relationship with Weenix, see Adriaan E. Waiboer, "The Early Years of Gabriel Metsu," *Burlington Magazine* 147 (2005): 89–90; Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 23–24; Melanie E. Gifford, "Fine Painting and Eloquent Imprecision: Gabriel Metsu's Painting Technique," 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), 159–61.
3. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Review of Franklin W. Robinson, *Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667): A Study of His Place in Dutch Genre Painting of the Golden Age*," *Art Bulletin* 58 (1976): 458, suggested that Metsu's interest in Dou's work after his move to Amsterdam may have been "a response to a market in Amsterdam for Dou-like paintings." See also 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), 103–5, and Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 33–44.
4. Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 370 n. 6.
5. On Rembrandt's influence on Metsu's early work and in particular on his *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, dated 1653, see Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 19–20.
6. Rather than painting the same model, these Leiden artists, among them Frans van Mieris (1635–81), Quiringh van Brekelenkam (1622/29–69/79), Dominicus van Tol (1635–76), Jacob van Spreeuwen (1611–after 1650), and Abraham de Pape (1620–66), depicted the same figure type. Dou introduced her into his work in the 1630s, possibly as a variation of "Rembrandt's mother," a figure type Rembrandt and his followers painted repeatedly. On the concept of Rembrandt's mother, see *Rembrandt's Mother: Myth and Reality*, ed. Christiaan Vogelaar (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 2005).
7. Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 175–80, nos A-20, A-21, A-22, A-24, A-25, A-27, A-28, all ill.
8. Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and

London, 2012), 241–43, nos. A-97, A-98, A-99, A-100, all ill.

9. Jacob Cats, *Houwelyck, dat is de gantsche ghelegentheydt des echten-staets* (Middelburg, 1625), 3–48.
10. This part of *Troostbrief der weduwen* by Twisck is quoted in Wayne E. Franits, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Cambridge and New York, 1993), 176, 243 n. 43 (original Dutch text). See chapter 4, “Weduwe,” of Franits’s book (161–94) for an excellent description of Dutch paintings of widows and old women at home.
11. Although documentation is lacking, a handful of biographical facts suggest that the artist was Catholic. Moreover, a number of his works have subjects or include elements that would have resonated with a Catholic audience. For more on Metsu’s religion, see Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 10.
12. For more on Metsu’s *Saint Dorothy*, see Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 119, 254, no. A-114, ill.

Provenance

- Alexis-Joseph Febvre (1811–82), Paris (his sale, Hôtel Drouot, George, Le Roy, C. P.: Lechat, Chevallier, Paris, 17–20 April 1882, no. 74 [for 3,500 francs to possibly Elhnazaer]).
- Collection M. Elhnazaer (sale, Musée Galliera, C. P.: Ader, Couturier, Paris, 9 December 1961, no. 31).
- French private collection, by 1971 (sale, C. P.: Guignard, Hôtel des Ventes Gabriel, Lorient, 2 July 2000, not sold; sale, C. P.: Mercier et Cie, Lille, 23 June 2002, no. 225 [Salomon Lilian, B. V., Amsterdam, and Kunsthandel P. de Boer, Amsterdam, 2002]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2003.

Exhibition History

- Maastricht, European Fine Arts Fair, March 2003 [exhibited by Salomon Lilian, B. V.].
- Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland, “Gabriel Metsu,” 4 September–5 December 2010; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, 16 December 2010–21 March 2011; Washington, National Gallery of Art, 10 April–24 July 2011, no. 36 [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].

References

- Eudel, Paul. *L'Hôtel Drouot et la curiosité en 1882 avec une préface par M. Armand Silvestre*. 2 vols. Paris, 1883, 2:248.
- Robinson, Franklin W. *Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667): A Study of His Place in Dutch Genre Painting of the Golden Age*. New York, 1974, 33, 80, fig. 57.
- Weebers, W. P. J. A. *Isack Mes, Genreschilder te Dordrecht: Zijn Leven en zijn Werk 1622–1668 (of eind 1667?)*. Nijmegen, 1976, 34, fig. 17.
- Waiboer, Adriaan E. “An Old Woman at Her Meal.” In *Salomon Lilian Old Masters*. Sales cat. Amsterdam, Salomon Lilian, B. V. Zwolle, 2003, 42–47, no. 15.
- Waiboer, Adriaan E. “Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667): Life and Work.” 4 vols. Ph.D. diss. New York University, 2007, 1:107 n. 7, 108, 110–11; 2:418–20, no. A-23; 4:1072.
- Waiboer, Adriaan E., ed. *Gabriel Metsu*. Exh. cat. Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art. New Haven, 2010, 9–10, fig. 8; 195, no. 36.
- Duparc, Frederik J., with Femke Diercks, Reinier Baarsen, and Loek van Aalst. *Golden: Dutch and Flemish Masterworks from the Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo Collection*. New Haven and London, 2011, 202, 204, fig. 1.
- Waiboer, Adriaan E. *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné*. New Haven and London, 2012, 34, 175, no. A-20.

Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of medium-weight, plain-weave fabric, has been lined. All four tacking margins have been removed, although remnants of the left and right tacking margins remain. Cusping along all four sides—deep on the lower edge, shallow on the left, right, and upper edges—indicates that the composition’s dimensions have not been significantly altered.^[1] A vertical canvas tear along the lower left quadrant, to the left of the figure, was repaired prior to lining.^[2] Remnants of paper tape from a previous lining are present along the canvas edges. There is one handwritten inscription along the stretcher but no wax collection seals, stencils, labels or import stamps along the lining or stretcher.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied, and remains exposed along the left

and right tacking margin remnants. A blackish sketched outline, which remains visible below the left edge of the skirt, appears to outline the foreground elements but not those along the background.^[3] The paint appears to have been applied with a thin wash underpaint followed by a more opaque final paint. The opaque paint has been applied extremely smoothly with no use of impasto and almost entirely of monochrome ochers. The glass on the floor was added after that area was completed, as it overlaps the skirt and floor.^[4] Very little of the composition is visible in the X-radiograph aside from the white tablecloth draped over the table and the figure's white collar.^[5]

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

The painting is indistinctly signed in whitish-gray paint on the black wall mirror hanging along the center of the background. A fine network of drying cracks allows a light brown underlayer to show through, which is darker and more pronounced than the whitish-gray paint of the signature and therefore makes the signature difficult to read. Under magnification, the “M” is no longer visible, but the “ETSU” remains clear.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2002 and remains in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. According to 2009 examination notes by E. Melanie Gifford, Scientific Department, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
2. Approx. 7 cm long.
3. According to 2009 examination notes by E. Melanie Gifford, Scientific Department, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
4. According to 2009 examination notes by E. Melanie Gifford, Scientific Department, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
5. In raking light, only the canvas weave is apparent. There is no raised brushwork or raised outer contours of the forms.