



Elegant Lady Writing at Her Desk

Gabriel Metsu
(Leiden 1629 – 1667 Amsterdam)

ca. 1662–64

oil on panel

39.4 x 33.5 cm

signed in dark paint, upper left corner:

“G.Metsu”

GM-110

Currently on view at: The National Gallery of Art,
Washington D.C.



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A lady in a black fur-trimmed jacket and brownish skirt has paused from her letter to look at the viewer in a friendly fashion, with a slight smile crossing her face. Poised to resume writing as soon as the interruption has passed, she sits with her right hand holding her quill pen above an inkwell resting on the tapestry-covered table before her. Adding to the momentary character of the scene is the inquisitive small brown and white dog by the woman's side, who peers toward the table while balancing expectantly on one paw. Although the content of the letter is unknown, it is undoubtedly amorous in nature, as is the case with virtually all Dutch seventeenth-century high-life genre scenes of letter writers. Images of ships at sea appear with some frequency in the background of such works, evoking the traditional notion that love is as changeable as the sea.^[1] A calm sea, as evident in this seascape, was considered a good omen for the relationship between two lovers.

Together with Metsu's celebrated companion pieces *Man Writing a Letter* and *Woman Reading a Letter* in the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin ((**fig 1**) and (**fig 2**)), *Elegant Lady Writing at Her Desk* from 1662–64 is one of the artist's most mature depictions of elegant individuals engaged in amorous correspondence.^[2] Metsu was undoubtedly inspired to paint scenes of letter writers by Gerard ter Borch (1617–81), whose images of men and women writing, reading, receiving and sealing letters also prompted other artists, including Caspar Netscher (ca. 1639–84), Frans van Mieris (1635–81), and Johannes Vermeer (1632–75), to focus on this type of subject matter.^[3] The most influential of Ter Borch's letter writing scenes was *A Woman Writing a Letter* of ca. 1655–56 (**fig 3**), although how the artist's contemporaries would have known this painting is uncertain.^[4] Metsu certainly had seen it by 1657–59, when he painted *A Woman Drawing* (**fig 4**). In this work, he followed Ter Borch's concept of a pensive female figure working at a table, but changed the subject to a drawing after a statue instead of a woman writing a letter.

In the present painting, Metsu presented the letter writer as a striking beauty smiling seductively at the spectator, a shift of focus that reflects the artist's customary manner of adapting Ter Borch's compositions in the 1660s. Metsu frequently appropriated Ter Borch's subjects and figure groups, but loosened the social and emotional corset of that master's elegant ladies and gentlemen. Metsu repeatedly depicted women interacting with and inviting the viewer to take part in courting rituals.

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Gabriel Metsu, *Man Writing a Letter*, ca. 1664–66, oil on panel, 52.5 x 40.2 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, NGI.4536



Fig 2. Gabriel Metsu, *Woman Reading a Letter*, ca. 1664–66, oil on panel, 52.5 x 40.2 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, NGI.4537



Fig 3. Gerard ter Borch, *A Woman Writing a Letter*, ca. 1655–56, oil on panel, 39 x 29.5



Likewise, he generally placed his figures in more fancifully conceived, opulent interiors than did Ter Borch. Here, he placed the letter writer in front of a white and red marble mantelpiece comprising Corinthian columns and an elaborately carved frieze, which is based on a chimneypiece in the Burgomasters' Council Chamber of the Amsterdam Town Hall.^[5] This building, designed by Jacob van Campen (1596–1657), was so splendid that the Dutch considered it to be the Eighth Wonder of the World.^[6] This visual reference to an architectural element in this grandiose building communicated to the viewer that the woman belonged to the highest echelons of Dutch society, an evocation of luxury that would have appealed strongly to Metsu's wealthy Amsterdam clientele.

Many of Metsu's genre scenes painted during the last few years of his life depict women whose facial features are based in various degrees on those of his wife, Isabella de Wolff. *Elegant Lady Writing at Her Desk*, however, is an exception. The woman's pronounced eyelids and broad nose bridge are not those of the artist's spouse. Her features are so distinctive that it is probable that the painting is a portrait of a woman posing as a letter writer; the ring on her finger may indicate that she is married. As such, the painting is similar to a portrait Metsu completed during the last year of his life that has a similar genre-like character: *Portrait of Lucia Wijbrants(?)*, probably commissioned by the sitter's husband, Jan Jacobsz Hinlopen.^[7]

About two to four years after Metsu completed *Elegant Lady Writing at Her Desk*, Vermeer also painted an attractive letter-writing woman smiling subtly at the viewer (**fig 5**). Although the works differ in many respects, the paintings share the portrait-like character of the women, who differ from the other figure types in the rest of the artists' oeuvres. It remains undetermined whether these similarities are the result of the two artists independently transforming Ter Borch's image in the same way, or whether the Delft painter knew Metsu's painting, which was probably part of a collection in Amsterdam.^[8]

-Adriaan Waiboer

cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague, 797



Fig 4. Gabriel Metsu, *A Woman Drawing*, 1657–59, oil on panel, 36.3 x 30.7 cm, Presented by the 1st Viscount Rothermere, 1940, The National Gallery, London, NG 5225, © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY



Fig 5. Johannes Vermeer, *A Lady Writing*, ca. 1665, oil on canvas, 45 x 39.9 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Harry Waldron Havemeyer and Horace Havemeyer, Jr., in memory of their father, Horace Havemeyer, 1962.10.1

Endnotes

1. See, for instance, Eddy de Jongh, ed., *Tot Lering en Vermaak: Betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstellingen uit de zeventiende eeuw* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Amsterdam, 1976), 121, who cites a poem by Jan Hermansz Krul: “Wel te recht mach Liefde by de Zee vergeleecken werden / aenghesien haer veranderinge / die d’eene uyr hoop / d’ander uyr vreesse doet veroorsaecken: even gaet het met een Minnaer / als het een Schipper doet / de welcke sich op Zee beghevende / d’eene dagh goedt we’er/d’ander dagh storm en bulderende wint gewaer wort” (Love may rightly be compared with the sea / from the viewpoint of her changes / which one hour causes hope / the next fear: so too goes it with a lover / who like a skipper / who journeys to the sea / one day encounters good weather / the next storm and roaring winds). Jan Harmenszoon Krul, *Minne-beelden: Toe-gepast de lievende ionckheyt* (Amsterdam, 1640), 2–3; translation taken from 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), 45.
2. Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 255–58, nos A-166, A-177, both ill. Metsu painted no fewer than nine such scenes, the earliest of which dates from around 1657–59.
3. Peter C. Sutton 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), 92. For Netscher’s painting, see Marjorie Wieseman, *Caspar Netscher and Late Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Doornspijk, 2002), 57–58, 181, no. 23, color pl. 5; for Van Mieris’s paintings, see Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2:95–96, nos. 82, 83, ill.
4. They may have seen it at the home of the Rotterdam architect and painter Jacob Lois (ca. 1620–76), whose posthumous inventory included a painting described as “a writing woman by Ter Borch” (“Een Schryvent vroungen van Ter Borch”). Abraham Bredius, *Künstler-Inventare: Urkunden zur Geschichte der holländischen Kunst des XVI., XVII. und XVIII. Jahrhunderts*, 8 vols. (The Hague, 1915–22), 4:589; Sturla Gudlaugsson, *Gerard ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:126. The same or another painting, described as “Een brieveschrijftertje gedaan na ‘t schijnt door Gerard ter Burg” (A woman writing a letter, as it appears, by Gerard ter Burg), was in the collection of Albert Houting, a secretary of the Dutch East India Company, at the moment when his estate was drawn up in Amsterdam, in April 1704 (Getty Provenance Index, Archival Inventory N-451 [Houting], no. 24).
5. Peter C. Sutton 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), 134; see also Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu*,

Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné (New Haven and London, 2012), 73.

6. Eymert-Jan Goossens, *Schat van beitel en penseel: Het Amsterdamse stadhuis uit de Gouden Eeuw* (Amsterdam and Zwolle, 1996), 11.
7. Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 95, 142, 230, no. A-87, ill.; 271–72, no. A-132, ill.; Irene Groeneweg, “Regenten in het zwart: vroom en deftig?” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 46 (1995): 201–4; Sturla Gudlaugsson, “Kanttekeningen bij de ontwikkeling van Metsu,” *Oud-Holland* 83 (1968): 26 n. 32, 35.
8. For more on Vermeer’s painting, see Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century: The Collection of the National Gallery of Art, Systematic Catalogue* (New York and Oxford, 1995), 377–82, ill.

Provenance

- Dr. Van Cleef (d. 1861), Utrecht (his sale, Hotel Drouot, Paris, 4–5 April 1864, no. 59 [for 5,020 francs]).
- Marquis Da Fosse, Lisbon, Portugal.
- Charles T. Yerkes (1837–1905), New York, by 1893 (his sale, American Art Association, Mendelssohn Hall, New York, 5–8 April 1910, no. 98 [for \$17,200 to Kleinberger Galleries, Paris and New York]).
- Oscar Huldshinsky (1846–1931), Berlin.
- James Simon (1851–1932), Berlin, by 1914.
- [Haberstock, Berlin, by 1924].
- Leo van den Bergh, Berlin (his sale, Mak van Waay, Graupe, Amsterdam, 5–6 November 1935, no. 13 [for 14,000 florins to Van Raalte]).
- Arthur Hartog (1892–1986), Wassenaar, by 1935; removed from his house by the Nazi occupation authorities in December 1941 (sale, 16 January 1942 [to Adolf Hitler for his Gemäldegalerie Linz, no. 2167]); recorded at the Munich Central Collecting Point, 15 July 1945, no. 4315; restituted to the Stichting Nederlandsch Kunstbezit, 9 October 1945; returned to Arthur Hartog, March 1948, London, New York, by 1952; by descent to private collection, New York (sale, Christie’s, New York, 27 January 2000, no. 76 [to private collection]).
- Private collection, Darien, Conn., 2000 [Otto Naumann, Ltd., 2004].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2004.

Exhibition History

- Berlin, Königlichen Akademie der Künste, “Ausstellung von Werken alter Kunst aus dem Privatbesitz der Mitglieder des Kaiser Friedrich Museum-Vereins,” May 1914, no. 103 [lent by James Simon].
- The Hague, Gemeentemuseum, “Oude Kunst uit Haagsch bezit,” 12 December 1936–31 January 1937, no. 63 [lent by Arthur Hartog].
- The Hague, Mauritshuis, “Herwonnen kunstbezit: Tentoonstelling van uit Duitsland teruggekeerde nederlandse kunstschaten,” March–May 1946, no. 35 [lent by Stichting Nederlandsch Kunstbezit].
- Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland, “Love Letters: Dutch Genre Paintings in the Age of Vermeer,” 1 October–31 December 2003; Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum of Art and Science, 31 January–2 May 2004, no. 15 [lent by Mr. Robert McKeon].
- San Diego, Timken Museum of Art, “Gabriel Metsu: The Love Letter,” 15 May–29 August 2004 [no number, lent by the present owner].
- Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, March 2009–31 July 2010 [lent by the present owner].
- Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland, “Gabriel Metsu,” 4 September–5 December 2010; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, 16 December 2010–21 March 2011; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art, 10 April–24 July 2011, no. 36 [lent by the present owner].
- Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, August 2011–September 2012 [lent by the present owner].
- Rome, Scuderie Del Quirinale, “Joannes Vermeer and the Golden Age of Dutch Art,” 26 September 2012–20 January 2013 [lent by the present owner].
- Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, January 2013–November 2016 [lent by the present owner].
- Paris, Musée du Louvre, “Vermeer et les maîtres de la peinture de genre / Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry,” 20 February–22 May 2017; Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland, 17 June–17 September 2017; Washington, National Gallery of Art, 22 October–21 January 2018 [lent by the present owner].

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- Hofstede de Groot, Cornelius. *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith*. 8 vols. London, 1907–27, 1:275–76, no. 76a. Translated from *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*. 10 vols. Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28.
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- *Oude Kunst uit Haagsch bezit*. Exh. cat. The Hague, Gemeentemuseum. The Hague, 1936, 34, no. 120.
- *Herwonnen kunstbezit: Tentoonstelling van uit Duitschland teruggekeerde nederlandse kunstschaten*. Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis. The Hague, 1946, no. 35.
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195, no. 40.

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- Waiboer, Adriaan E. "Donna che scrive una lettera." In *Johannes Vermeer: Il secolo d'oro dell'arte olandese*, Edited by Sandrina Bandera, Walter Liedtke, and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr, 158–59, no. 27. Exh. cat. Rome, Scuderie del Quirinale. Rome, 2012.

Versions

Versions and Copies

1. J. Rombouts, watercolor. L. Dupper Wz., Dordrecht (his sale, Roos...Engelberts, Dordrecht, 28–29 June 1870, no. 283, as J. Rombouts after G. Metzu).

Versions Notes

Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular oak, has 1.5 cm-wide oak additions on all four sides. A photograph of the painting dated 1895 shows the enlarged panel and composition, which indicates the restoration took place prior to that date.^[1] Narrow wood shims have been applied to all four sides, and the enlarged panel has been marouflaged to a radially cut oak plank and cradled. Three paper labels are affixed to the cradle members and a red wax seal is located on the marouflage panel between the cradle members, but there are no import stamps, panel maker's marks or machine toolmarks.

A creamy brown-colored, thinly and evenly applied ground remains visible along the outer contours of the figure and acts as a mid-tone in the composition. The paint has been applied in thin layers over opaque layers along the gray and light brown shadows of the white head covering, the flesh tones, the subtle changes of tone in the skirt, the black ribbons of the jacket, and the decoration of the oriental carpet. Small details such as the red in the corner of the figure's eyes and the minute dots of yellow and white suggest light reflecting off the figure's jewelry, the dog's pearl collar and blue ribbon, the ornamentation on the upper part of the fireplace, and the lid of the inkwell. The texture of the white fur trim of the figure's jacket and the dog has been achieved with a thicker application of underlying paint.



The figure's position within the composition, the quill in her hand, her earrings and garments, the carpeted table, and the dog are found to have been painted in reserve, which indicates they were carefully planned. In contrast, the mantelpiece, chair, and painting in the background do not appear to have been included in the initial design. Both the chair and the framed seascape painting were added after the brown wash of the background was painted. The yellow highlights found in the frame of the painting in the background extend, wet-on-dry, onto the white satin veil of the sitter and onto the dark brown of the chair, showing us that these highlights were painted at a later time when the underlying paint was dry.

A graphite underdrawing is revealed in infrared images captured at 900–1700 nanometers along the carpet design and the contour lines of the figure and dog. The images also reveal minor compositional changes to the position of the dog's proper right leg and the third finger of the figure's proper left hand.

The painting is signed in dark paint along the upper left corner but is undated.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2004 and remains in a good state of preservation.^[2]

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. According to a 2012 examination report by Devi Ormond, associate paintings conservator, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, the photograph was provided by the Leiden Collection.
2. Entry based on 2012 examination report by Devi Ormond, associate paintings conservator, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.