



Gabriel Metsu

(Leiden 1629 – 1667 Amsterdam)

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Gabriel Metsu was born sometime in late 1629. His parents were the painter Jacques Metsu (ca. 1588–1629) and the midwife Jacquemijn Garniers (ca. 1590–1651).^[1] Before settling in Leiden around 1615, Metsu's father spent some time in Gouda, earning his living as a painter of patterns for tapestry manufacturers. No work by Jacques is known, nor do paintings attributed to him appear in Leiden inventories.^[2] Both of Metsu's parents came from Southwest Flanders, but when they were still children their families moved to the Dutch Republic. When the couple wed in Leiden in 1625, neither was young and both had previously been married. Jacquemijn's second husband, Guiliam Fermout (d. ca. 1624) from Dordrecht, had also been a painter. Jacques Metsu never knew his son, for he died eight months before Metsu was born.^[3] In 1636 his widow took a fourth husband, Cornelis Bontecraey (d. 1649), an inland water skipper with sufficient means to provide well for Metsu, as well as for his half-brother and two half-sisters—all three from Jacquemijn's first marriage.

It is difficult to pinpoint who trained Metsu as a painter. Houbraken, whose *Schouburgh* sheds light on so many painters, offers no insights in this regard. Various authors have put forth the name of Gerrit Dou (1613–75), though there is no evidence to back this up. Moreover, Dou's influence on Metsu's work first manifests itself only in the mid-1650s, by which time Metsu had been working independently for a few years.^[4] It is far more likely that Metsu received his primary instruction in drawing from the Haarlem silversmith Claes Pietersz de Grebber (1590–1650) soon after he had settled in Leiden around 1640. In any case, a thirteen-year-old Metsu served as a witness for him.^[5] One of Claes's brothers was the famous Haarlem painter Frans Pietersz de Grebber (1572/73–1649), the father of the painters Pieter de Grebber (ca. 1600–52/53) and Maria de Grebber (1602–80). Maria was the mother of Metsu's future wife.

Judging from Metsu's earliest known history scenes, his second master was probably a history painter. Specialists in this genre, however, were scarce in Leiden. Antonie Claesz de Grebber (ca. 1622–1691), son of the above-mentioned silversmith, was one of these very few. Some of his works are so close to those of Metsu that we must consider the possibility that he was Metsu's second teacher. Such an apprenticeship would not have lasted long, however, given that “Gabriel Metsu, schilder” (Gabriel Metsu, painter) is mentioned in 1644 in a list of thirty-one names drawn up in support of a petition to establish a Guild of Saint Luke.^[6] It is highly unlikely that the barely fifteen-year-old Metsu was already active as an independent painter. The mention of his name could indicate that his colleagues recognized his remarkable talent and that he already had contributed substantially to the production of his teacher. When the Leiden fine art painters, united with the house painters, finally convinced the Leiden town council in 1648 of the need for a Guild of Saint Luke of their own, Metsu was among the first to join and pay his dues. Considering his young age, though, it is improbable that he had already set up his own workshop. Perhaps his share in the production of his master had become more important and he was allowed to sign his own work.

Written next to his name in the guild record in 1650 is “vertrokken” (departed). Accordingly, it was long assumed that he moved at that time from Leiden to Amsterdam. This note, however, was added only in 1658; between 1650 and that year, the guild's administration was poorly kept and the contributions hardly received, if at all. Nevertheless, Metsu probably did leave Leiden at some point after 1650. In 1650 and 1651, he appears to have worked for a time with Nicolaus Knüpfer (ca. 1603–55) in Utrecht, possibly at the instigation of his fellow townsman Jan Steen (1626–79), a former pupil of Knüpfer.^[7] Metsu returned to Leiden after this Utrecht intermezzo.

In mid-1654 Metsu indeed moved to Amsterdam, where he would work for the remainder of his life.^[8] He settled on the Prinsengracht at De Gecroonde Hoet brewery, in a small house that belonged to a distant relative. This move coincided



with a far-reaching change in his work: within a short time he transformed himself from a history painter into a genre painter. Only in Amsterdam does he seem to have acknowledged his Leiden origins, and Dou's influence can be discerned for the first time. This, however, remained limited to his choice of subjects and composition; he did not adopt Dou's fine and time-consuming painting style. The bright color accents enlivening his monochrome paintings recall Nicolaes Maes (1634–93), while his fluid facture mirrors that of Jan Baptist Weenix (1621–60/61), whose work he had become acquainted with while in Utrecht.

On 19 May 1658 Metsu married Isabella de Wolff (ca. 1632–1718) from Enkhuizen. Her parents were Wouter Coenraetsz de Wolff (1590–1636) and the painter Maria de Grebber (1602–80). Metsu evidently met her through his former teacher Antonie Claesz de Grebber, who had abandoned Leiden for Amsterdam two years earlier and who witnessed the marriage contract on Metsu's behalf. Metsu frequently used Isabella as a model, and she surely features in many of his paintings. Metsu died in the fall of 1667. He must have moved shortly before then, for he was taken from the Leidsestraat to be buried in the Nieuwe Kerk on 24 October. With his death, genre painting lost in these years one of its most important representatives, whose work inspired countless painters, including Jan Steen, Johannes Vermeer (1632–75), Frans van Mieris (1635–81), and Pieter de Hooch (1629–in or after 1684).

- Piet Bakker, 2017



Endnotes

1. The exact date of Metsu's birth is not known. Waiboer contends that it must be situated between 27 November and mid-December 1629. Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, 2012), 5.
2. Attributed paintings occur in Leiden estate inventories only regularly as of the 1640s; Jacques Metsu died in 1629.
3. Gabriel was probably the only child to issue from this union. How many half brothers and sisters he had from his parents' previous marriages is difficult to assess. When Jacquemijn Garniers petitioned the town council in 1631 to appoint her as an "ordinaris" midwife, she stated that she had nine children to raise, but she may have been exaggerating to appeal to their sympathies. Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, 2012), 4.
4. The first manifestation of Dou's influence on Metsu is *A Public Notary*, ca. 165(3?) (The Leiden Collection, New York); see the entry in this catalogue.
5. Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, 2012), 331, doc. 48.
6. For this list, see Regionaal Archief Leiden, Gildenarchief, inv. 855, fol. 15, 1644; published in Abraham Bredius, "De boeken van het Leidsche St. Lucas gilde," in *Archief voor Nederlandsche Kunstgeschiedenis*, ed. F.D.O. Obreen (Rotterdam, 1881), 5: 177–78. For the guild's complicated history, see Piet Bakker, "Crisis? Welke crisis? Kanttekeningen bij het economisch verval van de schilderkunst in Leiden na 1660," *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 27 (2011): 232–69.
7. Adriaan E. Waiboer, "The Early Years of Gabriel Metsu," *Burlington Magazine* 147 (2005): 80–90.
8. This change of venue is often attributed to Amsterdam's cosmopolitan character, which would have appealed greatly to an ambitious painter such as Metsu. But it could have been motivated equally by economic circumstances, if one bears in mind the dwindling market in Leiden, which was expressed in the rapid decrease in the number of painters after 1652. Metsu was not the only one to leave the city, although he was among the first to do so. Piet Bakker, "Crisis? Welke crisis? Kanttekeningen bij het economisch verval van de schilderkunst in Leiden na 1660," *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 27 (2011): 232–69.

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