



Godfrey Kneller

(Lübeck 1646 – 1723 London)

How to cite

Bakker, Piet. “Godfrey Kneller” (2017). In *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, 4th ed. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Elizabeth Nogrady with Caroline Van Cauwenberge. New York, 2023–. <https://theleidencollection.com/artists/godfrey-kneller/> (accessed April 25, 2026).

A PDF of every version of this biography is available in this Online Catalogue's Archive, and the Archive is managed by a permanent URL. New versions are added only when a substantive change to the narrative occurs.



Godfrey Kneller, né Gottfried Kniller, was born in Germany and educated in the Netherlands and Italy; he is regarded, however, primarily as an English painter. In 1676, Kneller moved to England, where he changed his name, and by the turn of the eighteenth century had become one of the most influential English portraitists. English and foreign nobility flocked to his London workshop. His talent was held in high esteem by English kings, and after the death of Sir Peter Lely (1618–80) Kneller became Principal Painter to the Crown, a position he held virtually uninterrupted for years.^[1] Kneller received a knighthood from William III (1650–1702) in 1692, and his last patron, George I (1660–1727), made him a baronet in 1715, the highest title ever granted to a painter at the time. The artist also enjoyed a substantial reputation beyond the British Isles and was made a knight of the Holy Roman Empire by Emperor Leopold I (1640–1705). The lovely country house Kneller built at Whitton, Middlesex, in 1709 also reflects his social standing. It is therefore no surprise that when he died in 1723 he was buried in grand style at Twickenham.

Such a dazzling career attracted much comment, and already in his own day his life and work were written about in England, as well as in the Netherlands where Arnold Houbraken described Kneller's life in his *Schouburgh*.^[2] Although the numerous publications constitute a considerable historiography, they concentrate almost entirely on the years he spent in England, even Houbraken's account, with little attention paid to Kneller's formative years.^[3]

Kneller was the third son of Zacharias Kniller (1611–75) and Lucia Beuten (d. 1689). Godfrey's older brother, Jan Zacharias (1642–1702), also became a painter, and his younger brother, Andreas (1649–1724), was a composer and organist. According to his English biographer, Godfrey was "well descended."^[4] His grandfather was "surveyor-general of the mines and inspector of count Mansfeldt's revenues."^[5] Godfrey's father had studied at Leipzig University and spent several years at the Swedish court, where he enjoyed the favor of Queen Maria Eleonora (1599–1655), widow of King Gustav II Adolf (1594–1632). After the queen's death in 1655, Zacharias returned to Lübeck where, "having studied architecture and the mathematics," he was appointed to the office of "chief-surveyor."^[6]

The description of Kneller's father found in English sources differs in a number of important respects from an early twentieth-century German account of Godfrey's life, where it is noted that Zacharias Kniller was a portrait painter.^[7] On 24 May 1650, the Lübeck city authorities granted him permission, as a free master, to paint "Contrafaite und andere perspektivische Stücke" (likenesses and other perspectival work).^[8] Yet, judging by the work that has survived, he was already a highly popular portraitist among the local elite in the 1640s.^[9] In the German biography, after the death of Maria Eleonora, Zacharias was appointed Werkmeister of Saint Catherine's Church rather than city architect in Lübeck.^[10] There, in 1676, a year after he died, his sons Jan Zacharias and Godfrey personally painted an epitaph to their father. It is difficult to establish which version of Zacharias's life is accurate because most of the dates are missing; it is possible that both are correct.^[11] It is striking, however, that none of the English accounts mention that Godfrey's father was a painter, even though the author of the most detailed biography, Buckeridge, claims to have been informed by Kneller personally. Therefore, it is possible that Kneller somewhat embellished the history of his family after being knighted in 1692.

Zacharias intended for Godfrey to have a military, not an artistic, career. To this end he sent him, "after he was sufficiently instructed in the Latin tongue,"^[12] to the Dutch Republic to study mathematics and fortification. It is not known exactly when Kneller left for Leiden, but it was certainly not before 1662, the date of his earliest known drawing, a portrait of Heinrich IV the Pious (1473–1541), Duke of Saxony.^[13] We can only guess at Zacharias's reason for sending Godfrey to a Dutch university instead of a German one, although he was not the only person from Lübeck to move to



Leiden at that time—between 1660 and 1663, ten fellow townsmen enrolled as students there.^[14]

When it became apparent that Godfrey was drawn more to painting than to the subjects he was studying, his parents sent him to Amsterdam, where, according to Smith, “he made a beginning by the famous Rembrandt’s direction.”^[15] This comment corresponds with what Buckeridge wrote, according to whom Kneller was “placed for his better instruction under the care of Rembrandt.”^[16] Vertue, however, argues that Kneller “studied under Ferdinand Bol (1616–80) and had some instruction from Rembrandt.”^[17] Both of these names are encountered in Houbraken, although in the reverse order. According to him, “he turned ... for his education first to Rembrandt, and then to Ferdinand Bol.”^[18]

Presuming that Kneller arrived in Leiden in late 1662 or early 1663, his move to Amsterdam would have taken place soon thereafter, probably in 1663. At first glance, an apprenticeship with Rembrandt starting in 1663 is at odds with the accepted view that the Dordrecht painter Arent de Gelder (1645–1727) was Rembrandt’s last pupil, and that De Gelder left the master’s workshop around this time.^[19] The real question, however, is whether Kneller studied under Rembrandt at all; comments such as “made a beginning” or “had some instruction” do not really imply years of instruction, although it is possible he had a few lessons from the master.^[20] The literature on Rembrandt also expresses some skepticism about an apprenticeship with “the most famous Painter at that time in Holland,”^[21] because nothing in Kneller’s early work indicates his influence.^[22] On the other hand, Ferdinand Bol’s influence is manifest. Accordingly, Kneller’s training in Amsterdam probably took place largely in the workshop of Bol.^[23]

An apprenticeship with Bol also corresponds with other known facts. Bol was approached by Leiden’s town council on 10 August 1663 to paint a chimneypiece for the burgomasters’ chamber, after which date he regularly visited Leiden.^[24] Kneller and Bol may well have met there. How long Kneller would have studied under Bol is not known, but he appears to have been active as an independent painter by 1666, when he signed and dated a portrait of the Archbishop-Elector of Mainz, Johann Philipp von Schönborn (1605–73).^[25] That a young painter should obtain such a prestigious commission so soon after completing his apprenticeship is nothing short of remarkable, and indeed, the identity of the sitter and the authenticity of Kneller’s signature are disputed.^[26] Perhaps the portrait should be regarded as an early example of his extraordinary talent for this genre, but it should be noted that securely attributed works of the 1660s are consistently of lesser quality. They are painted entirely in the style of Bol and can be distinguished from the master’s own work only with great difficulty. Kneller also borrowed themes, mainly depictions of scholars in a room, from his teacher, even though Bol had painted his scholars in the early 1650s.^[27]

Wishing to develop his skills as a painter, Kneller traveled to Rome in 1672,^[28] where according to Buckeridge, he practiced “under the favourable influence of Carlo Marat [*sic*] and the Chevalier Bernini.”^[29] According to Smith, he spent much time in the Vatican, where he “Copyed very much after Raphael.”^[30] Houbraken, too, mentions the “overheerlyke Konst” (exquisite art) of Carlo Maratta (1625–1713), the most important painter in Rome in the 1670s.^[31] This visit—the only reminder of which is a 1672 dated drawing—was followed by a stay in Venice where he met the Dutch painter Robert Duval (1649–1732).

Upon learning that his father was dying, Kneller returned to Lübeck. On the way he stopped in Nuremberg, where he met Joachim von Sandrart (1606–88). Impressed by Kneller’s work, Sandrart included him in his *Teutsche Academie* a few years later.^[32] Kneller cannot have stayed long in Lübeck, because he was in Hamburg in 1676. Shortly after his arrival, he painted portraits of the family of the art lover Jacob de le Boë, the brother of the Leiden scholar and collector Franciscus de le Boë Sylvius (1614–72). In 1672 Jacob had inherited half of his brother’s famous painting collection, which included



work by Gerrit Dou (1613–75) and Frans van Mieris (1635–81).^[33] In Hamburg, Kneller associated a great deal with English merchants. He then traveled with one of them to England, thereby, according to Smith, indulging his desire “to see Sir Antony Van Dyck’s Works, being most ambitious of imitating that great Master.”^[34] Kneller clearly succeeded in this aim, becoming the most eminent and successful English painter of the first quarter of the eighteenth century.

- Piet Bakker, 2017

Endnotes

1. Kneller did not hold this post during the short reign of the Catholic King James II (1633–1701) of England (James VII of Scotland) between 1685 and 1688, although he did remain one of the most important painters at the English court.
2. Marshall Smith, *The Art of Painting* (London, 1693), 23–25; Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 3: 233–38; Bainbrigg Buckeridge, “An Essay Towards an English School of Painting,” in *The Art of Painting with the Lives and Characters of above 300 of the Most Eminent Modern Painters*, ed. Roger de Piles (London, 1704; 3rd ed., 1754; reprint, 1969), 393; Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England; With some Account of the principal Artists; And incidental notes on other arts; Collected by the late Mr. George Vertue* (London, 1763), 3: 196–214.
3. J. Douglas Stewart, *Sir Godfrey Kneller and the English Baroque Portrait* (Oxford, 1983), adds almost nothing to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century biographies of Kneller, though Stewart does attempt to introduce a chronological order. He relies entirely on the scanty details provided by Kneller’s first English biographers—Marshall Smith, George Vertue, and Bainbrigg Buckeridge—for its description of the artist’s life during this period. The latter claimed to have received his information directly “from Sir Godfrey Kneller’s own mouth;” Bainbrigg Buckeridge, “An Essay Towards an English School of Painting,” in *The Art of Painting with the Lives and Characters of above 300 of the Most Eminent Modern Painters*, ed. Roger de Piles (London, 1704; 3rd ed., 1754; reprint, 1969), 393.
4. Marshall Smith, *The Art of Painting* (London, 1693), 23.
5. Bainbrigg Buckeridge, “An Essay Towards an English School of Painting,” in *The Art of Painting with the Lives and Characters of above 300 of the Most Eminent Modern Painters*, ed. Roger de Piles (London, 1704; 3rd ed., 1754; reprint, 1969), 393; Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England; With some Account of the principal Artists; And incidental notes on other arts; Collected by the late Mr. George Vertue* (London, 1763), 3: 201.
6. Bainbrigg Buckeridge, “An Essay Towards an English School of Painting,” in *The Art of Painting with the Lives and Characters of above 300 of the Most Eminent Modern Painters*, ed. Roger de Piles (London, 1704; 3rd ed., 1754; reprint, 1969), 393.
7. J. Douglas Stewart, *Sir Godfrey Kneller and the English Baroque Portrait* (Oxford, 1983), also makes no mention of Kneller as a portrait painter. For the biography of Zacharias Kniller, see Wolfgang Michael, “Gottfried Kneller,” in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (Leipzig, 1906), 51: 814–20. Hans Vollmer, *Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler* (Leipzig, 1927), 20: 600.
8. Wolfgang Michael, “Gottfried Kneller,” in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (Leipzig, 1906), 51: 814–20. Hans Vollmer, *Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler* (Leipzig, 1927), 20: 600.
9. A number of his works have been preserved in Lübeck, including a full-length portrait of the Lübeck



city councilor Jürgen Pavels (1568–1645) from 1645, and a portrait of the mayor of Lübeck, Anton Köhler (1585–1657), from 1657.

10. The German word *Werkmeister* probably corresponds most closely with the English nouns sexton or verger. According to Houbraken, Kneller's father was a verger at the church. Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 3: 233.
11. Queen Maria Eleonora died in 1655 and he didn't become *Werkmeister* until 1659. He might have worked as city architect in the meantime. Other "perspectival pieces" mentioned in the contract with the city also point to the work of an architect.
12. Bainbrigg Buckeridge, "An Essay Towards an English School of Painting," in *The Art of Painting with the Lives and Characters of above 300 of the Most Eminent Modern Painters*, ed. Roger de Piles (London, 1704; 3rd ed., 1754; reprint, 1969), 394.
13. The drawing is a copy of a woodcut in Nicolaus Reusner's *Icones sive Imagines Impp. Regum., Principum, Electorum, et Ducum Saxoniae* of 1597, which might have been in the book collection of Kneller's grandfather. J. Douglas Stewart, *Sir Godfrey Kneller and the English Baroque Portrait* (Oxford, 1983), 2.
14. See the enrollments in the *Album Studiosorum* of Leiden University for the years 1660 to 1663. Kneller is not registered and, considering his young age, doubts about whether he actually studied there would not be misplaced. He might have lived in Leiden in preparation of studying at the university. It is also possible that, contrary to what Buckeridge writes, Kneller attended the senior classes of the Latin School and, "after he was sufficiently instructed in the Latin tongue," did not go on to enroll at the university, but instead pursued other interests.
15. Marshall Smith, *The Art of Painting* (London, 1693), 23.
16. Bainbrigg Buckeridge, "An Essay Towards an English School of Painting," in *The Art of Painting with the Lives and Characters of above 300 of the Most Eminent Modern Painters*, ed. Roger de Piles (London, 1704; 3rd ed., 1754; reprint, 1969), 394.
17. Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England; With some Account of the principal Artists; And incidental notes on other arts; Collected by the late Mr. George Vertue* (London, 1763), 3: 201.
18. "Begaf hy zig ... tot onderwijzinge eerst van Rembrant, daar na van Ferdinand Bol." Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 3: 233. Houbraken took his time to write Kneller's biography. He states that he inquired among "French Writers" (De Piles, perhaps), corresponded with English friends and, on a visit to England in 1713, questioned people who knew Kneller.
19. See the biography of Arent de Gelder in this catalogue.
20. Similarly, the Rotterdam portrait painter Michiel van Musscher (1645–1705), in 1665, received seven lessons from Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667) in Amsterdam; see the biography of Michiel van Musscher in this catalogue. Kneller, after all, had a portrait painter as a father and would have already learned the



rudiments of this craft in Lübeck. In view of his background and contrary to the impression given by the English biographers, he cannot have been entirely inexperienced when he arrived in Amsterdam. His drawings support the view that he had received some prior training. According to Houbraken, who made no mention of Kneller's time in Leiden, Kneller went to Amsterdam "na dat hy zig eenigen tyd [in de Schilderkonst] geoeffent had" (after having practiced as a painter for some time), without, however, any other references. Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 3: 233.

21. Bainbrigg Buckeridge, "An Essay Towards an English School of Painting," in *The Art of Painting with the Lives and Characters of above 300 of the Most Eminent Modern Painters*, ed. Roger de Piles (London, 1704; 3rd ed., 1754; reprint, 1969), 394.
22. See, for example, Albert Blankert, "Rembrandt's Pupils and Followers in the Seventeenth Century," in *The Impact of a Genius. Rembrandt, His Pupils and Followers in the Seventeenth Century: Paintings from Museums and Private Classes*, ed. Albert Blankert et al. (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Waterman Gallery; Groningen, Groninger Museum) (Amsterdam, 1983), 29–30, does not mention Kneller; Ben Broos, "Fame Shared Is Fame Doubled," in *The Impact of A Genius. Rembrandt, His Pupils and Followers in the Seventeenth Century: Paintings from Museums and Private Classes*, ed. Albert Blankert et al. (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Waterman Gallery; Groningen, Groninger Museum) (Amsterdam, 1983), 47–48, doubts whether Kneller was a pupil of Rembrandt. Liedtke, however, includes him in a list of pupils, placing him chronologically before Arent de Gelder, Rembrandt's last pupil, whose pupilage is dated around 1665. Walter Liedtke, "Rembrandt's 'Workshop' Revisited," *Oud Holland* 117, nos. 1–2 (2004): 48–73, esp. 68.
23. Albert Blankert, *Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680), Rembrandt's Pupil* (Doornspijk, 1982), 22.
24. For the commission, see M. Hoogduin-Berkhout, "'Op de geluckige regeeringe van Leiden': Geschilderde voorstellingen in het Leidse stadhuis 1575–1700," *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 22 (2006): 87–92; Albert Blankert, *Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680), Rembrandt's Pupil* (Doornspijk, 1982), 75.
25. *Portrait of Johann Philipp von Schönborn (1605–73)*, 1666 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).
26. For the discussion concerning the authenticity of the signature and date, see J. Douglas Stewart, *Sir Godfrey Kneller and the English Baroque Portrait* (Oxford, 1983), 2–4, esp. note 8.
27. Albert Blankert, *Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680), Rembrandt's Pupil* (Doornspijk, 1982), 22.
28. Whether he departed for Rome from Amsterdam or Lübeck is not known. Two portraits of scholars dated 1668 in the St. Annen Museum in Lübeck may indicate that he started the journey in his hometown, although the provenance of these two works could not be traced.
29. Bainbrigg Buckeridge, "An Essay Towards an English School of Painting," in *The Art of Painting with the Lives and Characters of above 300 of the Most Eminent Modern Painters*, ed. Roger de Piles (London, 1704; 3rd ed., 1754; reprint, 1969), 394.
30. Marshall Smith, *The Art of Painting* (London, 1693), 23.
31. Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam,

- 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 3: 234.
32. Joachim von Sandrart, *Joachim von Sandrarts Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste von 1675: Lebem der berühmten Maler, Bildhauer und Baumeister*, ed. Arthur R. Peltzer (Nuremberg, 1675–79; reprint, Munich, 1925), 350–51.
33. Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 3: 234 Joachim von Sandrart, *Joachim von Sandrarts Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste von 1675: Lebem der berühmten Maler, Bildhauer und Baumeister*, ed. Arthur R. Peltzer (Nuremberg, 1675–79; reprint, Munich, 1925), 350–51.
34. Marshall Smith, *The Art of Painting* (London, 1693), 24.

Literature

- Smith, Marshall. *The Art of Painting*. London, 1693, 23–25.
- Buckeridge, Bainbrigg. “An Essay Towards an English School of Painting.” In *The Art of Painting with the Lives and Characters of above 300 of the Most Eminent Modern Painters*. Edited by Roger de Plies, 393. London, 1704; 3rd edition, 1754; reprinted, 1969.
- Houbraken, Arnold. *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*. Amsterdam, 1718–21; revised edition published in The Hague, 1753; reprinted in Amsterdam, 1980, 3: 233–38.
- Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England; With some Account of the principal Artists; And incidental notes on other arts; Collected by the late Mr. George Vertue*. London, 1763, 3: 196–214.
- Von Sandrart, Joachim *Joachim von Sandrarts Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste von 1675: Lebem der berühmten Maler, Bildhauer und Baumeister*, Edited by Arthur R. Peltzer. Nuremberg. 1675–79, reprinted in Munich, 1925, 350–51.
- Blankert, Albert. *Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680), Rembrandt’s Pupil*. Doornspijk, 1982, 22.
- Stewart, J. Douglas. *Sir Godfrey Kneller and the English Baroque Portrait*. Oxford, 1983.
- Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*. Vol. 3, *B. Keil – J. Ovens*. Landau, 1983, 1480–515.
- Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*. Vol. 5, *Nachträge, Ortsregister, Ikonographisches Register, Bibliographie*. Landau, 1994, 3105–6, 3246–50
- Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*. Vol. 6, *Nachträge 2, Ortsregister, Ikonographisches Register, Bibliographie, Künstlerverzeichnis*. Landau, 1994, 3721, 3934–37.
- Kirchner, T. et al., eds. *Joachim von Sandrart: Teutsche Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste, Nuremberg 1675–1680*. Wolfenbüttel, 2008–2012, 3: 78–79 [<http://ta.sandrart.net/en/text/1094>] (accessed December 5, 2022).
- Horn, Hendrik J. and Rieke van Leeuwen. *Houbraken Translated: Arnold Houbraken’s Great Theatre of*



the Netherlandish Painters and Paintresses. The Hague, 2021, 3: 233–38
[<https://houbraken-translated.rkdstudies.nl/3-180-239/page-230-239/>] (accessed October 31, 2022).