



Fisherman and His Wife in an Interior

Quiring van Brekelenkam
(Zwammerdam? 1622 – ca. 1669 Leiden)

1657

oil on panel

47 x 60.3 cm

signed and dated in brown paint along lower edge,
right of center: “Q. Brekelenkam__ .1657”

QB-100



How to cite

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Illuminated by light streaming from an open window into a simple room with an earthenware floor, a fisherman descales a pail full of herring under the watchful eyes of his wife who stands, hands on hips, before the couple's box bed. To their right sits a simple meal of bread, cheese, and a beverage in an earthenware pitcher. A cooking pot hangs in the hearth at the far right of this cozy interior. When Quiringh van Brekelenkam painted this work in 1657, he was already an established artist, having joined the Guild of Saint Luke in 1648.^[1] Although he frequently depicted artisans such as tailors and spinners in their workshops, in this instance he represented a domestic scene of a fisherman cleaning his catch while his wife waits patiently for him to finish his task.

Van Brekelenkam's paintings are stylistically less refined than those of his teacher Gerrit Dou (1613–75), which is more appropriate considering the social status of his subjects. As an anonymous eighteenth-century author noted, "his brushwork and treatment were loose and fluent, true to life, and of a benign nature, being a disciple of Dou, whom he followed in a vague way."^[2] Van Brekelenkam painted for a less affluent art market than his master, with the hope that his domestic subject matter would appeal to the burgeoning middle class in Leiden. Unfortunately, it seems that his paintings did not command very high prices, which may have been one cause for his persistent financial problems.

In this scene, Van Brekelenkam features the fisherman's wife as the primary caretaker and probably the dominant personality of the home.^[3] Her character reflects a well-known passage from the book of Proverbs: "the wife of noble character . . . selects wool and flax and works with eager hand. She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar. She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls" (Prov. 31:13–15). As she waits for her husband to prepare the fish, it is evident that she has prepared the simple meal of bread and cheese and that her house is in clean condition and good order. It is unclear whether all the fish is meant for their own consumption. The wife may also have a role in selling the fish at market. Van Brekelenkam suggests this role through her assertive stance as she gazes at her husband with hands on her hips. Ten years later, Van Brekelenkam depicted a fishmonger at market in a similar fashion (fig 1). Gabriel Metsu (1629–67) also used this body language in the confrontational exchange between two female merchants in his painting *The Vegetable Market in Amsterdam*, which he executed in the early 1660s (fig 2).

Although Van Brekelenkam painted for a largely middle-class market in the 1650s, he sought to expand his clientele in the 1660s by painting upper-class scenes in a more refined style, similar to those being painted by Dou, Metsu, and Frans van Mieris (1635–81). For example, *Sentimental Conversation* of the early 1660s (fig 3) displays Van Brekelenkam's ability to depict fine fabrics in both the gentleman's

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Quiringh van Brekelenkam, *The Fishwife*, 1666 (?), oil on panel, 50 x 39.7 cm, Museum der Bildenden Künste, Leipzig, inv. 992



Fig 2. Gabriel Metsu, *The Vegetable Market in Amsterdam* (detail), ca. 1661–62, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. 1460, photo: Franx Raux, © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY



Fig 3. Quiringh van Brekelenkam, *Sentimental Conversation*, early 1660s, oil on panel, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931, 32.100.19, www.metmuseum.org



jerkin and the fur-trimmed jacket of his elegant companion. Despite their thematic and stylistic differences, *Sentimental Conversation* and *Fisherman and His Wife in an Interior* exhibit the same sensitivity to rendering the dynamic relationships between figures and to capturing light effects in interior settings.

- Jennifer E. Henel, 2017



Endnotes

1. See Van Brekelenkam's biography in this catalogue; and Elizabeth Alice Honig, "Brekelenkam, Quiringh van," *Grove Art Online: Oxford Art Online*, accessed 5 April 2014.
2. As translated by Angelika Lassius, *Quiringh van Brekelenkam* (Doornspijk, 1992), 10–11, and cited in footnote 13, *Adversaria Liedsche Schilders* (18th-century notes, anonymous author), Gemeentearchief, Leiden.
3. He depicted the wife of a fisherman in much the same pose in another painting dated ten years later. See Quiringh van Brekelenkam, *Kitchen Interior with Two Figures*, 1667, oil on panel, Musée J.-P. Pescatore, Luxembourg, inv. 52.

Provenance

- Willem Smits et al. (sale, The Hague, 18 May 1785, lot 79 [J. D. Nijman]).
- Frederik Willem Greebe (sale, Amsterdam, 8 December 1788, no. 23).
- Gerrit Muller (sale, Amsterdam, 2 April 1827, no. 11).
- Private collection, Philadelphia, until 1930, [W. E. Duits Ltd., London, 1930].
- Private collection, Belgium, 1930–95 [Johnny van Haefen, London (sale, Maastricht, 1995)].
- Private collection, Boston [Salomon Lilian, Amsterdam, by 2005].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2005.

Exhibition History

- Ithaca, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, "An Eye For Detail: Dutch Painting From The Leiden Collection," September 2014–May 2015 [lent by the present owner].

References

- Havard, Henry. "Quiringh Brekelenkam." In *L'Art et Les Artistes Hollandais*. 4 vols. Paris, 1881, 4: 118, as 'Le Vieux Cuisinier.'
- Lassius, Angelika, *Quiringh van Brekelenkam*. Doornspijk, 1992, 102–3, no. 79.

- Berry Drago, Elisabeth. *Painted Alchemists: Early Modern Artistry and Experiment in the Work of Thomas Wijck*. Amsterdam Studies in the Dutch Golden Age. Amsterdam, 2019, 119–20, fig. 3.10.
- Michalski, Jan and Aleksandra Sjorkska-Krystek, eds. *Human Warmth. The Art of Quiringh Gerritsz. Van Brekelenkam (1622–1669)*. Exh. cat. Krakow, Archiwum Galerii Zderzak. Krakow, 2024, 32.

Technical Summary

The support is a rectangular-shaped composite panel comprised of two horizontally grained oak planks.^[1] The horizontal panel joint, about 5 cm above the lower edge, passes through the toe of the male figure's shoe. The panel has no bevels and has been thinned and cradled. A previously repaired horizontal split, along the upper third of the composition, runs through the female figure's shoulders. A small triangular wood insert has been applied to the lower left corner and a small notch has been cut in the lower right corner.^[2] A numerical chalk inscription appears on the reverse, but there are no wax seals, stencils, import stamps, labels or panel maker's marks.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied, followed by paint applied in broad, fluid brushstrokes with slightly blurred faces and strongly modeled folds in the clothing.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. The images and X-radiograph reveal a few minor compositional changes. From left to right: a horizontally oriented rectangular form originally depicted in the lower left corner is now obscured by the broom bristles; the leaded window appears to have originally been shaped like a parallelogram, with parallel vertical sides (rather than the trapezoid seen now); the round plate on the floor with the fish in the foreground was originally oval shaped; and the woman's proper left arm from shoulder to wrist was shifted to the left during the paint stage.

The painting is signed and dated in brown paint along lower edge, right of center: "Q. Brekelenkam__ .1657."

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition, although a repaired horizontal split and the small triangular wood insert along the lower left edge indicate previous panelwork. The panel remains in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on visual examination only.
2. The wood insert is ca. 0.6 cm H x 3.2 cm W.