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Lady Playing a Lute in an Interior

Eglon van der Neer
(Amsterdam 1634/36 – 1703 Düsseldorf)

1675
oil on panel
39.4 x 33.4 cm
signed and dated, indistinctly, in light paint along upper right: “van *** Neer 16[7?]5”
EN-100

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Eglon van der Neer's musician presents an elegant figure as she sits before stately architecture touched with gilt and partly masked by a swag of heavy curtain. She rests her elbow on a velvet-draped table crammed with costly objects, including a book of tablature, a flute, a rumpled satin cloth, a silver ewer, a marble (?) statue of a putto, and an open jewel casket. The woman herself is no less opulently packaged: she wears a fur-trimmed crimson house jacket over a shimmering white satin skirt and a bodice stiff with gold brocade. Emerging from the garments like Venus rising from the surf, the iridescent flesh of her plump arms and inviting décolletage is accentuated by the delicate frill of a white chemise. The young musician's downcast gaze as she quietly listens to the sounds of her instrument help create the painting's reflective mood and engaging character.

The woman plays what appears to be a two-headed "French" lute. An identical instrument appears in other of Van der Neer's paintings of female musicians from the 1670s.[1] Both as a solo instrument and in ensemble playing, the lute was highly regarded among elite players for its versatility and diverse repertoire; moreover, the warm tone produced by the gut strings was deemed ideal for vocal accompaniment. Although the lute's basic structure remained the same, it was modified continually throughout the seventeenth century, at least partly in response to stylistic changes in the music itself.[2] Much baroque music featured the *basso continuo*, in which the bass line provided the melody around which other instruments or voices improvised harmonies. Accordingly, the lower register of the lute was extended by modifying or adapting the instrument to accommodate additional (unstopped) bass strings. The archlute, chitarrone, theorbo, and two-headed "French" lute were among the more popular variants produced in this way. As the modifications were often quite individual, the differences between the instruments, and the terminology used to describe them, are rather vague: indeed, when considering the design of the theorbo, the seventeenth-century German composer and music theorist Michael Praetorius remarked, "Since constant changes take place in these various matters, nothing very definite may be stated about them here."[3] The two-headed lute is thought to have been invented by the French lutenist Jacques Gaultier (active 1617–52). An engraved portrait by Jan Lievens (1607–74) shows Gaultier holding an instrument similar to that depicted in Van der Neer's painting **(fig 1)**.[4]

Taking full advantage of his meticulous technique, Van der Neer has carefully calculated every aspect of the painting to entice the senses of touch, sight and sound, and in so doing, to emphasize the inherent sensuality of the image itself. The deliberate juxtaposition of so many luxurious surface textures prompts admiration of the artist's skill, and the accuracy of the illusion allows the viewer to dwell on the pleasurable aesthetic and sensorial qualities of the actual objects.[5] Nowhere is this

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Jan Lievens, *Portrait of Jacques Gaultier*, 1632–35, etching, engraving, and drypoint, 268 x 213 mm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Washington Irving Jenkins, inv. M26837



Fig 2. Eglon van der Neer, *A Lady Tuning a Theorbo*, 1678, oil on panel, 42.5 x 36.7 cm, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, inv. 204, bpk, Berlin / Alte Pinakothek / Art Resource, NY

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more seductively presented than in Van der Neer's rendering of the woman's soft flesh: in visually "touching" her flesh (as well as the other objects in the painting), we are led to consider the touch of *her* fingers upon the strings of the lute. We imagine the sweet sounds produced by her playing, which prompts us to summon pleasant recollections of our own musical experiences. The reverse is also true, of course: seeing her fingers dance across the lute strings prompts us to imagine our own fingers testing surfaces and textures so meticulously and sensually presented.

In light of the unabashedly sensual pose of Van der Neer's model—positioned frontally, her knees spread wide, her jacket opened, and her bodice artfully loosened—it is impossible not to connect with music's more erotic associations. Musical motifs in paintings routinely connoted harmony in both its familial and amorous aspects, and Dutch paintings of love and courtship involved music more often than not. More specifically, a lute, or any of the instrument's variant forms, could be a powerfully erotic symbol and often figured as a metaphor for a woman's genitalia.[6] Given the pervasive sensuality of the painting, it seems likely that Van der Neer had such erotic allusions in mind, albeit cloaked in an aura of elegance and refinement.

Like many of his colleagues, Van der Neer frequently refined the depiction of a particular theme in a series of closely related paintings executed over a short span of time. In the 1670s, for example, he produced several paintings of female lute players seated in sumptuous interiors: in addition to the present work, there are examples in a private collection in Hamburg; in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Karlsruhe (dated 1677); in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin; and in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich (**fig 2**).[7] The last, dated 1678, repeats the present composition with just a few variations: the woman tunes the lute rather than playing it, and the music book has been placed at shoulder height rather than by her elbow. This latter modification enabled Van der Neer to give a more elegant turn to the musician's head. The architectural background in the Munich painting, while still classical in style, has been modified to suggest a larger, lighter hall rather than a dark and intimate chamber. The woman's costume and hairstyle have also been updated: the fur-trimmed house jacket ubiquitous in Dutch genre scenes of the 1650s, 1660s, and early 1670s has been discarded, revealing a sumptuous and vaguely historicizing mélange of silky garments more in keeping with fashions of the late 1670s. In both paintings, the emphasis on the classical architecture, the overt luxury of the costumes and accessories, and above all the cool perfection of Van der Neer's technique reflect the taste for "French" elegance and refinement that spread throughout the Netherlands during the last quarter of the seventeenth century.

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- Marjorie E. Wieseman, 2017

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Endnotes

1. Eddy Schavemaker, *Eglon van der Neer (1635/36–1703): His Life and His Work* (Doornspijk, 2010), nos. 46, 57, 73.
2. On the complicated development of lute variants in the Renaissance and baroque periods, see Robert Spencer, "Chitarrone, Theorbo, and Archlute," *Early Music* 4 (October 1976): 408–22; and on their representation in the visual arts, Mariagrazia Carlone, "Lutes, Archlutes, Theorboes in Iconography," *Music in Art* 30, nos. 1–2 (2005): 88–96.
3. Michael Praetorius, *Syntagma Musicum II: De Organographia* (Wolfenbüttel, 1619; English translation by David Z. Crookes, Oxford, 1991), 52. The two-headed lute is commonly described as a theorbo; however, on the theorbo the bass strings are carried by a more extended neck.
4. The print shows the instrument in reverse. For a recent discussion of the image, see Stephanie Dickey, in Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., ed., *Jan Lievens: A Dutch Master Rediscovered* (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Milwaukee, Milwaukee Art Museum; Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis) (New Haven, 2008), 207.
5. See, among other studies: Eric Jan Sluijter, "'Een stuck waerin een jufr: Voor de spiegel van Gerrit Douw,'" *Antiek* 23 (1988): 150–61.
6. Among the many publications on musical symbolism in seventeenth-century Dutch painting, see Roy Sonnema, "Representations of Music in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1990); and Edwin Buijsen, Louis Peter Grijp, et al., *The Hoogsteder Exhibition of Music and Painting in the Golden Age* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Hoogsteder & Hoogsteder; Antwerp, Hessenhuis Museum) (The Hague, 1994). Specifically on the lute as an erotic symbol, see Eddy de Jongh, "Realisme en schiknrealisme in de Hollandse schilderkunst van de zeventiende eeuw," in *Rembrandt en zijn tijd* (Exh. cat. Brussels, Musée des Beaux Arts de Belgique) (Brussels, 1971), 178.
7. Eddy Schavemaker, *Eglon van der Neer (1635/36–1703): His Life and His Work* (Doornspijk, 2010), nos. 57, 73, 46, and 83, respectively; for additional examples see nos. 38, 39, and 61. Besides inventing new iterations of a theme, Van der Neer also made adjustments to compositions as he worked: for example, he changed the position of the musician's head in *A Woman Playing the Lute* (Berlin); see Eddy Schavemaker, in Jeroen Giltaij et al., *Senses and Sins: Dutch Painters of Daily Life in the Seventeenth Century* (Exh. cat. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen; Frankfurt, Städelsches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie) (Hatje Cantz, 2004), 270.

Provenance

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- Count Eduard Aleksander Raczyński (1847–1926), Ragolin, Pozńan, Poland, by 1912.
- (Possibly sale, Christie's, London, 21 July 1933, no. 143 [to Lacy for 7 gns.]).
- [Xaver Scheidwimmer, Munich, 1959].
- Baroness Aida Nora von dem Bussche-Streithorst (her sale, Christie's, New York, 6 April 2006, no. 46); [Johnny van Haeften Ltd., London, 2006].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2006.

Exhibition History

- Rome, Scuderie del Quirinale, "Vermeer: Il secolo d'oro dell'arte olandese," 27 September 2012–20 January 2013, no. 35 [lent by the present owner].
- Dallas, Dallas Museum of Art, "Vermeer Suite: Music in 17th-Century Dutch Painting," 17 January 2016–21 August 2016 [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].
- Shanghai, Long Museum, West Bund, "Rembrandt, Vermeer and Hals in the Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 23 September 2017–25 February 2018 [lent by the present owner].
- Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, "The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection," 28 March 2018–22 July 2018 [lent by the present owner].
- St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, "The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection," 5 September 2018–13 January 2019 [lent by the present owner].
- Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi, "Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age. Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre," 14 February–18 May 2019 [lent by the present owner].
- Amsterdam, H'ART Museum, "From Rembrandt to Vermeer: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 9 April–24 August 2025 [lent by the present owner].
- West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art, "Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 25 October 2025–29 March 2026 [lent by the present owner].

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[Exhibition catalogue also published in French and Arabic.]

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Versions
Versions and Copies

- Eglon van der Neer, *Lady Tuning a Lute*, 1678, oil on panel, 42.5 x 36.7 cm, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, inv. 204.

Technical Summary

The support, a rectangular-shaped composite panel comprising two planks of vertically grained oak, has a horizontal panel join near the upper edge and a vertical wood shim along the left edge.[1] The panel is unthinned and uncradled, and has bevels on all four sides. A light-colored, radio-opaque priming has been applied to the reverse, and a red wax seal and an ink inscription have been applied over the priming. Two horizontal battens were removed sometime after the priming was applied, and an additional light-colored priming was applied locally to the wood that was exposed when the battens were removed and to the narrow horizontal plank along the upper edge. Machine tool marks visible beneath the light-colored coating along the right edge appear to continue across the panel reverse. There is a red wax collection seal and four handwritten inscriptions, but no import stamps, stencils, labels or panel maker's marks are visible.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied. The paint has been thinly and smoothly applied with areas of low brushmarking and transparent glazing but no use of impasto, although the contours of the forms are slightly raised.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. Minor compositional changes are visible. The thumb of the figure's proper right hand has been shifted closer to the index finger; the drapery originally hung along the background to the figure's right and was tied back behind

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her proper left shoulder; the sleeve along the figure's proper left shoulder and forearm has been shifted; and an ornamental element along the lower end of the pilaster to the right of the figure has been painted out in the final composition although a similar element is present further up the pilaster.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2006. It is in excellent condition, with minimal abrasion along the figure's proper left shoulder and along the lower edge of her dress, and is in an excellent state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on visual examination only.

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