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Scholar Interrupted at His Writing

Gerrit Dou
(Leiden 1613 – 1675 Leiden)

ca. 1635
oil on oval panel
24.5 x 20 cm
signed, on a piece of paper protruding from the open book: “GDou” (GD in ligature)
GD-102

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How to cite

Surh, Dominique. “Scholar Interrupted at His Writing” (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/artwork/a-scholar-interrupted-at-his-writing/ (accessed November 21, 2026).

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An elderly scholar glances up from his writing to gaze directly at the viewer. With pen paused on the paper before him, he sits at his desk where an open book leans against a globe and a pen case lies obliquely along the table edge. Among Gerrit Dou's numerous paintings of a scholar in his study, none focuses so directly on a specific moment in time as does this compelling masterpiece, one of the most finely accomplished works in the artist's early mature style. The old man's alert pose and fleeting expression create the sense of an arrested moment, whereas Dou's careful rendering of the scholar's aging features, including his thinning hair and finely wrinkled skin, reveals a keen awareness of time's inevitable passing. The artist reiterates this emphasis by depicting an hourglass with fine sand trickling through its narrow neck.

Dou concentrates our attention on the scholar's expression through a delicate play of light and shadow on his face. Light flooding in from the left highlights his forehead and the tip of his nose, leaving his eyes dimly lit in shadow. This focus is heightened by the glowing light on the column, which contrasts with the shadow on the man's face and the darkness of the background. The open book casts a subtle reflection of light back onto his face, seeming to embody the way its contents illuminate him and further reinforcing the psychological intensity of his gaze.

Dou's mastery of lighting and compositional balance in *Scholar Interrupted* suggests that he executed this work around 1635. Another point of reference for this date, as Baer has noted, is the close compositional similarity between this work and Rembrandt's etched *Portrait of Johannes Wtenbogaert,* dated 1635.[1] The painting also shares much in common with another small-scale panel from 1637, Dou's earliest extant dated work, *An Interior with a Young Violinist* in Edinburgh **(fig 1)**. In both paintings, Dou creates an effective balance between a single figure in an interior space and copious still-life elements surrounding him. Many of the objects on the table and shelves in *Scholar Interrupted*, particularly the terrestrial globe and the book with the metal clasp, reappear in Dou's other paintings from this period. His muted palette, dominated by browns, grays, and tawny yellows for the highlights, is also seen in other works from this period such as his *Self-Portrait* in Cheltenham and *Portrait of a Lady, Seated with a Music Book on Her Lap* in the present collection (GD-116).

Martin identified the model for the scholar as Douwe Janszoon, the artist's father.[2] Dou's father, however, would have been about fifty years old in 1635, and the scholar in this painting appears significantly older than that.[3] The bearded old man wears a *tabbaard*, a traditional housecoat commonly worn in the seventeenth century by lawyers, scholars, and ecclesiastics. His black skullcap probably indicates that Dou intended him as a religious scholar.[4] Although the book on the table is

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Gerrit Dou, *An Interior with Young Violinist*, 1637, oil on panel, arched top, 31.1 x 23.7 inches, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, NG 2420

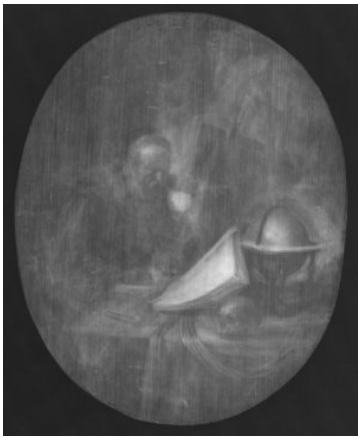


Fig 2. X-radiograph of Gerrit Dou, *Scholar Interrupted at His Writing*, GD-102



Fig 3. Attributed to Gerrit Dou, *Artist*

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visibly open to page 61 and contains chapter heads set off in the margins, its precise contents are illegible. The handwriting of the scholar's letter is similarly blurred, yet Dou took great measures to distinguish the textual character of the book and letter by varying his brushwork.

An X-radiograph of the *Scholar Interrupted* reveals that the composition evolved during the painting process **(fig 2)**. In the upper right quadrant, Dou originally planned for an artist's easel similar to those that appear in his paintings from the late 1620s and early 1630s.[5] This earlier configuration is seen in such works as *Artist in His Studio* **(fig 3)** and *Man Writing by an Easel* **(fig 4)**, which point to the concept of the learned artist or the parallel between the artist and the scholar.[6] When he painted over the easel in the present work, he added a shelf with various small jars and books and included a Japanese parasol leaning against the wall. While the compositional reworking does not appear to be unusual for Dou, the change signifies a development in the fine-tuning of the iconography.[7]

The pictorial tradition of the scholar in his study was especially popular in Leiden among Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69) and his followers in the decade between about 1625 and 1635.[8] Given that the city was an important center of scholastic learning, the seat of one of the oldest universities in Europe, and the site of a prominent school of theology, the painting's subject matter and themes would have been familiar to the local intellectual elite. Though the painting possesses the character of a genre scene painted from life, the nature of the scholar's contemplative work is evoked in the various symbolic references associated with the still-life objects. The books and terrestrial globe may be understood as attributes of the scholar's wisdom and knowledge, while the hourglass and skull were well-established *vanitas* symbols that refer to the passing of time and the fleeting nature of existence. One can assume that the scholar himself is examining questions about the transience of life in his own writings, and that he remains mindful that the wisdom and knowledge passed along through books will long outlive him. As a clever parallel, Dou references the theme of art surpassing the artist's short life by inserting his signature, "GDou," on a tattered piece of paper on the side of the book, adjacent to the skull.[9]

The precise meanings of the objects on the shelf—particularly the closed Japanese parasol, the empty birdcage, and the gourd hanging from the staircase—are more difficult to establish.[10] The parasol frequently appears in Dou's later paintings, whether in his self-portraits above his easel or as an attribute of a quack performing before gullible listeners.[11] In both contexts, the open parasol appears to signify the working of illusion through deception.[12] Another intriguing detail is the barely visible metal container on the shelf nestled between two jars above the globe, on which Dou has written the letters "[…]ALVES" **(fig 5)**.[13] This ambiguous reference

in His Studio, ca. 1630–32, oil on panel, 59 x 43.5 inches, private collection, United Kingdom



Fig 4. Gerrit Dou, *Man Writing by an Easel*, ca. 1631–32, oil on panel, 31.5 x 25 inches, private collection



Fig 5. Detail of shelf with glass and metal jars, Gerrit Dou, *Scholar Interrupted at His Writing*, GD-102



Fig 6. Nicolas Joseph Voyez (1742–1806), after Gerrit Dou, *Le vieillard en réfléxion,* ca. 1757–73, engraving, 355 x 275 mm, British Museum, London, © Trustees of the British Museum

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may, in fact, allude to *salves* and identify its contents as ointments, an indication of the practice, often associated with quacks, of using herbal remedies in the treatment of physical ailments.[14] It is difficult to pinpoint the precise meaning of these elements and in what manner Dou intended for them to relate, if at all, to the scholar's work of contemplation and writing.

Three known much later versions and an engraving from around 1760 by Nicolas Joseph Voyez (**fig 6**) correspond compositionally to the *Scholar Interrupted,* yet the painted versions may have been modeled after another now lost variant. They all differ from the present work in their arched-top rather than oval format, and only the Voyez print includes the scarf draped over the table edge and reflects the precise position of the pen case on the table as it appears in *Scholar Interrupted*.[15] The lightly colored ground of the present work, visible along the entire circumference of the panel's edge, rules out any possibility that the format was modified.

The year Dou executed the present work also marks the beginning of the patronage of the artist by the Delft merchant-turned-statesman Pieter Spiering. Dou's early biographer Joachim van Sandrart recounts that Spiering offered Dou a lucrative retainer fee in exchange for the right of first refusal of his works.[16] It is unclear how long this agreement lasted, but Spiering must have amassed a superb collection of paintings directly from the artist over the years, including the present *Scholar Interrupted*. The painting is listed in a document dated 1652 involving a group of ten panels that Spiering had sent to Queen Christina of Sweden for sale by approval, sometime in the late 1640s.[17] Even though Queen Christina did not purchase *Scholar Interrupted*, Spiering's positive assessment has been shared by later collectors, most notably Charles Morrison, who acquired this small masterpiece around 1854. The painting remained in the Morrison family at Sudeley Castle until it was sold in 2007, at which time it was acquired by the present collector.

- Dominique Surh, 2017

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Endnotes

1. Ronni Baer, “The Paintings of Gerrit Dou (1613–1675)” (PhD. diss. New York University, 1990), no. 14; Ronni Baer, “Man Interrupted at His Writing,” in *Gerrit Dou 1613–1675: Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; London, Dulwich Picture Gallery; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (Washington D.C., 2000), 70–71, no. 4.
2. Wilhelm Martin, “Het leven en de werken van Gerrit Dou beschouwd in verband met het schildersleven van zijn tijd,” (PhD diss. Universiteit Leiden, 1901), no. 57.
3. The author would like to thank Piet Bakker (letter to the author, June 2012, curatorial files, The Leiden Collection) for providing the following reference to a notarial document in Leiden in 1627 that Dou’s father, Douwe Janszoon, was mentioned as being approximately forty-five years old, making him approximately fifty-three in 1635. See reference Regional Archive Leiden, Notarial Archive, notary J. J. Verwey, no. 106, act 121, 16 October 1627.
4. Marieke de Winkel, *Fashion and Fancy*: *Dress and Meaning in Rembrandt’s Paintings* (Amsterdam, 2006), 27ff, 40.
5. Richard W. Hunnewell, “Gerrit Dou’s Self-Portraits and Depictions of the Artist” (Ph.D. diss. Boston University, 1983).
6. Both paintings are illustrated in Ronni Baer, *Gerrit Dou 1613–1675: Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; London, Dulwich Picture Gallery; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (Zwolle, 2000), 64–65, no. 1; 68–69, no. 3.
7. Within the present collection, five other paintings by the artist underwent significant compositional changes during the painting process, including: *Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an Artist’s Atelier* (GD-108); *Landscape with a Goat* (GD-114); *Scholar Sharpening a Quill* (GD-104); *Portrait of a Lady with a Music Book on her Lap* (GD-116); and *Portrait of a Gentleman with a Walking Stick* (GD-113).
8. Henri van de Waal, “Rembrandt’s ‘Faust’ Etching: A Socinian Document and the Iconography of the Inspired Scholar,” in *Steps Toward* Rembrandt, ed. Rudolf Herman Fuchs (Amsterdam, 1974), 133–81 (originally published in *Oud Holland* 79 (1964): 6–48.
9. Baer mentions the possible influence of Rembrandt’s portraits from the early 1630s in which his placed his signature in a letter or paper held by the subject. See Ronni Baer, *Gerrit Dou 1613–1675: Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; London, Dulwich Picture Gallery; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (Zwolle, 2000), 70–71, no. 4, n. 4, 136.
10. While the bird and birdcage sometimes carry an erotic meaning in Dutch painting, it is unclear whether Dou intended the empty birdcage hanging from the column to carry any pointed commentary. Given the religious dress of the scholar and the absence of a bird, Dou may have hinted at a religious vow of

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chastity. On the symbolism of birds, see Eddy de Jongh, "A Bird's-Eye View of Erotica: Double Entendre in a Series of Seventeenth-Century Genre Scenes," in *Questions of Meaning: Theme and Motif in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Painting*, ed. and trans. Michael Hoyle (Leiden, 2000), 22–58. Originally published as "Erotica in vogelperspectief: De dubbelzinnigheid van een reeks zeventiende-eeuwse genrevoorstellingen," *Simiolus* 3 (1968–69).

11. A Japanese parasol appears open above an easel in Dou's *Self-Portrait* of 1645 in a private collection in Spain; *Self-Portrait* of 1647 in the Dresden Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister; the *Quack* of 1652 in Rotterdam; and *Self-Portrait* from ca. 1665 in the Van Otterloo Collection.

12. The parasol as a symbol of the quack doctor and the painter's dependence on deception was noted by Ivan Gaskell, "Gerrit Dou: His Patrons and the Art of Painting," *Oxford Art Journal* 5, no. 1 (1982): 20. See also Jan A. Emmens, "De kwakzalver van Gerard Dou," *Openbaar Kunstbezit* 15 (1971): 4.

13. Click here for the online version of the *Middelnederlandsch Woodenboek* and the Dutch word *salve* (pl. *salven).* The word shown in the painting seems to refer to the English plural.

14. Willem Moreelse's *Portrait of a Scholar* from 1647 (Toledo Museum of Art, acc. no. 62.70) portrays a scholar holding a botanical print of two herbs, the euphorbium and butterbur, which Laurinda Dixon has identified with the treatment of sluggishness and melancholia among scholars. See Laurinda S. Dixon, "Privileged Piety: Melancholia and the Herbal Tradition," *JHNA* 1, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 1–29, https://doi.org/10.5092/jhna.2009.1.2.1. Quacks were associated with the selling of medicinal ointments, potions, and salves, as illustrated by a drawing by Lenaert Bramer, *Kwakzalver*, from about 1659 in the Prentenkabinet in Leiden, in which a male figure is shown holding up a jar for sale.

15. For the details and whereabouts of the three versions, see the Versions section. The arched-top format of the Voyez print may have been added by the engraver, who otherwise repeated all of the details visible in the present work.

16. While Sandrart speaks of a commission arrangement of 1,000 gulden, both Angel and Houbraken mention 500 gulden; see Bakker's biography of Dou.

17. Martin identified number 5 in the 1652 document with the painting formerly in the Marquess of Bute collection, *Old Man with Pen in Hand,* which does not contain a globe and hourglass, yet Baer suggested that the present work more likely fits the description. See Wilhelm Martin, *Het leven en de werken van Gerrit Dou* (Leiden, 1901), 45, no. 58; reproduced in Wilhelm Martin, *Gerard Dou, des Meisters Gemälde,* Klassiker der Kunst (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1913), no. 61; Ronni Baer, "The Paintings of Gerrit Dou (1613–1675)" (PhD diss. New York University, 1990), nos. 14 and 15; Ronni Baer, *Gerrit Dou 1613–1675: Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; London, Dulwich Picture Gallery; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (Zwolle, 2000), 70–71, no. 4. The 1652 document sheds light both on Spiering's collection of paintings by the artist and his aspirations to resell them. Dou's paintings do not seem to have appealed to the queen's taste, and they were returned to Spiering soon thereafter. See Per Bjurstrom, *Queen Christina of Sweden: A Personality in European Civilization* (Exh. cat. Stockholm, Nationalmuseum) (Stockholm, 1966), 426, no. 1028.

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Provenance

- Pieter Spiering, The Hague; sent to Queen Christina of Sweden (1626–89) for approval probably late 1640s; returned to Spiering by 1652.
- Baron Nagel Collection, London (his sale, Christie's, London, 21 March 1795, no. 48 [for £120.15]).
- Richard Creed Collection (his sale, Christie's, London, 15 May 1813, no. 9 [to Philip Hill for £131.50; John Smith, London, to Philippe Panné for 250 guineas]).
- Edward Gray, London, by 1829.
- (Possibly sale, Edward Foster, London, 15 June 1835, no. 130; possible sale, Christie's, London, 4 June 1836, no. 7 [to Larken for £2.12]; possible sale, Christie's, London, 4 May 1839, no. 117, unsold at £3; possible sale, Christie's, London, 18 January 1840, no. 25 [to Money for £2.10]).
- Charles Morrison Collection, London, by 1854; by descent to Mrs. Morrison, 1879; by descent to Sudeley Castle Trustees, Winchcombe, Gloucestershire, Walter Morrison Collection; [Johnny van Haeften, London, 2007].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2007.

Exhibition History

- London, Royal Academy of Arts, "Exhibition of Works by the Old Masters and by Deceased Masters of the British School: Winter Exhibition, Tenth Year," 1879, no. 113 [lent by Mrs. Morrison].
- Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, "Gerrit Dou, 1613–1675: Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt," 16 April–6 August 2000; London, Dulwich Picture Gallery, 6 September–19 November 2000; The Hague, Mauritshuis, 9 December 2000–25 February 2001, no. 4 [lent by the Trustees of Sudeley Castle].
- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum of Art, December 2009–January 2011, on loan with the permanent collection [lent by the present owner].
- Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, "Communication: Visualizing the Human Connection in the Age of Vermeer," 25 June–16 October 2011; Miyagi Museum of Art, 27 October–12 December 2011; Tokyo, Bunkamura Museum of Art, 23 December 2011–14 March 2012, no. 13 [lent by the present owner].
- Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, on loan with the permanent collection, April 2013–February 2014 [lent by the present owner].
- Leiden, Museum de Lakenhal, "Gerrit Dou: The Leiden Collection from New York," 9 March–31 August 2014 [lent by the present owner].

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- Paris, Museé du Louvre, “Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection: The Age of Rembrandt,” 22 February–22 May 2017 [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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National Gallery of Ireland; Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art. New Haven and London, 2017.

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Versions
Engraved

1. Nicolas Joseph Voyez (1742–1806), after Gerrit Dou, *La vieillard en réfléxion,* ca. 1757–73, engraving, 355 x 275 mm, British Museum, London.

Versions and Copies

1. Copy after Gerrit Dou, *An Alchemist in His Laboratory*, oil on panel, unknown dimensions, Chemical Heritage Foundation, Philadelphia.
2. Copy after Gerrit Dou, *Man Interrupted at His Writing*, oil on canvas, 16 x 13.5 cm, Collection Anthony Langalante, Pennsylvania.
3. Copy after Gerrit Dou, *Scholar Interrupted at His Study*, oil on panel, 33 x 26.7 cm, National Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.

Technical Summary

The support for this small oval painting is a vertically grained oak panel made from a single plank. The wood is from the Baltic region and has a fell date of 1600.[1] The panel retains its original bevel around the outer

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edge of the reverse. The bevel angle is slightly shallower along the left edge. The panel has a slight convex warp when viewed from the front.

The panel was prepared with a light-colored, thinly and evenly applied ground. The ground is visible along the entire perimeter of the face painting, but it does not extend over the edges. The presence of the ground around the entire circumference of the front of the painting and the presence of the bevel on the entire circumference of the reverse indicate that the painting retains its original dimensions.

The X-radiograph shows several changes. In the upper right quadrant there is currently a shelf with various objects on it under a spiral staircase, but the original composition appears to have had a painting on an easel in this area. In addition, the birdcage, hourglass, and the slip of paper extending from the book are not visible in the X-radiograph, indicating they were later additions. Infrared reflectography shows a dark curved shape extending across the table, through the edge of the book and the brow of the skull.[2]

The paint was applied thinly and smoothly with slight impasto in the objects on the table, except for the hourglass. Both highlights and shadows were painted over the midtones. The hourglass and the slip of paper extending from the book with the artist's signature on it were painted wet-over-dry, further indicating that they were added later. The pigment vivianite was used in the scarf. This pigment changes from blue to yellow, therefore there may have been more of a color contrast between the scarf and the tablecloth originally.[3] Coarse pigments in a fairly thick paint were used to create the text of the book, which is in contrast to the dilute paint with fine particles used for the handwritten page in this painting and for the book text in *Scholar Sharpening his Quill* (GD-104).[4]

There is a fair amount of traction crackle throughout the painting, but it is especially heavy in the lower portion of the tablecloth. There is also abrasion in the scholar's cloak and around the perimeter. The painting was treated in 2007.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. Dendochronology report by Ian Tyers, November 2012. Tyers reports that the board's narrow size indicates it has probably been trimmed, which precludes the conjecture of an earliest probable usage date.
2. Infrared reflectography was performed by Shawn Digney-Peer at unknown specifications.
3. John Twilley, scientific examination report, 15 April 2011.
4. John Twilley, scientific examination report, 15 April 2011, and scientific examination report of *Scholar Sharpening his Quill*, 10 January 2013.

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