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Scholar Sharpening His Quill

Gerrit Dou
(Leiden 1613 – 1675 Leiden)

ca. 1632-35
oil on oval panel
26.3 x 21.2 cm
signed under quill, center right: “GD” (in monogram)
GD-104

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An elderly scholar, clad in a purplish-brown skullcap and fur-trimmed *tabard*, is seated at his study before an open book. With clenched chin and furrowed brow, he cautiously attempts to slice the tip of a quill pen, using the soft pad of his thumb to balance the tip against the pressure of his blade. Concentrating on the precision of his task, he peers intently at the quill through gold-trimmed spectacles perched at the end of his nose.

The theme of the contemplative scholar at work in his study was a favorite of Dutch artists. Gerrit Dou, however, has here shown a different type of scholarly concern, the need to prepare his writing instrument to allow for the proper transmission of his thoughts to the thick tome before him. In the Dutch emblematic world, this activity symbolized the notion of Practice, one of three Aristotelian precepts, along with Nature and Education, essential for a successful and virtuous upbringing.[1] The notion of sharpening one's intellect through practice was exemplified by the Latin idiom *nil penna sed usus* ("not the pen but its use"), and was illustrated in emblematic literature by the ostrich, a flightless bird whose feather quills were used for writing (**fig 1**).[2] A slightly earlier example of the same theme that Dou would have known because it was painted in Leiden was *The Pen Cutter* by Jan Lievens (1607–74), ca. 1627 (see JL-101, fig. 1), which shows an old man pausing from his work to examine the sharpness of his quill.

Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69) and his Leiden circle often depicted older men and scholars in the late 1620s and early 1630s. The sitter in this painting, one of the most frequently depicted models in Leiden at the time, came to be known much later in the art historical literature as "Rembrandt's father," due to his frequent appearance in that artist's work during his Leiden period (see also GD-109).[3] Dou features this model in a number of paintings from the late 1620s and early 1630s.[4] Martin dated the present work to the period of Dou's apprenticeship with Rembrandt between 1628 and 1631, but he probably executed it slightly later, around ca. 1632–35, about the same time as the artist's *Man in a Gorget and Feather Beret* in Kassel, which depicts the same model.[5]

A component of the art theoretical training Dou gained from Rembrandt during his apprenticeship would have been the importance of practice, which may explain Dou's fascination with this subject.[6] In fact, the Leiden Collection painting is probably a second version of a composition that was formerly in the collection of James Simon in Berlin (**fig 2**).[7] That now-lost version differs from the present work in both its octagonal format and its more restricted iconography. It does not include, for example, the books, hourglass and compass on the table, or the column and hanging lamp in the background. One argument in favor of the chronological precedence of

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Crispijn van de Passe, "Nil penna sed usus," engraving from Gabriel Rollenhagen, *Emblemata ofte Volsinnighe uytbeelses versamelt ende vermeerdert met syne eygene sinrijcke vindingen* (Arnhem and Utrecht, 1617)



Fig 2. Gerrit Dou, *Scholar Sharpening His Quill*, ca. 1632, oil on panel, octagonal, 21 x 18 cm, whereabouts unknown



Fig 3. Willem Joseph Laquy after Gerrit Dou, *The Night School,* ca. 1770, oil on canvas, 83 x 70 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-2320-B

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the painting formerly in Berlin is a pentimento in the ink well of the Leiden Collection work. This pentimento reveals that Dou initially painted the ink well in the same position as that in the octagonal version before he shifted it to the right.

The more refined elements of the scholar's wardrobe and materials in the Leiden Collection painting also differ from those in the variant formerly in Berlin. The scholar in the present painting is shown wearing a gold loop earring, a silk scarf, and a shirt brocaded with delicate golden threads. His sharpening tool is appointed with costly ornamentation, details that appear at odds with his humble surroundings. Despite the scholar's enhanced appearance, he remains reliant on seeing through his spectacles, even though he does not need to light the oil lamp to provide added illumination.[8] These inherent contradictions between materiality and scholarly engagement are underscored by the unusual position of the hourglass, shown tilted on its side and used as a prop for the book, which seems to hint at the scholar's disregard for the transience of life and worldly possessions.

Within the Protestant culture of seventeenth-century Leiden—where values of industriousness, discipline, and practice were highly esteemed—this depiction of an aging scholar devotedly tending to his task would have been seen as a poignant reminder of life's potentials and limits. Dou must have drawn inspiration from the academic surroundings of his native Leiden, the site of one of Europe's oldest universities. In this context, education and learning were paramount, and elder scholars embodied values and dilemmas that made them both human and fallible. Executed at the beginning of Dou's career as an artist, the present work is a poignant reminder of the repetition and practice that went into his artistic training.

Dou treated the subject of the pen cutter on several occasions throughout his career. In a more ambitious narrative apparently illustrating Aristotle's tripartite maxim, Dou featured a pen cutter in one of the wings of the lost Braamcamp triptych, from about 1660, known only through an eighteenth-century copy by Willem Joseph Laquy **(fig 3**).[9] The idea of the pen cutter as an embodiment of Practice was repeated in a number of Dou's night-school scenes, especially *An Evening School* from about 1655 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and in a late work from 1671 in the Gemäldegalerie in Dresden, *An Old Schoolmaster Cutting His Pen*, in which a group of school children learning to write are visible in the background **(fig 4)**.[10]

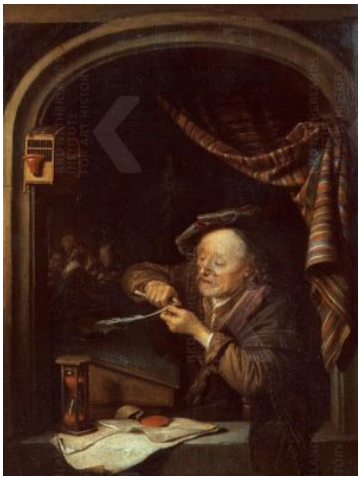


Fig 4. Gerrit Dou, *An Old Schoolmaster Cutting His Pen*, 1671, oil on panel, 32.2 x 24.9 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, inv. no. 1709

- Dominique Surh, 2017

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Endnotes

1. Plutarch's *Golden Book*, also known as *De liberis educandis* (*On the Education of Bringing up Children*), was translated into Dutch three times in the seventeenth century and repeated the tripartite Aristotelian notion of *Natura*, *Disciplina*, and *Exercitatio*. See Jan Baptist Bedaux, ed., *Pride and Joy: Children's Portraits in the Netherlands 1500–1700* (Exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Halsmuseum; Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten) (Ghent and Amsterdam, 2000), 19–22. Jan A. Emmens was the first to explore Dou's incorporation of these ideas in his work and suggested that *Scholar Sharpening His Quill* was an illustration of Practice (*Exercitatio*). See Jan A. Emmens, "Natuur, onderwijzing en oefening bij een drieluik van Gerrit Dou," in *Kunsthistorische Opstellen,* 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1981), 2: 5–22 (first published in *Album Discipulorum Prof. G. van Gelder* [Utrecht, 1963], 125–63, and in abbreviated form in English as "A Seventeenth-Century Theory of Art: Nature and Practice," in *Delta* 12 [1969]: 30–39); Peter Hecht, "Gerrit Dou's Braamcamp Triptych Reconsidered: A Sceptical View of Its 'Allegorical' Meaning," in *Shop Talk: Studies in Honor of Seymour Slive* (Cambridge, 1995), 100–2.
2. Gabriel Rollenhagen, *Emblemata ofte Volsinnighe uytbeelses versamelt ende vermeerdert met syne eygene sinrijcke vindingen* (Arnhem and Utrecht, 1617) (electronic ed., Wolfenbüttel: Herzog August Bibliothek, 2004). An Italian motto further likens the quill to intellect: *Senza taglio non vaglio* ("I am worthless unless sharpened"), see note 1 above. The theme was a favorite among Dutch artists, including Jan Lievens, Salomon Koninck, Gabriel Metsu, Jan Steen, and Frans van Mieris, among others.
3. Arthur M. Hind, "The Portraits of Rembrandt's Father," *Burlington Magazine* 8, no. 36 (1906): 426–27; see also Christiaan Vogelaar and Gerbrandt Korevaar, eds., *Rembrandt's Mother: Myth and Reality* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 2005), 143ff.
4. On the discussion of the model known as "Rembrandt's Father" seen in the *Man with a Globe* in the Hermitage, St. Petersburg, and in *Man in a Gorget and Feather Beret* in Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, Kassel, see Ronni Baer, "The Paintings of Gerrit Dou (1613–1675)," 3 vols. (PhD diss. New York University, 1990), nos. 2 and 11.
5. Wilhelm Martin, *Gerard Dou, sa vie et son oeuvre: Etude sur la peinture hollandaise et les marchaunds au dix septième siècle* (Paris, 1911), 168, no. 31; Wilhelm Martin, *Gerard Dou, des Meisters Gemälde in 247 Abbildungen,* Klassiker der Kunst in Gesamtausgaben 24 (Stuttgart, 1913), 23.
6. Emmens regarded Dou's *Scholar Sharpening His Quill* as a valuable document demonstrating the example of the Aristotelian concept passed on to him by his teacher Rembrandt. See Jan A. Emmens, "Natuur, onderwijzing en oefening bij een drieluik van Gerrit Dou," in *Kunsthistorische Opstellen,* 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1981) 2:21.
7. The version, which was subsequently with art dealers A. S. Drey, Munich, in 1925, and later with D. Katz, Dieren, may be equivalent with one or both of the other two versions known only through sale records (see Versions). It is likely that the drawing by Oyens and the print by Waanders were made after

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this variant.

8. For a useful summary of the depiction of spectacles in art, see Vincent Ilardi, *Renaissance Vision from Spectacles to Telescopes*, Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society 259 (Philadelphia, 2007).
9. Described by Houbraken, Dou's original work was lost in the shipwreck of the *Vrouw Maria* in 1771 while in transit to Catherine of Russia and is known only through the copy by Willem Joseph Laquy. See Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Dou's Reputation," 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), 17 and 120, no. 28.
10. Annegret Laabs and Christoph Schölzel, *The Leiden Fijnschilders from Dresden*, ed. Christian Vogelaar (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal; Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen) (Zwolle, 2000), 42–43; see also Walter Liedtke, *Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2 vols. (New York, 2007), 1: 156.

Provenance

- Bicker van Zwieten (his sale, Bicker van Zwieten, The Hague, 12 April 1741, no. 68 [to Hoed for 110 florins]).
- André de Stolberg, Count of Brabeck, Söder (his sale, Rumpler, Hannover, 31 October 1859, no. 78 [for 500 florins]).
- King George V of Hannover (1819–78), 2nd Duke of Cumberland and Teviotdale, by 1864; confiscated when annexed by Prussia in 1866; held as inalienable property by the House of Braunschweig-Luneburg (*in fidei commissum*), 1892–1924; returned to the House of Braunschweig-Luneburg in 1924; by descent to the Princely House of Hannover, Germany and Switzerland, until 2001.
- Private collection, Los Angeles and Denver; (private sale, Sotheby's, New York, 2007).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2007.

Exhibition History

- Hannover, Welfen-Museum, on loan until 1864–66, no. 132 [lent by King George V].
- Hannover, Museum for Arts and Sciences, on loan in the Cumberland-Galerie, 1886–92, no. 118 [lent by the government holding the endowment belonging to King George V].
- Hannover, Provinzial Museum, on loan in the Fideicommiss-Galerie, 1892–1924 [lent as inalienable property on trust (*in fidei commissum*) of the House of Braunschweig-Lüneberg].

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- 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. 12 [lent by the present owner].
- Leiden, Museum de Lakenhal, “Gerrit Dou. The Leiden Collection from New York,” 9 March–31 August 2014 [lent by 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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Paintings by Gerrit Dou in the Leiden Collection." *JHNA* 6:1 (Winter 2014): 1, 3, 5, 7, 10-11, figs. 1a-b, 15, 26, 27a-b, 28a-c, 48. DOI:10.5092/jhna.2014.6.1.3

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Versions

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Engraved

1. F. B. Waanders after Gerrit Dou, *A Scholar Sharpening His Quill*, (after the octagonal version formerly in Berlin).

Versions and Copies

1. Gerrit Dou, *Scholar Sharpening His Quill,* oil on panel, octagonal, 21 x 18 cm, whereabouts unknown (formerly in the collection of James Simon, Berlin; subsequently with art dealer A. S. Drey, Munich, 1925; art dealer D. Katz, Dieren).
2. Gerrit Dou, *Pen Sharpener*, oil on panel, 24 x 19 cm, whereabouts unknown (formerly in sale, Leiden, 26 August 1788).
3. Gerrit Dou, *Pen Sharpener*, oil on panel, 25.5 x 20.5 cm, whereabouts unknown (formerly in sale, Cauwerven, Leiden, 31 July 1765; sale, A. Motte, [city?], 20 August 1794 for 101 florins, to Ijver; sale Robiano, Brussels, 1 May 1837; sale, D. v. d. Schrieck, Leuven, 10 April 1861).

Technical Summary

The oval painting was executed on a vertically grained oak panel. The panel has been thinned, and no original bevel remains. A horizontally grained, crescent-shaped addition extends three quarters of the way around the perimeter, along all but the upper right quadrant when viewed from the front.

The panel was prepared with a light-colored ground. It was thinly applied and does not mask the texture of the woodgrain. It is radio-opaque, accentuating the woodgrain in the X-radiographs, which is a sign that it probably contains a lead-based pigment. The X-radiographs show a light area around the figure, indicating that Dou blocked in the area of the figure first.

Dou applied the paint thinly and smoothly, using low impasto only in the objects on the table, the gold handle of the scholar's knife, and the shadow of the book. The writing in the book was executed with a very dilute paint with fine pigment particles. This contrasts with the book text in *Scholar Interrupted at His Writing* (GD-102), in which coarse pigment particles in a thicker paint were used.[1] The purple cloak of the scholar was created with red lake and indigo. Red lake is a fugitive pigment, but the pigment particles do not show signs of fading; however a top glaze layer may have been lost.[2] Infrared reflectography shows three artist's changes.[3] The inkpot was moved to the right, originally located where the compass now lies; the knuckles of the scholar's proper left hand were shifted to the left; and the thumb of the scholar's proper right hand was shortened and moved toward the index finger.

The painting is in fairly good condition. The panel bears a slight convex warp when viewed from the front and there is a vertical split in the panel stemming from the center of the top edge. It was repaired with a

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wooden insert measuring 4.2 cm high by 3 cm wide, which extends into the added crescent. There is another repair to the panel along the bottom edge, consisting of a vertically grained wooden insert that measures 3 cm high by 11 cm wide. There is heavy abrasion to the paint and ground along the entire perimeter, but especially where the oval crescent was attached. There are also paint losses along the split and in the upper right quadrant. There is further abrasion in the inkwell, the scholar's hat, and his cloak, most notably in the shadows. The "G" in the artist's monogram is also worn. The varnish is matte and does not fully saturate the paint. The painting was treated in 2007.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. John Twilley, scientific examination report, 10 January 2013.
2. John Twilley, scientific examination report, 10 January 2013.
3. Infrared reflectography was performed by Shawn Digney-Peer at unknown specifications.

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