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Smoker Seated at a Table

Gabriel Metsu
(Leiden 1629 – 1667 Amsterdam)

ca. 1654–57
oil on copper
22.4 x 18.8 cm
signed in dark paint along background, upper left corner: “G.Metsu”
GM-111

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Gabriel Metsu used almost exclusively canvas supports during his early years in Leiden, but preferred small oak panels during his mature career in Amsterdam. Only once did he choose a copper support, in 1654–57, when he painted *Smoker Seated at a Table*. The smooth surface of this relatively soft but durable metal allowed him to employ a more meticulous technique than in his earlier paintings. Indeed, *Smoker Seated at a Table* marks a significant step in Metsu's artistic evolution during his first years in Amsterdam, at which time he gradually abandoned the fluid brushwork characteristic of Jan Baptist Weenix (1621–60/61) in favor of the more refined and softer technique of Gerrit Dou (1613–75). Although Metsu's technique here does not match the delicacy of Dou's manner of painting or that of his own highly finished paintings from later in his career, *Smoker Seated at a Table* reflects his deliberate move towards "fine" painting in the Leiden manner.[1] Metsu painted in this way either to meet an existing demand for "fine" paintings in Amsterdam or to create a market for such works on his own accord.[2]

The painting represents a middle-aged bearded man who sits at a table enjoying a smoke. He holds his pipe upside down to light the tobacco by dipping it into the burning coals in an earthenware brazier. The small black board with an arched top in the left background indicates that the setting is a tavern. Innkeepers and serving staff used such slate panels to tally their customers' drinks, as can be seen in the background of Metsu's *A Woman Offering a Glass of Wine to a Man* **(fig 1)**. The smoker who, to judge from his woolen suit and round hat, is a farmer, has already been served his beer in a white tankard that rests on his table.[3] He looks out at the viewer with a brazen yet sympathetic gaze, not unlike that of the bearded figure in *Public Notary* (GM-101), which Metsu had completed a few years earlier.

The present painting belongs to a long tradition of Dutch and Flemish images of men drinking and smoking in a tavern—paintings commonly seen in collectors' homes, the shops of art dealers, and the workshops of other painters. Metsu depicted this subject no less than five times, the most renowned of which is *An Old Man Holding a Pipe and a Jug* from the mid-1650s **(fig 2)**.[4] Metsu's depictions of older men and women engaged in their individual activities owes much to Dou, who had featured elderly people in many of his early paintings.[5] Unlike other of Metsu's works, however, neither the composition nor the male figure in this painting has a precedent in Dou's works. In fact, the man's facial features do not even reappear in other paintings by Metsu, which raises the possibility that *Smoker Seated at a Table* is a genre-like portrait.

The coloration of *Smoker Seated at a Table* relates closely to Metsu's other early Amsterdam paintings, among them *A Woman with a Jug and a Man with a Pipe* **(fig 3**

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Detail of Gabriel Metsu, *A Woman Offering a Glass of Wine to a Man*, 1658–60, oil on canvas, 40.6 x 35.5 cm, private collection



Fig 2. Gabriel Metsu, *An Old Man Holding a Pipe and a Jug*, 1661–63, oil on panel, 22 x 19.5 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-250



Fig 3. Gabriel Metsu, *A Woman with a Jug and a Man with a Pipe*, 1654–57, oil on canvas, 33 x 29.2 cm, Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum, Cheltenham, Baron de Ferrières

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bequest, 1898, © Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museums, Gloucestershire, UK / Bridgeman Images

). During this period of his career Metsu characteristically set off flesh tones, whites and areas of bright color, often bluish-greens or orange-reds, against a gray background. In *A Woman with a Jug and a Man with a Pipe*, the woman's apron is the single coloristic focal point, whereas in *Smoker Seated at a Table* it is the rim of the man's hat. Metsu's sensitivity toward color is evident in the way he has here modulated the gray tonality of the painting with the browns of the earthenware brazier, the wooden table, and the upholstery of the chair.

Smoker Seated at a Table includes a number of objects that appear in some of Metsu's other paintings. The table, for example, is seen in several later works, including *A Man Offering a Glass of Wine to a Woman*, which Metsu completed in 1667, the last year of his life.[6] It is likely that the artist owned this piece of furniture. The same is probably true for the earthenware brazier and the white jug. Although the same chimney does not feature in other paintings, it does resemble those in other of Metsu's early Amsterdam works, including *A Woman with a Jug and a Man with a Pipe*.

Although it appears differently today, Metsu originally signed *A Smoker Seated at a Table* in the top left corner with an unusual signature: *G.Metsùe*.[7] The artist generally inscribed his name *GMetsu* or *Gmetsu* (G and m in ligature), but he added an E to his name in eleven extant works. Most of these date from the last few years of his life.[8] What may have prompted him to vary his signature is unknown. Some of the artist's distant family members are also known to have signed their name Metsue.[9] It should be noted that consistency in spelling was not as important in the seventeenth century as it is today, and people often wrote their names in different ways.

- Adriaan Waiboer, 2017; revised 2022

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Endnotes

1. It should be noted that, as far as we know, Dou always painted on wood panels and only used a metal support on one occasion. This exceptional example is also in The Leiden Collection: Gerrit Dou's *Portrait of Dirck van Beresteyn*, which the artist painted on an unusual alloy of silver and copper.
2. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Review of Robinson 1974," *Art Bulletin* 58 (1976): 458, already mentioned that Dou's influence on Metsu's early Amsterdam paintings may have been "a response to a market in Amsterdam for Dou-like paintings." See also Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, 2012), 33.
3. I am grateful to Marieke de Winkel for her observations about the identification of the sitter as a farmer on the basis of his clothes: personal communication, 2000.
4. For more on this painting, see Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, 2012), 105–6, 243–44, no. A-101, ill.; for Metsu's other paintings of smoking man, see ibid., 197, no. A-51; 198, no. A-52; 245, no. A-103, all ill.
5. Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, 2012), 33–43.
6. Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, 2012), 198, no. A-52; 272, no. A-133, both ill.
7. The present appearance of the signature appears to be the result of earlier restoration campaigns, which were completed before the painting entered The Leiden Collection. According to observations made by Annette Rupprecht in 2013, under magnification the line crossing the "t" and the "u" and the area surrounding the "u" have been reworked. Earlier published transcriptions of the signature display a more distinctive slanting of the letters and a cursive-like script. The upright and regular lettering of the "s" and "u" visible today is thus likely different than Metsu originally intended. See the technical examination report kept on file at The Leiden Collection, and for the transcription of the signature, see Olaf Granberg, *Catalogue raisonné de tableaux anciens inconnus jusqu'ici dans les collections privées de la Suede* (Stockholm, 1886), 23, no. 39.
8. Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, 2012), 249, no. A-107; 252, no. A-111; 253, no. A-112; 253–54, no. A-113; 255, no. A-116; 259, no. A-118; 264–65, no. A-124; 268, no. A-128; 271–72, no. A-132; 272, no. A-133.
9. See Jan Briels, *Vlaamse schilders en de dageraad van Hollands Gouden Eeuw, 1585–1630* (Antwerp, 1997), 359 (under J. Metsu), note 2.

Provenance

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- Count de Dubarry (his sale, Pierre Rémy and P. le Brun, Paris, 21 November 1774, no. 33 [to Le Brun for 240 francs]).
- De Ghendt (his sale, Basan and Guilleaumon, Paris, 15 November 1779, no. 73 [to Langlier for 300 francs]);
- Gustaf Adolf Sparre (1746–94), Sahlgren-Sparre Palace, Gothenburg or Kulla Gunnarstorp, near Helsingborg; by descent to his widow, Elisabeth Sofia Amalia Beata Sparre (née Ramel), Kulla Gunnarstorp, died 1830; by descent to her grandson Gustaf Adolf de la Gardie (1800–33); by descent to his father Jacob Gustaf de la Gardie (1768–1842).
- Count Carl de Geer af Leufstra (1781–1861), (who purchased Kulla Gunnarstorp in 1837 and the entire Sparre collection by ca. 1840); by descent to his granddaughter, 1855, and moved, with the entire collection, to her house at Vänas, Knislinge, Southern Sweden.
- Count Carl-Axel Wachtmeister (1921–2011), Vänas, Knislinge.
- (Sale, Christie's London, 14 December 1990, no. 122, bought in; sale, Christie's London, 13 December 1991, no. 43, bought in).
- (Sale, Sotheby's, London, 5 December 2007, no. 8; [Johnny van Haeften, London, 2007]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

Exhibition History

- Stockholm, Bukowski, "Äldre mästares taflor ur Svenska privatsamlingar," May–June 1884," no. 109 [lent by Count Wachtmeister, Vanås].
- Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, "Holländska Mästare I Svensk Ägo," 3 March–30 April 1967, no. 99 [lent by Count Wachtmeister, Vanås].
- Kristianstad, Kristianstads Museum, "Ur Gustav Adolf Sparres konstsamling *på Wanås*," 12 February–6 March 1977, no. 26 [lent by Count Wachtmeister, Vanås].
- 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].
- Albany, Albany Institute of History & Art, "Delights of the Senses: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and

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Life. Featuring Paintings from The Leiden Collection," 14 September–31 December 2024, no. 7 [lent by the present owner].

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- Nogrady, Elizabeth and Diane Shewchuk, eds. *Delights of the Senses: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Life. Featuring Paintings from The Leiden Collection*. Exh. cat. Albany, Albany Institute of History & Art. Albany, 2024, 54–55, no. 7.
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Technical Summary

The support, a rectangular, rolled sheet of copper, has substantial weight and does not flex when handled.[1] There are no indentations or undulation and the support remains perfectly in plane. There are two layers of oxidation products, a continuous brown layer and mottled black spots. There are six labels and one black stencil but no wax collection seals or maker's marks.

A light gray ground has been thinly and evenly applied. The figure's face was laid in with a free underpaint, which remains exposed along the corners of the eye and nose, followed by delicately blended final paint built up with fine strokes.[2]

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. The images and a pentimento indicate the top of the figure's hat was made taller and altered during the paint stage to create two diagonal angles and a less rounded shape.

The painting is signed in dark paint along the background in the upper left corner but is undated.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2008 and remains in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. According to Isabel Horovitz, *Copper as Canvas: Two Centuries of Masterpiece Paintings on Copper, 1575–1775* (New York, 1999), 67–68, "a highly worked sheet of copper will be less flexible than one that is not highly worked, and this is why quite thin (0.5 mm) sheets of copper can provide such excellent rigid supports for paint films."
2. According to 2009 examination notes by E. Melanie Gifford, Scientific Department, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

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