



Woman Reading a Book by a Window

Gabriel Metsu
(Leiden 1629 – 1667 Amsterdam)

ca. 1653–54

oil on canvas

105 x 90.7 cm

signed in dark paint on white letter, left of red
plume: “[F?] Gabriel/Metsu”

GM-105



How to cite

Waiboer, Adriaan. "Woman Reading a Book by a Window" (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-woman-reading-a-letter-by-a-window/> (accessed September 10, 2025).

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Gabriel Metsu, like a number of other Dutch artists renowned for their domestic scenes and high-life interiors, began his career painting an entirely different type of subject. Metsu initially painted subjects drawn from the bible or mythology, much as did Nicolaes Maes (1634–93) and Johannes Vermeer (1632–75). Another artist who shifted from one genre to another was Pieter de Hooch (1629–84), who depicted guardroom scenes before switching to domestic subjects. For none of these young masters did the change from one subject type to another occur overnight. Their thematic and stylistic evolution was an ongoing process as they learned to balance their artistic aspirations, inherent strengths, and the changing character of the art market. Vermeer's *Procuress* of 1656 is a case in point, for it relates both to genre and history painting traditions. Even though this painting appears, at first glance, to be a merry company scene, it has thematic connections to the parable of the Prodigal Son.^[1] Similarly, *Woman Reading a Book by a Window*, which dates to the artist's late Leiden period, about 1653–54, is a transitional piece in Metsu's career. While this large picture appears to be a scene drawn from daily life, it probably derives from a literary or allegorical source.

In this painting, Metsu has depicted a life-sized woman seated next to an open window. Leaning on a small table covered with a striped carpet, she stares out into the world as though contemplating an idea she has just taken from the text of the open book before her.^[2] Her distinctive wardrobe—a voluminous rusty-red cloak, loose-fitting white shirt, and black feathered beret—would have indicated to a seventeenth-century viewer that she was not a contemporary Dutch sitter, but a figure drawn from a different time and place. Metsu's painting, in fact, calls to mind works by Ferdinand Bol (1616–80) from the early 1650s that depict attractive female figures in “antique” attire, which may best be described as half-length *tronies* (fig 1).^[3] An even closer comparison can be made with a painting dated 1652 by the Haarlem artist Salomon de Bray (1597–1664), which is a *portrait historié* of a woman probably in the guise of Semiramis (fig 2).^[4] The similarities in costume between the women in Metsu's and De Bray's paintings are striking; however, the large book makes it unlikely that Metsu's sitter also depicts the Assyrian queen.^[5]

Rather than a half-length *tronie* or a *portrait historié*, Metsu's woman probably represents an allegorical figure. Seventeenth-century artists frequently modernized traditional allegories by placing them in contemporary interiors, as, for example, did Jan Miense Molenaer (1610–68) in *A Lady at Her Toilet* (*Lady World*) and Vermeer in *Allegory of Faith*.^[6] When painting allegorical figures, Dutch artists generally consulted Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1593), an influential emblem book that explains how abstract concepts, such as virtues and vices, could be personified. Ripa published the first edition of his seminal work in Italian in Rome in 1593, but Metsu was likely

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Ferdinand Bol, *A Woman at a Window*, early 1650s, oil on canvas, 100 x 84.5 cm, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, inv. 769



Fig 2. Salomon de Bray, *Portrait of a Woman as Semiramis (?)*, 1652, oil on panel, 99.5 x 83.5 cm, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, OS I-687



Fig 3. Gabriel Metsu, *Moneylender Visited by a Weeping Woman*, 1654, oil on canvas, 74 x 67.2 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Sydney Bartlett bequest, 89.501

familiar with the Dutch edition, which had been translated by Dirck Pers in 1644. Ripa's book describes and illustrates various female personifications with books, including Wisdom, Philosophy, Rhetoric, Eloquence, and Knowledge.^[7] Ripa, however, always includes additional attributes with these personifications, among them a birdcage or a torch, that are not to be found in Metsu's painting.^[8] Hence, even though it seems probable that Metsu intended his female figure to be an allegorical personification of an abstract concept related to learning or knowledge, it is not yet possible to interpret exactly his intent.

Woman Reading a Book by a Window occupies a significant place in Metsu's early artistic development. It is the earliest surviving painting in which the artist depicted a contemporary Dutch interior. Prior to this time, Metsu had painted only outdoor scenes and imaginary interiors of sandstone palaces, churches and brothels. Although this interior serves only as a backdrop to the figure, the setting is comparable to those depicted by other Leiden genre painters of the mid-seventeenth century. These generally focus on the left corner of a shallow room with the back wall running parallel to the picture plane and a window that allows natural light to illuminate the interior. Confident with what he had achieved in *Woman Reading a Book by a Window*, Metsu went a step further in *A Moneylender Visited by a Weeping Woman* (fig 3), which shows a larger and more elaborate interior.

Metsu signed this painting *Gabriel/Metsu* on a letter stuck in a window bar behind the woman's head. It is only one of two works that the artist inscribed with his full name. The other painting, *A Woman Giving Alms to a Boy*, dates to 1657–59.^[9] Metsu usually signed his works *Gmetsu* (*G* and *m* in ligature) or *G.Metsu*.

- Adriaan Waiboer, 2017

Endnotes

1. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Jan Vermeer* (New York, 1981), 70, ill., suggested that the biblical subject of the Prodigal Son underlies Vermeer's *Procuress*, 1656, oil on canvas, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.
2. It is impossible to decipher the text of the book. Adri Mackor, who is preparing a doctoral dissertation (University of Ghent) on the work of Marinus van Reymerswaele (ca. 1490–ca. 1546) and who has developed a proficiency in reading inscriptions on painted documents, has not been able to read the words either (personal communication, 2013). The same or a similar striped carpet appears in other Metsu works of the mid-1650s, including *A Moneylender Visited by a Weeping Woman* (fig. 3), and two versions of *A Woman at Her Toilet* (see Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* [New Haven, 2012], 180, nos. A-28, A-29, both ill.).
3. For Bol's other paintings, see Albert Blankert, *Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680): Rembrandt's Pupil* (Doornspijk, 1982), 141, no. 134, pl. 143; no. 135, pl. 144; no. 136, pl. 143.
4. On De Bray's painting and the identification of the woman as possibly being Semiramis, see Pieter Biesboer, ed., *Painting Family: The De Brays, Master Painters of 17th-Century Holland* (Exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum; London, Dulwich Picture Gallery) (Zwolle, 2008), 51–52.
5. Further indicating that *Woman Reading a Book by a Window* is not a portrait is the fact that the woman is a figure type Metsu included often in his early works, among them *A Moneylender Visited by a Weeping Woman* (fig. 3). Franklin W. Robinson, *Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667): A Study of His Place in Dutch Genre Painting of the Golden Age* (New York, 1974), 19, proposed that the painting is probably a portrait of a woman in extravagant dress.
6. For Molenaer's painting's, see Dennis P. Weller, ed., *Jan Miense Molenaer: Painter of the Dutch Golden Age* (Exh. cat. Raleigh, North Carolina Museum of Art; Columbus, Indianapolis Museum of Art; Manchester, N.H., Currier Museum of Art) (Raleigh, 2002), 100–2, no. 12, ill.; for Vermeer's painting, see Walter Liedtke, *Dutch Paintings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2 vols (New York, 2007), 2:893–902, no. 206, ill.
7. Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia, of uytbeeldingen des verstands [...]*, trans. Dirck P. Pers (Amsterdam, 1644), 273 (Cognitione); 406 (Philosophia); 435 (Rettorica); 595 (Eloquenza); 620–21 (Sapienza).
8. For example, Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia, of uytbeeldingen des verstands [...]*, trans. Dirck P. Pers (Amsterdam, 1644), 595, describes Eloquenza as a woman dressed in red (like Metsu's woman), but also mentions that she is depicted with an hourglass and a birdcage with a parrot on top of it. Ripa mentions that Cognitione requires a torch not only to see what she is reading, but also to illuminate her intellect (ibid., 273). Perhaps Metsu modernized the scene by replacing the torch with an open window, which allows the natural light of the sun to serve as her source of physical and spiritual illumination.
9. Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, 2012), 207, no.



A-63, ill.

Provenance

- (Sale, H. D. G. de Marée and W. Horstink, Haarlem, 12 May 1817, no. 96 [for 260 florins to Engesmet]).
- A. B. Roothaan, Amsterdam (his sale, De Vries ... Roos, Amsterdam, 29 March 1826, no. 56 [for 71 florins to Hérís]).
- Comte F. de Robiano (1778–1836), Brussels (his sale, Brussels, 1 May 1837, no. 439 [for 630 francs to Guillaume van Callenbergh]).
- Charles Scarisbrick (1800–61), Lancashire (his sale, Christie's, London, 24–25 May 1861, no. 91, as A. G. Metzu [for £35.14 pounds to Peane]).
- [Kleinberger Galleries, Paris and New York, by June 1922; Riesler; Kunsthandel Z. M. Hackenbroch, Frankfurt, before 1925].
- Dr. Albert Hahn (1889–1968), Frankfurt, by 1925; by descent to the heirs of Hahn (sale, Christie's, London, 7 December 2006, no. 3 [Johnny van Haften, Ltd., London, 2006]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2006.

Exhibition History

- Frankfurt, Städelches Kunstinstitut, “Ausstellung von Meisterwerken alter Malerei aus Privatbesitz,” Summer 1925, no. 138 [lent by Dr. Albert Hahn].
- Kyoto, Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, “Communication: Visualizing the Human Connection in the Age of Vermeer,” 25 June–16 October 2011; Miyagi, Miyagi Museum of Art, 27 October–12 December 2011; Tokyo, Bunkamura Museum of Art, 23 December 2011–14 March 2012, no. 26 [lent by the present owner].
- Williamstown, The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, “An Inner World: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting,” 5 March–17 September 2017 [lent by the present owner].
- Philadelphia, Arthur Ross Gallery, University of Pennsylvania, “An Inner World: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting,” 17 April–25 July 2021, no. 4 [lent by the present owner].
- San Diego, Timken Museum of Art, “Exchanging Words: Women and Letters in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting,” 21 September–31 December 2022 [lent by the present owner].

References

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- Yeager-Crasselt, Lara. “Embracing an Inner World in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting.” In *An Inner World: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting*. Edited by Heather Moqtaderi and Lara Yeager-Crasselt, 18–19, 27–28, no. 4. Exh. cat. Philadelphia, Arthur Ross Gallery, University of Pennsylvania. Philadelphia, 2021.
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National Gallery of Canada; Frankfurt am Main, Städel Museum. New Haven, 2021.

- Yeager-Crasselt, Lara. *Exchanging Words: Women and Letters in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting*. Exh. brochure. San Diego, Timken Museum of Art. San Diego, 2022, fig. 10.

Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of medium-weight, plain-weave fabric with tacking margins removed, has been lined. The upper edge has been cut and forms three arched lobes of varying widths. Diagonal-weave fabric inserts have been added to both upper corners to create a rectangular format. The support has been lined as a rectangle, and the composition has been extended onto the inserts.^[1] There are two stencils, three import stamps, and white chalk numerals but no wax collection seals along the lining or stretcher.

The 48.5 cm-wide central arch over the figure's head is cut straight horizontally at the midpoint. The left arch is 26 cm wide and the right arch 15 cm wide. Cusping visible in the X-radiograph along the entire right vertical edge but not the left suggests the right side of the composition has not been altered in width, and it is unlikely that the two outer arches were ever of similar widths. Pronounced cusping along the lower edge and slight cusping along the center of the upper edge suggest the composition has not been significantly altered in height.

A light-colored radio-opaque ground has been thinly and evenly applied. The paint has been applied smoothly aside from the white drapery and books, which have been applied in low impasto with visible brushwork. Dark passages along the figure's red drapery and red hat plume are reticulated and appear medium rich.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images at 780–1000 nanometers. The images suggest a slight shift in position of the figure's profile, from her proper right eye to between her lips, and to the swag of hair cascading down her proper left shoulder.

The painting is signed in dark paint along the white letter tucked along the ironwork of the window to the left of the red plume of the figure's hat. The letter with the flourish that precedes "Gabriel" is indistinct. The painting is undated.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2007 and remains in an excellent state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. If the lining is removed or replaced, stretcher bar marks along the support reverse may reveal valuable information regarding its original shape.