





Woman Seated at Her Toilet

Studio of Gerard ter Borch the Younger
(Zwolle 1617 – 1681 Deventer)

ca. 1657 or later
oil on panel
47 x 35 cm
GB-107

How to cite

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In this placid vignette, a young woman fiddles with a lock of her hair as she stares pensively at her image reflected in the small mirror on the table before her. Other toilet accessories are scattered across the table: a round silver box, a candlestick, a brush, a pincushion, and a single strand of pearls. The woman's attentive maid stands just behind, patiently pulling a comb through her mistress's dark blond curls. In the right foreground is a low table with an ivory comb resting at one corner; filling much of the background of the scene is an ornate chimneypiece.

The subject of a woman at her toilet was one of the most popular themes in Dutch genre painting during the second half of the seventeenth century, charmingly explored on multiple occasions by artists such as Gerrit Dou (1613–75), Gabriel Metsu (1639–67), Frans van Mieris (1635–81), Caspar Netscher (1639–84), and Johannes Vermeer (1632–75) in addition to Gerard ter Borch the Younger. While some paintings draw conspicuous parallels with popular imagery and rhetoric that associated women regarding themselves in a mirror with the sins of pride and lust,^[1] others focus more simply on the pleurably sensual qualities of these intimate feminine rituals. Considering Ter Borch's life-long fascination with the quiet beauty and cherished minutiae of women's domestic preoccupations, it is no surprise that depicting women at their toilet became one of his favored themes. Images of women primping and preening, adjusting their costume, or dressing their hair offered viewers a discreet glimpse of these private rituals. The ubiquitous presence of a maid—sometimes older, but invariably plain and soberly dressed—introduced a contrast that subtly accentuated the youthful beauty and feminine grace of the woman being dressed.

Ter Borch treated the subject of a woman dressing her hair, assisted by her maid, on at least three occasions. Each time he expressed a slightly different understanding of the event, underscoring his unique sensitivity to the minute but fascinating variations that can be found in even the most mundane, repetitive activities. Ter Borch first approached the theme in a painting of about 1650 or slightly earlier, now known only through copies.^[2] The composition shows a woman seated at her dressing table with a small dog in her lap. She peers at her reflected image in a mirror supported by a young boy, as she and her maid coax her long blond locks into some intricate coiffure. *Woman Seated at Her Toilet* incorporates most of the same elements but reverses the orientation of the figures and omits the young boy.

Woman Seated at Her Toilet is most closely related to Ter Borch's *A Lady Dressing Her Hair*, of about 1657–58 in the Wallace Collection in London (fig 1). The basic compositional elements are identical in both pictures: a woman seated at a plush-covered dressing table with her maid standing just behind, and a massive marble

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Gerard ter Borch, *A Lady Dressing Her Hair*, ca. 1657–58, oil on panel, 35 x 25 cm, The Wallace Collection, London, no. 235, © The Wallace Collection



Fig 2. Attributed to Gerard ter Borch, *The Duet*, ca. 1669, oil on canvas, 82.5 x 72 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. 1900, Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY



Fig 3. Detail showing painted monogram and wax seal on reverse of *A Woman Seated at Her Toilet*, GB-107

chimneypiece in the left background. In *Woman Seated at Her Toilet*, the costume of the seated woman has been modified slightly and a small table was added at the lower right. The figure of the maid is no longer in profile, but turned three-quarters to the viewer, her head bent to the task of combing her mistress's long hair. The composition has been expanded on all sides, effectively distancing the figures from the picture plane. By making this small adjustment, the artist of this work replaced the disarming intimacy of the Wallace Collection picture with a cool detachment that supports the changes he made in the figures themselves. Whereas in the Wallace Collection picture the maid seems to chatter gaily to the woman seated before her, here she seems more subservient, more distant, engaging less with her mistress and the viewer. Her downturned face masks her expression, introducing a degree of ambiguity.

Gudlaugsson described *Woman Seated at Her Toilet* as a relatively late work by Ter Borch, of about 1670,^[3] constituting a reprise of a subject that had occupied him at least a dozen years before. It seems more likely, however, that the picture is a roughly contemporary variation of the Wallace Collection's *A Lady Dressing Her Hair*. The woman's costume (specifically her red jacket) and hairstyle are more in keeping with styles of the late 1650s; furthermore, the marble chimneypiece appears in other paintings by Ter Borch of the late 1650s (including fig. 1), but not in any autograph works from around 1670. Although the elongated proportions of the figures in *Woman Seated at Her Toilet*—the slim ovoid heads, narrow shoulders, and attenuated limbs—are seen in a few other genre paintings ascribed to this period, for example *The Duet* in the Louvre, dated about 1669 (fig 2), they appear less gracefully integrated here. This weakness, as well as the simplistic modeling of the draperies and the overly sharp contours of the figures against the background, suggest that *Woman Seated at Her Toilet* was produced by a member of Ter Borch's studio rather than by the master himself.

Woman Seated at Her Toilet is generally in good condition, although the dark background is somewhat worn and some pigments (notably the dark blue of the maid's apron) appear to have deteriorated. The rather flat appearance of the woman's red jacket may result from the loss of the thin glazes typically applied atop the paint layer to shade and model forms. On the back of the panel is a red wax collection seal, which, though fragmentary, bears an impression of a crenellated tower on a shield borne aloft by two griffins, motifs belonging to the arms of the Neufville family in the Netherlands.^[4] There is also a painted insignia incorporating the initials GSI, which has not yet been identified (fig 3).



- Marjorie E. Wieseman, 2017

Endnotes

1. See Eric Jan Sluijter, “Een stuck waerin een jufr voor de spiegel van Gerrit Douw,” *Antiek* 23 (1988): 150–61.
2. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:95–96, no. 76; sale, Brussels, 9 March 1953, no. 93.
3. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:212.
4. See A. C. de Neufville, *Histoire généalogique de la maison de Neufville* (Amsterdam, 1869), 193ff.

Provenance

- Robbert de Neufville, Leiden (his sale, Haak, Leiden, 15 March 1736, no. 9 [for 42 florins]).
- Nicolaas Nieuhoff, Amsterdam (his sale, Van der Schey-de Winter-Yver, Amsterdam, 14 April 1777, no. 29 [for 800 florins to Fouquet]).
- [M. Antoine-Charles Dulac, Paris (sale, Chariot-Paillet, Paris, 30 November 1778, no. 240 [for 1,960 livres to Dubois])].
- Jan Jansz Gildemeester, Amsterdam (his sale, Van der Schley, Amsterdam, 11 June 1800, no. 29 [for 255 florins to B. Kooy]).
- Arend van der Werff van Zuidland, Dordrecht (his sale, Versteegh, Dordrecht, 31 July 1811, no. 111 [for 140 florins to Meulemans for Van der Werff of Haarlem]).
- Chevalier Sébastien Énard (1752–1831), Château de la Muette, Passy (his sale, Henry-Lacoste, Paris, 23 April 1832 [date of sale changed to 7–14 August 1832], no. 154 [for 2,000 francs to Henry (bought in)]; sale Énard et al., Christie’s, London, 22 June 1833, no. 9 [bought in at £65.2]).^[1]
- G. de Poulton Nicholson, Berlin (his sale, Lepke, Berlin, 8 April 1924, no. 70 [for 20,500 marks]).^[2]
- [Steinmeyer, Lucerne, 1924; S. Bolton, London, 1925; Böhler and Steinmeyer, New York, 1929].
- (Sale, Sir George Vernon et al., Puttick & Simpson, London, 27 November 1929, no. 44 [as “Property of a Gentleman” (W. G. Eden); £15 to Cooper (bought in)]).
- (Sale, Lord Dewar et al., Puttick & Simpson, London, 28 May 1930, no. 108 [property of W. G. Eden; £6.60 to Ede (bought in)]).
- Hershel V. Jones (1861–1928), Minneapolis; by descent to Mrs. Hershel V. Jones, New York (sale, Sotheby’s Parke-Bernet, New York, 18 April 1940, no. 57; for \$1,900 to D. W. Cooper]).
- D. W. Cooper; by descent to Elizabeth C. Dunham (sale, Sotheby’s, New York, 8 October 1993, no. 178A).

- Private collection (sale, Christie's, London, 6 December 2007, no. 55 [Johnny Van Haeften, London, 2007]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2007.

Provenance Notes

1. The present painting was among those withdrawn from sale by Énard's nephew, Pierre-Orphée Énard, to be offered for sale in London in hopes of achieving a better price; see Anik Devries, "Sébastien Énard, un amateur d'art du début du XIXe siècle et ses conseillers," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 123 (1981): 84.
2. Gudlaugsson (Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. [The Hague, 1959–60], 2:212) recorded the painting in the collection of Dr. Wolffenberg, Berlin, in 1924; however, as Adolf and Gustav Wolffenberg were co-owners of Lepke's auction house at the time, this reference may simply indicate that he saw the painting at the auctioneers' prior to the sale.

Exhibition History

- Detroit Institute of Arts, "Ninth Loan Exhibition of Dutch Genre and Landscape Painting," 16 October–10 November 1929, no. 72 (lent by Böhler and Steinmeyer, New York).
- Albany, Albany Institute of History & Art, "Delights of the Senses: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Life. Featuring Paintings from The Leiden Collection," 14 September–31 December 2024, no. 2 [lent by the present owner].

References

- Hoet, Gerard. *Catalogus of Naamlyst van Schilderyen*. 2 vols. The Hague, 1752, 1: 458, no. 9.
- Smith, John. *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters*. 9 vols. London, 1829–42, 4:123, no. 17, as probably a copy after Ter Borch.
- Hofstede de Groot, Cornelis. *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith*. Edited and translated by Edward G. Hawke, 5: 27, no. 65. 8 vols. London, 1907–28. Originally published as *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*. 10 vols. Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28.
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- Donath, Adolph. "Der Kunstmarkt 1923/24." *Jahrbuch für Kunstsammler*, nos. 4–5 (1925): 103–4, fig. 38.



- Valentiner, Wilhelm. R. *Ninth Loan Exhibition of Dutch Genre and Landscape Painting*. Exh. cat. Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts. Detroit, 1929, xvii, no. 72.
- Gudlaugsson, Sturla, J. *Geraert ter Borch*. 2 vols. The Hague, 1959–60, 1:365, fig. 234; 2:142 (under no. 127), 211–14, no. 234.
- Ingamells, John. *The Wallace Collection Catalogue of Pictures, IV: Dutch and Flemish*. London, 1992, 39.
- 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, 44–45, no. 2.
- Nogrady, Elizabeth with Annie Correll. “Introduction.” In *Delights of the Senses: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Life. Featuring Paintings from The Leiden Collection*. Edited by Elizabeth Nogrady and Diane Shewchuk, 7. Exh. cat. Albany, Albany Institute of History & Art. Albany, 2024.
- Marx, Lizzie. “The Delights and Displeasures of Smell in Dutch Genre Scenes.” In *Delights of the Senses: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Life. Featuring Painting from the Leiden Collection*. Edited by Elizabeth Nogrady and Diane Shewchuk, 20. Exh. cat. Albany, Albany Institute of History & Art. Albany, 2024.

Versions

Versions and Copies

1. Gerard ter Borch, *A Lady at Her Toilet*, ca. 1657–58, oil on panel, 35 x 25 cm, Wallace Collection, London, no. 235. Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith*, 8 vols. (London, 1907–27), translated from *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 10 vols. (Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28), 5:22–23, no. 48; Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:141–42, no. 127.
2. After Gerard ter Borch, *A Woman Seated at Her Toilet*, oil on panel, 31 x 25 or 53 x 40 cm, formerly H. Reinhardt Galleries, New York, 1925; sale, Charles Stokvis, Galerie des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 17 November 1947, no. 107 (this sale is not noted in Gudlaugsson). Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:212, no. 234a (as possibly identical to Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith*, 8 vols. [London, 1907–27], translated from *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 10 vols. [Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28], 5:26, no. 60a).
3. After Gerard ter Borch, *A Woman Seated at Her Toilet*, oil on canvas, 57 x 47 cm, formerly private collection, Basel, 1957; (possibly) sale, Christies, London, 10 July 1992, no. 142 (as follower of Ter

- Borch). Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:213, no. 234a. Composition expanded at left and right sides.
4. After Gerard ter Borch, *A Woman Seated at Her Toilet*, oil on canvas, 43 x 35.5 cm, sale J. Witsen, Amsterdam, 16 August 1790, no. 9 (for fl. 41 to Coclers); present whereabouts unknown. Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith*, 8 vols. (London, 1907–27), translated from *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 10 vols. (Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28), 5:27, under no. 65; Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:213, no. 234b (as possibly identical with one or more of the other versions listed).
 5. After Gerard ter Borch, *A Woman Seated at Her Toilet*, oil on canvas, 48.5 x 40 cm, formerly G. Neumans, Paris, 1912. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:213, no. 234c. Hofstede de Groot considered this genuine, but dirty and possibly overpainted. Possibly identical to Version 4, 6, or 7.
 6. After Gerard ter Borch, *A Woman Seated at Her Toilet*, monogrammed GTB lower right, oil on canvas, 46 x 36 cm, sale Mme la Marquise d'Aoust, Lair-Dubreuil and Féral, Paris, 5 June 1924, no. 96 (as attributed to Ter Borch); current whereabouts unknown. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:213, no. 234d (possibly identical to Version 4, 5, or 7). Seen by Hofstede de Groot and judged genuine, but completely overpainted.
 7. After Gerard ter Borch, *A Woman Seated at Her Toilet*, oil on canvas, 48.5 x 40 cm, formerly M. Knoedler & Co., New York, ca. 1940. With modifications to hairstyle and chimneypiece. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:213, no. 234e (as workshop; possibly identical to Version 4, 5, or 6).
 8. After Gerard ter Borch, *A Woman Seated at Her Toilet*, oil on canvas, 76 x 64 cm, sale Sotheby's, London, 8 July 1981, no. 99; sale, Koller, Zürich, 3–4 June 1983, no. 5018. (possibly) Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith*, 8 vols. (London, 1907–27), translated from *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 10 vols. (Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28), 5:20, no. 43; Eduard Plietzsch, *Gerard ter Borch* (Vienna, 1944), 50, under no. 67 (as variant of the Wallace Collection painting); Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:213, no. 234f (as workshop), enlarged composition.
 9. After Gerard ter Borch, *A Woman Seated at Her Toilet*, oil on canvas, 78 x 67 cm, formerly private collection, Switzerland, 1955. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:213–14, no. 234g, enlarged composition.
 10. After Gerard ter Borch, *A Woman Seated at Her Toilet*, oil on canvas, measurements unknown, sale D. N. Teengs, Monnikendam, 23 September 1824, no. 11. Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith*, 8 vols. (London, 1907–27), translated from *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der*

Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts, 10 vols. (Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28), 5:26, no. 61; Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:214, no. 234h (as possibly identical to his no. 234f or 234g, our Versions 8 and 9).

11. After Gerard ter Borch, *A Woman Seated at Her Toilet*, oil on panel, 53 x 40.5 cm, formerly Galerie Koller, Zürich, 1966; sale, Moharishuis, Arnhem, 24–29 November 1968, no. 146.
12. After Gerard ter Borch, *Woman Dressing Her Hair, with a Maid*, support and dimensions unknown, sale, Zeger Hasebroek, Leiden, 26 April 1763, no. 124 (“Een Dame, die haar Paleert, met haar Dienstmaagd, naar Ter Burg”). Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:212, under no. 234.

Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained but horizontally oriented rectangular-shaped oak, has bevels along the upper and lower sides only.^[1] The panel is unthinned and uncradled and has no machine tool marks. There is one red wax collection seal, one import stamp, a stencil, three labels, and a hand-painted cross but no panel maker’s mark.

A light gray-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied. The paint has been built up in successive thin layers, light over dark, allowing the darker layers beneath the flesh tones to show through. Delicate dots of light add highlights along the figure’s skirt, earrings, and pearl necklace on the table.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. The images and pentimenti indicate minor compositional changes during the paint stage. The fingers of the figure’s proper right hand have been uncurled, the palm has been shifted closer to the figure, and the elbow has been raised.

The painting is unsigned and undated.

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

Technical Summary Endnotes

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