



**Young Man Smoking and A Woman
Pouring Beer**

Gabriel Metsu
(Leiden 1629 – 1667 Amsterdam)

ca. 1656–58

oil on panel

37.6 x 31.2 cm

faintly inscribed with the back of a brush along
table edge: “G MEtsu”

GM-108



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In this convivial tavern scene, a young man dressed in a bright red shirt, brown shorts and stockings leans forward in his seat to light his pipe from the hot coals in the brazier he holds in his left hand. An attractive waitress, who stands behind the makeshift table in front of the youth, smiles endearingly at him as she pours him a glass of beer from an earthenware jug. The hat resting on the back of the man's chair indicates that he has just arrived in the tavern and has settled in to enjoy his drink and tobacco.

Dutch artists frequently depicted figures smoking in their genre paintings, but the place of tobacco in that society was a subject of great debate. On the one hand, medical experts had drawn attention to the benefits of the plant, which had first been imported to the Netherlands in the late sixteenth century. In his widely read *Schat der gesontheydt* (Treasury of Health) of 1636, Johann van Beverwijck argued that tobacco was a prophylactic against one of the deadliest diseases of his time, the plague.^[1] On the other hand, the recreational use of tobacco was criticized because the effects of smoking were considered to be similar to those of consuming alcohol.^[2] Moreover, smoking carried a social stigma, as initially it enjoyed popularity among sailors, soldiers and the lower rural classes, precisely those groups from which the middle class preferred to distance itself. Over the course of the century, however, the tobacco industry expanded, and smoking became a widely accepted leisure pastime, even among the upper classes.

In this painting, Gabriel Metsu seems little concerned with making a moral judgment about the young man's enjoyment of smoking, and more interested in depicting the gentle rapport between him and the appealing woman serving him his beer. The length of the man's pipe even hints at his somewhat respectable status. Poor people could afford only unpolished short-stemmed pipes, whereas members of the middle classes used pipes with longer stems that cooled off the smoke and softened the somewhat bitter taste of burnt tobacco.^[3]

Metsu painted this work in 1656–58, during his early Amsterdam years when he often depicted men and women enjoying tobacco or alcohol in public houses. His first painting of a couple drinking together is *A Man and a Woman Sharing a Meal* from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (**fig 1**), which draws on an inn scene from about 1650 by Gerard ter Borch (1617–81).^[4] Metsu subsequently made two variations of the subject: the present work and *A Man Smoking a Pipe at a Fireplace* (**fig 2**). Aside from the different times of the day depicted in these works, they also differ in the character of the relationships of the two protagonists. In the Leiden Collection painting the scene depicts a waitress and a young customer, and nothing more.^[5] In *A Man Smoking a Pipe at a Fireplace*, however, the smiling interactions and postures of

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Gabriel Metsu, *A Man and a Woman Sharing a Meal*, 1655–58, oil on canvas on panel, 30 x 28 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-249



Fig 2. Gabriel Metsu, *A Man Smoking a Pipe at a Fireplace*, 1656–58, oil on panel, 27.5 x 23 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, 1737



the young man and woman suggests that an amorous tension exists between them.

In the eighteenth century, when each of these paintings was first recorded, the value of *Young Man Smoking and a Woman Pouring Beer* was substantially higher than that of the night scene. The Dutch painter and art dealer Philips van Dijk (1683–1753) sold the two paintings to Johan Hendrik Graaf van Wassenaar Obdam from The Hague in 1730 and 1734, at which time he received more than double the price for *Young Man Smoking and a Woman Pouring Beer* (315 florins) as he did for the night scene (150 florins).^[6] Van Wassenaar's heirs sold the latter picture after the collector's death in 1653, but they held on to *Young Man Smoking and a Woman Pouring Beer* for some 20 years, eventually selling it in 1769. The difference between the sales prices is again telling: *A Man Smoking a Pipe at a Fireplace* sold for 283 florins, while the present painting fetched again more than twice as much: 605 florins. This work then passed through several prominent eighteenth- and nineteenth-century collections, including those of the Duc de Choiseul-Praslin, the Baron de Beurnonville, and Edward Cecil Guinness.

- Adriaan Waiboer, 2017

Endnotes

1. Johann van Beverwijck, *Schat der gesontheydt* (Amsterdam, 1636), 150.
2. The Flemish physician and botanist Rembert Dodoens, for example, pointed out that inhaling smoke led to a state comparable to drunkenness (Rembert Dodoens, *Purgantium aliarumque eo facientium* [Antwerp, 1574], 349–51).
3. On the connotations of smoking in the Low Countries in the seventeenth century, see Ivan Gaskell, “Tobacco, Social Deviance, and Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Looking at Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art: Realism Reconsidered*, ed. Wayne Franits (Cambridge, 1997), 68–77; and Eddy de Jongh, “Vluchtige rook vereeuwigt: Betekenissen en tabaksgebruik in zeventiende eeuwse voorstellingen,” in *Rookgordijnen: Roken in de kunsten van olieverf tot celluloid*, ed. Benno Tempel (Exh. cat. Rotterdam, Kunsthall) (Rotterdam, 2003), 85–126.
4. Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, 2012), 62. For Ter Borch’s painting, see *ibid.*, 44, fig. 15.
5. Other paintings by Metsu featuring a woman and a younger male figure also do not show them interacting with each other or reciprocating glances. See, for instance, Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, 2012), 185, no. A-35; 210–11, no. A-67, both ill.
6. Everhard Korthals Altes, “Philip van Dijk, een achttiende-eeuwse Haagse schilder-kunsthandelaar met een lokale en internationale clientele,” *Oud Holland* 116 (2003): 51, 52, published the receipts of the paintings Van Dijk sold to Van Wassenaar on 11 February 1730 and 16 July 1734. The receipts are preserved in the archives of Castle Twickel in Delden (inv. no. 542, 12). For more on Van Dijk’s dealings with Van Wassenaar, see *ibid.*, 35–41. It should be noted that Korthals Altes erroneously assumed that Van Wassenaar’s “Een stuckie van gl metzu zijnde Een toback Rookertje en een vrouwtie dat bier schenkt etc” (A piece by Gabriel Metsu being a man smoking tobacco and a woman pouring beer etc.) was identical to “een stucke van gl metzu een nagt ligje” (a piece by Gabriel Metsu [depicting] a night light). As argued here, these concern two different works.

Provenance

- (Philip van Dijk, The Hague), sold to Johan Hendrik Graaf van Wassenaar Obdam, The Hague, 16 July 1734; by inheritance to Unico Wilhelm Graaf van Wassenaar Obdam, Delden, The Hague, 1745; (his sale, Amsterdam, 25 October 1769, no. 20 [for 605 florins to Huybert Ketelaar]).
- Antoine Poulain, Paris.



- Armand Frédéric Ernest Nogaret (his sale, Le Brun, Paris, 2–5 June 1780, no. 26 [for 3,801 francs to Alexandre Joseph Paillet]).
- Renaud César de Choiseul-Praslin (1735–1791) (his sale, Paillet, Paris, 18–25 February 1793, no. 64 [for 3,350 francs to his son, Antoine-César de Choiseul-Praslin]).
- Antoine-César de Choiseul-Praslin (1756–1808) (his sale, Paillet, Paris, 9–10 May 1808, no. 20 [for 4,001 francs to Alexandre Joseph Paillet]).
- Earl of Granville, by 1835 (his sale, Christie's, London, 21 June 1845, no. 8 [for £231 to Faulkner]).
- Baron E. de Beurnonville, Paris (his sale, Féral, George, Petit, Paris, 9–16 May 1881, no. 365 [for 20,000 francs to Sedelmeyer Gallery]; by whom sold in 1881 [for 25,000 francs to Secrétan]).
- E. Secrétan, Paris (his sale, Boussod, Valadon, Sedelmeyer, Féral, Mannheim, Paris, 1–4 July 1889, no. 142 [for 64,500 francs to Thomas Agnew & Sons on behalf of Edward Guinness; purchased by Guinness for £2,844.9]).
- Edward Cecil Guinness, 1st Earl of Iveagh, London, 1889; by inheritance to Arthur Ernest Guinness, Holmbury House, Holmbury St. Mary, Surrey, 1927 (his sale, Christie's, London, 10 July 1953, no. 62 [for £7,350 to Duits Gallery and Marlborough, London]).
- Count Hans Christopher von Seherr-Thoss, Litchfield, Connecticut, by 1958; by descent to Sonia P. Seherr-Thoss, 1992 (sale, Sotheby's New York, 25–26 January 2007, no. 15 [Johnny van Haefte, Ltd., London]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2007.

Exhibition History

- London, British Institution, "Catalogue of Pictures by Italian, Spanish, Flemish, Dutch and French Masers, with which the Proprietors Have Favoured the Institution," May 1835, no. 111 [lent by Earl Granville].
- London, Royal Academy of Arts, "Exhibition of Works by the Old Masters and by Deceased Masters of the British School; Including a Collection of Water Colour Drawings Illustrating the Progress of the Art of Water Colour in England: Winter Exhibition," 1891, no. 90 [lent by Lord Iveagh].
- Paris, "Sedelmeyer Gallery, Illustrated Catalogue of 300 Paintings of the Dutch, Flemish, Italian, French and English Schools, being some of the principal pictures which have at various times formed part of the Sedelmeyer Gallery," 1898, no. 89 [lent by Lord Iveagh].
- London, Royal Academy, "Dutch Pictures 1450–1750," Winter 1952–53, no. 505 [lent by the Hon. Ernst Guinness].
- Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, "Chefs-d'Oeuvres de la Curiosité du Monde: 2e Exposition Internationale de la C.I.N.O.A.," 10 June–30 September 1954, no. 28, [lent by Duits Gallery].

- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, January 2011–August 2015 [lent by the present owner].
- Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum, “Work, Pray & Admire: New Views on Calvinism and Art,” 11 November 2018–26 May 2019 [lent by the present owner].
- 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. 8 [lent by the present owner].

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1. Henri-Emile Lefort, after G. Metsu, *Intérieur hollandaise*, 1881, etching (first published in sale catalogue, George, Petit, Paris, 9–16 May 1881, no. 365, and reproduced in F. W. H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings, and Woodcuts, ca. 1450–1700* [Amsterdam, 1949–], 14:16, no. 32).

Watercolor

1. Cornelis Buys after Gabriel Metsu, *Woman Pouring Beer and a Young Man Smoking*, watercolor (last seen in 1810, apparently lost).

Versions

1. After Gabriel Metsu, *Woman Pouring Beer and a Young Man Smoking*, oil on panel, 37 x 30 cm, formerly Galerie Internationale, The Hague, 1961.
2. After Gabriel Metsu, *Woman Pouring Beer and a Young Man Smoking*, (support unknown), 38 x 32.5 cm, formerly D. L. van Hengel, Arnhem.
3. After Gabriel Metsu, *Woman Pouring Beer and a Young Man Smoking*, oil on panel, 35 x 30 cm, possibly formerly Sedelmeyer Gallery, Paris, 1898.
4. After Gabriel Metsu, *Woman Pouring Beer and a Young Man Smoking*, oil on panel, 38 x 32 cm, formerly Baron Konigswaerter, Vienna.
5. After Gabriel Metsu, *Woman Pouring Beer and a Young Man Smoking*, oil on panel, 37 x 30 cm (probably equivalent with Version 4, or Version 1).
6. After Gabriel Metsu, *Woman Pouring Beer and a Young Man Smoking*, untraceable, 39.4 x 31.8 cm.
7. After Gabriel Metsu, *Woman Pouring Beer and a Young Man Smoking*, untraceable.
8. After Gabriel Metsu, *Maid and Servant*, nineteenth century, oil on panel, 38.5 x 31 cm, previous sale, Van Ham Kunstauktionen GmbH & Co., Cologne, 24 February 2021, no. 575.

Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular oak, has bevels on all four sides.^[1] The panel is unthinned and uncradled. Three small rectangular wood blocks reinforce worm tunnels along the right edge. The panel has remnants of a red wax seal, two paper labels, a black stencil, and faint machine toolmarks, but no import stamps or panel maker's mark.

A light orange tone in various places suggests a light warm-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied. The paint has been applied smoothly in thin layers. The red drapery has a red surface glaze in places, and the blue drapery appears to be richly colored.



No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 720 nanometers. The images reveal faint compositional lines in the fireplace above the young man. There is variation across certain elements, such as the young woman's face, her white shawl, and the young man's right boot that are not clearly evident in normal light.

The painting has a faintly inscribed signature along the table edge, which is slightly clearer in infrared. The letters have been scratched through the brown paint and allow the ground to show through.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2007 and remains in a good state of preservation.^[2]

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of wood is based on visual examination only.
2. Entry based on 2012 examination report by Jevon Thistlewood, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.