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Young Woman Seated in an Interior, Reading a Letter

Gabriel Metsu
(Leiden 1629 – 1667 Amsterdam)

ca. 1658–61
oil on panel
25.8 x 21 cm
GM-103

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Gabriel Metsu was a master at rendering the sense of expectation and anticipation that occurs when one reads a letter from a loved one. Here, a young woman, sitting demurely near her sewing basket and with a sewing cushion on her lap, looks down to read the letter that has arrived while she was diligently engaged in her needlework. The scene is quiet and still, with the only semblance of movement being the slight smile that crosses her face as she reads her lover's missive. Although not privy to the text, the viewer is a silent witness to this tender and private moment.

Metsu, who was always keen to respond to contemporary trends in Dutch genre painting, was an avid painter of scenes of amorous correspondence, a popular theme for artists painting during the third quarter of the seventeenth century. The appeal of these works reflects the important role of letter writing in the Netherlands. The ability to compose eloquent messages was an indication of civility and education, even if the writer made use of the letter-writing manuals that were widely available in the Dutch Republic.[1] The subject allowed artists to create engaging images of men and women either reading a billet-doux from a lover or searching for words to express their own feelings on paper.

Metsu made no fewer than nine images of men or women reading or writing love letters from the late 1650s to the mid-1660s.[2] *Young Woman Seated in an Interior, Reading a Letter* is the earliest of the three representations of a female letter reader he made during this period. He executed it around 1658–61, just as he began shifting his attention from working maids to elegant women engaged in leisurely pastimes.[3] The young woman's clothes, earrings and silver ear picker (an ornamented tool to clean the ear canal) hanging on a chain attached to a blue velvet purse clearly associate her with the middle class.

Metsu's approach to this subject owes much to the paintings of pensive women writing and reading letters that Gerard ter Borch (1617–81) made in the mid-1650s. Indeed, Ter Borch may be credited with inspiring not only Metsu's interest in depicting the theme of amorous correspondence, but also that of Pieter de Hooch (1629–84), Frans van Mieris (1635–81), Johannes Vermeer (1632–75), and Caspar Netscher (ca. 1639–84).

Two of Ter Borch's paintings in particular, *A Woman Writing a Letter* from ca. 1655–56 **(fig 1)** and *A Woman with a Wine Glass Reading a Letter* **(fig 2)** from about one to two years later, seem to have inspired Metsu when making this work.[4] Ter Borch situated the women in these paintings seated close to the picture plane and placed them against a dark background. Metsu freely adapted these compositional features in making this painting, but in doing so he created an image more tranquil and intimate than those created by Ter Borch, partly by painting his scene in a smaller

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Gerard ter Borch, *A Woman Writing a Letter*, ca. 1655–66, oil on panel, 39 x 29.5 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague, 797



Fig 2. Gerard ter Borch, *A Woman with a Wine Glass Reading a Letter*, ca. 1656–57, oil on canvas, 37.5 x 28.7 cm, Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, 1055

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format and placing his figure nearer the front of the picture plane. Whereas Ter Borch incorporated two to three areas of color to enliven his scenes—the women's clothes, the carpets on the tables, and the upholstery of a chair—Metsu limited his bright color—the red of the bodice—to the woman herself.[5]

Ter Borch often used his half-sister Gesina (1631–90) as a model for his genre scenes and, in a similar fashion, Metsu frequently painted his own wife, Isabella de Wolff, in domestic roles, as he did here. Though Metsu did not portray her accurately in all of these scenes, her facial features are generally recognizable even if her appearance varies from one work to the next.[6] When Metsu painted this work, Isabella had been his wife only briefly: the couple had married in Enkhuizen in May 1658. Isabella was the daughter of Wouter Coenraetsz de Wolff and Maria de Grebber (1602–80), one of Holland's few female artists.[7]

- Adriaan Waiboer, 2017

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Endnotes

1. Peter C. Sutton, “Love Letters: Dutch Genre Painting in the Age of Vermeer,” in *Love Letters: Dutch Genre Paintings in the Age of Vermeer*, ed. Peter C. Sutton (Exh. cat. Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland; Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum of Arts and Sciences) (New Haven, 2003), 34–35.
2. Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, 2012), 203–4, no. A-60; 214–17, nos. A-71, A-72, A-73; 230, no. A-88; 250, no. A-108; 255–58, nos. A-116, A-117; 282–83, no. B-14, all ill.
3. For Metsu’s two other paintings of a woman reading a letter, see Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, 2012), 257–58, no. A-117; 282–83, no. B-14, both ill.
4. Metsu certainly knew Ter Borch’s *A Woman Writing a Letter*, as he used it as his departure point for *A Woman Drawing* of 1657–59.
5. This type of red was Metsu’s favorite color, and it appears in the majority of his works, often as a visual accent against a light- or dark-brownish background (see, for example, GM-101).
6. Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, 2012), 58–59. There are paintings, such as *A Woman Sewing, with a Parrot* (see ibid., 240, no. A-107, ill.), in which Isabella de Wolff’s identity as a model cannot be confirmed with certainty.
7. Irene van Thiel-Stroman, “Maria de Grebber,” in *Judith Leyster: A Dutch Master and Her World*, ed. Pieter Biesboer and James A. Welu (Exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum; Worcester, Worcester Art Museum) (New Haven, 1993), 228–29; see also Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, 2012), 8–9.

Provenance

- (Possible sale, Christie’s, London, 23 February 1798, no. 59 [for £8.18]).
- Private collection by 1935.
- A. R. Ball, New York, by 1944.
- Mrs. Charles E. Dunlap, New York (her sale, Sotheby’s Parke Bernet, New York, 4 December 1975, no. 303).
- Possibly W. W. Blake (sale, Sotheby’s, London, 6 July 1983, no. 84 [to Dreesman].
- Dr. Anton C. R. Dreesmann (1923–2000), Amsterdam, by 1983 (his sale, Christie’s, London, 11 April 2002, no. 555 [to Ambassador John William Middendorf II]).
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Ambassador John William Middendorf II (b. 1924), by 2002 [Johnny van Haeften, Ltd., London, 2004].[1]

- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2006.

Provenance Notes

1. Rembrandt van Rijn's *Portrait of a Young Woman*, now in The Leiden Collection, was also formerly in the collection of Ambassador John William Middendorf II.

Exhibition History

- Montreal, Art Association of Montreal, "Loan Exhibition of Great Paintings: Five Centuries of Dutch Art," 9 March–9 April 1944, no. 77 [lent by A. R. Ball].
- Amsterdam, Gebr. Douwes Fine Art, "Selling Exhibition of Old Master Paintings of the 17th, 18th and Early 19th Century," 27 November–22 December 1995; 3–19 January 1996, no. 26 [lent by Dr. Anton C. R. Dreesman].
- Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland, "Love Letters: Dutch Genre Paintings in the Age of Vermeer," 1 October–31 December 2003; Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum of Art and Science, 31 January–2 May 2004, no. 15 [lent by Ambassador John William Middendorf II].
- San Diego, Timken Museum of Art, "Gabriel Metsu: The Love Letter," 1 May–29 August 2004 [no number].
- Maastricht, European Fine Arts Fair, March 2005 and March 2006 [exhibited by Johnny van Haeften, Ltd.].
- Raleigh, North Carolina Museum of Art, "Small Treasures: Rembrandt, Hals, and Their Contemporaries," 12 October 2014–4 January 2015; Birmingham, Birmingham Museum of Art, 1 February–26 April 2015, no. 21 [lent by the 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

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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].
- 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. 9 [lent by the present owner].

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- Gebr. Douwes Fine Art. *Selling Exhibition of Old Master Paintings of the 17th, 18th and Early 19th Century*. Sales cat. Amsterdam, Gebr. Douwes Fine Art. Amsterdam, 1995–96, no. 29.
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- *Journal of National Museum of China* 169, no. 8 (2017): frontispiece.
- Long Museum, West Bund. *Rembrandt, Vermeer and Hals in the Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection*. Exh. cat. Shanghai, Long Museum, West Bund. Shanghai, 2017, 128–29.

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- Yeager-Crasselt, Lara. “Young Woman Seated in an Interior, Reading a Letter.” In *The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection*. Edited by Polina Lyubimova, 126–27; 237, no. 30. Translated by Daria Babich and Daria Kuzina. Exh. cat. Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts; St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum. Moscow, 2018.
- Ducos, Blaise, and Lara Yeager-Crasselt, eds. *Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age. Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre*. Exh. cat. Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi. London, 2019, 154, no. 74. [Exhibition catalogue also published in French and Arabic.]
- 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. 2.
- 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, 58–59, no. 9.

Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained, vertically oriented, rectangular non-Baltic oak, has bevels on all four sides.[1] The panel is unthinned and uncradled, and has vertically oriented hand toolmarks across the panel width and machine toolmarks along the left edge. There are three red wax collection seals, three import stamps, a stencil and a collector’s label, but no panel maker’s mark.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied followed by a thin, light gray underlayer.[2] The paint along the background has been applied in transparent glazes allowing the underlayer to show through, and the gray-blue wall color to the figure’s right is beaded up where it meets the figure’s wrist and forearm. The paint along the figure has been applied in successive thin layers with low brushmarkings light over dark. In raking light, the outer contours of the figure are slightly raised.

No underdrawing or compositional changes are readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers or in the X-radiograph.

The painting is unsigned and undated.

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition in 2006 and remains in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

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1. The characterization of wood is by Ian Tyers, independent consultant, Arcus Dendrochronology, Sheffield, England, who kindly examined the X-radiograph and offered his expert opinion via e-mail.
2. Visible in small chips along all four edges and along all four corners.

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