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Old Woman at a Window with a Candle

Gerrit Dou
(Leiden 1613 – 1675 Leiden)

1671
oil on panel
26.5 x 20.5 cm
signed and dated bottom center in brown paint:
“GDou / Anno 1671”
GD-103

How to cite

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In the early nineteenth-century, John Smith observed that Gerrit Dou's *Old Woman at a Window with a Candle,* despite its powerful effect, did not exhibit the usual meticulous finish associated with the artist.[1] Indeed, Dou executed this scene with loosely brushed strokes in the highlighted areas and thinly applied paints in the shadows. The freshness of this technique allowed him to capture a spontaneous moment of visual and emotional suspense. The old woman, seemingly stirred by a noise from outside, leans out of the arched, stone window opening into the darkness. Illuminated by the flickering flame of the candle, she looks to the side, her lips slightly parted as though she were calling out into the night.

As in some of Dou's other niche scenes (three of which are in the present collection: *Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an Artist's Atelier,* (GD-108); *Herring Seller and Boy,* (GD-106); and *Young Woman in a Niche with a Parrot and Cage*, (GD-105), the artist used the arched window frame both as a *repoussoir* device and as a means to concentrate our focus on the pictorial narrative. Here, Dou positioned the woman so that her candlestick and its flame provide the painting's visual focus, similar to his *Young Woman with a Lighted Candle at a Window* from ca. 1658–65 **(fig 1)**. They also emphatically break the picture plane as the woman reaches across the threshold of the window to extend the path of her light. As the candlelight flutters in the open air, it casts radiating shadows along the inside of the niche while illuminating Dou's name and the painting's date of 1671 inscribed on the sheet of paper attached to the building's stone exterior.[2] Simultaneously, the flame casts a reddish glow on the old woman's ruddy face, her simple red and white chemise and bodice, the empty birdcage in the upper right, and the limp body of a dead hen lying on the windowsill.[3]

Dou often included subsidiary figures in the backgrounds of his paintings, either as narrative commentaries or enhancements to his primary subject. Here, sketchily blocked out in the dark interior are a man and a woman who sit before a warming fire. A similar juxtaposition of foreground and background figures is seen in Dou's earlier nocturnal scene *The Wine Cellar* from ca. 1660 **(fig 2)**. Here, as Ronni Baer has suggested, the two figures in the foreground represent "young love" while the solitary figure in the background references winter and old age.[4] The present work probably represents an inversion of this idea, with the primary subject portraying a solitary woman as the embodiment of old age in counterpoint to the warmth of human companionship shared by the couple in the background. The empty wooden pail and the unoccupied birdcage symbolize life that has expired, as does the dead hen, which signifies that the old woman herself may be nearing her end.[5]

Although the position of the candlestick has particular iconographic and

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Gerrit Dou, *Young Woman with a Lighted Candle at a Window*, ca. 1658–65, oil on panel, 26.7 x 19.5 cm, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, inv. no. 132 (1930.21), © Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid



Fig 2. Gerrit Dou, *The Wine Cellar—An Allegory of Winter*, ca. 1660, oil on panel, 30.5 x 25.4 cm, Inv. GE 44 (Hohenbuchau Collection), © LIECHTENSTEIN, The Princely Collection, Vaduz-Vienna / SCALA, Florence /Art Resource, NY (2016)



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compositional significance, Dou seems to have arrived at the final arrangement well into the paint process. Initially, he intended the old woman to hold an oil lamp on the window ledge, as can be seen in a photograph taken during restoration (**fig 3**). A similar oil lamp, with a flame emitting from its side, is found in Dou's *Old Woman with Two Young Children*, dated ca. 1655–65, in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (**fig 4**). Dou subsequently replaced the oil lamp with the basket she now holds.[6] Intriguingly, the way the woman's face is lit from the front reflects the original position of the oil lamp, while the broader network of highlights and shadows on the niche derive from the candlelight. The character of these varied light sources indicate that Dou made this compositional modification at a relatively late stage in the painting's execution.

Fig 3. Detail of GD-103, stripped state photograph, during 2007 conservation treatment by Nancy Krieg



Fig 4. Gerrit Dou, *Old Woman with Two Young Children,* ca. 1655–66, oil on panel, 28 x 22 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, inv. no. 2003.71, Photograph ©2017 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Another change in the composition was in the position of the birdcage. While its final location is comparable to that found in numerous other paintings by the artist, infrared photographs indicate that Dou originally positioned it hanging lower down on the frame, to the right of the basket.[7] This original location would have placed it along the old woman's direct line of sight, thus making it the focus of her gaze, possibly as a reference to departed innocence or youth.[8] This change seems to have coincided with the introduction of the dead hen lying on the ledge, indicating a deepening of the reference to senescence and the culmination of life. Other changes in the composition are evident at the lower right corner. Dou must have originally intended to depict a small flowerpot just below the ledge, as pentimenti of its shape can be seen just below the dead chicken in the infrared image. A similar flowerpot is found in a comparable scene of an old woman at a niche from ca. 1660, now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna.[9]

The earliest provenance of *Old Woman at a Window with a Candle* is from the mid-eighteenth century, when the work formed part of the notable Parisian collections of Nicolas de Montribloud and Claude Tolozan. By 1802, when the painting was with the London art dealer Michael Bryan, it was announced as having been part of the Citoyen Robit Collection, an association that seems to have been made in error.[10] During the first three decades of the nineteenth century, the painting was actively traded at auction in London at least ten times and was owned by at least four private collectors between 1809 and 1828, a period that attests to the English market's keen interest in this powerfully atmospheric work.

- Dominique Surh, 2017

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Endnotes

1. John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish, and French Painters*, 9 vols. (London, 1829–42), 1: 28, no. 83; the painting is titled *Old Woman at a Window with a Candle.*
2. In 2010 Ian Tyers examined the panel for dendrochronological dating and noted the youngest tree ring was formed in 1637, suggesting the tree from which the panel was obtained was felled after 1645. See Ian Tyers, dendrochronological report, November 2010, 19–21 (on file, The Leiden Collection, New York).
3. The author would like to thank Dr. Nancy Clum of the Wildlife Conservation Society for help in identifying the bird as a hen by pointing to the species's characteristic head ornaments, including the red comb and wattles (and lack of spurs or more elaborate wattles that would indicate a cock) seen in the present example.
4. Ronni Baer, "The Wine Cellar," in *Gerrit Dou 1613–1675: Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; London, Dulwich Picture Gallery; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (Zwolle, 2000), 110–11, no. 23.
5. For the symbolism of the bird and birdcage, see *Young Woman in a Niche with a Parrot and Cage* (GD-105); on the withered hag and empty birdcage as allusions to departed innocence, see Simon Schama, "Wives and Wantons: Versions of Womanhood in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 3 (1980): 5–13.
6. In her 2012 conservation report of the painting, Annette Rupprecht has noted a slightly raised triangular shape near the base of the old woman's left hand where the artist painted the top of the oil lamp, visible in the X-radiograph, the infrared photograph, and the raking-light photograph (on file, The Leiden Collection, New York).
7. In her 2012 conservation report, Annette Rupprecht notes that the original position of the birdcage was just to the proper right of the basket in the final arrangement (on file, The Leiden Collection, New York).
8. See Simon Schama, "Wives and Wantons: Versions of Womanhood in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 3 (1980): 5–13.
9. For an illustration, see Ronni Baer, "Old Woman with a Jug at a Window," in *Gerrit Dou 1613–1675: Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; London, Dulwich Picture Gallery; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (Zwolle, 2000), 114–15, no. 25.
10. William Buchanan describes how art dealer Michael Bryan was financed with backers to purchase a large portion of the Robit Collection in Paris, yet Fredericksen notes that there were probably many paintings that were erroneously said to have come from the Robit Collection but which in actuality came

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from other sources. The present work may well be one of those instances, for we know it came from the Tolozan sale in February 1801 and it was not found in the Robit sale of 11 May 1801. See William Buchanan, *Memoirs of Painting, with a Chronological History of the Importation of Pictures by the Great Masters into England since the French Revolution*, 2 vols. (London, 1824), 2: 68, no. 65; Burton Fredericksen, "Notes on Description of Sale Catalog Br-62," Getty Provenance Index, consulted on 23 May 2012.

Provenance

- Christophe-Nicolas de Montribloud (d. 1786) (his sale, Paillet and Julliot, Paris, 9 February 1784, no. 36 [to Claude Tolozan for 2000 livres]).
- Claude Tolozan (1728–96), Paris (his sale, Paillet, 2 February 1801, no. 28 [to Auguste-Louis-César-Hipolyte-Théodore L'Espinasse de Langeac for 2,320 francs]).
- Auguste-Louis-César-Hipolyte-Théodore L'Espinasse de Langeac (d. 1814), Count of Arlet.
- [Michael Bryan, London, by November 1801 (sale, Peter Coxe, Burrell & Foster, London, 9 May 1804, no. 71 [for £52.10]).
- Walsh Porter (d. 1809) (his sale, Christie's, London, 14 April 1810, no. 27 [for £210]).
- [William Buchanan, London (private sale, De Berenger, London, 4 June 1810, no. 34probably withdrawn); (sale, Christie's, London, 21 June 1811, no. 43 [to William Smith for £127.10]).]
- William Smith (sale, Christie's, London, 10 June 1815, no. 87, bought in at £101.17).
- Admiral William Waldegrave (1753–1825), 1st Baron Radstock, London (his sale, Phillips, London, 19 April 1823, no. 53, bought in at £194.5); (his sale, Christie's, London, 13 May 1826, no. 26 [to William Buchanan for £157.10]).
- [William Buchanan, London (private sale, Christie's, London, 21 April 1828, no. 16, unsold); (private sale, May 1828, no. 25, unsold); (sale, Christie's, London, 28 June 1828, no. 28, bought in at 145 guineas).]
- Arthur Sanderson (1846–1915), Edinburgh.
- Sir George Lee, London, 1901.
- Sir George Hunter Donaldson (1845–1925), London, 1902 [Sedelmeyer Gallery].
- [Sedelmeyer Gallery, London, 1911.]
- [Trafalgar Galleries, London, 1977–80].
- Private collection (private sale, Christie's, New York, 30 April 2007, no. 1964 [to Otto Naumann Ltd.]).
- [Otto Naumann Ltd., New York, 2007.]
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2007.

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Exhibition History

- London, Bryan's Gallery, "The Robit Collection," 1801, no. 65; The Old Academy Room, Pall Mall, London, 1802.
- London, Royal Academy, "Old Master Paintings," London, 1977, 22, no. 10 [lent by Trafalgar Galleries, London].
- London, David Carritt, Ltd., "Ten paintings by Gerard Dou, 1613-1675," November 13 – December 12, 1980, no. 9 [lent by Trafalgar Galleries, London].
- Amsterdam, Waterman Gallery, "The Impact of a Genius: Rembrandt, His Pupils and Followers in the Seventeenth Century. Paintings from Museums and Private Collections," April–May 1983; Groningen, Groningen Museum, 17 May–20 June 1983, no. 18 [lent by a private collection].
- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum of Art, December 2009–January 2011, on loan with the permanent collection [lent by the present owner].
- Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, "Dutch Treat," 11 October 2011–6 January 2012 [lent by the present owner].
- Leiden, Museum de Lakenhal, "Gerrit Dou. The Leiden Collection from New York," 9 March–31 August 2014 [lent by the present owner].
- Raleigh, North Carolina Museum of Art,"Small Treasures: Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, and Their Contemporaries," 26 October 2014–4 January 2015, no. 11 [lent by the present owner].
- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, August 2015–August 2016 [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. 2 [lent by the present owner].
- London, Dulwich Picture Gallery, "Reframed: The Woman in the Window," 4 May–4 September 2022 [lent by the present owner].
- Amsterdam, H'ART Museum, "From Rembrandt to Vermeer: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 9 April–24 August 2025 [lent by the present owner].
- West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art, "Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 25 October 2025–29 March 2026 [lent by the present owner].

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Versions
Versions

1. After Gerrit Dou, *An Old Woman at a Niche by Candlelight,* 1688, oil on canvas, 33 x 25 cm, Nancy, Musée des Beaux-Arts.
2. After Gerrit Dou, *An Old Woman at a Niche by Candlelight,* oil on canvas, 32 x 26 cm, previous sale, Auktionsverk, Stockholm, 22–23 May 2001, no. 1394.

Technical Summary

The painting was executed on a panel made from a single plank of vertically oriented oak. It has an earliest fell date of 1645.[1] The panel is beveled on the top, bottom and right edges as seen from the reverse. The lack of bevel on the left side indicates that it was probably trimmed. There are three pronounced horizontal grooves in the panel's surface, which are visible in raking light and in the X-radiograph. The longest of these runs from the woman's chin to the architecture below the birdcage. It is unclear if these are flaws in the wood or if they occurred when the plank was milled. Examination in raking light also reveals downward sloping rays emanating from the upper right corner.

The panel was prepared with a thin, light-colored ground, which does not mask the texture of the wood grain. The paint was built up in successive thin layers of light over dark. X-radiographs, infrared photographs,[2] and examination in raking light reveal numerous artist's changes. The woman was originally depicted holding the base of a tall oil lamp in her proper left hand with her arm extended straight rather than bent at the elbow holding a pail, as seen in the final composition. In her right hand, she originally held a flat, round object. In addition, the birdcage originally hung lower down, next to the pail; a flower pot appeared just below the ledge; and the dead poultry was positioned below the ledge as well.

The painting is in good condition and the panel is in plane. There is some abrasion, particularly in the areas of the artist's changes and in parts of the dark background. It was treated in 2007.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. Ian Tyers, dendochronology report, November 2010. According to Tyers, the narrow width of the board indicates that it was probably significantly trimmed.
2. Infrared reflectography was performed by Shawn Digney-Peer at unknown specifications.

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