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Portrait of a Lady, Seated with a Music Book on Her Lap

Gerrit Dou
(Leiden 1613 – 1675 Leiden)

ca. 1640–44
oil on panel
27.2 x 20 cm
signed in dark paint along book edge, lower right: "GDov" (GD in ligature)
GD-116

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Gerrit Dou's small-scale portrait of this well-to-do young lady conveys much about her interests, values, and social class. Her tasteful jewelry and dress, as well as the open music book in her lap, suggest that she comes from a wealthy family from among Leiden's literate circles. Her elegant attire consists of a three-tiered white linen neckerchief around her shoulders, with lace trim and matching lace cuffs that adorn her bracelet-length sleeves. She wears a high-necked white collar with several thin strands of gold beading, and an ornamental black stomacher accented with a bow from which hangs a single black pearl. This fashionable ensemble was current during the early 1640s and was also worn by ladies in Haarlem and Amsterdam, as seen, for example, in Frans Hals's (1582/83–1666) *Portrait of a Woman with a Fan* of ca. 1640 in the National Gallery, London, and Rembrandt van Rijn's (1606–69) *Portrait of Agatha Bas* from 1642 in the British Royal Collection **(fig 1)**.[1] Like Agatha Bas's fashionable dress, the ensemble of the present sitter features an amber-colored satin skirt with gold embroidery that contrasts with her black outer gown. The scale of her lacework is much less bold and her accessories less ostentatious than that of her Haarlem and Amsterdam counterparts, indicating her more conservative taste. In keeping with her reserved demeanor, she wears her hair tied back in a traditional hairdo with a matching lace headdress that covers her ears and extends to the sides of her face.

Based on her dress style, Baer dates the present portrait to ca. 1640–44.[2] Another closely related painting is Dou's *Portrait of a Lady* **(fig 2)**[3]. In both of these works, Dou situated the woman in a simple interior space near a table with books and softened the scene with a deep reddish-brown curtain hanging above and to the left of the sitter. The present painting also includes a staircase and column at the left, which help to define the interior space of the room. The additional illumination from the left of this column also creates a play of light and shadow along the back wall, against which the lady is contrasted.

An X-radiograph indicates that the rectangular composition was initially conceived with an arched top. The greater visibility of the arch along the upper right-hand side coincides with the direction of the light that falls onto this area and accounts for the greater content of lead white in the underlying paint **(fig 3)**. Pentimenti along the figure's face, right arm, and shoulder seen in the X-radiograph, moreover, indicate that Dou initially positioned the sitter centrally beneath the painted arch and later shifted her to the right by about one centimeter, possibly when he modified the arched-top format and added the curtain to balance the composition. A similar combination is found in Dou's *Self-Portrait* in a private collection in Spain, as well as in his *Painter with a Pipe and Book* in the Rijksmuseum, both from about 1645.[4] The conventional format of the present portrait suggests that the sitter was married and

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of Agatha Bas*, 1641, oil on canvas, 105.5 x 83.9 cm, The Royal Collection, London, Royal Collection Trust, © 2014 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II



Fig 2. Gerrit Dou, *Portrait of a Lady*, ca. 1635–40, oil on panel, 49.2 x 38.7 cm, The Norton Simon Foundation, Pasadena, California, inv. no. F.1969.43.P, © 2012 The Norton Simon Foundation

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that Dou most likely originally painted her portrait with a male pendant, placing the woman on the heraldic left. The ring on her left hand, which Dou executed with only a few strokes of paint, is probably a wedding ring.[5]

The books with which she is engaged suggest that she is a pious and educated individual. The ornamental clasp and gold detailing on the standing book on the table are characteristic of a Bible, while the open music book on her lap, which she actively thumbs as if to turn a page, indicates her proficiency in reading music. The musical notation of the book contains four staffs per page and is written with some beamed eighth and sixteenth notes, which would have been typical of a secular piece. The worn condition of the paint in this area, however, makes it impossible to determine whether the musical notation was once an identifiable song.

The paint surface is even and smooth, with visibly raised thicker paint throughout the elaborate detail work and highlights. These areas include the ornamental lace trim of the sitter's collar, the golden brocade along the center of her skirt, and the sparse highlights applied to her headdress as well as to the bindings of the books on the table. Extremely fine brushstrokes, especially in the stray curly hairs framing the sitter's face, indicate that the artist used a single, fine bristle for the application of the paint (**fig 4**). Though Dou's polished handling of the brushwork in this portrait matches the refinement of the sitter, the treatment of her hair is reminiscent of the artist's much looser handling of a peasant woman's hair in the *A Young Woman* in Cleveland from about the same time **(fig 5)**, a comparison that underscores the artist's great versatility in brushwork depending on the formality of the subject matter.

- Domique Surh, 2017



Fig 3. X-radiograph of GD-116



Fig 4. Detail of brushwork in the woman's hair and forehead, *Portrait of a Lady, Seated with a Music Book on Her Lap,* GD-116



Fig 5. Detail of brushwork in the woman's hair and forehead, Gerrit Dou, *A Young Woman*, ca. 1640, oil on panel, 35 x 31 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Bequest of William G. Mather, 1951.325

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Endnotes

1. See Marieke de Winkel, *Fashion and Fancy*: *Dress and Meaning in Rembrandt's Paintings* (Amsterdam, 2006).
2. Ronni Baer, "The Paintings of Gerrit Dou (1613–1675)," 3 vols. (PhD diss. New York University, 1990), no. 34.
3. For the Norton Simon painting, see Ronni Baer, "The Paintings of Gerrit Dou (1613–1675)," 3 vols. (PhD diss. New York University, 1990), no. 35; Amy Walsh, *Northern European Paintings at the Norton Simon Museum* (New Haven, forthcoming), no. 20.
4. Illustrated in Ronni Baer, *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) (Washington D.C., 2000), nos. 14, 16; see also no. 7.
5. Eddy De Jongh, *Portretten van echt en trouw* (Zwolle, 1986), 138–40.

Provenance

- (Sale, D. de Jongh, Rotterdam, 26 March 1810, no. 28 [to Le Brun for 505 f.]; sale, Lebrun, Paris, 16 April 1811, no. 112 [to Ballatre for 1450 frs.]).
- Sir George Hunter Donaldson (1845–1925), London, until 1911; [Sedelmeyer Gallery, Paris, 1911].
- [Duits & Co., Ltd., London, by 1948, to Mr. R. A. Constantine, February 1948].
- Mr. R. A. Constantine, Yorkshire, until after 1960.
- [Martin B. Ascher, London, before 1970] (sale, Christie's, London, 14 May 1971, no. 129, for 7500 gns., to A. Brod [Alfred Brod Gallery, London]).
- Private collection, Germany [Charles Roelofsz, Amsterdam, 1982; Kunstandel P. de Boer, Amsterdam, 1983; French & Company, New York, 1983–85].
- H. L. de Villeneuve, by 1985 until 2009.
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2009.

Exhibition History

- Middlesbrough, Municipal Art Gallery, "Exhibition of Dutch and Flemish Masters of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," 28 September–22 October 1949, no. 31 [lent by the Constantine family].

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- Scarborough, Municipal Art Gallery, “Dutch and Flemish Masters from the Collection of Mrs. R. A. Constantine and Family,” June 1960, no. 28 [lent by the Constantine family].
- Norfolk, Virginia, Chrysler Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, June 2009–July 2011 [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].
- 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 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. 3 [lent by the present owner].

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- Scarborough Municipal Art Gallery. *Dutch and Flemish Masters from the Collection of Mrs. R. A. Constantine and Family*. Exh. cat. Scarborough, Municipal Art Gallery. Scarborough, 1960, no. 28.
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- Veldhorst, Natascha. "A World of Sound: Voices and Music in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art." In *Delights of the Senses: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Life. Featuring Paintings from The Leiden Collection*. Edited by Elizabeth Nogrady and Diane Shewchuk, 12. Exh. cat. Albany, Albany Institute of History & Art. Albany, 2024.

Technical Summary

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The painting was executed on a panel made from a single plank of vertically grained oak. Dendrochronology indicates the tree was felled after 1614.[1] The back of the panel is not beveled and it bears rough tool marks. This could be an indication that it has been thinned. Remnants of three metal brads along the top edge indicate that at some point a shim was probably attached to the top edge.

The light-colored ground was thinly and evenly applied. It is radio-opaque, accentuating the woodgrain in the X-radiograph. The paint was built up in successive, thin layers. The X-radiograph shows that originally the composition was arched on the top. It also indicates that the sitter's body may originally have been situated slightly to the left of its current position. Infrared reflectography[2] indicates that the contours of the drapery were changed. Both swags were raised, the left swag more so than the right, and the drapery may have hung down on the right, similar to the way it does so on the left.

The painting is in very good condition. The panel has a slight convex warp and the paint in the curtains exhibits some traction crackle. The painting underwent minor treatment in 2009.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. Ian Tyers, dendrochronological report, November 2010.
2. Infrared reflectography was performed at unknown parameters.

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