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Portrait of the Artist in His Studio

Michiel van Musscher
(Rotterdam 1645 – 1705 Amsterdam)

1673
oil on panel
37.4 x 28.6 cm
MM-103

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How to cite

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The young Michiel van Musscher sits in his workshop and looks straight at the viewer with supreme self-confidence. He is fashionably dressed in a brown velvet beret and a purplish brown, satin *Japonse rok* tied around his waist with a pink, patterned silk scarf.[1] His eyebrows are slightly raised and his lips are parted, as though he is preparing to engage in conversation with us. In his right hand he holds a palette, brushes, and a mahlstick, whereas his left hand is partially raised in a rhetorical gesture, directing the viewer to an exquisite display of objects on a narrow stone ledge in front of him: an open watch attached to a pink ribbon, a blue sheet of paper partially revealing a washed drawing of a female nude, a tattered sketchbook, an open book with geometrical drawings resting on a large, closed book, and a celestial globe. In the background, in an opening framed by the figure on the left and a rich tapestry hanging on the right, is an easel standing by a window and containing an unfinished painting with three figures.

This early painting by Van Musscher is executed with an astounding level of detail, and foreshadows the artist's interest in depicting different fabrics, which would come to full development in his late career. Van Musscher achieved the glistening quality of the satin *rok*, possibly the actual "paerse sautijne Japonse Rock" listed in Van Musscher's posthumous 1705 inventory,[2] by applying highlights along the folds of the garment with a thick brush **(fig 1)**, and by offsetting the *rok* against the finely painted bare floorboards behind him. He also achieved a remarkable realism in the tapestry, especially in the extraordinary detail of the slightly frayed edges, by alternating short, opaque brushstrokes with tiny dots to simulate the weave pattern **(fig 2)**. The care Van Musscher took to depict his objects down to the most minute details is particularly evident in the open book, which has been identified as two pages from the 1555 Dutch edition of Sebastiano Serlio's (1475–1554) famous treatise *Tutte l'opere d'architecttura et prospetiva.* These pages explain how to draw an octagonal shape in perspective **(fig 3)**.[3] The globe showing a hint of the star sign Ursa Major has been executed with such precision that it has been identified as the celestial globe engraved by Pieter van den Keere (1571–ca. 1646) after a design by the Dutch astronomer and cartographer Petrus Plancius (1552–1622) of around 1625 **(fig 4)**.[4]

Although the painting is unsigned and undated, an old and now illegible inscription on the back of the panel once read: *Pinxit 1673* [or *1683*].[5] Around 1932 this work was attributed to Van Musscher on an RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History) photo mount, an attribution that was generally, though not unanimously, adopted in the literature.[6] It does seem certain, however, that Van Musscher painted this self-portrait. The figure's facial features, especially the prominent, straight nose and almond-shaped eyes, are

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Detail of Michiel van Musscher, *Portrait of the Artist in His Studio*, MM-103, showing the right sleeve of the silk *rok*



Fig 2. Detail of Michiel van Musscher, *Portrait of the Artist in His Studio*, MM-103, showing the tapestry

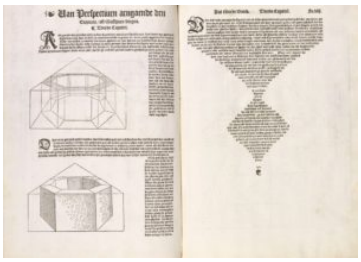


Fig 3. Sebastiano Serlio, *Boeck van Architecturen Sebastiani Serlij / tracterende van Perspectyven*, trans. Pieter Coecke van Aelst (Antwerp, 1555), fols. 7v and 8r (second book, third chapter "Van Perspectiven aengaende den corporen / oft Massijven dingen")

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consistent with those in the artist's signed self-portraits, as, for instance, his 1679 *Self-Portrait* in Rotterdam **(fig 5)** and his 1685 *Self-Portrait* in Amsterdam **(fig 6)**. Moreover, Serlio's book and Plancius's celestial globe also appear in Van Musscher's Rotterdam painting.[7] Finally, the execution of the painting is consistent with that seen in Van Musscher's other works. The handling of the shimmering silk and the almost porcelain-like flesh tones, for example, are comparable to those in Van Musscher's 1687 pendant portraits of Pieter Ranst Valckenier and Eva Suzanna Pellicorne, (see MM-102.a–b).

If, as seems probable, Van Musscher indeed executed this painting in 1673, he would have been at that time 28 years old. He was just starting his successful career as one of the most important portraitists in Amsterdam.[8] It has been suggested that the young artist created this painting to showcase his abilities as a portraitist and as a craftsman who could realistically render the materials and textures of the world around him.[9] In doing so, Van Musscher apparently took as his model one of Gerrit Dou's most famous and important self-portraits, which the Leiden master had painted some eight years earlier in ca. 1665 **(fig 7)**.[10] The two compositions are remarkably similar, especially the postures of the artists, the manner in which they hold their palettes, and the views into the studio with its easel. In each work, moreover, a tapestry is elegantly draped from the upper edge of the composition. The two paintings are also thematically related; neither artist is dressed in a painter's smock, but rather in an upper-class wardrobe that suggests his erudition: Dou in the fur *tabbaard* worn by scholars in his day, and the younger Van Musscher in a modern, fashionable *rok*.[11] This theme of the intellectual artist is reinforced in both paintings by the presence of the globe and the books. At the same time, by including an open watch Van Musscher was also touching upon the concept of *vanitas*, he was perhaps hinting that his art will triumph over his own mortality.[12]

The fact that the book and the globe in this self-portrait are identifiable sets this work apart from Dou's self-representations. The Leiden master depicted books and globes generically for their symbolic value. By specifically including Serlio's book and Plancius's celestial globe, Van Musscher asserted the full range of his artistic expertise, which included a command of perspective and an ability to render abstract concepts. The drawing directly under the book emphasizes his skills as a draughtsman. The ultimate testimony to Van Musscher's talents is, however, provided by the actual painting's beautiful execution, which is every bit as impressive as the expertise suggested by the painted objects.

- Ilona van Tuinen, 2017

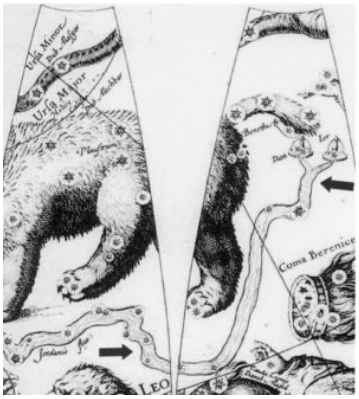


Fig 4. Detail of Pieter van den Keere after Petrus Plancius, *Celestial Globe with the Ursa Major*, engraving, ca. 1625, published in *Michiel van Musscher (1645–1705): The Wealth of the Golden Age*, ed. Robert E. Gerhardt, Tonko Grever, and Francis Griep (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum van Loon) (Zwolle, 2012), 15



Fig 5. Michiel van Musscher, *Self-Portrait*, 1679 oil on panel, 56 x 46.5 cm, Het Schielandshuis, Rotterdam, inv. no. HMR 10567



Fig 6. Michiel van Musscher, *Self-Portrait*, 1685, oil on canvas, 20.5 x 17.8 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. SK-A-4232

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Fig 7. Gerrit Dou, *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1665, oil on panel, arched top, 59 x 43.5 cm, Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo Collection, Boston

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Endnotes

1. For the *Japonse rok*, see Marieke de Winkel, "Rollenspel," in *Kopstukken: Amsterdammers geportretteerd 1600–1800*, ed. Norbert Middelkoop (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Amsterdam Museum) (Bussum, 2002), 96–97. This exotic and relatively costly kimono was often worn as an informal housecoat. Because of its elegant appeal and the different possible variations, it was common for men in the late seventeenth century to wear this garment in portraits.
2. For a partial transcription of this posthumous inventory, dated 20 July 1705 and kept at the Stadsarchief Amsterdam, NA 4837, see Marieke de Winkel, *Fashion and Fancy: Dress and Meaning in Rembrandt's Paintings* (Amsterdam, 2006), 351, Appendix II, U. If the "purple, satin *Japonse rok*" mentioned here is indeed identical to the one in the painting executed some thirty years earlier, Van Musscher would have had this valuable gown in his possession for a long time.
3. For the identification of the treatise, see Robert E. Gerhardt, "Michiel van Musscher: The Best Amsterdam Painter of Small Portraits," in *Michiel van Musscher (1645–1705): The Wealth of the Golden Age*, ed. Robert E. Gerhardt, Tonko Grever, and Francis Griep (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum van Loon) (Zwolle, 2012), 12. The Dutch edition, *Boeck van Architecturen Sebastiani Serlij / tracterende van Perspectyven*, was translated by Pieter Coecke van Aelst (1502–50) and published by his widow in 1553 in Antwerp. Click here for an online edition of Coecke's edition published by the University of Utrecht. The pages depicted here are fol. 7v and 8r from the second book of the third chapter entitled "Van Perspectiven aengaende den corporen / oft Massijven dingen" (On the Perspective of Bodies and Solids). For an English translation of these pages, see *Sebastiano Serlio on Architecture: Volume One, Books I–V of 'Tutte l'opere d'architecttura et prospetiva' by Sebastiano Serlio*, trans. Vaughan Hart and Peter Hicks (New Haven and London, 1996), 48–49.
4. For the identification of the globe, see Robert E. Gerhardt, "Michiel van Musscher: The Best Amsterdam Painter of Small Portraits," in *Michiel van Musscher (1645–1705): The Wealth of the Golden Age*, ed. Robert E. Gerhardt, Tonko Grever, and Francis Griep (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum van Loon) (Zwolle, 2012), 12.
5. The inscription was first mentioned on an old RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History) photo mount around 1932, and repeated in the literature. See also the Technical Summary. Annette Rupprecht was unable to detect the inscription with visible, ultraviolet, and infrared illumination.
6. H. van Hall was the first to adopt this attribution in H. van Hall, *Portretten van Nederlandse beeldende kunstenaars* (Amsterdam, 1963), 223, no. 6. Pieter van Thiel, however, felt that the attribution was not correct; see Pieter J. J. van Thiel, "Andermaal Michiel van Musscher: Zijn zelfportretten," *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 22 (1974): 147 n. 10. Recently, Robert Jan te Rijdt attributed this painting to Gerrit Dou's student Dominicus van Tol (ca. 1635–76); see Robert Jan te Rijdt, "Het toeval helpt een beetje: Tibout Regters—Jan Verkolje—Dominicus van Tol," in *Face Book: Studies on Dutch and Flemish*

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Portraiture of the 16th–18th Centuries—Liber Amicorum Presented to Rudolf E. O. Ekkart on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday, ed. Edwin Buijsen, Charles Dumas, and Volker Manuth (Leiden, 2012), 469–72. He based this attribution on the striking similarities between this painting and the descriptions of a painting attributed to Van Tol in 1773 and 1774 auction catalogues (see Provenance). The attribution to Van Tol is problematic. First, it could well have been an erroneous attribution made by the auctioneer in 1773. The high level of finish, the porcelain-like depiction of the human flesh, and the careful, typical rendering of the fabrics appear to betray Van Musscher's hand rather than the looser and less polished technique of Van Tol. Unfortunately, no self-portraits by Van Tol appear to have survived, making it impossible to do a physiological comparison as one can with Van Musscher's self-portraits.

7. Thanks to Robert E. Gerhardt, correspondence January 2013, copy on file at The Leiden Collection, for bringing this information to my attention. Gerhardt is currently completing a monograph on Michiel van Musscher.

8. See Piet Bakker's biography of the artist in this catalogue. See also the entry on Van Musscher's 1687 pendant portraits of Pieter Ranst Valckenier and Eva Suzanna Pellicorne, MM-102.a–b, which the artist painted when he was already well-established.

9. Robert E. Gerhardt, "Michiel van Musscher: The Best Amsterdam Painter of Small Portraits," in *Michiel van Musscher (1645–1705): The Wealth of the Golden Age*, ed. Robert E. Gerhardt, Tonko Grever, and Francis Griep (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum van Loon) (Zwolle, 2012), 12–15.

10. See Robert E. Gerhardt, "Michiel van Musscher: The Best Amsterdam Painter of Small Portraits," in *Michiel van Musscher (1645–1705): The Wealth of the Golden Age*, ed. Robert E. Gerhardt, Tonko Grever, and Francis Griep (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum van Loon) (Zwolle, 2012), 12–15, who also compares Van Musscher's self-portrait to this work by Dou.

11. For a discussion of Gerrit Dou's *Self-Portrait*, see Ronni Baer, "Self-Portrait," 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, and The Hague, Mauritshuis) (New Haven, 2000), 122–23. Dou wears a fur-lined scholar's *tabbaard*, fashionable for intellectuals in the first half of the seventeenth century. Van Musscher's fashionable *Japonse rok* became increasingly popular among the upper class from the 1660s onward, including among scholars, as testified by Van Musscher's own *Portrait of the Mathematician and Astronomer Barend van Lin*, signed and dated, bottom right, 1671, oil on canvas, 59.5 x 51.5 cm, Amsterdam Museum.

12. Van Musscher continued to refer to his mortality in his other self-portraits, culminating in his 1685 Amsterdam self-portrait (fig. 6), in which the moralistic inscription connects "Van Musscher's hand that drew these outlines to remember his appearance" to the "hour glass . . . that teaches us of the brevity of life" ("Dus heeft hier Muschers handt, deez Omtreck zelfs geg[even] / Tot een geheugenis, hoe zijn gedaente was" / "De Tijd . . . thoond' . . . dat zijn glas, / Al veel verloopen is en leerd ons 't brosze leven").

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Provenance

- (Possibly sale, Johan van der Marck Aegidiusz, Amsterdam, 25 August 1773, no. 464, as by Dominicus van Tol [to Fouquet for 200 guilders]).
- Possibly Comte Du Barry (his sale, 21 November 1774, no. 70, as by Dominicus van Tol [to Langlier for 656 livres]).
- Unknown collection, Russia.
- [Dr. Curt Benedict, Charlottenburg, Berlin, by June 1932.]
- [Otto Naumann Ltd., New York, by 1997.]
- Bert van Deun, Oberageri, Switzerland; by descent to his widow [Otto Naumann Ltd., New York, 2004].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2004.

Exhibition History

- Amsterdam, Museum van Loon, “Michiel van Musscher (1645–1705): The Wealth of the Golden Age,” 9 March–10 June 2012 [lent by the present owner].
- Charlottesville, VA, University of Virginia, Fralin Museum of Art, “A Portrait of the Artist, 1525–1825,” January–June 2015 [lent by the present owner].
- The Hague, Mauritshuis, “Dutch Self-Portraits: Selfies of the Golden Age,” 8 October 2015–3 January 2016 [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].
- Amsterdam, H’ART Museum, “From Rembrandt to Vermeer: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 9 April–24 August 2025 [lent by the present owner].

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- 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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[Exhibition catalogue also published in French and Arabic.]

- Blanc, Jan. “Being Modern, Being Dutch: The Seventeenth-Century Invention of the Golden Age.” In *Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age. Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre*. Edited by Blaise Ducos and Lara Yeager-Crasselt, 42. Exh. cat. Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi. London, 2019. [Exhibition catalogue also published in French and Arabic.]
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Technical Summary

The support is a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular, wedge-shaped oak with bevels along all four sides.[1] The unthinned and uncradled panel has machine toolmarks, a red wax seal, an import stamp, a label remnant, and various handwritten inscriptions, including an illegible three-line handwritten ink inscription previously wet out with varnish, but no stencils or panel maker’s mark.

A dark brown-colored radio-opaque ground has been thinly and evenly applied, followed by oil paint smoothly applied with extremely fine detail that includes strokes of dots and dashes to create the illusion of the tapestry pile and fringe and no use of impasto.

The X-radiograph reveals two significant compositional changes made during the paint stage and a number of minor shifts in positions of objects. The two significant changes are as follows. First, originally the upper edge of the painting had been painted as a continuous arch, which formed an architectural niche; the left side of the arch remains visible, whereas a tapestry swag added to the upper and right edges obscures the right side of the arch. Second, the open book on perspective lying on a closed leather-bound book was added. Originally a rolled document, oriented parallel to the lower panel edge, lay on the cover of the closed leather-bound book.

The figure drawing on blue paper was added after the sheet of white paper lying directly on the table had

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been completed. The left edge of the sheet of white paper was shifted to the right, and the corner hanging over the table edge was changed from one that formed a right angle to one with an indented notch. The figure's proper right hand has been raised and shifted away from the figure's body. The angle of the mahlstick in the figure's proper left hand has been lowered. Originally, the tip of the mahlstick was closer to the paintbrushes and the angle of the stick had been more parallel to the brushes. Lastly, the figure's face is particularly radio-opaque and the wisps of hair along the figure's forehead are not visible in the X-radiograph at all.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. The images reveal the rolled document was originally depicted resting on the cover of the closed leather-bound book, and the positions of the palette and the figure's thumb have been shifted slightly forward, away from the figure's body (similar to the shift of the proper right hand visible in the X-radiograph).

The painting is unsigned and undated although the illegible inscription along the reverse may include a date of 1673.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 1996 prior to its acquisition in 2004 and remains in an excellent state of preservation regardless of areas of thinness through the background.

Technical Summary Endnotes

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

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