Self-Portrait (?) at an Easel

Attributed to Gerrit Dou
(Leiden 1613 – 1675 Leiden)

ca. 1628–29
oil on panel
66.6 x 50.9 cm
GD-112

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In the quiet of his atelier, a young artist gazes out at the viewer while seated before a large, stretched canvas on a wooden easel, his right arm raised as though he is about to apply paint to his composition. The horizontal shape and substantial scale of the canvas indicate that the young artist is composing a history scene, the most difficult and prestigious in the hierarchy of painting genres. At the same time, his direct gaze suggests that his scene incorporates some aspect of the real world, one that implicitly involves us.

The studio scene offers a fascinating glimpse into an artist’s workshop. One sees here that Dutch artists sat when they painted, and the way they stretched their canvases on a wooden frame. The young artist has also brought to his studio a number of props appropriate for a history painting. Some of these are in a large chest filled with costly vessels of silver and gold, exotic fabrics, and a heavy chain with a medallion, while on the floor are a cuirass, plumed helmet or cabasset, and various patterned textiles.[1] The large tome and horn are attributes associated with the muse of history, Cleo. Also in the studio are wooden stretchers of different shapes leaning against the back wall. The grisaille tronies of an old man and woman tacked to the wall are the types of character studies artists often painted in Leiden during the late 1620s and early 1630s.

This intriguing work, which is unsigned and undated, is characteristic of paintings created in Leiden around 1630, but much debate has surrounded its attribution. It was once thought to have been executed by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), but that traditional assessment was challenged in 1911 when Wilhelm Martin gave the painting to Rembrandt’s pupil, Gerrit Dou. Martin dated it to the period of Dou’s apprenticeship with Rembrandt from 1628 to 1631.[2] Subsequently, Kurt Bauch proposed that Rembrandt retouched the work in critical areas, specifically the face of the artist.[3] Werner Sumowski, who initially accepted Bauch’s proposal, eventually concluded that Dou made the various compositional adjustments himself.[4]

An attribution of the painting to Dou, however, convinced neither Richard Hunnewell nor Ronni Baer. In 1983 Hunnewell suggested an alternative attribution to Rembrandt’s close circle, or possibly, Willem de Poorter (1608–48),[5] while Baer, in 1990, characterized the still-life elements in the painting as “superficially Dou-like” but noted that their “formulaic highlights and . . . rough, broad handling . . . find no parallel in Dou’s autograph
Baer suggested that the painting was executed by the same unidentified hand or hands as *Parable of the Hidden Treasure* in the Szépművészeti Múzeum in Budapest (fig 1).[7] She also noted that the painting is closely related to *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt* formerly in Downton Castle. Both paintings have been considered collaborative works in which Dou participated, but their attributions are uncertain.[8]

In an unpublished essay from 2003, Bob van den Boogert defended the attribution of the painting to Dou. He argued that the painting is closely associated in style and compositional organization with a painting in Budapest: *An Officer of the Leiden Civic Guard with an Arms Still Life* (fig 2).[9] Although the Budapest painting is unsigned and undated and the attribution is debated, Van den Boogert believed that the young Dou executed both paintings. Both panels have the same dimensions, include comparable still-life elements, and share a similar layering of objects that creates a consistent approach to spatial recession. A recent examination of the two works side by side revealed striking similarities in palette and compositional approach, increasing the likelihood that the same artist executed both works.[10] Whether or not that artist is Dou, however, is another question.

The ongoing discussions regarding the attribution of this painting to Dou relate to larger unresolved questions about the character of Dou’s early paintings. Very little is known about Dou’s apprenticeship with Rembrandt, and experts do not agree on the paintings he produced during this time.[11] The problem of defining the nature of Dou’s early style is exacerbated by the fact that there are no dated paintings by Dou before 1637.

One of the central issues in assessing Dou’s early works is the nature of his painting technique. Baer, for example, believes that the young master painted in a relatively smooth style, as is evident in *Artist at His Easel* (fig 3).[12] Jørgen Wadum, on the other hand, believes that from the beginning of his career, even before he entered Rembrandt’s workshop, Dou executed his works with fine, parallel hatchings.[13] Ernst van de Wetering has discussed the didactic importance of imitation in studio practice and argues that it is to be expected that Dou’s early painting style would closely resemble Rembrandt’s own.[14] The question then remains as to whether the character of Dou’s early brushwork is identifiable as a consistent, idiosyncratic feature, or whether Dou expanded his technique and experimented with brushwork during these years in Rembrandt’s studio.
The application of paint in the Leiden Collection painting is relatively loose and thick, but until a clearer resolution of these divergent views of Dou’s early manner of painting is achieved, it seems appropriate to designate this work as “attributed to Gerrit Dou.”

Even though no firm attribution of this work can be made at the present time, the pictorial influences that shaped the subject matter and composition of the Leiden Collection painting are readily evident and point to an origin within Rembrandt’s close circle in Leiden. The cuirass and plumed helmet, for example, are similar to objects in the military still life in the foreground of Rembrandt’s *History Painting* of 1626 in the Lakenhal.[15] The oval grisaille sketches on the back wall of the studio recall tronies and turbaned figures in drawings and prints by Rembrandt and his fellow Leiden artist, Jan Lievens (1607–74).[16] The most striking pictorial source for the Leiden Collection painting, however, is Rembrandt’s *Artist in His Studio*, ca. 1628–29, in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston(fig 4).[17]

Like Rembrandt’s work, the composition is organized around a large painting on an easel turned away from the viewer, with a doorway on the right and a light source on the left. Similar, as well, are the rustic wooden floorboards, crumbling plaster and orthogonally oblique wall in the middle of the room, which leave little doubt that the Boston painting served as this painting’s direct prototype.

The identity of the artist sitting before the easel has been frequently discussed, with scholars variously identifying the figure as either Rembrandt or Dou.[18] Martin first cited the figure as an anonymous, generic artist, but later identified it as a portrait of Dou.[19] Indeed, the artist’s features—rounded cheeks, a mouth with a full upper lip at the center, cleft chin, and slightly upturned nose—are remarkably similar to Dou’s *Self-Portrait* from ca. 1635 in the Cheltenham Art Gallery or another self-portrait from 1645 in the Kremer Collection (fig 5). Dou would have been around seventeen years old in 1630, when the Leiden Collection painting was executed, which seems consistent with the age of the man in this work.

The dating of the painting to ca. 1630 is also supported by dendrochronological data, which indicates that the wood panel was ready for priming by the middle of the 1620s.[20] The analysis provides further evidence that the painting was executed within Rembrandt’s close circle: the panel comes from the same tree as Rembrandt’s *Head of an Old Man in a Cap* from ca. 1630, now in the Bader Collection.[21] This match
suggests that the two wooden supports were obtained from the same panel maker in Leiden, possibly acquired as part of a mutual workshop consignment.\[^{22}\]

Based on the aforementioned evidence, it seems most reasonable to conclude that the present painting originated within Rembrandt’s immediate circle in Leiden, most likely by Gerrit Dou, although there were undoubtedly other artists in Leiden whose names have not been recorded who worked in a similar style. Also supporting the notion of Dou’s authorship is the characterization of the artist as a *pictor doctus* surrounded by the objects of his profession. Here, the young but erudite painter presents himself as a skilled and ambitious artist, which is consistent with the presentation of Dou’s artistic persona in his later self-portraiture.\[^{23}\] Although the complexities surrounding Dou’s early artistic personality are such that a firm attribution of this work to the young master cannot yet be made, ongoing research about the artist’s early career may eventually determine that this painting holds an important place within his artistic evolution.

- Dominique Surh
2017
Endnotes

1. Together, these objects have been interpreted as a vanitas still life and as an illustration of the Hippocratic aphorism, “Ars longa, vita brevis” (“art endures but life is brief”). See J. Richard Judson, “Artist in His Studio,” in Rembrandt after Three Hundred Years (Exh. cat. The Art Institute of Chicago; The Minneapolis Institute of Arts; The Detroit Institute of Arts) (Chicago, 1969), 51–52, no. 36. The grouping of valuable objects and military attributes has also been explained, albeit less convincingly, as a reference to the conflict that is caused by the possession of gold. See Hans-Joachim Raupp, Untersuchungen zu Künstlerbildnis und Künsterdarstellung in den Niederlanden im 17. Jahrhundert (Hildesheim, 1984), 170.

2. During the nineteenth century the painting was attributed to Rembrandt and was considered a self-portrait. See Joseph H. Carter, Catalogue of the High Legh Collection [ca. 1893], 52, no. 28. Martin would have seen the painting in 1911, when it appeared with Kleinberger Galleries in Paris, prompting his decision to include it as an autograph work by Dou in the French edition of his monograph on the artist published that year. See Wilhelm Martin, Gerard Dou, sa vie et son œuvre: Étude sur la peinture hollandaise et les marchaunds au dix septième siècle (Paris, 1911), 173, no. 63. Hofstede de Groot also considered Artist at His Easel to be by Dou, even though his volume on Dou went to press before the painting came on the market, see Hofstede de Groot’s archival files at the RKD-Nederlands Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis, where GD-112 is listed under “Dou: Bekende Mannen,” which reproduces the text copied from the 1893 High Legh Collection catalogue, and includes the note: “Is een bekende Gerard Dou.”

3. Kurt Bauch, Der frühe Rembrandt und seine Zeit: Studien zur geschichtlichen Bedeutung seines Frühstils (Berlin, 1960), 221–23; Kurt Bauch, Rembrandt: Gemälde (Berlin, 1966), 29, A7. Kurt Bauch argued that the pentimenti along the figure’s face and back were indications of workshop corrections made by Rembrandt. He maintained that the confident modeling of the sitter’s face was by the same hand as the Laughing Self Portrait in the Rijksmuseum, then attributed to Rembrandt, and therefore concluded that Rembrandt had executed this part of the painting. On the numerous changes made during the painting phase, see the technical report by Joanna Dunn, on file, the Leiden Collection, New York. Several changes were made during the process of painting, which are visible to the naked eye in the upper layers of paint. These include the adjustments made along the seated figure’s back and face (originally higher in the picture plane closer to the level of his lips, and along the right side of the trunk where a curved silhouette was replaced by a rectangular edge. Other indistinct forms at the center left, located near the representations of the canvas stretchers leaning against the back wall are more readily visible through the X-
radiograph, showing various silhouettes near the back wall that were later covered over with paint by the artist, indicating that the composition was modified in the background during the painting process.


5. Hunnewell discussed the present work along with a group of seven unsigned, and four spuriously signed paintings from the early 1630s representing the theme of the artist in his studio that Martin or Van Hall had attributed to Dou. Because the group of paintings dates from a period during which Dou’s development remains unclear, Hunnewell chose to categorize them simply as an iconographic group needing further examination. Richard W. Hunnewell, “Gerrit Dou’s Self Portraits and Depictions of the Artist,” 2 vols. (PhD diss. Boston University, 1983), Appendix C (Listing of Rejected Self Portraits and Problematic Works), 288, 291–92, no. 13.

6. I am grateful to Ronni Baer for sharing her reasons for doubting the painting’s attribution to Dou during an examination in front of the painting in New York on 6 December 2013. Among other aspects discussed, Baer does not find the handling of the pages of the manuscript in the foreground, the modeling of the face, or the loose brushwork of the grisaille sketches to be consistent with other works securely attributed to the artist. Ronni Baer, “The Paintings of Gerrit Dou (1613–1675),” 3 vols. (PhD diss. New York University, 1990), Catalogue C (Works of Rejected Attribution), 23, no. C 1.

7. I am grateful to Ildikó Ember, who has shared the result of Peter Klein’s dendrochronological analysis of the *Parable of the Hidden Treasure*, which consists of...
three boards in which the youngest tree ring was formed in 1616, 1602, and 1617, making its possible creation plausible after 1636. On the *Parable of the Hidden Treasure*, see Agnes Czobor, *Rembrandt and His Circle in Hungarian Collections* (Budapest, 1969), plates 9–10.


10. I would like to thank Ildikó Ember and Júlia Tátrai for receiving GD-112 on loan at the Szépműszeti Múzeum in the fall of 2014, and to Gerdien Verschoor for arranging a discussion and examination session of the painting next to *An Officer of the Leiden Civic Guard with an Arms Still Life* (inv. 62.10) on the occasion of a CODART Focus Study Day devoted to “Rembrandt and the Dutch Golden Age” from 26–27 October 2014. Based on this firsthand examination, I concluded that the two works could both be by the same hand, despite some differences in the paint handling, especially in the faces of the figures. In the
case of the Budapest work, the possibility of overpainting around the face could account for
the differences in paint handling between this area and the rest of the painting. Forthcoming
technical investigation of the Budapest painting may lead to additional insight, particularly
as it relates to the present work.

11. In the first major museum show devoted to Dou in 2000, a number of paintings attributed to
Dou’s early period were presented, many of which had been attributed to the artist since
the time of Martin and endorsed, more recently, by either Baer or Sumowski. Baer’s
inclusion in the exhibition of a number of these early, unsigned paintings to Dou has
received some criticism from experts in the field. Ernst van de Wetering argued that “during
the recent Dou exhibition . . . the work of mediocre Dou disciples was presented as early
work of Dou himself.” Similarly, in a discussion about Dou’s painting technique, Jørgen
Wadum states: “We feel that in this exhibition weak imitations were presented as early
works by Dou.” The complexity of the situation is evident in Van den Boogert’s assertion
that the attribution of the present painting to Dou only makes sense if other attributed works
are removed from Dou’s early oeuvre. The four paintings that Van den Boogert argues
should not be considered autograph are: Artist at His Easel, ca. 1630–32 (fig. 3); Man
Writing at an Easel, ca. 1631–32, oil on panel, 31.5 x 25 cm, formerly in the Ivor Collection,
New York; Old Man Lighting a Pipe, ca. 1635, oil on panel, 49 x 61.5 cm, formerly in a
private collection, England; and Old Woman Peeling Apples, ca. 1629–31, Staatliches
Museen, Berlin. The first three of these paintings were included 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,
(1613–1675),” 3 vols. (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1990), 9–33; Ernst van de
Wetering, “Delimiting Rembrandt’s Autograph Oeuvre—An Insoluble Problem?” in The
Mystery of the Young Rembrandt, ed. Bernhard Schnackenburg and Ernst van de
Wetering (Exh. cat. Kassel, Staatliche Museen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister;
Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis) (Wolfratshausen, 2001), 63; Jørgen Wadum,
“Dou Doesn’t Paint, Oh No, He Juggles with His Brush: Gerrit Dou, a Rembrandtesque
den Boogert, “Gerrit Dou (Leiden 1613–1675), Self-Portrait of the Artist in his Studio,”

12. Baer considers the paintings’ smooth handling and palette of cooler tonalities in aubergine,
violet, and blue, as well as the recurring motifs of the book, globe, and inkstand, to be
characteristic of Dou’s style around 1630–32. 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) (Zwolle,
2000), no. 1, 64–65; see also Ronni Baer, “The Paintings of Gerrit Dou (1613–1675),” 3

14. After leaving Rembrandt’s studio in 1631, Dou began to work independently and presumably began to have pupils of his own, whose imitations, in turn, would closely resemble his own style. Thus, it is possible that some signed and unsigned paintings from the early 1630s were executed by Dou’s own pupils or early imitators. See Ernst van de Wetering “Delimiting Rembrandt’s Autograph Oeuvre—An Insoluble Problem?” in *The Mystery of the Young Rembrandt*, ed. Bernhard Schnackenburg and Ernst van de Wetering (Exh. cat. Kassel, Staattliche Museen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister; Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis) (Wolfратshausen, 2001) 58–67.


18. Various scholars regarded the painting as a portrait of Rembrandt, an assertion that was first put forward in 1893 when the painting was thought to be by Rembrandt, see Joseph H. Carter, *Catalogue of the High Legh Collection* [ca. 1893], 52, no. 28; Kleinberger Galleries, *A Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of 150 Paintings by Old Masters of the Dutch, Flemish, German, Italian, Spanish and French Schools from the Kleinberger Galleries* (Paris, 1911), no. 16; Leo Balet, “Die Sammlung Bachstitz,” *Der Cicerone* 13 (1921): 336–38; Horst Vey, *Die Sammlung Henle As dem großen Jahrhundert der niederländischen Malerei* (Cologne, 1964), no. 10.


20. Peter Klein indicates that the youngest year ring was formed in one of two boards in the year 1613 (with the earliest possible felling dates as 1622/28/49) with production possible from 1627 to 1637. See Peter Klein, “Report on the Dendrochronological Analysis of the Panel ‘The Artist in the Studio’ (G. Dou),” dated 2009, unpublished report, kept on file, The Leiden Collection. A second dendrochronologist, Ian Tyers, was engaged to provide an additional analysis, which yielded some contradictory information. Tyers states that the youngest year ring of GD-112, in 2 of 3 boards, was formed in 1609 (with the earliest possible felling date 1618/24/45) with production possible from 1622 to 1633. See Ian Tyers, “GD-112 Gerrit Dou, An Artist in His Studio,” dated November 2010, unpublished report, kept on file, The Leiden Collection.

21. The connection between the two panels is made by Peter Klein. Although once doubted by the Rembrandt Research Project, *Head of an Old Man in a Cap* is now widely considered to be an undisputed work by Rembrandt. Strong evidence for this is the print made after the painting by Jan Gillisz. van Vliet. See David De Witt, *The Bader Collection: Dutch and Flemish Paintings* (Kingston, 2008) no. 161, 261–65; Josua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 1: 1625–1631, Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project (The Hague, 1982), 1, C22, 16, 43–44, 576–80. I would like to thank David De Witt for sharing Peter Klein’s unpublished dendrochronological report on the painting, which states that the youngest year ring of the panel was formed in 1613, making a plausible creation date for the work ca. 1630.

22. For a discussion of the Leiden production of wood, panel makers and relevant bibliography,
Provenance

- Possibly Count Joseph von Rechberg (1769–1833), Austria.
- George Cornwall Legh, M. P. (1804–77), East Hall, High Legh, Knustford, Cheshire; by
descent to Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Martin Cornwall Legh (1839–1904).
29].
- K. Henschel, Kassel, ca. 1924.
February 1939, no. 37, as by Rembrandt [for £546 to Watson]).
- Philippens, Amsterdam, ca. 1938–40.
- [Schaeffer Galleries, New York, by 1948].
- Heinz Kisters (1912–77), Kreuzlingen, 1959 (to Günther and Anne Liese Henle).
- Günther and Anne Liese Henle, Duisburg (his Sale, Sotheby’s, London, 3 December 1997,
no. 6, unsold; sale, Christie’s, London, 10 July 2002, no. 70; [Jack Kilgore & Co., New
York; Otto Naumann Ltd., New York, 2004]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

Exhibition History

1958 [lent by F. H. Enneking, Amsterdam].
der niederländischen Malerei,” 22 February–5 April 1964, no. 10 [lent by Günther and Anne
Liese Henle, Duisburg.

- Norfolk, VA, Chrysler Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, 2005–6 [lent by the present owner].
- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, December 2009–January 2011 [lent by the present owner].
- Budapest, Szépművészeti Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, October–December 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].
References

- Carter, Joseph H. *Catalogue of the Collection of Paintings at High Legh Hall*. Birmingham, [ca. 1893], 52, no. 28, as a self-portrait by Rembrandt van Rijn.


- Van Hall, Hermine. *Portretten van nederlandse beeldende kunstenaars/Portraits of Dutch Painters and Other Artists of the Low Countries*. Amsterdam, 1963, 81–82, no. 25 (as by Dou, retouched by Rembrandt van Rijn).


- Bauch, Kurt. *Rembrandt: Gemälde*. Berlin, 1966, 29, A7 (as by Gerrit Dou, retouched by ...
Rembrandt van Rijn).


- Kleinert, Katja and Cécile Tainturier. “Schilders uit de verf: Leidse ateliervoorstellingen uit
de zeventiende eeuw.” *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 22 (2006): 114, no. 6 (as by Gerrit Dou).


Technical Summary

The painting was executed on a wood panel. The panel is comprised of three vertically grained and oriented oak boards of unequal size. The left plank is 21 cm wide, the center is 24 cm wide, and the right is only 5.5 cm wide. The left plank could not be dated, but the center and right planks came from the same tree, which was felled after 1617.[1] There are no original bevels because the panel has been thinned and cradled.

The panel was prepared with a thin, even, light-colored ground. The ground is radio-opaque, accentuating the wood grain in the X-radiographs. The paint was applied in thin, successive layers of light over dark, with slight impasto in some areas. Infrared photography shows that the sitter was moved slightly to the right and his jaw was lowered slightly.[2] The jaw originally ended at the present location of the sitter’s lips. An amorphous shape in the X-radiographs in the area between the sitter’s back and the three canvases against the wall and brushwork unrelated to the final composition in this area implies that there was a more significant compositional change. The X-radiographs also show large areas of reserve remain around the trumpet, fabric, and the scarf in the lower left corner, indicating further changes in these areas. It appears the trumpet was also shifted to the right.

The panel remains in plane, but it has cracked along the vertical cradle members at the top and bottom of the panel. There is a fair amount of abrasion to the paint in the background, the sitter’s robe, the lid of the trunk, and the shadows of the sitter’s face, and along the right edge. The painting was treated in 2002.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. Ian Tyers, dendrochronological report, November 2010. Tyers states that the boards are narrower than normal, leading him to surmise that they have been trimmed. Therefore he does not give a possible creation date for the panel. Dr Peter Klein, who analyzed the panel on a separate occasion, does not comment on the width of the boards and suggests an earliest possible creation date of 1630 (see Peter Klein, dendrochronological report, 2010).

2. Infrared photography was taken by Annette Rupprecht at 780, 850, and 1000 nm.