



Self-Portrait of an Artist Seated at an Easel

Attributed to Cornelis Bisschop
(Dordrecht 1630 – 1674 Dordrecht)

ca. 1653
oil on panel with arched top
29.7 x 24.8 cm
LS-100



How to cite

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Seated before a panel painting resting on his easel, a young painter turns toward the viewer with his arm casually propped on the back of his chair.^[1] With slightly parted mouth and searching, wide-eyed gaze, the artist is portrayed with an air of immediacy and informality. Except for a small table in the left background, the studio is bare and unadorned, its simplicity evident even in the worn, mottled wood of the artist's chair. A strong light entering from the left creates sharp highlights on the man's mustard-colored blouse and violet beret, and illuminates the thin ties of his cyan blue painter's robe where it hangs over the back of the chair. Although the artist grasps a palette and brushes in his left hand, the viewer has not interrupted his work, as he does not hold a brush in his right hand and the palette is bare except for the small, smudged remnants of white and red pigments.

The attribution of this handsome portrait is a conundrum.^[2] The painting was once associated with Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635–81), probably because of the panel's arched format and the smooth and careful rendering of the sitter's features and clothes. However, most Leiden artists, including Van Mieris and Gerrit Dou (1613–75), added allegorical accoutrements in their self-portraits—lacking here—that served to enhance the artist's intellectual prestige and social status. For example, Dou's *Self-Portrait* from the mid-1630s (**fig 1**) portrays the artist resting his arm on a plaster cast and situates him in an elegant, curtain-draped interior.^[3] This artist's simple dress and the unadorned view of his studio seem entirely different from that pictorial tradition. Closer in character to its half-length composition and informal pose is Judith Leyster's (1609–60) *Self-Portrait* of the early 1630s (**fig 2**). Nevertheless, the clarity of the image and the light tonalities of the palette are characteristic of works produced later in the century. The shape of the artist's beret and the short cut of his hair are typical of styles from the early 1650s.

Self-portraiture was not confined to artists from Haarlem and Leiden, as can be amply attested by the example of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69) during his long career in Amsterdam. As with Rembrandt's example, attributions of artist self-portraits are often based on the sitter's appearance, and taking that approach, in this instance, may yield results. Given the young artist's probable age of around 20–25 years old, one can postulate that he must have been born around 1630. Cornelis Bisschop (1630–74) would appear to be a prime candidate.^[4] Bisschop was a Dordrecht artist who, according to Arnold Houbraken, studied with Ferdinand Bol (1616–80).^[5] He spent his entire career in Dordrecht, where he executed portraits, genre subjects and history scenes, but his reputation rested primarily on his illusionistic paintings, often candlelit scenes.^[6] His fascination with *trompe l'oeil* illusionism is evident in a self-portrait from 1668 in Dordrecht, depicting him lifting a curtain from a painting, a direct visual association to the ancient painter Parrhasius

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Gerrit Dou, *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1635–38, oil on panel, arched top, 18.3 x 14 cm, Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum, 1899.1.25, © Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museums, Gloucestershire, UK / Bridgeman Images



Fig 2. Judith Leyster, *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1630, oil on canvas, 74.6 x 65 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1949.6.1

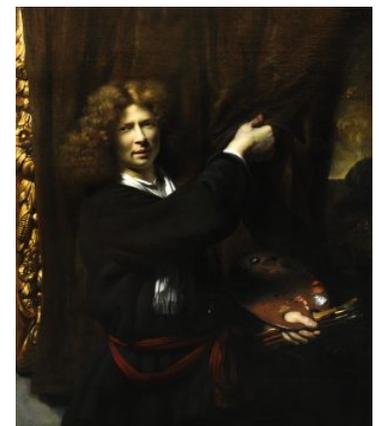


Fig 3. Cornelis Bisschop, *Self-Portrait*, 1668, oil on canvas, 117 x 98.6 cm,



(fig 3). Parrhasius was renowned for fooling his contemporary Zeuxis by painting a curtain so real that Zeuxis attempted to lift it to view the painting he believed the curtain covered.^[7]

A self-portrait by Bisschop in Detroit executed in the mid-1660s, slightly earlier than the Dordrecht self-portrait, exhibits facial characteristics remarkably similar to those in *Self-Portrait of an Artist Seated at an Easel* (fig 4).^[8] In both the Detroit and Leiden Collection paintings, the sitter looks at the viewer with an open expression with his eyebrows arched and his mouth slightly opened. His curly, dark brown hair falls gently to the side of his roundish face. The sitter's nose is also similarly shaped in each portrait.^[9] Aside from such similarities in the sitter's physical appearance, the Leiden Collection painting is executed in a manner that resembles the style of Bisschop's paintings of the 1660s. For example, the smooth handling of paint and the harmonious balance between ochers and grays in the self-portrait anticipate qualities seen in Bisschop's *Girl Peeling an Apple*, 1667, in the Rijksmuseum (fig 5). Unfortunately, not enough is known about Bisschop's paintings from the 1650s; hence these connections, while intriguing and evocative, are not sufficient to attribute the Leiden Collection painting firmly to this Dordrecht artist.

- Lara Yeager-Crasselt, 2017

Dordrechts Museum, Dordrechts,
DM/887/308



Fig 4. Cornelis Bisschop, *The Artist in His Studio*, ca. 1665–70, oil on canvas, 90.8 x 76.8 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Anna Scripps Whitcomb, 38.29, photo © 2015, Detroit Institute of Arts



Fig 5. Cornelis Bisschop, *Girl Peeling an Apple*, 1667, oil on panel, 70 x 57 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-2110



Endnotes

1. When this painting was sold at Sotheby's in London on 4 December 2008, no. 144, it was identified as: "Dutch School," ca. 1640–50.
2. Records at the Frick Art Reference Library, which note that the painting was once in the collection of Thomas Giffard, Chillington Hall, describe it as "Netherlandish school: Portrait of an Artist," and alternatively, "attributed, with question, to Frans van Mieris the Elder; possibly a youthful self-portrait." In 2009 Jack Kilgore suggested an attribution to Jacob van Velsen (ca. 1597–1656), a Delft artist who depicted an artist in his studio on several occasions (correspondence in the Leiden Collection). However, the Leiden Collection painting seems to bear little resemblance to Van Velsen's work, nor does it appear to embody the artistic traditions of Delft. For Van Velsen, see Walter Liedtke, ed., *Vermeer and the Delft School* (Exh. cat. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art) (New Haven, 2001), 349–51. The 2008 Sotheby's catalogue states that this painting resembles works by the Rotterdam artists Hendrick Maertensz Sorgh, Cornelis Saftleven, and Jan Olis, as well as a self-portrait by the Flemish artist David Teniers the Younger. See, for example, Cornelis Saftleven, *Self-Portrait before an Easel*, 1629, 31 x 23 cm., Paris, Musée du Louvre; and David Teniers the Younger, *Self-Portrait*, Vienna, Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der Künste. For a discussion of artist self-portraits produced during this period, see Hans-Joachim Raupp, *Untersuchungen zu Künstlerbildnis und Künstlerdarstellung in den Niederlanden im 17. Jahrhundert* (Hildesheim, 1984), 234–36, nos. 141, 143, 144.
3. For this work and Dou's place in Leiden, see 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) (New Haven, 2000), no. 7.
4. I would like to thank Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. for his guidance in discussing this work, and for suggesting its possible attribution to Cornelis Bisschop. Guido Jansen kindly brought my attention to the auction catalogue of the Leiden burgomaster, Johan van der Marck Aegidiusz, an auction that occurred in Amsterdam on 25 August 1773. This sale contained 98 self-portraits of Leiden artists, but I was not able to locate the Leiden Collection painting.
5. See Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlandse konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam, 1718–21; revised edition published in, The Hague, 1753; reprinted in Amsterdam, 1980), 2:220.
6. Bisschop's paintings were acquired by King Louis XIV of France, and he was invited to become court painter for the Danish king, but he was never able to fulfill that role because of illness that led to his early death. See Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlandse konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam, 1718–21; revised edition published in The Hague, 1753; reprinted in Amsterdam, 1980), 2:221–22.
7. For an account of the story of Parrhasius and Zeuxis as it relates to Gerrit Dou, see 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) (New Haven, 2000), 20.

8. The attribution of the Detroit work has been alternatively given to Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635–81), Jan van Mieris (1660–90), and Michiel van Musscher (1645–1705).
9. It is interesting that the Detroit painting was also formerly attributed to Frans van Mieris the Elder, and that the sitter is likewise portrayed within an arched format.

Provenance

- Thomas Giffard (d. 1823), Wolverhampton, Staffordshire.
- Sir Ernest Trollope Bt., by descent to Louisa Charlotte Trollope (1858–1966), thence by descent (sale, Sotheby's, London, 4 December 2008, no. 144 [Johnny van Haeften, Ltd., London]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2008.

Technical Summary

The support, a vertically oriented, rectangular composite panel with an arched upper edge, is comprised of two, unequally sized, horizontally grained oak planks.^[1] The horizontal join crosses below the figure's proper right elbow and the upper edge of artist's palette. The upper plank is of eastern Baltic origin and derives from a tree felled after 1604. The lower plank is a tangential section and contains too few rings to date.^[2]

The arched upper edge and lower horizontal edge are irregularly cut, which suggests they have been modified. The panel is uncradled and has no bevels, but does have horizontal hand tool marks and vertical machine tool marks along the reverse. There is one paper label, but no wax collection seal, import stamps, stencils or panel maker's marks.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied, followed by paint applied smoothly along the light gray background, easel, and palette and with low brushmarkings along the figure's drapery and hat. A narrow gap between the background and the figure's head exposes the light, warm underlayer.

No underdrawing is evident with infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers, but the images and X-radiograph do reveal compositional changes. The figure originally held an object with a repeating L-shaped pattern in his proper right hand. The palette was added after the proper left hand and sleeve were executed and the artist may have originally held brushes in his hand. The figure's face appears to have originally been that of a somewhat older person with a longer narrower face and sharper features than in the final painted composition, which depicts a young man with a round face and an open-mouthed, slightly startled expression.



The painting is unsigned and undated.

The painting was consolidated, cleaned, and restored in 2009, and remains in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on Ian Tyers's dendrochronology report.
2. According to Ian Tyers's dendrochronology report.