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Hunter Getting Dressed after Bathing

Gabriel Metsu
(Leiden 1629 – 1667 Amsterdam)

ca. 1654–56
oil on panel
51.7 x 63.8 cm
signed in dark paint, lower center, on gunstock: “GMetsù.” (GM in ligature)
GM-106

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In one of the most remarkable and unexpected paintings in Dutch art, Gabriel Metsu has here portrayed himself as a seated nude bather putting on his shirt after a dip in the water. Not at all modest, he smiles at the viewer like an actor addressing his audience. Lying on the ground near him are his rifle and powder horn, while the dead hare hanging from a tree branch suggests that he has taken his swim to cool off after his successful hunt. Standing patiently by his side is his faithful dog. Other, smaller figures are seen in the background, including a nude bather and a couple walking along a road near the bridge spanning the water where a man stands observing the scene.

Given the watery terrain of the Netherlands, remarkably few works actually depict people enjoying a swim. Bathers are sometimes seen in landscape paintings by, among others, Philips Wouwerman (1619–68), Paulus Potter (1625–54), and Jacob van Ruisdael (1628/29–82), but they are generally small-scale figures and not individualized as in this case.[1] In fact, swimming does not seem to have been a common pastime for the Dutch. Water in urban areas was often polluted, and even in the countryside people rarely plunged into rivers and lakes. People even abstained from taking baths (except for medical reasons) out of fear that germs could enter the body once submersed in the water.[2]

The only artist, other than Metsu, to depict a single large-scale male bather was Gerrit Dou (1613–75) in a painting now in the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg **(fig 1)**. The thematic similarities with Metsu's painting prompted one scholar to argue that Dou's composition served as Metsu's model.[3] *Hunter Getting Dressed after Bathing*, however, predates Dou's painting by some 10 years. Moreover, Dou's classicizing image of a soldier pointing into the distance is remarkably different from the smiling hunter in Metsu's work. Unlike Dou, Metsu made no effort to hide corporal imperfections or irregularities and gave his hunter a distinctly portrait-like character.

The identification of the hunter as Metsu is based on a comparison of his facial features with *Self-Portrait as a Painter* **(fig 2)**.[4] Although Dutch genre paintings are filled with self-portraits and depictions of artists' family members, Metsu's rendering of himself nude is unique. The question of why Metsu portrayed himself in this extremely unconventional manner is difficult to answer, but it may be related to the guise he assumed here as a hunter. In the seventeenth century, hunting for all but the smallest game was restricted to the court, the nobility, and officers of the state.[5] The young Metsu, who did not occupy an elevated position in society, would never have been allowed to participate in this sport, but, as is suggested in this painting, he may have been permitted to shoot hares.[6] Despite the prominent status of hunting, however, Dutch artists often depicted hunters as lusty figures who were as interested

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Gerrit Dou. *Male Nude*, ca. 1660–65, oil on panel, 25 x 19 cm, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, 893



Fig 2. Gabriel Metsu, *Self-Portrait as a Painter*, 1655–58, oil on panel, 38 x 31.4 cm, Royal Collection, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 901, Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014



Fig 3. Gabriel Metsu, *A Hunter*

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in chasing women as game. The phallic shape of their long-barreled rifles often served as a visual pun to their virility. Metsu may have been playing on this association by the prominent placement of his rifle, and by signing his painting on the rifle's stock.

Artists also played on verbal puns to suggest a hunter's lustful desires. The Dutch verb *vogelen* (literally "to bird") was used commonly to refer to copulating, and painters, including Metsu, often depicted hunters courting women by offering them birds.[7] Likewise, the expression "hunting hares" was a metaphor for intercourse.[8] Although hares appear less frequently than birds in depictions of hunters, Gerrit Dou and Frans van Mieris (1635–81) repeatedly included them in suggestive images of poultry and game shops to underscore a woman's sexuality.[9]

Hunter Getting Dressed after Bathing was probably meant to evoke a lascivious sportsman, with his nude muscular body and suggestive smile further accentuating his self-assured masculinity. Highlighting a hunter's libido also seems to have been the central theme in another image of a sportsman that Metsu painted around the same time as *Hunter Getting Dressed after Bathing*. This genre-like portrait represents a sportsman and his partridge dog enjoying a break in the woods **(fig 3)**. Having put down his powder horn and rifle, the hunter proudly holds up a bird he has just shot, a gesture indicating his virility.[10] Several years later, around 1660, the Leiden artist Arie de Vois (1630/35–80) drew inspiration from Metsu by painting his self-portrait as a hunter in the same pose as that in *Hunter Showing His Prey*.[11] De Vois placed the long-barreled rifle next to the hunter's hip, a rather explicit reference to the rifle's phallic symbolic association.

It is tempting to think that Metsu intended this painting as a personal joke, but the picture probably found a prominent buyer during the artist's lifetime or soon after his death. The English merchant Thomas Mayden, who lived on the Fluwelen Burgwal in Amsterdam, owned at his death in 1692, "een swemmer van [Metzu]" (a swimmer by Metzu), which was almost certainly *Hunter Getting Dressed after Bathing*.[12] In addition to "een swemmer," Mayden owned another painting by Metsu described as "een smit" (a smith). This painting may have been *A Cavalier Visiting a Blacksmith's Shop* **(fig 4)**, which Metsu had completed not long after his painting of the nude hunter. Interestingly, the painting of the blacksmith's shop depicts the artist in the role of a pompous officer who has ordered an old, feeble smith to make him some horseshoes. Perhaps the two paintings in which the artist featured himself in an unusual and somewhat humorous manner entered Mayden's collection together.

The early eighteenth-century provenance of *Hunter Getting Dressed after Bathing* is unknown, but the picture reappeared in the collection of Lucas Merens (1698–1776), a captain of the Dutch East India Company and mayor of the city of Hoorn. The

Showing His Prey, 1654–56, oil on panel, 50 x 38.8 cm, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, 378, bpk, Berlin / Hamburger Kunsthalle / Elke Walford / Art Resource, NY



Fig 4. Gabriel Metsu, *A Cavalier Visiting a Blacksmith Shop*, 1654–56, oil on canvas, 65.4 x 73.3 cm, Salting Bequest, 1910, The National Gallery, London, NG 2591, © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY

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Amsterdam art dealer Jan Spaan acquired *Hunter Getting Dressed after Bathing* at Merens's posthumous sale in 1778. He probably passed it on immediately to a foreign dealer, as no less than two years later the painting featured in a collection catalogue of the Swiss politician and writer François Tronchin.[14] Tronchin, who assembled a large collection of Dutch paintings with the help of the French painter Jean-Étienne Liotard (1702–89), was the author of his own collection catalogue. He deserves credit for being the first to recognize Metsu's self-portrait in the nude hunter.[15] The painting passed through six generations of the Tronchin family until it was sold with the estate in the early twentieth century.

Descriptions of *Hunter Getting Dressed after Bathing* in auction catalogues and art historical literature have always focused on its idiosyncratic subject matter. Tronchin's catalogue is one of the few sources commenting on its distinctive brushwork, describing it as "large & moëlleuse" (broad and supple).[16] Indeed, one of the key characteristics of Metsu's painting is the fluid technique, as seen in the hunter's body, the architecture, and much of the vegetation. Even more loosely painted are the landscape, the bridge, and the clouds in the background. Metsu, however, strongly varied his brushwork throughout the painting, and rendered the foreground still-life elements, such as the fur of the dead hare and the ironwork on the rifle, with great refinement. He used such differences in handling to create depth and to focus the viewer's attention.

The same variation in brushwork can be found in other works from the mid-1650s, including *A Cavalier Visiting a Blacksmith Shop*.[17] Metsu allowed the brownish ground to show through in both works and let it serve as a base tone for the landscape and the architecture. Likewise, he left the composition's preparatory sketch visible in some areas, including the vegetation in the bottom left. He worked up only the foreground in greater detail, particularly the hunter, his clothes, and his dog. Another technique characteristic of this period of Metsu's career is the manner in which he contoured forms in black to suggest shadows and to make objects stand out against their respective backgrounds.

Finally, it is worth noting that Metsu placed more emphasis on the landscape in *Hunter Getting Dressed after Bathing* than he did in most of his other paintings. Aside from *A Hunter Showing His Prey*, only two other works, both dating to the early years of his career, have such a prominent landscape. These works represent Old Testament stories and are set in Italianate landscapes that call to mind works by Utrecht painters.[18] Even though *Hunter Getting Dressed after Bathing* depicts a Dutch landscape similar to what the artist could have seen near Leiden, the setting is probably not based on reality but rather is a creation of Metsu's imagination.

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- Adriaan Waiboer, 2017

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Endnotes

1. See Alan Chong's discussion of the phenomenon of nude bathers in Dutch art in Peter C. Sutton et al., *Masters of 17th-Century Dutch Landscape Painting* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; Boston, Museum of Fine Arts; Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art) (Boston, 1987), 389.
2. Bianca M. du Mortier, "Costumes in Gabriel Metsu's Paintings: Mode and Manners in the Mid-Seventeenth Century," in *Gabriel Metsu*, ed. Adriaan E. Waiboer (Exh. cat. Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (New Haven, 2010), 143–45.
3. Franklin W. Robinson, *Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667): A Study of His Place in Dutch Genre Painting of the Golden Age* (New York, 1974), 29.
4. Comparisons can also be made with a number of other works in which Metsu assumed the guise of a high-class suitor courting an elegant lady, who can be identified as his wife, Isabella de Wolff. See, for instance, Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 254–55, no. A-115; 268, no. A-128, both ill.
5. Scott A. Sullivan, *The Dutch Gamepiece* (Montclair, N.J., 1984), 236.
6. Franklin W. Robinson, *Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667): A Study of His Place in Dutch Genre Painting of the Golden Age* (New York, 1974), 29.
7. Eddy de Jongh, "Erotica in vogelperspectief: De dubbelzinnigheid van een reeks 17de eeuwse genre-voorstellingen," *Simiolus* 3 (1968–69): 22–43. Cesare Ripa (translated by Dirck P. Pers), *Iconologia, of uytbeeldingen des verstands […]*, trans. Dirck P. Pers (Amsterdam, 1644), 144, even mentioned that partridges were particularly wild during mating and therefore highly suitable for artists to symbolize unbridled lust. For Metsu's paintings, see Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 207–8, no. A-64; 217, no. A-74; 265–66, no. A-125, all ill.
8. "Jager: Ick jaegh de Haes op barre Heyden . . . Vryer: En ick seer gaern in donckere nollen" (Hunter: I hunt the hare on barren heath . . . Lover: And I like to do so very much in dark holes). *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal*, 23 vols. (The Hague and Leiden, 1882–1987), 7:5253. Roemer Visscher, *Brabbelingh* (Amsterdam, ca. 1600), 91.
9. Eric Jan Sluijter, ed., *Leidse Fijnschilders: Van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge, 1630–1760* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 1988), 161–62.
10. Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 32.
11. Franklin W. Robinson, *Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667): A Study of His Place in Dutch Genre Painting of the Golden Age* (New York, 1974), 30; Eric Jan Sluijter in *Leidse Fijnschilders: Van Gerrit Dou tot Frans*

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van Mieris de Jonge, 1630–1760, ed. Eric Jan Sluijter (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 1988), 255–57, no. 91, ill.

12. Amsterdam City Archives, *Desolate Boedelkamer* 396, fol. 40v (Getty Provenance Index, Inventory Contents, PI inv. no. N-323). Sebastiaan A. C. Dudok van Heel, *Van Amsterdamse burgers tot Europese aristocraten: Hun geschiedenis en hun portretten; De Heijnen-maagschap 1400–1800* (The Hague, 2008), 718–19.
13. Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 29–31.
14. François Tronchin, *Catalogue des tableaux de mon Cabinet* (Geneva, 1780), 34.
15. François Tronchin, *Catalogue des tableaux de mon Cabinet* (Geneva, 1780), 34: “Metzu sortant du bain au retour de la chasse.”
16. “la touche en est large & moëlleuse; de même que de tous les accessoires dont Metzu a fait le tableau le plus imposant par sa couleur vigoureuse, & son merveilleux effet.” François Tronchin, *Catalogue des tableaux de mon Cabinet* (Geneva, 1780), 34.
17. For a detailed analysis of the painting techniques employed by Metsu in *A Cavalier Visiting a Blacksmith Shop*, see Melanie E. Gifford, “Fine Painting and Eloquent Imprecision: Gabriel Metsu’s Painting Technique,” in *Gabriel Metsu*, ed. Adriaan E. Waiboer (Exh. cat. Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (New Haven, 2010), 161–63.
18. Franklin W. Robinson, *Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667): A Study of His Place in Dutch Genre Painting of the Golden Age* (New York, 1974), 19; Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 2012), 157, no. A-6 (*Lot and His Daughters*); 169, no. A-10 (*The Dismissal of Hagar*), both ill. *The Dismissal of Hagar* constitutes Metsu’s direct response to Jan Baptist Weenix’s views of the Italian *campagna*.

Provenance

- Probably Thomas Mayden, Amsterdam, by 1662 (his inventory, 29 October 1662).
- Lucas Merens, Hoorn (his sale, Ploos van Amstel, Hendrik de Winter, and Jan Yver, Amsterdam, 15 April 1778, no. 60 [to Jan Spaan for 52 guilders; Lebrun, Paris, by 1780]).
- François Tronchin des Délices, Bessinge, by 1780, for 4,000 “livres” (his sale, Constantin and Boileau, 23–24 March 1801, no. 110); by descent to Jean-Louis Robert Tronchin, Bessinge; by descent to Armand Henri Tronchin, Bessinge; by descent to Louis-Rémy Nosky Tronchin, Bessinge; by descent to Henry Tronchin, Bessinge; by descent to Robert Tronchin, Bessinge, 1928.
- Xavier Givaudan, Bessinge (who purchased the paintings collection with the domain), by 1938; by descent to André Givaudan, Bessinge, by 1974.

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- (Sale, Lord Chetwode et. al., anonymous part, Christie's, London, 12 December 1980, no. 110; anonymous sale, Koller, Zürich, 15–16 May, 1981, no. 5088).
- Jean Charles Lignel (his sale, Jean Claude Anaf, Lyon, 20 October 1991, no. 59).
- Private collection, United States [Otto Naumann Ltd, New York, 2007].
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

Exhibition History

- Geneva, Musée Rath, "Anciens maitres exposés au Musée Rath," July 1850, no. 29 [lent by the Tronchin family].
- Geneva, Musée Rath, "De Genève à l'Ermitage: Les collections de François Tronchin," 21 June–15 September 1974, no. 151 [lent by André Givaudan, Bessinge].
- Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland, "Gabriel Metsu," 4 September–5 December 2010; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, 16 December 2010–21 March 2011; Washington, National Gallery of Art, 17 April–24 July 2011, no. 35 [lent by the present owner].
- Rotterdam, Kunsthal Rotterdam, "Sweet and Salt: Water and the Dutch," 14 February–10 June 2012 [lent by the present owner].
- Ithaca, Cornell University, Herbert F. Johnson Museum, "An Eye for Detail: Dutch Painting from the Leiden Collection," 20 September 2014–21 June 2015 [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].
- 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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- 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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Rembrandt's Time. Edited by Elizabeth Nogrady et al., 151, ill. Exh. cat. Amsterdam, H'ART Museum; West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art. Zwolle, 2025. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]

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Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of horizontal, wavy-grained, rectangular, non-Baltic oak, has bevels on all four sides.[1] The wavy grain is visually pronounced through the sky. There are two coatings along the uncradled panel reverse: a textured brown radio-opaque layer followed by a white wax layer. The brown layer has been applied with 2 cm-wide horizontal and diagonal brushwork. A black stencil and a paper label have been applied over the brown lead layer. The white wax layer extends over the stencil and label. No machine toolmarks, import stamps or panel maker's mark are visible through the coatings.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied. There is a narrow raised vertical line of ground 0.5 cm into the face of the painting, along the upper right corner. The paint has been applied smoothly in thin layers with low brushmarking and transparent glazing, light over dark.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. Although the brushwork of the brown layer applied to the panel reverse makes the X-radiograph difficult to read, there is no indication of the foliage above the diagonal roofline in the upper left corner and the small figure and bridge handrails in the background, which are visible in the infrared images.

The painting is signed in dark paint along the brown wooden gunstock along the lower center of the composition but is undated.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2007 and remains in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of wood is by Ian Tyers, independent consultant, Arcus Dendrochronology,

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Sheffield, England, who kindly examined the X-radiograph and offered his expert opinion via email.

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