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Two Women in an Interior with a Basket of Lemons

Caspar Netscher
(Prague or Heidelberg ca. 1639 – 1684 The Hague)

ca. 1664–65
oil on panel
37.6 x 34.4 cm
CN-108

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Caspar Netscher's elegant depiction of a woman selecting lemons offers a twist on the familiar theme of a woman supervising her maid. The popularity of the subject in Dutch painting was linked to the exhortations of Jacob Cats and others regarding the housewife's pivotal role in the smooth running of the household.[1] One of the primary responsibilities of a seventeenth-century Dutch housewife, according to Cats, was to ensure that her family was properly fed and provided for, whether she dispatched those duties herself or delegated them to a maidservant. Domestic manuals such as Cats's *Houwelyck* (Marriage) emphasized the importance of shopping wisely, obtaining the best quality food for the family without squandering the household purse. Images of women shopping for foodstuffs or interacting with vendors became increasingly popular from the 1640s onward in the hands of artists such as Quiringh van Brekelenkam (after 1622–ca. 1669), Jacob Ochtervelt (1634–82), Pieter de Hooch (1629–84), and others. Some depict the mistress of the house shopping in the marketplace or negotiating with vendors at the door to the family home **(fig 1)** (see also GM-114); others emphasize the housewife's pedagogical and managerial skills, showing her expertise by inspecting the goods selected by her maid **(fig 2)**. Many of these interactions feature fish or soft fruits, perishable foodstuffs that tested a woman's skill in evaluating freshness and quality.

Most of these depictions are set in the *voorhuis* (front foyer) or courtyard of the home, or include a view to the outside, drawing attention to the role of commerce as a platform for interaction between the private realm and the outside world. By contrast, Netscher's *Two Women in an Interior with a Basket of Lemons* takes place within a cloistered room: although there is a doorway, it offers no visible route to—or interference from—the outside world. The exchange between the women seems designed not so much to show off the young woman's domestic competence as to draw attention to her graceful gestures and stylish garments. Moreover, while Brekelenkam's and Ochtervelt's housewives typically have set aside sewing, childcare, or some other worthy domestic chore in order to attend to the maid or vendor, Netscher's pretty protagonist shows no evidence of having been so industriously occupied. Indeed, the only objects on the table beside her are a heavy silver candlestick, a mirror, a pearl necklace, and a crumpled cloth, while a decorative shelf hanging on the wall behind holds a gilded casket and two glass flasks: all objects that can be linked to the vanities of a woman's toilette.

In the seventeenth century, lemons and citrons were luxury items, imported to the Netherlands from the Mediterranean at considerable effort and expense. Their astringency was used to temper the sweetness of wine, or to balance the "moist humors" and "cold slime" of oysters. In paintings, lemons often functioned as symbols of temperance and moderation; or, prompted by the contrast between their external

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Jacob Ochtervelt, *A Fishmonger at the Door*, 1663, oil on canvas, 55.5 x 44 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague, inv. 195



Fig 2. Quiringh van Brekelenkam, *Interior with a Lady Choosing Fish*, 1664, oil on panel, 49.8 x 39.4 cm, Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester, inv. 1979.449, © Manchester City Galleries



Fig 3. Caspar Netscher, *Cherrywoman*

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beauty and the tart flesh within, as warnings against sinful behavior.[2] It is by no means certain that Netscher invested his painting with such associations. Nevertheless, by having the woman select lemons—rather than some more essential foodstuff, or one that might require particularly keen judgment—Netscher underscores her pampered situation. This is all the more apparent when *Two Women in an Interior with a Basket of Lemons* is juxtaposed with a slightly earlier and far humbler depiction of the same older woman as a fruit vendor **(fig 3)**, this time selling cherries in an outdoor market to a young girl who receives the bright fruit in her bunched-up apron.[3]

with a Child, oil on panel, 34.9 x 29.2 cm, National Trust, Tyntesfield, North Somerset, inv. no. 21099, photo credit: National Trust

- Marjorie E. Wieseman, 2017

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Endnotes

1. Wayne Frantis, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Cambridge, 1993), 100; Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (New York, 1987), 422.
2. On the varied uses and interpretations of lemons, see Julie Berger Hochstrasser, "Feasting the Eye: Painting and Reality in the Seventeenth-Century 'Bancketje,'" in Alan Chong, and Wouter Kloek, et al., *Still-Life Paintings from the Netherlands, 1550–1720* (Exh. cat. Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Art; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Zwolle, 1995), 75–76; Julie Berger Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven and London, 2007), 70–74; and Regina Deckers, "Meisterwerke der Natur: Zitrusfrüchte im Stillleben," in *Die Frucht der Verheißung: Zitrusfrüchte in Kunst und Kultur*, ed. Yasmin Doosry, Christiane Lauterbach, and Johannes Pommeranz (Exh. cat. Nuremberg, Germanischen Nationalmuseum) (Nuremberg, 2011), 171–99, esp. 181–82. A contemporary source for the uses of citrus fruits is Johannes Commelijn, *Nederlantze hesperides, dat is, Oeffening en gebruik van de limoen- en oranje-boomen; gestellt na den aardt, en climaat der Nederlanden* (Amsterdam, 1676), esp. 46–47.
3. Netscher painted another depiction of the same older model offering a basket of fruit to a well-dressed woman, who holds out a coin: *The Fruit Seller*, ca. 1664, oil on panel, 30 x 34 cm, present location unknown; Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Caspar Netscher and Late Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Doornspijk, 2002), 186, no. 30.

Provenance

- Joseph-Hyacinthe-François de Paule de Rigaud, Comte de Vaudreuil (1740–1817), Paris (his sale, Paris, 24 November 1784, no. 68 [for 4,600 livres to Jacques Langlier for de Courmont [1]]).
- François-Louis-Joseph de Laborde de Méréville (1761–1802), Paris and London. [2]
- Edward Coxe (d. 1814), London (his sale, London, 23 April 1807, no. 72, as by Ter Borch [for £52.10]).
- Mr. Smith (possibly John Smith?)
- James-Alexandre de Pourtalès, Comte de Pourtalès-Gorgier (1776–1855), London (his sale, London, 20 May 1826, no. 99 [for £142.16 to James Dunford]). [3]
- Charles Cope, London, by 1842 (his sale, Christie's, London, 8 June 1872, no. 53 [for £372.15, to Agnew's Gallery, London; to Heugh]).
- John Heugh, London, by 1872 (his sale, London, 11 May 1878, no. 253 [for £210, to Agnew's Gallery, London, for Hodgson]).

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- R. K. Hodgson, Esq., London, 1878 [Agnew's Gallery, London; for £650 to Guinness, 1891].
- Edward Cecil Guinness, 1st Earl of Iveagh (1847–1927), London, 1891; by inheritance to Honorable Arthur Ernest Guinness (1876–1949), by 1927; by descent to Mrs. Ernest Guinness (Marie Clotilde Russell, d. 1953), Holmbury House, Holmbury St. Mary, Sussex, by 1952 (sale, Christie's, London, 10 July 1953, no. 65 [for £1,650 to Slatter; Dr. Arthur Kauffmann, London/Dr. Fritz Nathan, Zurich, to Bührle, 1954]).
- Collection Emil Bührle (1890–1956), Zurich; by descent to Dr. Dieter Bührle (1921–2012), Zurich (from about 1956); sold by him to Römer Fine Art, Zurich, 2007.
- Galerie Nissl, Eschen, Liechtenstein, 2007].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2007.

Provenance Notes

1. Presumably Louis-Marie Lebas de Courmont, marquis de Pomponne (1742–94), although the painting is not mentioned in the sale of his collection held in Paris on 26 May 1795 (Lugt 5323). Lebas de Courmont and the collector Jean-Joseph de Laborde (father of François-Louis-Joseph) lived on the same street in Paris (rue d'Arthois) and moved in the same circle of financier-collectors; see Jean-François Delmas, "Le mécénat des financiers au XVIIIe siècle: Étude comparative de cinq collections de peinture," *Histoire, économie et société* 14 (1995): 51–70 passim (accessed 2 April 2013).
2. But not in the sales of this collection held in Paris in 1783 or London in 1801 (Lugt 3744 and 6210, respectively). It is not know precisely when the painting left de Laborde's collection. For a short time, de Laborde was the owner of Italian and French paintings from the Orléans collection. Straitened finances forced him to mortgage the paintings to the English banker and collector Jeremiah Harman (1764–1844) in 1793. Five years later Harman sold the paintings for £43,500 to the dealer Michael Bryan acting on behalf of the "Bridgewater Syndicate"; for an overview of the activities of the Bridgewater Syndicate, see Nicholas Penny, *National Gallery Catalogues: The Sixteenth Century Italian Paintings*, vol. 2, *Venice 1540–1600*, London 2008, 466–67. On Laborde's collection, see Ferdinand Boyer, "Les collections de François de Laborde-Méréville (1761–1802)," *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire de l'art français 1967* (1968): 141–52.
3. An annotation in the copy of the sale catalogue held at Widener Library, Harvard University, indicates "Bo^{t} at 94£10 by PC [private contract?] of Mr Smith before the sale HP [Harry Phillips]."

Exhibition History

- London, Royal Academy of Arts, "Exhibition of the Works of the Old Masters, Together with Works of Deceased Masters of the British School," 1872, no. 190 [lent by Mrs. Charles Cope].
- London, Royal Academy of Arts, "Dutch Pictures 1450–1750," Winter 1952–53, no. 436 [lent by Mrs.

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Ernest Guinness].

- Zurich, Schloss Jegenstorf, “Alte Meister aus der Sammlung E. Bührle, Zurich,” 21 May–31 August 1955, no. 12 [lent by E. Bührle].
- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, January 2011–January 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].
- Nivå, The Nivaagaard Collection, “The Joy of Everyday Life in The Netherlands and Denmark,” 28 January–16 June 2024 [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. 12 [lent by the present owner].

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- Royal Academy. *Exhibition of the Works of the Old Masters, Together with Works of Deceased Masters of the British School*. Exh. cat. London, Royal Academy. London, 1872, 20, no. 190.
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London, 1918–21, 2:282.

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- Schloss Jegenstorf. *Alte Meister aus der Sammlung E. Bührle, Zurich*. Exh. cat. Zurich, Schloss Jegenstorf. Zurich, 1955, 7, no. 12.
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Versions
Versions and Copies

1. After Caspar Netscher, *Two Women in an Interior with a Basket of Lemons*, support and dimensions unknown, whereabouts unknown.

Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular oak, has bevels on all four sides. A vertical split

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has been reinforced with three wood cleats and a mahogany strip.[1] The panel is unthinned and uncradled and has no machine tool marks. There are two paper labels but no wax collection seals, import stamps or panel maker's marks along the panel reverse.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied followed by paint thinly and smoothly applied with no use of impasto. No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images and no compositional changes are noted in the X-radiograph. There is a large area of reserve surrounding the younger woman's head.

The painting is unsigned and undated.

The painting underwent minor panel work and restoration along the vertical split in 2006.

It is in fair condition with areas of abrasion along the elderly woman's drapery, the wicker basket and the floor, and is in a good state of preservation.[2]

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood and wood strip is based on examination of images by George Bisacca, Paintings Conservation Department, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
2. Entry based on examination report by Jevon Thistlewood, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and further discussions with George Bisacca, Paintings Conservation Department, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

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