



Paulus Potter  
Dutch, 1625 - 1654

## *A Farrier's Shop*

1648

oil on panel

overall: 48.3 x 45.7 cm (19 x 18 in.)

Inscription: center left in transom frame above doorway: paulus potter f. 1648

Widener Collection 1942.9.52

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### ENTRY

According to Paulus Potter's widow, the artist would put a small sketchbook in his pocket whenever he had time to take a walk. When he saw something that was intriguing or enjoyable and that might serve his purpose, he immediately sketched the subject.[1] This anecdote about Potter's working process may well help explain how he came upon the idea to depict this intense little drama between man and animal outside a farrier's shop, a subject no other Dutch artist ever depicted. One can only imagine that Potter, on one of his walks near the fields outside of The Hague, was attracted by the commotion caused by a horse having its teeth filed, or floated. A large metal instrument, known as a twitch, pinched the animal's muzzle so that it would keep its mouth open.[2] On such an occasion Potter must have seen the horse rearing back and pawing the air with its left foreleg. He would have noted the intense concentration of the old, bespectacled farrier as he braced himself to work the rasp, and the open-mouthed expression of his younger accomplice holding the restraint. He also may have witnessed the slack-jawed gaze of the young bystander, who, with hands stuffed in his pockets, looks up at the operation in amazement. Inside the shop, hard at work at his anvil, the blacksmith takes no more interest in the proceedings than do the dogs or the chickens scratching for food. Whether Potter recorded his impressions in his sketchbook or merely carried them home in his head, the subject was so vivid in his mind that he was able to create a work that captures the emotional intensity of the moment.

Although the basic compositional scheme is one that Potter had developed in the previous year, particularly in *Figures with Horses by a Stable*, signed and dated 1647 (Philadelphia Museum of Art),[3] this painting is unique in its vivid

characterization of a scene. To enhance the dramatic effect Potter situated the action along a shaded diagonal wedge formed by the farrier shop and the small wooden structure attached to it, known as the brake. Long shadows on the ground and the brightly illuminated white horse behind the central group of figures accentuate the chiaroscuro contrasts between foreground and background. Gray smoke from the blacksmith's fire rises from the chimney and merges into the dark clouds of the windswept sky.

It is not known what influences inspired Potter to develop this compositional scheme, although enough similarities exist between it and paintings by Pieter van Laer (Dutch, c. 1592 - 1642) and Isack van Ostade (Dutch, 1621 - 1649) to suggest that Potter might have been familiar with works by those artists (see, for example, Van Ostade's *The Halt at the Inn* and *Workmen before an Inn*). Indeed, Potter apparently spent some time in Haarlem in the mid-1640s. It was only after he joined the Saint Luke's Guild in Delft in 1646, however, that he began to incorporate *contre-jour* light effects, which he would have learned from Italianate painters.[4]

As is evident from the anecdote about his walks with his sketchbook, and also from his drawings [fig. 1] and etchings, Potter observed the world carefully and recorded his impressions without idealization. A comparison of the study of a horse in the Barber Institute of Fine Arts and the white horse in *A Farrier's Shop* suggests that he composed his paintings on the basis of such drawings. Presumably, comparable studies from life also existed for other figures in this painting.

The intense realism of Potter's style was particularly appreciated in the nineteenth century, and his works commanded enormous sums of money.[5] This painting, for example, fetched 15,000 francs in the Perregaux sale of 1841, perhaps in part because of the enthusiastic, and extensive, description in the sale catalog. The special place reserved for the painting within this esteemed artist's oeuvre is particularly evident in the concluding sentence of the catalog entry: "En dernière analyse, c'est un tableau de Paul Potter aussi parfait de coloris, de faire, de sentiment, de vérité, que les plus beaux qu'il ait jamais enfantés, avec l'avantage inappréciable d'une composition plus savante, plus variée et plus animée." [6]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Paulus Potter, *Study of a Horse*, pencil, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham

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## NOTES

- [1] Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1976), 2:129. Houbraken received this information in a letter written by Nicolaas van Reenen, the son of Potter's widow. The full text quoted by Houbraken is: "Dat hy zyn Moeder dikwerf heeft hooren zeggen: Dat zy haar Man nooit ledig heeft gezien; dat hy zelf wanneer hy een uur voor haar over had om een zyn zak by zig droeg; om als hy iets zag dat geestig was, en in zyn kraam konde dienen, staks dat voorwerp af te schetsen."
- [2] Much confusion has existed in old references about the exact operation being undertaken by the old man in the red shirt. In the Clemens sale of 1777 in Ghent it was thought that he was giving a cure to the horse ("fait une cure à un cheval"). In the Johan Philip de Monté sale, the action was described as "bettering the teeth" ("de tanden te verbeteren"). The catalog text in the Perregaux sale of 1841 described the man as examining the horse's mouth with an iron probe ("examiner, avec une sonde de fer, la bouche à demi ouverte de l'animal"). When the painting was exhibited as part of the Rudolphe Kann collection in Paris in 1907 (see Charles Sedelmeyer, *Catalogue of Rodolphe Kann Collection*, 2 vols. [Paris, 1907]), it was thought that the man was extracting a tooth, an interpretation that was maintained in the Widener catalogs. Amy L. Walsh ("Paulus Potter: His Works and Their Meaning," PhD diss. [Columbia University, 1985], 92) has noted that horses' teeth are filed or floated because they continue to grow as the animals age. She interprets this farrier and his apprentice as swindlers who are filing the horse's teeth to make the animal appear younger than it is. Filing a horse's teeth is, however, a standard bit of care for the animal as the uneven wear of unfloated teeth can cause disruptions

in proper digestion and thus lead to malnutrition.

- [3] See inventory no. E1924–3–17, from Philadelphia Museum of Art.
- [4] Potter first used *contre-jour* light in his *Cows Driven to Pasture*, 1647, in the Residenzgalerie, Salzburg. For an illustration of this work see Peter C. Sutton et al., *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Landscape Painting* (Boston, 1987), 418, fig. 1.
- [5] John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters*, 9 vols. (London, 1829–1842), 5:117, noted the high prices that Potter's paintings commanded.
- [6] Perregaux sale, Paris, November 25, 1841, 52 (see Provenance). ("In the final analysis, this is a painting by Paul Potter that is as perfect in its colors, its execution, its mood, [and] its veracity as the most beautiful he ever created, with the invaluable advantage of a more erudite, varied, and animated composition.")
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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The cradled-panel support consists of a single board with a vertical grain. Worm tunnels are visible in the X-radiograph and on the back of the panel, and a small vertical hairline crack is found along the bottom edge, just right of center. Vertical striations are visible from the brush application of the moderately thick white ground. Opaque paint is applied in light passages with impasted highlights, while dark passages are thinly glazed in a series of translucent layers.

Pentimenti of a chicken and a stick are visible in the lower right corner, and minor changes were made in the legs of the standing dog. The sky and dark passages are moderately abraded, and there are scattered small losses and local abrasions, particularly along the right edge in a vertical band. The painting was treated in 1981 to remove discolored varnish and inpainting, although insoluble overpaint was left in place in some areas.

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## PROVENANCE

Dominique Bertrand Clemens, Ghent; (his sale, Salle de la Confrerie de Saint George, Ghent, 23 September 1777 and days following, no. 49; bought in). his brother, Jacques Clemens, canon of St. Bavo's Cathedral [1713-1779], Ghent; (his

sale, Maison Mortuaire, Ghent, 21 June 1779 and days following, no. 212); Neijman, Amsterdam. Johan Philip de Monté, Utrecht; his widow; (her sale, A. Lamme, Rotterdam, 4-5 July 1825, no. 1); (Lambert Jean Nieuwenhuys, Brussels).[1] Comte François-Alexandre-Charles Perregaux [1791-1837], Paris; (his estate sale, Galerie Le Brun, Paris, 8-9 December 1841, no. 26); George. Madame Autran, Marseilles, by 1867. (Charles Sedelmeyer, Paris), in 1898. M. Rodolphe Kann [d. 1905], Paris and Marseilles, by 1900; purchased 1907 with the entire Kann collection by (Duveen Brothers, Inc., London, New York, and Paris); sold 1909 to Peter A.B. Widener, Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; inheritance from Estate of Peter A.B. Widener by gift through power of appointment of Joseph E. Widener, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; gift 1942 to NGA.

[1] An annotated copy of the De Monté sale catalogue states that Nieuwenhuys purchased the picture for 7,100 guilders. For a discussion of the sale and L.J. Nieuwenhuys' purchase of the work, see Charles J. Nieuwenhuys, *A Review of the Lives and Works of Some of the Most Eminent Painters*, London, 1834, 186-188.

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## EXHIBITION HISTORY

1908 Exhibition of Works by the Old Masters and Deceased Masters of the British School. Winter Exhibition, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1908, no. 66.

1994 The Pleasures of Paulus Potter's Countryside, Mauritshuis, The Hague, 1994-1995, no. 13, repro. (catalogue titled Paulus Potter: Paintings, drawings and etchings, by Amy Walsh, Edwin Buijsen, and Ben Broos).

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