NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Gerard ter Borch the Younger
Dutch, 1617 - 1681

The Suitor's Visit

c. 1658

oil on canvas
overall: 80 x 75 cm (31 1/2 x 29 1/2 in.)
framed: 110.8 x 106 x 12.7 cm (43 5/8 x 41 3/4 x 5 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.58

ENTRY

The encounter taking place at the doorway of this elegant, high-ceilinged room, decorated with gilded leather wall covering, seems the height of gentility.[1] A debonair young man, hat in hand, bows slightly as he responds to the alluring gaze of the young woman who has come forward to greet him. She apparently has just risen from her green velvet seat where she had been playing a duet with the woman strumming on her theorbo: her music book and bass viol can be seen lying on the table. Behind the women stands a man who, in the dimness of the interior light, warms himself before the hearth as he turns to peer at the visitor.

Ter Borch drew upon his surroundings in Deventer for creating a sense of immediacy in his compositions. The objects in this work, including the tapestry on the table, the chair, the theorbo, the hearth, and the leather wall covering, were ones he knew well, as they reappear in different contexts in a number of other paintings from the mid-1650s.[2] The model for the suitor was his student Caspar Netscher (Dutch, 1639 - 1684), who also features in other of Ter Borch's paintings from the mid-to-late 1650s.[3] Indeed, Netscher made a copy of this painting before he set sail for Rome in 1659, a date that establishes a *terminus post quem* for this work.[4] Finally, the elegant standing woman, resplendent in her red top and white satin dress, is almost certainly Gesina ter Borch (1631–1690), the artist's beloved half-sister.[fig. 1] Not only did she frequently serve as a model for the artist,[5] but her ideas seem to have had a profound effect on the type and character of the subjects Ter Borch chose to depict during this phase of his career.[6]

By the mid-1650s Gesina had embarked on her own artistic and literary career with her poetry album, which is filled with arcadian images of love's pleasures and

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disappointments.[7] Gesina's poetry and pictorial images in this and other albums belong to that important Dutch literary genre, largely influenced by Petrarchan ideals, that both celebrates the delights of love and warns against the dangers of becoming ensnared in ill-advised attachments.[8] In this respect she followed in the path of her father, who, aside from his topographic drawings, was also a poet and who, in the 1620s, helped illustrate an amorous songbook with images of lovers cavorting in the grass.

It is against this background of family interest in art, music, and emblematic literature about love and its complexities that one must consider the nature of the narrative that unfolds in *The Suitor's Visit*. Under the veneer of gentility is a scene that is alive with sexual innuendo. The gazes of the couple at the door are at once enticing and yearning, a private communication that does not go unnoticed by the gentleman standing before the hearth. More explicitly sexual, however, is the nature of their gestures. The young woman clasps her hands in a manner that could be construed as an invitation for intercourse, as the thumb of her right hand protrudes between the index finger and second finger of her other hand in a most unconventional, and expressive, manner. His gesture in response appears to be an assent, for as he bows he forms a circle between the thumb and index finger of his left hand.

Ter Borch does not spell out the outcome of the woman's ploy—for her central position in the composition and the dog's inquisitive gaze clearly indicate she is the initiator of the intrigue. Undoubtedly, however, Ter Borch's circle of acquaintances would have recognized that his composition had remarkable parallels with an image found in Jan Hermanszoon Krul's influential *Eerlycke Tytkorting* (Honorable Pastimes), published in Haarlem in 1634, which contains emblems devoted to the delights and travails of love.[9] The related print [fig. 2] accompanies an emblem entitled "De Overdaed en Doet Geen Baet" (roughly, "The Excess That Brings No Profit"). The thrust of the emblem is a warning that encouragement by a woman is not always to be trusted. Whereas a suitor might feel that love and commitment would follow, all too often the lover is rejected and then belittled. Krul writes of the lover's lament: "If you never intend to have me, why so much courtship? / It would honor you best to send me straight away."[10] The similarities between the painting and the print seem to imply that the outcome of this match will likewise be disappointment. Finally, not unrelated to the painting's mood are the colors of the woman's dress. In the list of color symbols Gesina compiled in her poetry album around 1659, white is equated with purity and

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carnation with revenge or cruelty.[11]

The subtlety of Ter Borch's narrative is matched by the gracefulness of his figures and the delicacy and refinement of his touch. No artist could convey as effectively as he the shimmering surface of a long white satin skirt or the undulating rhythms of a translucent lace cuff. His brushstrokes, while small, are quite loose and rapidly applied with the result that the surface has a richly animated quality.[12] Such an effect is also felt in the nuanced psychological interactions he created amongst his figures. Ter Borch's effectiveness in depicting human emotion and a sense of inner life in such genre scenes may stem from his experiences as a portrait painter. Even the poses he used in these works are occasionally similar. For example, the manner in which the suitor holds his wide-brimmed hat is derived from a portrait the artist created in 1656.[13]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Gesina ter Borch, *Self-Portrait of Gesina in a Gray Cartouche, Crowned with the Ter Borch Arms*, 1659, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam (poetry album, fol. 2r). Photo © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

fig. 2 Jan Hermanszoon Krul, "De Overdaed en Doet Geen Baet" (The Excess That Brings No Profit), from *Eerlycke Tytkorting*, Haarlem, 1634, National Gallery of Art Library, Washington, DC

NOTES

[1] This entry was originally published in Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Gerard ter Borch* (Washington, DC, 2004), no. 30, and based largely on Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century* (Washington, DC, 1995), 26–28.

[2] Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–1960),

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2:148, has carefully indicated other instances in which these objects appear in Ter Borch's works. The table carpet, for example, is also seen in *The Letter Writer* (Mauritshuis, The Hague, inv. no. 797), the chair in *The Visit* (Bührle Foundation, Zurich), the mantelpiece in *A Young Woman at Her Toilet* (Wallace Collection, London, inv. no. P235), and *A Lute Player with a Boy* (Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, inv. no. 349).

[3] See painting from the National Gallery, London, *Officer Dictating a Letter While a Trumpeter Waits*, c. 1658/1659.

[4] For information about Netscher's signed copy on panel, see Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–1960), 2:148, cat. no. 139a, and Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Caspar Netscher and Late Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Doornspijk, 2002), 314–315, cat. no. B2. The composition was also known to Gabriel Metsu. See Everhard Korthals Altes, "The Eighteenth-Century Gentleman-Dealer Willem Lormier and the International Dispersal of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Paintings," *Simiolus* 28 (2000–2001): 266, fig. 16.

[5] See *The Unwelcomed Call*, Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague.

[6] Alison M. Kettering, "Ter Borch's Ladies in Satin," *Art History* 16 (March 1993): 122 n. 66, on the other hand, suggests that the model was Gesina's younger sister Aeltjen (Aleida), who would have been twenty-one years old in 1657. Gesina, who was born in 1631, would have been twenty-six.

[7] See Alison M. Kettering, *Drawings from the Ter Borch Studio Estate in the Rijksmuseum*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1989), 2:416–614. Gesina began this poetry album in 1652, and contributed to it intermittently until the 1660s.

[8] See Alison M. Kettering, "Ter Borch's Ladies in Satin," *Art History* 16 (March 1993) for a discussion of the adaptation of Petrarchan concepts of love in Dutch literary traditions and in Ter Borch's paintings.

[9] The contents of this emblem book were reprinted in Krul's *De Pampiere Wereld* (Amsterdam, 1644), 295. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–1960), 1:116–117; 2:148, was the first to draw attention to the relationship between Ter Borch's composition and the print from Krul's emblem, which he cited in its republished form in *De Pampiere Wereld*.

[10] Jan Krul, *Eerlyck Tytkorting* (Haarlem, 1634), 16 (author's translation).

[11] Alison M. Kettering, *Drawings from the Ter Borch Studio Estate in the Rijksmuseum*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1989), 2:440, fol. 39: "Wit Suijverheijt" and "Incornaet Vraecke or Vreedtheijt."

[12] In executing the satin, Ter Borch freely applied thin fluid paint layers that he blended wet-into-wet in a series of thin scumbles [Scumbling] of liquid, soft-edged colors. He then painted a very thin glaze over the underlying layers

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to further blend and soften their forms. He created his flesh tones with a gray Underpainting, thinly glazed in the shaded areas, and more thickly painted in the light areas. I would like to thank Carol Christensen for discussing Ter Borch's technique with me.

[13] Gerhard Langemeyer and Hendrik R. Hoetink, *Gerard ter Borch: Zwolle 1617–Deventer 1681* (The Hague, 1974), 136, cat. no. 36a.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The tightly woven, plain-weave fabric support, composed of fine irregularly spun threads, was lined with the tacking margins trimmed. Broad cusping is visible along the left and right edges. A smooth beige ground is striated with white in places, suggesting the presence of a white underlayer.

Thin fluid paint layers are applied freely and blended wet-into-wet in a series of thin scumbles of liquid, soft-edged colors. Fine details are painted wet over dry. Flesh tones are composed of a gray underpainting, thinly glazed to form shading, more thickly overpainted to create light areas. Microscopic examination reveals a change in the placement of the dog's front legs and an adjustment of the suitor's proper left hand gesture.

Although the background has probably darkened over time, the painting is in excellent condition, with small abraded losses confined to the thinly applied darks. The painting was treated in 2003–2004, at which time discolored varnish and old inpainting were removed.

PROVENANCE

Charles-Auguste-Louis-Joseph, duc de Morny [1811-1865], Paris; (his estate sale, at the Palais de la Présidence du Corps Législatif, Paris, 31 May-12 June 1865, no. 82); Josè Salamanca y Mayol [Marquès de Salamanca, d. 1866], Madrid; (sale, at his residence by Charles Pillet, Paris, 3-6 June 1867, no. 126); Baron Adolphe de Rothschild [1823-1900], Paris; by inheritance to his first cousin once-removed, Baron Maurice de Rothschild [1881-1957], Paris; (Duveen Brothers, Inc., London, New York, and Paris); sold July 1922 to Andrew W. Mellon, Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C.; deeded 28 December 1934 to The A.W. Mellon Educational and

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Charitable Trust, Pittsburgh; gift 1937 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1939 Masterpieces of Art. European Paintings and Sculpture from 1300-1800, New York World's Fair, 1939, no. 369.

2004 Gerard ter Borch, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Detroit Institute of Arts, 2004-2005, no. 30, repro.

2005 Sparkling Satin - The Best of Gerard ter Borch, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 2005, no catalogue.

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