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

# *Metsu, Gabriel*

Dutch, 1629 - 1667

**BIOGRAPHY**

Gabriel Metsu was born in Leiden sometime between November 27 and mid-December 1629, about eight months after the death of his father, the Flemish painter Jacques Metsue. In 1644, when fifteen-year-old Gabriel Metsu joined a semiformal group of local artists, he entered the membership rolls as a “painter.” Six days after the establishment of Leiden’s Saint Luke’s Guild in 1648, Metsu paid his membership dues as an independent master. With the exception of short absences in the early 1650s, he remained in Leiden until at least 1654, moving to Amsterdam the following year.[1] On April 12, 1658, he married Isabella de Wolff, a relative of the Haarlem classicist painter Pieter de Grebber (c. 1600–1652/1653). In January of the next year, Metsu became an official citizen of Amsterdam, where he died in 1667 at the young age of thirty-eight.

It has often been assumed that Metsu must have studied with Gerrit Dou (Dutch, 1613 - 1675), Leiden’s leading genre painter during the 1640s. This assumption may well be correct but it is not without problems, given that early works from Metsu’s Leiden period tend to be executed in a fairly broad and fluid manner, far removed from the meticulously crafted, small-scale paintings of Dou and the other Leiden *fijnschilders*, such as Frans van Mieris (Dutch, 1635 - 1681). Rather than Dou, Metsu may initially have studied under the history painter Anthonie Claesz de Grebber (c. 1622–1691), who was related to Pieter de Grebber and, like Metsu, was also Catholic. Strong links with the work of the Utrecht painter Nicolaus Knüpfer (c. 1603–1655), further suggest that Metsu apprenticed with this master in the early 1650s. Also influential for Metsu’s early work was another master from Utrecht, the Italianate landscape painter Jan Baptist Weenix (1621–1660/1661).[2]

Metsu’s stylistic and thematic adaptability suggests that he understood the changing character of the art market. For example, after he moved to Amsterdam he began to paint genre scenes that featured upper-class domestic situations. He also began to paint with greater detail and with a refinement associated with Leiden masters. In Amsterdam he also responded to the thematic and stylistic innovations of Johannes Vermeer (Dutch, 1632 - 1675), Gerard ter Borch the Younger (Dutch, 1617 - 1681), and Pieter de Hooch (Dutch, 1629 - 1684).


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Metsu's facile brushwork and his engaging narrative scenes were highly regarded during his own time, but the height of his fame came in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when he was viewed as one of the supreme masters of the Dutch Golden Age. His paintings were sold for enormous sums of money, and, because of Metsu's fame, no fewer than three of Vermeer's paintings were atrributed to him, among them the National Gallery's *Woman Holding a Balance*.

In addition to his genre scenes, Metsu painted a few depictions of outdoor markets, religious scenes, portraits, and still lifes. The genre and portrait painter Michiel van Musscher (1645–1705) was his only known pupil.

[1] Adriaan E. Waiboer, "Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667): Life and Work," PhD diss. (New York University, 2007), 45–57.

[2] Adriaan E. Waiboer, "Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667): Life and Work," PhD diss. (New York University, 2007), 78–90.

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