ENTRY

With piercing eyes, the bearded man in Gerrit Dou’s small painting gazes steadily off to his right, his weathered face brightly illuminated against the dark beret that covers the back of his head. Everything about his physique and body language, from the set line of his jaw and the tight curls of his moustache to the forward tilt of his head, conveys his firm resolve. Dou reinforced this sense of authority through the vigor of his brushwork, which enlivens the figure by capturing the light striking his form. Bright accents bring life to his eyes, help model his forehead and cheek bones, and articulate the strands of his cropped, grey hair. Similar highlights define the folds of his open shirt and the buttons of his black jacket.

Dou’s tour de force is an outstanding example of a tronie, a type of figure study that Dutch artists frequently employed in the early to mid-17th century. Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606 - 1669) and those connected to his workshop were particularly interested in painting such works, and Dou certainly derived his penchant for depicting them from his master. Rembrandt and Dou made tronies of both young and old models, but they were particularly drawn to the elderly, in whom they found “character,” whether in the creases that lined a wizened face or in the wisdom that radiated from those who have experienced the vagaries of life. Tronies were often sold as independent works, although sometimes they were used by artists as studies for their own genre scenes and history paintings. Although there is very little documentation about these tronies, the term was widely used in 17th-century inventories to describe such figure studies. [1]

A great number of tronies were painted in Leiden in the 1620s and 1630s not only by Rembrandt and Dou, but also by Jan Lievens (Dutch, 1607 - 1674). Most of the
sitters are anonymous, although some models have been identified, among them Rembrandt’s mother. The elderly subjects of Dou’s *tronies* have often been identified as his own parents. Occasionally, collectors and dealers even made pendants of Dou’s small panels, which tend to be oval in shape and about the same size. Thus it is not surprising that the first likely mention of *Bust of a Bearded Man* in the sale of the Jacques de Roore collection in The Hague in 1747 described the sitter as the artist’s father and paired it with a now-lost “portrait of the artist’s mother.” If this was the Gallery’s painting and its purported pendant, they were sold separately in the Johan van der Marck sale in Amsterdam in 1773 (nos. 66 and 67). In 1777, however, when this “portrait of Dou’s father” appeared in a sale in Paris, it was paired with a self-portrait of the same dimensions by Dou.

Despite the romantic notion that Dou, Rembrandt, and Lievens depicted their aged parents in such works, most of these identifications—including the notion that this *tronie* was a portrait of Dou’s father—have been proven wrong. [2] Dou’s *Self-Portrait* in the Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum in Braunschweig, which dates from the 1650s, shows the artist holding a small family portrait, presumably his own [fig. 1]. [3] The father of this family has a darker beard and rounder face than the man in this *tronie*, and is without question a different individual. Unfortunately, the identity of the bearded man in the Gallery’s painting is unknown. [4]

Dou was renowned for the remarkable detail of his works, and his meticulous manner of execution brought him fame and fortune throughout his life. [5] In Philips Angel’s 1641 lecture “In Praise of the Art of Painting,” presented in Leiden, the artist and theorist recommended the “never sufficiently praised Gerard Dou” as a model for young painters. He urged artists to emulate Dou’s ability to combine a meticulous style with a “curious looseness” of brushstrokes. [6] Angel remarked that a praiseworthy painter should be able, like Dou, to represent the textures of materials with precise yet lively and bold brushstrokes. On the other hand, an artist who allowed his work to become too stiff and lifeless would be mocked rather than praised. [7]

Few of Dou’s *tronies* equal the vigor and animation of this small oval panel, which makes this work difficult to date with certainty. Nevertheless, the rough-hewn character of the model, the strong chiaroscuro effects, and the fusion of detailed handling of paint with expressive brushwork suggests a date in the early 1640s. [8] These painterly qualities can be compared to Dou’s depiction of a scholar writing at his desk from the mid-1630s, a work in which the elderly bearded man has a comparably intense expression, but whose wrinkled forehead is painted in a more
delicate manner [fig. 2].

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.
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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Gerrit Dou, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1655, oil on panel, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig

fig. 2 Gerrit Dou, *Man Interrupted at His Writing*, c. 1635, oil on panel, The Leiden Collection, New York. © The Leiden Collection, New York

NOTES

[1] For an excellent discussion of the history of the term *tronie* and the character of such images, see Dagmar Hirschfelder, “Portrait or Character Head? The Term *Tronie* and Its Meaning in the Seventeenth Century,” in Ernst van de Wetering and Bernhard Schnackenburg, *The Mystery of the Young Rembrandt* (Wolfratshausen, 2001), 82–91. See also Dagmar
Hirschfelder and Leon Krempel, eds., Tronies: Das Gesicht in der frühen Neuzeit (Berlin, 2014).


[3] Although no document identifies the sitters, scholars generally agree that the individuals represented in the group portrait are Dou’s father (Douwe Janszoon), his mother (Maria Jansdochter), and his brother (Jan). The style of Dou’s costume indicates that he painted his self-portrait in the early 1650s, although the costumes of the figures in the painting he holds appear to date from the early 1630s.

[4] Another version of the painting, probably not authentic, was exhibited in Raleigh: Wilhelm Valentiner, Rembrandt and His Pupils (Raleigh, 1956). That painting, which measures 7 ½ x 5 inches, is on canvas.


TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The primary support is a panel with horizontal grain and a very weak convex warp. On the reverse, most of the edges are beveled except for a small portion of the right side. Despite the lack of beveling along the right edge, the painting appears to retain its original dimensions.

The panel was prepared with a ground layer that is off-white in color and can be seen along the edges in areas of abraded and chipped paint. It is possible there is a second ground layer—a cool, light earth-brown color—exists on top of the off-
white layer, but it is unclear if this layer was applied overall or locally. The composition was blocked out with a semitransparent brown layer, which is evident in the lightest folds of the clothing and the cap. It is difficult to determine if the facial features were delineated with this brown sketch layer because the face was brought up to such a high level of finish. There likely is, however, a layer of dead-coloring under the face and neck.

The paint medium is estimated to be oil. The paint in the background and in the figure’s clothing was applied in thin, semitransparent layers, allowing the painted sketch to contribute to the final effect. The face was painted wet-into-wet, with tiny, lively strokes that have a slight impasto and help suggest the wrinkles and furrows in the face.

The painting is in excellent condition and the panel is structurally sound. There are a few old pinpoint losses in the figure’s forehead and there is some abrasion to the paint along the edges. A few small spots of retouching appear in the figure’s forehead and clothing. Last, the painting is covered in a thick layer of discolored varnish that has a very fine craquelure overall.

PROVENANCE


[2] This is the name as given in the 1747 sale catalogue. He was probably Jacobus Ignace de Roore, 1686-1747, a painter and art dealer in Antwerp.

[3] Yver’s name appears beside this lot (and lot number 67, a woman’s portrait) in an annotated copy of the sale catalogue in the NGA Library, indicating the painting might have been bought in.

[4] Although some of the paintings in this sale belonged to the comtesse du Barry, and Smith and Hofstede de Groot describe the sale as the Du Barry sale, not all the paintings were hers and the Dou was included in this group; see The Getty Provenance Index Databases, description and contents of Sale Catalog F-A450, where the buyer’s name is also recorded. Langlier was a dealer; the painting does
not appear in his sale, held 24 April 1786 and the following days at the Hôtel de Bullion in Paris.

[5] Smith 1842, 18, no. 58, gives the name as Paignon de Dijonval.


[7] Ernst Wilhelm Moes (Iconographia Batava, 2 vols., Amsterdam, 1897: 1:483, no. 3984, item 3) is the first author to cite this name, but incorrectly spells it "Coulston" and does not provide details about the 1881 sale. The correct spelling of the name, the identification of the 1881 sale, and the names of the buyers at both the 1844 and 1881 sales were kindly provided by Lynda Mcleod, librarian at Christie's Archives, London (e-mail of 17 April 2015, in NGA curatorial files).


EXHIBITION HISTORY

1908 Loan to display with permanent collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 1908-1909.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


Bust of a Bearded Man

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The Artist's Father.


