



Jacob Ochtervelt
Dutch, 1634 - 1682

A Nurse and a Child in an Elegant Foyer

1663

oil on canvas

overall: 81.5 × 66.8 cm (32 1/16 × 26 5/16 in.)

Inscription: lower right on the floor: J. Ochtervelt f. / 1663

The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund 2015.68.1

ENTRY

In this radiant painting, Jacob Ochtervelt pictures a tender moment unfolding between a young patrician boy and a ragged beggar who has come to his family's door asking for alms. [1] As the young beggar sets his foot cautiously on the hall floor with outstretched hat in hand, his mother stands outside nursing an infant. The patrician youth, elegantly robed, coiffed, and standing next to the family maid, drops a coin in the boy's hat while his parents, visible in the adjacent room, proudly observe their son's charity. Just outside the home on the doorstep, two girls play a game with knucklebones, while indoors a brown-and-white spaniel barks excitedly at the strangers.

Ochtervelt brings remarkable intimacy to this scene of 17th-century life. The forthright gaze and spotless attire of the patrician boy suggest a maturity beyond his years. However, the gesture of holding his nursemaid's hand belies his aloof demeanor and reveals the sense of assurance he receives from her touch. The young beggar similarly seems to possess self-confidence in his approach. Yet his total fixation on the coin as it drops into his hat and the presence of his mother

looking on carefully beside him temper his bold gesture and remind us that he, too, is only a child. Although the two youths do not make eye contact, their exchange establishes a meaningful connection between their two worlds.

A Nurse and a Child in an Elegant Foyer, which is signed and dated 1663, is traditionally placed within Ochtervelt's corpus of genre work. He was best known as a painter of high-life genre scenes, his most innovative of which were those which took place in the front hall (or *voorhuis*). As in the Gallery's painting, he used the threshold of the home to stage interactions between individuals from different social worlds. [2] Typically, such works depict itinerant street musicians offering entertainment or food vendors hawking fish or produce to members of a bourgeois family [fig. 1]. [3] *A Nurse and a Child in an Elegant Foyer* similarly juxtaposes the privileged world of an aristocratic family with the uncertain life of the poor, thereby endowing it with the feel of Ochtervelt's other genre scenes. However, it differs from his other *voorhuis* paintings in that the scene is a demonstration of a virtue (charity) and shows the patrician boy and his parents gazing out of the picture—qualities that suggest the painting may not be strictly a genre scene, but rather an idealized, genre-like portrait of a wealthy family.

In the same year that Ochtervelt painted *A Nurse and a Child in an Elegant Foyer*, he executed *Portrait of a Family*, now at Harvard Art Museums [fig. 2]. The family's refined clothing and handsomely appointed surroundings—particularly the adjacent room, replete with a large marble fireplace, gold-framed painting, and gilt leather wall covering—recall the decor in *A Nurse and a Child in an Elegant Foyer*, as does the conception of this portrait as a demonstration of the family's value system. The father turns the pages of a large book as a symbol of his erudition while the young child coaxes a dog to sit on its hind legs, symbolically indicating the importance of education and discipline. To this family, such training required a constant reiteration of rules, which also meant that the child possessed the virtue of industriousness. [4]

Ochtervelt's *Portrait of an Unknown Family* in the Szépmvészeti Múzeum, Budapest [fig. 3], similarly pictures a family in elegant attire in a richly appointed room. He brought remarkable liveliness to the family members through their different gestures and glances, thereby naturalizing their interaction. Similar to the painting at Harvard, in this scene one of the children tends to a spaniel dancing obediently on its hind legs. The girl's bright smile and warm eyes convey her pride at her ability to control the dog, who patiently waits for the treat she holds in her hand.

A Nurse and a Child in an Elegant Foyer

© National Gallery of Art, Washington

A Nurse and a Child in an Elegant Foyer may belong to this tradition of portraiture that demonstrates a family's moral underpinnings through seemingly everyday activities undertaken by children. Although family portraiture accounts for but a small percentage of Ochtervelt's oeuvre, [5] the artist consistently pictured parents observing their child's behavior, thereby underscoring their role in transmitting social values and moral character to their offspring. [6]

If *A Nurse and a Child in an Elegant Foyer* represents historical persons, their identity remains unknown. The child can be recognized as a boy because of the character of his skirt's hemline and the way he wears his medal. [7] However, further attempts to identify the family based on its setting have proven unsuccessful, and, given the extraordinary sumptuousness of the interior, it may be imagined. Multispectral infrared reflectography confirms that Ochtervelt orchestrated the image with great care. Using precisely drawn, ruled lines, he demarcated the door frames, floor tiles, picture frames, and the fireplace. Underdrawing is also visible in the contours of the maid's face, areas of the patrician boy's costume, and throughout the fireplace's entablature, as well as in the two large Italianate landscape paintings hanging over the door and fireplace [fig. 4]. Despite its verisimilitude, marble flooring was very expensive in the 17th century, and to have it in two adjacent rooms was unusual. [8] The level of gilding on the fireplace's columns, entablature, and cornice, not to mention on the leather wall and the frame around the large landscape painting in the room occupied by the parents, would also have been rare. [9] The rounded building visible through the open door that contains arrow loops, the vertical slits characteristic of medieval towers from which archers shot arrows at attackers, also appears to be fanciful.

Whether the interior Ochtervelt represented in *A Nurse and a Child in an Elegant Foyer* is real or exaggerated, the sitters would have had to be extraordinarily wealthy if the work is indeed a family portrait. The shimmering attire of the household's inhabitants, from the boy's satin leading strings and ribbons to the mother's and father's velvet and fur-trimmed outfits, belong to a family of high means. Perhaps no accoutrement conveys this message better than the large gold medal and chain draped over the boy's shoulder. [10] Shining against his bright white apron, it stands out as an important visual focus in the painting. Modeled with delicate strokes and in exceptional detail, though not enough to identify the profile figure represented or assist in an identification of the family, it is not only a symbol of the family's wealth and rank, but also a reflection of the boy's maturity and good breeding. [11]

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

A Nurse and a Child in an Elegant Foyer represents Ochtervelt at his artistic height. His brushwork is exquisite, his textures are dazzling, and the colors of the composition are disarmingly radiant. Moreover, it combines the keen understanding of human relationships that Ochtervelt gained from his work as a genre painter with his insights into the messages individuals wish to convey about themselves provided by his work as a portrait painter. Intimate and tender, *A Nurse and a Child in an Elegant Foyer* brings to life the concerns, ambitions, and, ultimately, virtues of this elegant, if unknown, family.

Alexandra Libby

May 7, 2019

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Jacob Ochtervelt, *Street Musicians at the Door*, 1665, oil on canvas, Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Eugene A. Perry in memory of her mother, Mrs. Claude Kilpatrick, inv. no. 162:1928



fig. 2 Jacob Ochtervelt, *Portrait of a Family*, 1663, oil on canvas, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Frederic Fairchild Sherman in memory of his brother, Frank Dempster Sherman, inv. no. 1922.135



fig. 3 Jacob Ochtervelt, *Portrait of an Unknown Family*, 1670, oil on canvas, Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest, inv. no. 4286



fig. 4 Multispectral infrared reflectogram rendered in color, Jacob Ochtervelt, *A Nurse and a Child in an Elegant Foyer*, 1663, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund

NOTES

- [1] I would like to thank Arthur Wheelock and Henriette Rahusen in the department of northern baroque paintings, National Gallery of Art, Washington, for sharing their thoughtful comments in the preparation of this essay.
- [2] Susan Kuretsky, who was unaware of the Gallery's *A Nurse and a Child in an Elegant Foyer* at the time she published her catalogue raisonné of Ochtervelt's work, counts 14 *voorhuis* paintings in *The Paintings of Jacob Ochtervelt (1634–1682)* (Oxford, 1979).
- [3] Susan Kuretsky discusses the general trends related to Ochtervelt's *voorhuis* scene in *The Paintings of Jacob Ochtervelt (1634–1682)* (Oxford, 1979), 34–39.

- [4] During the 17th century, educational literature routinely called on Plutarch's *De liberis educandis*, a treatise on education in which he recalls the parable of the Spartan king Lycurgus, who raised two dogs, one through habit and discipline and the other without any training at all. The first dog became an obedient hunter through the constant reiteration of rules, and the second dog became an unruly glutton. The story, which Plutarch used metaphorically to illustrate the importance of training children to ensure their future good behavior as adults, was reprinted, translated, and adapted throughout the 17th century. See Jan Baptist Bedaux, "Introduction," in *Pride and Joy: Children's Portraits in the Netherlands 1500–1700*, ed. Jan Baptist Bedaux and Rudi Ekkart (New York and Ghent, 2000), 19–22. On 17th-century children's education in the Netherlands more broadly, see Jeroen Dekker, Leendert Groenendijk, and Johan Verberckmoes, "Proudly Raising Vulnerable Youngsters: The Scope for Education in the Netherlands," in *Pride and Joy: Children's Portraits in the Netherlands 1500–1700*, ed. Jan Baptist Bedaux and Rudi Ekkart (New York and Ghent, 2000), 43–60.
- [5] Kuretsky also catalogs a total of 12 portraits in Ochtervelt's oeuvre, seven of which are signed and dated. See Susan Kuretsky, *The Paintings of Jacob Ochtervelt (1634–1682)* (Oxford, 1979).
- [6] Charity was a Christian virtue taught in the home and of great importance to the Dutch. On its importance in 17th-century Dutch education, see Mary Frances Durantini, *The Child in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Ann Arbor, 1983), 109–113.
- [7] See Saskia Kuus, "Drie aperocken van tieren taj en ander kindergoed uit Wendela Bickers rekeningenboek, 1655–1668," *Kostuum* (1997): 45–62; Saskia Kuus, "Children's Costume in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Pride and Joy: Children's Portraits in the Netherlands 1500–1700*, ed. Jan Baptist Bedaux and Rudi Ekkart (New York and Ghent, 2000), 73–83.
- [8] For a discussion of marble flooring as a painterly technique rather than a realistic representation of 17th-century decor, see Marjorie E. Wieseman, "Acquisition or Inheritance? Material Goods in Paintings by Vermeer and His Contemporaries," in *Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry*, ed. Adriaan E. Waiboer (Dublin, 2017), 52–53; C. Willemijn Fock, "Semblance or Reality? The Domestic Interior in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting," in *Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Mariët Westermann (Zwolle, 2001), 86–91.
- [9] Marjorie E. Wieseman, "Acquisition or Inheritance? Material Goods in Paintings by Vermeer and His Contemporaries," in *Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry*, ed. Adriaan E. Waiboer (Dublin, 2017), 53–54.
- [10] It is unclear whether the object hanging from the gold chain is a medal or a

coin. Tom Eden, a numismatist at Morton & Eden in London, believes that it could be a 10-ducat coin, as large gold coins were often used as presentation pieces and are often found mounted or with traces of mounting. Tom Eden, personal communication with author, Nov. 18, 2015.

[11] One often finds gold medals hanging around the necks or across the chests of children in 17th-century Dutch portraiture. Since the Renaissance, gold medals on chains were given as gifts from political figures to individuals in their service as a means of rewarding loyalty. Although such medals would have been given to adults and not to children, around 1600 Dutch artists began to portray children wearing medals around their necks or at their hips, hanging from double and sometimes triple gold chains. Such medals indicate the honor and integrity of the children's parents, who presumably received the medal, as well as their own promise to possess such virtues. In the Gallery's painting, the medal serves as an analogy for the patrician boy's good breeding, underscoring the message of his charitable deed as a demonstration of his already strong moral compass. For a thoughtful analysis of the meaning of medals, see Ann C. Claxton, "Medals in Portraits of Children in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting," *The Medal* 27 (1995): 12–23.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The primary canvas support is a fine, plain-weave canvas that has a slightly irregular weave. Strong cusping is visible in the x-radiograph around all four sides of the composition. [1] The tacking margins were removed during a previous treatment and the painting was lined to a canvas with a tight, regular plain weave.

A thick, tan ground is visible at the intersection of objects throughout the composition; under magnification, the ground appears as a yellow-brown matrix with large white particles and smaller black and earth-brown particles of varying size. On top of the ground is a thin, semitransparent red-earth imprimatura that was locally applied under the black and white marble tiles and the red and white marble tiles in the adjacent room.

Examination with multispectral infrared reflectography reveals an extensive underdrawing, though it is also visible with the aid of magnification in the form of thin black lines along the edges of objects and architectural elements. [2] In addition, in normal light, black lines that do not correspond to the painted image are faintly visible under the marble floor. The underdrawing was applied directly on top of the ground or imprimatura if present. It is unknown which medium Ochtervelt

used for the underdrawing; however, the black lines appear slightly blended into the paint layers above, indicating that the upper paint layers were applied when the black lines were only partially dry. The underdrawing is composed of both ruled lines, which were used to delineate the architectural elements (the door frames, the marble tiles, the straight elements of the fireplace, and the picture frame), and freehand sketching, which was used for the decorative elements (on the fireplace, the putti on the mantel, and the landscape composition). While there are a few drawn lines in the patrician boy's clothing and one contour indicating the maid's jawline, no underdrawing is visible in the other figures in the multispectral infrared reflectogram or through microscopic examination.

Numerous pentimenti are visible in the multispectral infrared reflectogram, including changes to the angle and placement of some perspective lines, as well as several smaller adjustments to the shape and positioning of the figures' heads, arms, and clothing.

There is a pinhole on the right side of the composition, near the proper left elbow of the seated man in the background, visible in the paint layer in normal light (under magnification), as well as in the x-radiograph. Most of the perspective lines of the architectural elements and marble tile floor all recede to the identified pinhole.

The paint medium is estimated to be oil and was finely applied so that no brushstrokes are visible. The crisp quality of the marble floor is partly due to Ochtervelt incising the paint with a tool along the edges of the tiles when the paint was still semi-wet. There are fingerprints in the paint layers on the right edge, near the top and middle of the doorway. Under magnification, it is clear that the paint layers, rather than the varnish layer, were disrupted while still wet.

The support, ground, and paint layers are all in excellent condition. There are some small scattered areas of retouching throughout, a larger cluster of retouching in the top left corner, as well as some reinforced lines on the lintel above the front door, and in the shadow of the dog.

Dina Anchin

May 7, 2019

TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] X-radiography was carried out with a Comet Technologies XRP-75MXR-75HP tube, and the images were digitally captured using a Carestream Industrex Blue Digital Imaging Plate 5537 (14 × 17 in.). The parameters were 35 kV, 8 mA, 40 seconds, and 97.5 in. distance (from source to plate). The resulting digital images were composited and processed using Adobe Photoshop CS5.
- [2] Multispectral infrared reflectogram rendered in color of Ochtervelt's *A Nurse and a Child in an Elegant Foyer*; composite of three registered sets of false-color spectral images, in wavelength bands 1100–1400 nm (blue), 1500–1800 nm (green), and 2100–2400 nm (red), courtesy of John Delaney and Kate Dooley, scientific research department, National Gallery of Art, Washington.
-

PROVENANCE

Thomas Theodore Cremer [1742-1815], Rotterdam; (his estate sale, at his residence by Nozeman, Van der Looy, W. van Leen, and W.A. Netscher, Rotterdam, 16-17 April 1816, 1st day, no. 84); Sérafin Lambert Louis Malfait [1775-1827], Lille. Charles Piérard, Valenciennes; (his estate sale, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 20-21 March 1860, no. 53). Comte de M****; (his estate sale, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 29 December 1860, no. 23). acquired c. 1982 by private collection, Europe; (sale, Sotheby's, New York, 20 January 2014, no. 38); (Johnny Van Haeften, London); sold 10 September 2015 to NGA.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2016 Libby, Alexandra. "Jacob Ochtervelt, A Nurse and a Child in the Foyer of an Elegant Townhouse." *National Gallery of Art Bulletin* no. 54 (Spring 2016): 20, repro.
-

To cite: Alexandra Libby, "Jacob Ochtervelt/A Nurse and a Child in an Elegant Foyer/1663," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/202761> (accessed June 19, 2021).