



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

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### 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 a theorbo; the former's 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 carpet 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

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

carnation with revenge or cruelty. [11]

In keeping with the sumptuous details of his subject, Ter Borch incorporated costly ultramarine pigment into the Washington painting in unexpected ways. Not only did he use it to compose the brilliant blue bodice of the female musician seated at the table, he even used it as an underpaint that, together with a layer of green glaze, creates the deep green color of the velvet seat cushion. The blue portions of the patterned rug draped over the table were probably also intended to appear as a green midtone, but the unstable yellow-lake pigment Ter Borch mixed with the ultramarine in those passages has since faded. [12] As Gifford and Glinsman have discussed, such an incremental color shift from the deep green velvet in the foreground to the bright blue lute player would have helped articulate a sense of spatial regression in the scene. [13]

The sophistication of Ter Borch's touch is matched only by the subtlety of his narrative and the gracefulness of his figures. His white satins were celebrated in poetry and emulated by his peers, though no artist could convey as effectively as he the shimmering surface of this costly fabric. Ter Borch painted deep shadows with translucent yellow and gray, and added contrast with pure white highlights. His brushstrokes vary from smooth planes to angular folds and he has softened the transitions with a dry blending brush. [14] Such a subtle 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. [15]

Original entry by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., April 24, 2014.

Revised by Alexandra Libby to incorporate information from a new technical examination.

December 9, 2019

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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 is based largely on Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century* (Washington, DC, 1995), 26–28.
- [2] The imported table carpet, for example, appeared in at least five of Ter Borch's paintings just as he married and settled in Deventer. See E. Melanie

Gifford and Lisha Deming Glinsman, "Collective Style and Personal Manner: Materials and Techniques of High-Life Genre Painting," in Adriaan Waiboer et al., *Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry* (Dublin, 2017), 73, 281–282, n. 43. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–1960), 2:148, has carefully indicated other instances in which such objects appear in Ter Borch's works, including the chair in *The Visit* (Bührle Foundation, Zurich) and the mantelpiece in both *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] E. Melanie Gifford and Lisha Deming Glinsman, “Collective Style and Personal Manner: Materials and Techniques of High-Life Genre Painting,” in Adriaan Waiboer et al., *Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry* (Dublin, 2017), 65–83, place Ter Borch’s technique and use of materials in dialogue with his contemporaries (see especially 68–69 on color change among these artists).
  - [13] Melanie Gifford and Lisha Glinsman, “Innovation, Competition, and Fine Painting Technique: Marketing High-Life Style in the Dutch 17th Century,” National Gallery of Art video, 30:12, Feb. 6, 2018, <https://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/audio-video/video/gifford-glinsman-painting-technique.html>.
  - [14] On Ter Borch’s technique of painting white satin and his contemporaries’ imitation, see E. Melanie Gifford and Lisha Deming Glinsman, “Collective Style and Personal Manner: Materials and Techniques of High-Life Genre Painting,” in Adriaan Waiboer et al., *Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry* (Dublin, 2017), 77–78.
  - [15] Gerhard Langemeyer and Hendrik R. Hoetink, *Gerard ter Borch: Zwolle 1617–Deventer 1681* (The Hague, 1974), 136, cat. no. 36a.
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## 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. Broad arcs visible in the x-radiograph suggest that the tan ground might have been applied with a curved knife.

Ter Borch probably laid out the composition with a brown-black painted sketch. He worked up the design with a freely brushed underpaint, but in a characteristic additional step, he later revised some areas by resketching alternative details onto the completed underpaint. [1] In applying his subtle final paint, he worked wet into wet, often with a stippled touch or feathered edges. In the white satin, he painted deep shadows with translucent yellow and gray contrasted with pure white highlights; his brushwork varied from smooth planes to angular folds, the transitions softened with a dry blending brush. [2] Pigment analysis using x-ray fluorescence spectroscopy and microscopic examination was performed during research for the 2017 exhibition *Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting*. [3] The use of ultramarine blue was identified throughout the composition, in both upper paint layers as well as in underpainting. Yellow lake was also identified,

though this pigment has faded. Probably some blue areas, such as parts of the patterned carpet draped over the table, once appeared green (see Entry).

In changes during the final painting stage, Ter Borch introduced further elegant details, replacing the suitor's original, more sober costume with extravagantly puffed sleeves and a doffed hat. 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.

Dina Anchin, based on examination and treatment notes by Carol Christenson and examination notes by Cathy Metzger.

December 9, 2019

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## TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] E. Melanie Gifford, "Fine Painting and Eloquent Imprecision: Gabriel Metsu's Painting Technique," in *Gabriel Metsu*, ed. Adriaan E. Waiboer (Dublin, 2010), 154–179.
  - [2] On Ter Borch's technique of painting white satin and his contemporaries' imitation, see E. Melanie Gifford and Lisha Deming Glinsman, "Collective Style and Personal Manner: Materials and Techniques of High-Life Genre Painting," in Adriaan Waiboer et al., *Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry* (Dublin, 2017), 77–78.
  - [3] E. Melanie Gifford and Lisha Deming Glinsman, "Collective Style and Personal Manner: Materials and Techniques of High-Life Genre Painting," in Adriaan Waiboer et al., *Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry* (Dublin, 2017), 65–83.
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## 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); José 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 Charitable Trust, Pittsburgh; gift 1937 to NGA.

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## 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.

2017 Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry, Musée du Louvre, Paris; National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin; National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2017-2018, no. 8.2, repro.

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