

Michel 1906a.
HdG 1907–1927, 4 (1912): 582–670.
Zoege von Manteuffel 1924.
Von Arps-Aubert 1932.
Walsh 1985.
Amsterdam 1987: 416–422.
Brown/MacLaren 1992: 313–314.
The Hague 1994.

1942.9.52 (648)

A Farrier's Shop

1648
Oil on oak, 48.3 x 45.7 (19 x 18)
Widener Collection

Inscriptions

In transom frame above doorway on left: *paulus potter f. 1648*

Technical Notes: The cradled-panel support consists of a single oak board with a vertical grain. Worm tunnels are visible in the x-radiograph and on the back of the panel, and a small vertical hairline crack is found right of center in the bottom edge. Vertical striations are visible from the brush application of the moderately thick white ground. Opaque paint is applied in light passages with impasted highlights, while dark passages are thinly glazed in a series of translucent layers.

Pentimenti of a chicken and a stick are visible in the lower right corner, and minor changes were made in the legs of the standing dog. The sky and dark passages are moderately abraded, and there are scattered small losses and local abrasions, particularly along the right edge in a vertical band. The painting was treated in 1981 to remove discolored varnish and repaints, although insoluble overpaint was left in place in some areas.

Provenance: (Sale, Ghent, 23 September 1777, no. 49). Jacques Clemens, Ghent; (sale, Maison Mortuaire, Ghent, 21 June 1779, no. 212; Neijman, Amsterdam. Johan Philip de Monté, Utrecht; (sale, A. Lamme, Rotterdam, 4–5 July 1825, no. 1); M. L. J. Nieuwenhuys, London.¹ Count François-Alexandre-Charles Perregaux [1791–1838], Paris; by inheritance to Madame Perregaux; (sale, Ridet & Seigneur, Paris, 8 December 1841, no. 26); Madame Autran, Marseilles, by 1867. (Charles Sedelmeyer, Paris). M. Rodolphe Kann [d. 1905], Paris and Marseilles; (Duveen Brothers, London and New York, 1907); sold 1909 to Peter A. B. Widener, Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; inheritance from Estate of Peter A. B. Widener by gift through power of appointment of Joseph E. Widener, Elkins Park.

Exhibited: *Illustrated catalogue of 300 Paintings by Old Masters . . .*, Sedelmeyer Gallery, Paris, 1898; no. 108. *Winter Exhibition of Works by the Old Masters and Deceased Masters of the British School*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1908, no. 66.

ACCORDING TO Paulus Potter's widow, whenever the artist had an extra hour to take a walk, he would put a little sketchbook in his pocket. When he saw something that was intriguing or enjoyable and would serve his purpose, he straight away sketched the subject.² This anecdote about Potter's working process may well help explain how he came upon the idea to depict this intense little drama between man and animal outside a farrier's shop, a subject no other Dutch artist ever depicted. One can only imagine that Potter, on one of his walks near the polders outside of The Hague, was attracted by the commotion caused by a horse whose muzzle was being pinched to open his mouth so that his teeth could be filed, or floated.³ There he must have seen the horse pawing the air with his left foreleg; the intense concentration of the old, bespectacled man as he braced himself to work the rasp; and the openmouthed expression of his younger accomplice who held the twitch. There too he may have witnessed the slack-jawed gaze of the young bystander, who, with hands stuffed in his pockets, looks up at the operation in amazement. Inside the shop, hard at work at his anvil, is the blacksmith, taking no more interest in the proceedings than the dogs or the chickens scratching for food. Whether Potter recorded his impressions in his sketchbook or merely carried them home in his head, the subject was so vividly imbued in his mind that he was able to create a work that captured the sense and emotional intensity of the moment.

While the basic compositional scheme is one that Potter had developed in the previous year, particularly in *Barnyard Scene: Horses with Figures*, signed and dated 1647 (Philadelphia Museum of Art, inv. no. E 24–3–17), this painting is unique in its vivid characterization of a scene. To enhance the dramatic effect Potter situated the action along a shaded diagonal wedge formed by the farrier shop and the small wooden structure attached to it. Long shadows on the ground and the brightly illuminated white horse behind the central group of figures accentuate the chiaroscuro contrasts between foreground and background. Above, gray smoke from the blacksmith's fire rises from the chimney and merges into the dark clouds of the windswept sky.

It is not known what influences inspired Potter to develop this compositional scheme, although enough similarities exist between it and paintings by Isack van Ostade (for example, *The Halt at the Inn*, 1942.9.49, and *Workmen before an Inn*, 1991.64.1) to suggest that he might have been familiar with that artist's work. Indeed, Potter apparently spent some



Paulus Potter, *A Farrier's Shop*, 1642.9.52

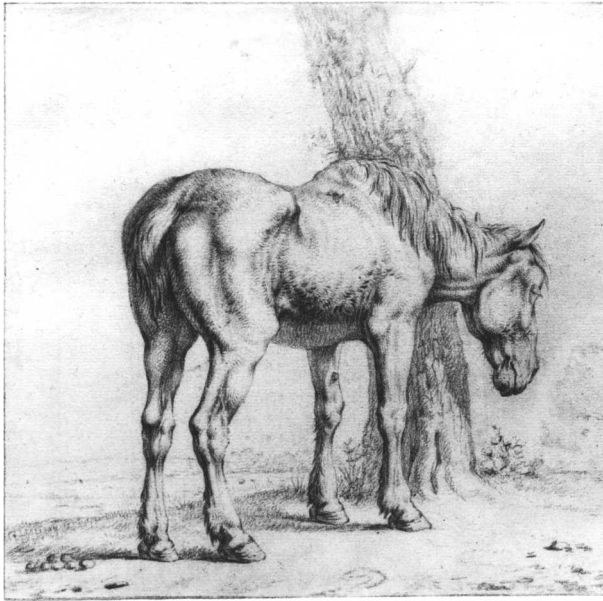


Fig. 1. Paulus Potter, *Study of a Horse*, pencil, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham

time in Haarlem in the mid-1640s. It was only after he joined the Saint Luke's Guild in Delft in 1646, however, that he began to incorporate *contre-jour* light effects, which he would have learned from Italianate painters.⁴

As is evident from the anecdote about his walks with his sketchbook, and also from his drawings (fig. 1) and etchings, Potter observed the world carefully and recorded his impressions without idealization. A comparison of the Birmingham study of a horse and the white horse in *A Farrier's Shop* suggests that he composed his paintings on the basis of such drawings. Presumably, comparable studies also existed that he would have used for other figures in this painting.

The intense realism of Potter's style was particularly appreciated in the nineteenth century, and his works commanded enormous sums of money.⁵ This painting, for example, fetched Fr 15,000 in the Perregaux sale of 1841, perhaps in part because of the enthusiastic, and extensive, description in the sales catalogue. The special place reserved for the painting within this esteemed artist's oeuvre is particularly evident in the concluding sentence of the catalogue entry: "En dernière analyse, c'est un tableau de Paul Potter aussi parfait de coloris, de faire, de sentiment, de verité, que les plus beaux qu'il ait jamais enfantés,

avec l'avantage inappreciable d'une composition plus savante, plus variée et plus animée."⁶

Notes

1. An annotated copy of the De Monté sale states that Nieuwenhuys purchased the picture for 7,100 guilders. For a discussion of the sale and Nieuwenhuys' purchase of the work, see Nieuwenhuys 1834, 186–188.

2. Houbraken 1753, 2: 129. Houbraken received this information in a letter written by Nicolaas van Reenen, the son of the widow. The full text quoted by Houbraken is: "Dat hy zyn Moeder dikwerf heeft hooren zeggen: Dat zy haar Man nooit ledig heeft gezien; dat hy zelf wanneer hy een uur voor haar over had om een zyn zak by zig droeg; om als hy iets zag dat geestig was, en in zyn kraam konde dienen, staks dat voorwerp af te schetsen."

3. Much confusion has existed in old references about the exact operation being undertaken by the old man in the red shirt. In the Clemens sale of 1777 in Ghent it was thought that he was giving a cure to the horse ("fait une cure à un cheval"). In the Johan Philip de Monté sale, the action was described as "bettering the teeth" ("de tanden te verbeteren"). The catalogue text in the Perregaux sale of 1841 described the man as examining the horse's mouth with an iron probe ("examiner, avec une sonde de fer, la bouche à demi ouverte de l'animal"). When the painting was exhibited as part of the Rudolphe Kann collection in Paris in 1907 (see *Kann* 1907), it was thought that the man was extracting a tooth, an interpretation that was maintained in the Widener catalogues.

4. Potter first used *contre-jour* light in his *Cows Driven to Pasture*, 1647, in the Residenzgalerie, Salzburg. For an illustration of this work see Amsterdam 1987, 418, fig. 1.

5. Smith 1834, 5: 117, noted the high prices commanded by Potter's paintings.

6. Perregaux sale, Paris, 25 November 1841, 52 (see Provenance).

References

- 1829–1842 Smith, 5 (1834): 144, no. 63.
- 1834 Nieuwenhuys: 186–188.
- 1857–1858 Blanc, 2 (1858): 448.
- 1867 Van Westrheene: 178, no. 22.
- 1898 Paris: no. 108, repro.
- 1907 *Kann*, 1: viii, 64 repro, 65.
- 1907–1927 HdG, 4 (1911): 654, no. 154.
- 1908 "Farrier's Shop": 20, repro. frontispiece.
- 1913–1916 Widener: n.p., intro., repro.
- 1923 Widener: n.p., repro.
- 1931 Widener: 98–99, repro.
- 1932 Von Arps-Aubert: 37, no. 28.
- 1938 Waldmann: 334–343.
- 1942 Widener: 6, no. 648.
- 1948 Widener: ix, 54, no. 648, repro.
- 1965 NGA: 104, no. 648.
- 1968 NGA: 92, no. 648, repro.
- 1975 NGA: 274–275, repro.
- 1985 NGA: 317, repro.
- 1986 Sutton: 306.
- 1990 Sutton: 240.