



Gabriel Metsu
Dutch, 1629 - 1667

The Intruder

c. 1660

oil on panel

overall: 66.6 x 59.4 cm (26 1/4 x 23 3/8 in.)

framed: 93.4 x 85.1 x 12.1 cm (36 3/4 x 33 1/2 x 4 3/4 in.)

Inscription: lower center on step to bed: G. Metsu

Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.57

ENTRY

Perhaps no Dutch artist was as facile with the brush as was Gabriel Metsu. His ability to capture ordinary moments of life with freshness and spontaneity was matched by his ability to depict materials with an unerring truth to nature. These qualities were particularly admired by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critics, from Houbraken to Fromentin. In 1754, for example, Descamps, who wrote with great admiration about Metsu's sense of design, softness of touch, and harmony of color, concluded by proposing "Metsu as the greatest model that Holland has produced, for all those who wish to follow or imitate the same genre."^[1] By 1821 Metsu's art was so esteemed that it was said to have reached the highest level of "perfection" to which "imitative art is able to attain."^[2] Thus it is of some consequence that in 1833, when John Smith described *The Intruder* in his catalog of Metsu paintings, he termed it "a chef d'oeuvre of the master. The beauty of the composition, the elegance of the drawing, the delightful effect which pervades it, together with the colour, and accomplished execution, fully entitle it to this appellation."^[3]

Smith's enthusiasm for this painting has been shared by all subsequent critics, and indeed *The Intruder* stands as one of Metsu's most finely wrought and carefully conceived works. Despite some losses in the glazing, all of the fluidity of his touch is evident in the array of fabrics and materials that give such luster to the image: the soft velvet of a morning jacket, the sheen of a silk skirt, the smoothness of carefully laid wooden floorboards, and glistening reflections on the pewter pitcher and candle stand. Moreover, in a painting that displays a wide range of human emotions, Metsu has indicated the gestures and expressions of his figures with

remarkable ease and naturalness.

All of these qualities show Metsu at his best and confirm the accolades that have always been accorded him. Nevertheless, truthfulness to nature, whether in the depiction of fabrics or human emotions, was merely incidental to the narrative he wanted to portray. For above all, Metsu was a storyteller. In painting after painting he sets up encounters between the sexes, in which individuals respond to interruptions or proposals, unimportant incidents that nevertheless elicit strong emotions. Although his scenes often have an anecdotal character, they appear to be taken from life, especially because he leaves the viewer guessing as to the outcome of the scenario he portrays.

This painting is no exception. While the physical activities of the protagonists are clear, the particular set of circumstances that preceded the event and those that will follow are impossible to fathom. Just why has this handsome young officer burst into the room and which of the two comely young ladies has he come to visit? It is difficult to judge from his gaze. In any event, the woman at her toilet is clearly delighted to see him, and the maid, who gently restrains him, smiles at his impertinence with a good-natured expression. The young woman who emerges from her bed, however, looks at him with undisguised disdain. To judge from the disarray of her clothes and the presence of her fur-lined red jacket and skirt thrown over the chair, she must have been lounging in bed and has quickly tried to dress after hearing the commotion at the door. Her state of relative undress, as well as the fact that she is putting her foot into her slipper as she clambers from the bed, adds a sexual overtone to the unexpected visit.[4] The pewter pitcher and candle, side by side on the floor in the immediate foreground, may have a similar intent, for their shapes have sexual allusions that would have been understood as such by contemporary observers.[5]

Metsu's painting had an afterlife that may help in an assessment of the character of his narrative. In 1675 Eglon van der Neer (1634–1703) painted *A Woman Washing Her Hands* [fig. 1] in which a suitor in the background is restrained by a maid in much the same way as in *The Intruder*. In this instance, the object of the suitor's attention is quite clearly the woman leaving the bed rather than the lady at her toilet. In contrast to Metsu's integrated composition, no psychological connection exists between the foreground figures and the background scene. Indeed, Van der Neer apparently juxtaposed the two as thematic opposites rather than intending them to be an integrated narrative: in emblematic literature, hand washing was considered synonymous with purity, a virtue not to be expected from the sexual

inclinations of the couple in the background.[6] Metsu, in his more subtle composition, may have also incorporated a similar, although less extreme, contrast between domestic virtue and sensual pleasure. The woman at her toilet holds a comb in her hand, which, like the basin and ewer in Van der Neer's painting, was symbolically related to moral cleanliness and purity in Dutch emblematic literature.[7] It is thus not inconceivable that Metsu wanted to suggest in this work those spiritual and sensual choices that continually confront men and women in the course of their daily lives. This interest in depicting individuals in the midst of a moral dilemma is also found elsewhere in his oeuvre.[8]

Metsu was a keen observer not only of everyday life, but also of other artists' works; indeed, few other Dutch artists managed to forge their style from so many countervailing influences. During his early years he was influenced by the Utrecht artist Nicolaes Knüpfer (c. 1603–1655), whose history paintings and freely executed bordello scenes clearly appealed to him.[9] Elements of the style and choice of subject matter of Gerrit Dou (Dutch, 1613 - 1675) also can be found in his work from this period. After Metsu moved from Leiden to Amsterdam in 1657, he responded to other artistic models as well: Nicolaes Maes (Dutch, 1634 - 1693), Gerard ter Borch the Younger (Dutch, 1617 - 1681), Pieter de Hooch (Dutch, 1629 - 1684), and, eventually, Johannes Vermeer (Dutch, 1632 - 1675).

Although *The Intruder* is not dated, it was almost certainly executed around 1660 when the influences of De Hooch and Ter Borch were strongest.[10] From De Hooch, who moved to Amsterdam in about 1660, Metsu gained an appreciation for the importance of establishing a structural framework for his scene through the spatial clarity of the room. Here, for example, the bond between the woman sitting at her toilet and the suitor is visually enhanced by the way each is enframed by an arch-shaped architectural element. Compositionally, Metsu has used the chair in the right foreground and the bright red robes thrown upon it as a means to separate the intruder from the women's space, which is defined by the clearly articulated floorboards in the foreground.

The nature of the narrative owes far more to Ter Borch than to De Hooch. Ter Borch explored a similar theme of sexual innuendos in *The Suitor's Visit*, a work that Metsu certainly knew.[11] Indeed, one can see enough subtle compositional and thematic reminders of *The Suitor's Visit* in the present painting to suggest that Ter Borch's work served as a point of departure for Metsu. Metsu, however, opted for a more anecdotal approach: his narrative is more complex, and the gestures and expressions more specific to the situation described. This narrative style,

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which may well be an outgrowth of Metsu's early attraction to Knüpfer's overtly theatrical compositions, gives his work great sensual appeal, but at a cost. All too often Metsu lets the activities of the moment override the subtle nuances of psychological insight that are at the core of Ter Borch's greatest works.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Eglon van der Neer, *A Woman Washing Her Hands*, 1675, oil on panel, Mauritshuis, The Hague

NOTES

- [1] Jean-Baptiste Descamps, *La vie des peintres flamands, allemands et hollandais*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1753–1765), 2:240–241. Descamps wrote: “Metzu comme le plus grand modèle qu’ait fourni la Hollande, à tous ceux qui voudront suivre ou imiter le même genre” (translated by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Jennifer Henel).
- [2] Christiaan Josi, *Collections d’imitations de dessins . . . commencée par C. Ploos van Amstel* (London, 1821). Josi wrote: “l’art imitatif peut être porté” (translated by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Jennifer Henel).
- [3] John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters*, 9 vols. (London, 1829–1842), 4:103. Smith knew the painting well, for he owned it for two brief periods of time between 1830 and 1833. See Provenance.
- [4] Even though it is a natural gesture, the placing of one’s foot in a slipper often had sexual overtones in Dutch literary and pictorial traditions. See Eddy de Jongh, *Tot lering en vermaak: Betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstellingen uit de zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1976), 245, 259–260.
- [5] The area around the pitcher shows that Metsu initially placed a lower and wider vessel in that spot, most likely a chamber pot; by inserting the pitcher, he emphasized the scene’s sexual allusions.
- [6] See Eddy de Jongh, *Tot lering en vermaak: Betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstellingen uit de zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1976), 195.
- [7] For a related emblem by Jacob Cats, see *Spiegel van den ouden en nieuwen tijdt* (The Hague, 1631), book 3:147, emblem 45. See Eddy de Jongh, *Tot lering en vermaak: Betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstellingen uit de zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1976), 197, repro.

(in reverse).

- [8] See, for example, *The Hunter's Gift*, c. 1658–1660 (City of Amsterdam, on loan to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, no. C177), discussed in Peter C. Sutton and Jane landola Watkins, *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting* (Philadelphia, 1984), 250–251.
- [9] See Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., “Review of Robinson 1974,” *Art Bulletin* 58 (1976): 457–458.
- [10] This painting can be associated with a few other paintings that must date at about this time. Primary among them is the *Cello-Player* (Royal Collection, Buckingham Palace, London), in which a woman wears a costume identical to that worn by the woman leaving the bed. See Franklin W. Robinson, *Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667): A Study of His Place in Dutch Genre Painting of the Golden Age* (New York, 1974), 139, fig. 69. The same model wears the fur-lined jacket of the woman seated at the table in *Oyster Eaters* (Hermitage, Saint Petersburg). See Franklin W. Robinson, *Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667)*, 183, fig. 137.
- [11] Metsu quoted the figure of the suitor in Ter Borch's *The Suitor's Visit* in his own depiction of *The Visit*. Although Metsu's painting is now lost, the composition is known from an engraving by I. Ch. Lingée. See Franklin W. Robinson, *Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667): A Study of His Place in Dutch Genre Painting of the Golden Age* (New York, 1974), 182, fig. 136. A similar figure appears in *Visit to the Nursery*, 1661 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 17.190.20). See Franklin W. Robinson, *Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667)*, 178, fig. 130.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The original support, an oak panel with vertical grain, has been thinned, backed, and cradled. An X-radiograph taken in 1940 shows the painting prior to cradling and suggests the panel is composed of a single board. The panel was prepared with a light-tan upper ground over a white lower ground. Metsu laid out the figures with a brown painted sketch, then worked up the composition in an underpainting. In the floor he scratched through the light-colored underpaint to describe the planks. Metsu made some revisions by sketching over the underpaint using black paint that can be seen with infrared reflectography at 1.5 to 1.7 microns.[1] He revised the proper right hand of the woman at her toilet, and introduced the candlestick and pitcher in the foreground. The vessel was originally sketched as a wide-necked vase and only converted into a pitcher during the final painting. The original shape is visible as a pentimento. [2] As is characteristic of Metsu's

technique, the secondary sketch appears throughout, for example, in the figure of the central young woman.[3] Metsu applied the final paint smoothly in the darks and more thickly in the lights, with small brushstrokes blended wet-into-wet. He glazed dark colors such as the green and red garments and handled highlights in low impasto.

Several areas of abrasion were extensively repainted in the past. Much of the repaint was removed during a 1986 conservation treatment. The green jacket at left is somewhat abraded and the upper paint layer has blanched. An upper layer of glaze has also been abraded in the brown skirt of the maid in the right background. Original paint in the deeper shades of the red slippers and red clothing on the chair at right has blanched and the pigment has altered to gray.[4] The area around the pitcher in the foreground was abraded, revealing the earlier shape of the vessel. The painting was treated again in 2010 at which time the abrasion and blanching in the paint and glazes were inpainted.

[1] Infrared reflectography was performed using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with an H astronomy filter.

[2] In an 1831 letter from Charles Bagot to dealer/collector John Smith, Bagot writes in regards to this painting: "I find no fault with the addition made to it in turning the pot de chamber into a vessel of another description and shall certainly leave it as it is. It is very well done." See Charles Sebag – Montefiore with Julia I. Armstrong-Totten, *A Dynasty of Dealers: John Smith and Successors 1801 – 1924: A Study of the Art Market in Nineteenth-Century London*. (London, 2013), 77.

[3] E. Melanie Gifford, "Eloquent Imprecision: Gabriel Metsu's Painting Technique," in Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu* (New Haven, 2010), 168–169.

[4] The pigments were analyzed by the NGA Scientific Research department using cross-sections, polarized light microscopy, and air-path X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (see report dated August 1, 1986, in NGA Conservation department files).

PROVENANCE

Possibly William van Huls, London; possibly (his estate sale, at his residence by Wilson, London, 6 August 1722 and days following, no. 129, as *Ladies in their Bedroom*); Edwin.[1] Colonel Gregory Holman Bromley Way [1766-1844], Denham Place, Buckinghamshire:[2] sold to (John Smith [1781-1855], London); sold 26 January 1830 to George John Venables-Vernon, 5th baron Vernon [1803-1866], Sudbury Hall, Derby; (his sale, Christie & Manson, London, 15-16 April 1831, 2nd day, no. 50, as *The Importunate Intruder*); purchased by (John Smith [1781-1855], London) for Sir Charles Bagot [1781-1843];[3] (his sale, Christie & Manson, London, 18 June 1836, no. 56); Albertus Brondgeest [1786-1849], The Hague, buying for Baron Johan Gijsbert Verstolk van Soelen [1776-1845], The Hague; sold 1846 with the Verstolk van Soelen collection through (John Chaplin, London) to a consortium of Samuel Jones Loyd [1796-1883, later 1st baron Overstone], Humphrey Mildmay [1794-1853], and Thomas Baring [1799-1873], London, and Stratton Park, Hampshire:[4] by inheritance to Baring's nephew, Thomas George Baring, 1st earl of Northbrook [1826-1904], London and Stratton Park; by inheritance to his son, Francis George Baring, 2nd earl of Northbrook [1850-1929], London and Stratton Park; sold March 1927 to (Duveen Brothers, Inc., London, New York, and Paris);[5] sold November 1927 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.

[1] Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu (1629-1667): Life and Work*, Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2007: 762, no. A-130; Frank Simpson, "Dutch Paintings in England before 1760," *The Burlington Magazine* 95, no. 599 (February 1953): 41.

[2] John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters*, 9 vols., London, 1829–1842: 4(1833):103, no. 94; 9(1842):524, no. 29, provides the provenance for the painting from Colonel Way through Brondgeest.

[3] See Charles Sebag-Montefiore with Julia I. Armstrong-Totten, *A Dynasty of Dealers: John Smith and Successors, 1801-1924*, Arundel and London, London, 2013: 21-22, 72, 75-77.

[4] The catalogue of the Verstolk van Soelen collection, annotated with the

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purchasers of each work, was prepared by Albertus Brondgeest and is dated 29 June 1846. The Metsu painting is number 30 and the purchaser was Baring. See William Henry James Weale and Jean Paul Richter, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Collection of Pictures Belonging to the Earl of Northbrook*, London, 1889: 199, 202-203.

[5] Duveen Brothers Records, accession number 960015, Getty Research Institute, Research Library, Los Angeles: reel 124, box 269, folders 14-17. Duveen's representative first saw the painting in 1913 in the front drawing room of Lord Northbrook's London house.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1834 The Works of Ancient Masters, British Institution, London, 1834, no. 103.

1850 Pictures by Italian, Spanish, Flemish, Dutch, French and English Masters, British Institution, London, 1850, no. 48, as *An Interior*.

1857 Art Treasures of the United Kingdom: Paintings by Ancient Masters, Art Treasures Palace, Manchester, 1857, no. 1059.

1871 Exhibition of the Works of the Old Masters, associated with Works of Deceased Masters of the British School. Winter Exhibition, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1871, no. 211.

1889 Exhibition of Works by the Old Masters, and by Deceased Masters of the British School. Winter Exhibition, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1889, no. 128.

1895 Loan Collection of Pictures, Corporation of London Art Gallery (Guildhall), London, 1895, no. 121.

1900 Exhibition of Pictures by Dutch Masters of the Seventeenth Century, Burlington Fine Arts Club, London, 1900, no. 47.

2010 Gabriel Metsu, 1629-1667, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2010-2011, no. 34, fig. 126.

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