

VERMEER
AND THE
MASTERS
OF GENRE
PAINTING



NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
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AMONG THE MOST ENDURING IMAGES of the Dutch Golden Age are genre paintings, or scenes of daily life, from the third quarter of the seventeenth century. Made during a time of unparalleled innovation and prosperity, these exquisite portrayals of refined Dutch society—elegant men and women writing letters, playing music, and tending to their daily rituals—present a genteel world that is extraordinarily appealing. Today, Johannes Vermeer is the most celebrated of these painters thanks to the beauty and tranquility of his images. Yet other masters, among them Gerard ter Borch, Gerrit Dou, Frans van Mieris, and Gabriel Metsu, also created works that are remarkably similar in style, subject matter, and technique. The visual connections between these artists' paintings suggest a robust atmosphere of innovation and exchange—but to what extent did they inspire each other's work, and to what extent did they follow their own artistic evolution? This exhibition brings together almost seventy paintings made between about 1655 and 1680 to explore these questions and celebrate the inspiration, rivalry, and artistic evolution of Vermeer and other masters of genre painting.



Cover
Johannes Vermeer
Lady Writing (detail),
c. 1665
oil on canvas
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, Gift of Harry
Waldron Havemeyer and
Horace Havemeyer, Jr., in
memory of their father,
Horace Havemeyer
(cat. 2.3)

(opposite) detail fig. 7
Gabriel Metsu
Man Writing a Letter

Fig. 1 (left)
Gerard ter Borch
Woman Writing a Letter,
c. 1655–1656
oil on panel
Royal Picture Gallery
Mauritshuis, The Hague
(cat. 2.1)

Ter Borch and the “Modern Composition”

Gerard ter Borch was the most influential of the Dutch genre painters owing to his remarkable ability to depict elegant images of domesticity and leisure that conveyed the inner life of his figures (fig. 1). He seemingly turned to genre painting because his father, Gerard ter Borch the Elder, encouraged him to focus on “modern compositions,” meaning scenes of everyday life rather than religious or mythological subjects: “And when you wish to paint, work up some modern compositions, as you surely can. . . . If you do that you will be loved by God, as you were in Haarlem and Amsterdam.”

Ter Borch the Elder wrote these words to his son in 1635, at a time when the Dutch Republic’s thriving shipping industry had created enormous wealth for its citizenry—which, in turn, stimulated a booming art market. Scenes of daily life were particularly appealing to the newly affluent, especially refined images depicting lively gatherings and festive garden parties, such as Esaias van de Velde’s *Elegant Company in a Garden* from 1614 (fig. 2). When Ter Borch fully turned his attention to genre scenes around 1650, however, he depicted just a few individuals—sometimes even a single figure—engaged in leisure pastimes or tending to daily rituals in quiet, domestic interiors rather than the bustling communal scenes favored by the earlier generation of artists. This approach resonated with many of his contemporaries, including Vermeer, who soon followed his lead.

Fig. 2
Esaias van de Velde I
Elegant Company in a Garden, 1614
oil on canvas
Rose-Marie and Eijk van
Otterloo Collection
[not in exhibition]



detail fig. 1
Gerard ter Borch
Woman Writing a Letter

Among the most influential of Ter Borch’s paintings was *Woman Writing a Letter*, which depicts his favorite model, his half-sister Gesina (fig. 1), in an intimate moment of putting her thoughts to paper. Quill in hand, and totally absorbed by her writing, she possesses an air of quietude and thoughtfulness. This feeling is enhanced by the delicacy of Ter Borch’s brushwork as well as his sensitivity to her emotional state of being.

Vermeer’s *Lady Writing* (cover) is one of several works by different artists that reflect the influence of Ter Borch’s masterpiece. In Vermeer’s painting, an alluring young woman poised over a letter looks out at the viewer with a knowing smile. Vermeer, like Ter Borch, minimized narrative and anecdotal elements that would explain the woman’s expression, and he endowed her with the same abiding grace that Gesina exudes. Although the compositions are similar, the Delft master brought a different artistic sensibility to his painting. Whereas Ter Borch employed an earthen palette of ocher and reds, Vermeer harmonized lemony yellows with teal blues, blending their tonal values throughout the picture to create chromatic balance. He also carefully arranged the composition to enhance the scene’s equilibrium and instill a feeling of timelessness.

Networks of Influence

Like Ter Borch, Gerrit Dou turned his attention to scenes of upper-class domestic life during the 1650s. For twenty years the Leiden master (a former student of Rembrandt) had occupied himself with portraits, *tronies* (character studies), hermits, and scholars.



Fig. 3
Gerrit Dou
Woman with a Parrot,
 c. 1660–1665
 oil on panel
 The Leiden Collection,
 New York
 (cat. 13.1)

Midway in his career, perhaps sensing the change in tastes among patrons, he began portraying elegant women playing music, gazing in mirrors, pining for loved ones, or holding a pet (fig. 3). The subjects Dou and Ter Borch painted were related, but the two artists differed in their techniques. While Ter Borch painted in a flowing manner, smoothly blending colors using small, rapidly applied brushstrokes, Dou went further and worked in a “fine painting” (*fijnschilder*) technique, marked by invisible brushwork and extraordinary attention to detail.

Dou spent his entire career in Leiden, where he trained numerous artists in his refined style of painting, including Frans van Mieris, whom he called “the prince” of his pupils. At the same time, younger painters inspired by Dou also drew inspiration from each other. For example, Van Mieris and Jan Steen, who was also from Leiden, often borrowed compositional ideas, motifs, and figural arrangements from one another. This robust network of mutual influence, which encompassed not only those working in one artistic center but also artists in different cities, is borne out



Fig. 4
Caspar Netscher
*Woman Feeding a Parrot,
 with a Page*, 1666
 oil on panel
 National Gallery of Art,
 Washington, The Lee and
 Juliet Folger Fund
 (cat. 13.3)

time and again in the rich body of seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings. Around 1660–1665, Dou took up the novel subject of a young woman tending to her parrot, an expensive pet that denotes her affluence (fig. 3). Dou’s painting found many admirers, including Caspar Netscher, working in The Hague, who painted his lustrous *Woman Feeding a Parrot, with a Page* shortly thereafter (fig. 4). Like Dou, Netscher represented a woman standing behind an open niche, and in both works, a drapery hanging in the niche is gathered to one side. A distinct difference between the two images is the woman’s demeanor: Dou’s figure appears sweet and chaste, whereas Netscher’s young woman is unabashedly sensual. Her gold-colored dress is cut seductively low to reveal the porcelain skin of her décolletage, while her coquettish gaze creates a lively, enticing image that feels both familiar and yet wholly original.

Close Encounters

The similarity of themes, compositions, gestures and poses in so many genre paintings raises the question of how these artists may

have encountered each other's work. In the case of Dou and Van Mieris, the two artists had been teacher and pupil and they also spent their entire careers in Leiden. They lived in the same neighborhood, belonged to the same guild, and even shared (and possibly competed for) the same patrons. The intersections between their works are thus not surprising. The relationship of Ter Borch and Netscher was also that of mentor and student, while Steen and Van Mieris were drinking buddies, perhaps accounting for their artistic overlap. Even in the absence of personal connections, however, the ease of travel in the Netherlands would have provided opportunities for artists to see one another's paintings, whether in guild halls, at auctions, through dealers, or in collectors' homes. Thanks to coaches, wagons, and even horse-drawn barges called *trekschuiten*, which traversed the hundreds of canals that connected towns, travel during this time was convenient and efficient. One could go by barge from Amsterdam to Haarlem in one hour, with trips leaving every hour, from Haarlem to Leiden in two hours, or from Delft to The Hague in one hour and fifteen minutes. Such effortless mobility between artistic centers must have facilitated cross-fertilization of ideas and techniques.

Ter Borch's companion paintings *Officer Writing a Letter* and *Woman Sealing a Letter* of around 1658–1659 (figs. 5 and 6), for example, were enormously influential on Gabriel Metsu's own pendant pieces *Man Writing a Letter* and *Woman Reading a Letter* from the mid-1660s (figs. 7 and 8), likely thanks to such ease of

Fig. 5
Gerard ter Borch
Officer Writing a Letter,
c. 1658–1659
oil on canvas
Philadelphia Museum of
Art, The William L. Elkins
Collection, 1924
(cat. 1.1)

Fig. 6
Gerard ter Borch
Woman Sealing a Letter,
c. 1658–1659
oil on canvas, Private
collection, New York
(cat. 1.2)

travel. Although Ter Borch executed his paintings in Deventer in the eastern part of the Netherlands, where Metsu is not known to have ever visited, he maintained a strong foothold in the thriving art market of Amsterdam, where Metsu lived after moving from Leiden in the late 1650s. In his innovative paintings, Ter Borch carefully pictured the exchange of love letters with images that complement one another, juxtaposing an officer sitting at a table, fully engrossed in his task, and a young woman holding a stick of sealing wax to a flame as she prepares her response. The paintings have the same palette, similar settings, and each features two figures at a table with a dog nearby.

It seems likely that, when Gabriel Metsu painted his companion pictures a few years later, he was inspired by Ter Borch's pendants, which he probably would have seen in Amsterdam. Not only do Metsu's paintings depict the same subject, but they also employ Ter Borch's careful chromatic equilibrium, compositional balance, and, above all, emotional tenderness. At the same time, the pendants reveal Metsu's distinctive artistic personality: his lively sense of color and his attentiveness to the relationships among his figures. In Metsu's paintings, the young lovers wear vivid, elegant clothes and occupy sunny, luxurious interiors replete with gold- and ebony-framed paintings. In *Man Writing a Letter*, Metsu eliminated the messenger present in Ter Borch's comparable scene, but positioned the gentleman's body in a livelier pose, as he twists in the

Fig. 7
Gabriel Metsu
Man Writing a Letter,
c. 1664–1666
oil on panel
National Gallery of Ireland,
Dublin, Sir Alfred and Lady
Beit, 1987 (Beit Collection)
(cat. 1.3)

Fig. 8
Gabriel Metsu
Woman Reading a Letter,
c. 1664–1666
oil on panel
National Gallery of Ireland,
Dublin, Sir Alfred and Lady
Beit, 1987 (Beit Collection)
(cat. 1.4)





Fig. 9
Map of the Netherlands,
1650

chair, thereby animating the otherwise quiet activity. On the other hand, in *Woman Reading a Letter*, Metsu gave the maid a more pronounced narrative role than did Ter Borch. Pulling back the curtain on a stormy seascape, she underscores the letter's amorous sentiment, as the dangers of love were often equated symbolically with turbulent waters. Even while borrowing Ter Borch's thematic idea for his pair of paintings, Metsu approached the subject with a narrative rhythm all his own.

Artistic Centers

Genre painting did not flourish in a single artistic center, but rather all over the Netherlands, from the cosmopolitan city of The Hague to the smaller towns of Zwolle and Deventer, where Ter Borch lived and worked (fig. 9). Often, the particular industry or character of a city led to localized trends in the artworks produced there. Paintings that came out of The Hague—for example, those of Caspar Netscher (fig. 4)—often are particularly sumptuous in



Fig. 10 (top left)
Jan Steen
Young Woman with a Letter ("Bathsheba with King David's Letter"),
c. 1659–1660
oil on panel
Private collection
(cat. 6.2)



Fig. 11 (top right)
Frans van Mieris
Woman Before a Mirror,
c. 1662
oil on panel
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,
Gemäldegalerie
(cat. 6.3)



Fig. 12 (left)
Gerard ter Borch
Young Woman at Her Toilet with a Maid, c. 1650–1651
oil on panel
Lent by The Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New York,
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan,
1917
(cat. 6.1)

their presentation of luxury and refinement, perhaps because it was the center of courtly life. Artists in Leiden, which had a thriving textile trade, made paintings that often feature an abundance of fabrics. Jan Steen, who was born and educated in Leiden, skillfully portrayed different materials, from satin dresses and silk bodices to fur-trimmed jackets and woolly oriental rugs. It is easy to imagine that the original owner of his opulent *Young Woman with a Letter* (“*Bathsbeba with King David’s Letter*”) (fig. 10) relished its convincing depiction of the radiant orange satin skirt or the gilt leather wall covering. Frans van Mieris was also a master of fabrics thanks to his painstaking *fijnschilder* technique. His meticulous depiction of crinkly satin skirts, soft fur-trimmed morning coats, and plush velvet chair seats, as in *Woman Before a Mirror* (fig. 11), helped his works fetch some of the highest prices on the market.

Even though Van Mieris and Steen were both from Leiden, they were also aware of Ter Borch’s compositional and thematic innovations thanks to the ease of travel and the fluidity of the art market between Dutch artistic centers. For example, Steen’s *Bathsbeba* and



Fig. 13
Johannes Vermeer
The Lacemaker, c. 1670–1671
 oil on canvas on panel
 Musée du Louvre,
 Département des
 Peintures, Paris
 (cat. 15.4)



Fig. 14
Nicolaes Maes
*Young Woman Making
 Lace*, 1655
 oil on panel
 National Gallery of Canada,
 Ottawa, Purchased 1954
 (cat. 15.2)

Van Mieris’s *Woman Before a Mirror*, both of which were executed in Leiden, have as their point of departure Ter Borch’s *Young Woman at Her Toilet with a Maid* (fig. 12). Although each painting depicts a woman in her private chamber with an attendant, each artist adapted the composition to reflect his own artistic personality. Steen, who was an inventive storyteller, transformed the genre subject to represent the biblical tale of Bathsheba receiving an illicit love letter from King David—a message to which she seems receptive, given her provocative gaze and the parted curtains revealing her bed. Van Mieris, who delighted in risqué, sensually charged scenes, similarly altered the dynamics between the woman and her maid. In place of Ter Borch’s attendant he painted an African servant, and transformed the young, unguarded woman into one who is mature and sexually available, as suggested by the way she coyly strokes her neckline and by the opened letter on the table.

Inspiration, Rivalry, and the Art of Vermeer

Today, Vermeer is the most celebrated of all Dutch genre painters, even though little is known about his life, including his training and his travels outside of Delft. While many of his pictures are related thematically or compositionally to those of other Dutch artists, they remain distinctive. Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* (fig. 15, detail), for example, has a restrained quietude that differs from the more active scenes that his contemporaries depicted. As in this painting, Vermeer also had an ability to infuse his scenes of daily life with substantive meaning. Here, as the woman gazes toward the balance, the painting of the Last Judgment hanging behind her imparts a spiritual significance to her act of weighing and judging.

A comparison of his *The Lacemaker* (fig. 13) with Nicolas Maes's *Young Woman Making Lace* (fig. 14) further demonstrates this aspect of Vermeer's artistic genius. In his painting, Maes depicted the lacemaker seated in the back of a dimly lit room, and included a number of pictorial elements—a portrait of Martin Luther and money bag hanging on the wall, and an open book on her desk—to symbolize her industriousness, frugality, and domesticity. Vermeer, however, closely cropped his composition and placed the young woman against a bare wall to focus upon the lacemaker herself. His image both captures the lacemaker's emotional engagement in her work and conveys a sense of tranquility and permanence.

In many ways, the comparison of Vermeer's *The Lacemaker* and Maes's *Young Woman Making Lace* embodies the questions of inspiration and rivalry raised in this exhibition. The many thematic and stylistic connections that existed among Dutch masters of the latter part of the seventeenth century helped create a climate of excellence that propelled their genre paintings to levels of achievement rarely matched in the history of art.



Fig. 15 (opposite)
Johannes Vermeer
Woman Holding a Balance
(detail), c. 1664
oil on canvas
National Gallery of Art
Washington, Widener
Collection
(cat. 14.2)

Sunday Lectures

East Building Auditorium

October 22 at 2:00 p.m.

Introduction to the Exhibition—Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry
Adriaan E. Waiboer, head of collections and research, National Gallery of Ireland, and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., curator of northern baroque paintings, National Gallery of Art

January 7 at 2:00 p.m.

Johannes Vermeer: Of His Time Yet Timeless
Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., curator of northern baroque paintings, National Gallery of Art

Film

Vermeer Beyond Time

December 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 29, 30 at noon

December 31 at 2:00 p.m.

East Building Auditorium

A new feature documentary produced in France explores the world of Johannes Vermeer.

Concert

Piffaro, the Renaissance Band

January 21 at 3:30 p.m.

West Building, West Garden Court

Teacher Program

Evening with Educators

Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry

Wednesday, November 8, 2017

4:30–7:30 p.m.

Register at nga.gov/teacherworkshops.

For a complete schedule of related programming, please visit nga.gov/vermeer-genre.

Hours: Monday–Saturday, 10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m.; Sunday 11:00 a.m.–6:00 p.m. Gallery website: www.nga.gov. For information about accessibility to galleries and public areas, assistive listening devices, sign-language interpretation, and other services and programs, inquire at the Information Desks, consult the website, or call 202.842.6691.

Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all of its programs is free of charge, unless otherwise as noted.

Catalog

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated 304-page catalog, *Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry*, by exhibition curators Adriaan E. Waiboer, Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., and Blaise Ducos, with additional contributions from Piet Bakker, Quentin Buvelot, E. Melanie Gifford, Lisha Deming Glinsman, Eddy Schavemaker, Eric Jan Sluiter, Marjorie E. Wieseman. Produced by the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Musée du Louvre, Paris, in association with Yale University Press. Softcover \$35.00.

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