

The Merits of Metsu

ECLIPSED BY HIS COUNTRYMAN VERMEER MORE THAN A CENTURY AGO, GABRIËL METSU IS OVERDUE FOR A RE-ASSESSMENT. BY JONATHAN LOPEZ



BY THE MIDDLE OF the 18th century, genre scenes from the Dutch Golden Age were a staple of the European art market, desirable commodities at auction not just in the Netherlands but also in Paris and London, the greatest centers of the trade. During this period, Gabriël Metsu (1629–67) emerged as one of the most prized of all Dutch masters, admired for his naturalistic light effects, delicate evocation of textures and engaging narratives of everyday life. In *La vie des peintres flamands, allemands et hollandais* (1753), the French art

historian Jean-Baptiste Descamps wrote, “I would propose Metsu as the greatest model that Holland has produced for anyone who might wish to follow or imitate this type of work.”

But fame can be a cruel mistress. Today, Metsu is known mostly to academic specialists, his popular reputation having been eclipsed by that of the once-obscure Johannes Vermeer. (1632–75). The paintings of Vermeer only came to the attention of a wide audience in the 1860s, mostly through the writings of the journalist and



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art critic Théophile Thoré, who compiled the first systematic catalogue of the artist's works and perceptively identified many important Vermeers that had previously been attributed to other painters, including Metsu and Pieter de Hooch. While Vermeer grew posthumously into an art-world superstar—his rare pictures commanding the loftiest of prices and his mysterious life prompting endless speculation—the broader climate of taste changed, and Metsu was cast unceremoniously into the shadows.

An exhibition of Metsu's works now at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (through July 24), seeks to win wider recognition for this comparatively neglected master. The show originated at the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin, where it was organized by curator Adriaan Waiboer, the world's foremost expert on Metsu. (Before coming to Washington, the exhibition made an intermediate stop at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, where I saw it.) Waiboer's catalogue essays and other scholarly writings have done much to clarify Metsu's development, bringing order to the often bewildering chronology of the master's oeuvre and untangling the complex web of influences that shaped his style.

Waiboer initially doubted Metsu's merits when the painter was proposed to him as a topic of study in 1999. "At first, I was not that keen on Metsu," he recalls. "I was more interested in biblical and mythological subjects, not in women making lace, reading letters or weighing scales." But on a trip to the Rijksmuseum with Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, his dissertation advisor at NYU's Institute of Fine Arts, he had a change of heart. "Egbert showed me two paintings, *An Old Man with a Pipe and Jug* and *An Old Woman with a Book on her Lap*, and I realized that these works were incredibly good. The pure technical quality of Metsu's work, his versatility, the way he imbued his figures with real human personalities—he was simply one of the most skilled painters of the mid-17th century."

Of Metsu's early life and training, little is known. Statements made by the artist in adulthood suggest that he was born in the Dutch city of Leiden in 1629. He never knew his father, a painter (and perhaps tapestry designer), who died soon after Gabriël was conceived. In 1636, Metsu's mother, a midwife, married a prosperous barge captain, likely providing the family a measure of comfort. Records from the Guild of St. Luke in Leiden—the painters' guild—indicate that he expressed an interest in the group's formation as early as 1644, at which time he was 14 years old and serving, most likely, as an apprentice in the studio of an established artist.

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It would appear that Metsu began to work as an independent master in Leiden by the age of 18.

The great Leiden painters of the Golden Age, such as Gerrit Dou and Frans van Meiris, are celebrated in the history of Dutch art for their meticulous technique, or *fijnschilderij*. But while residing in Leiden, Metsu didn't paint that way. His Leiden period was marked by the broader, freer manner generally associated with the Utrecht school, as evidenced in the circa 1653–54 biblical history painting *The Dismissal of Hagar*. Only after moving to Amsterdam around 1655 did Metsu begin to adopt methods more typical of Leiden, perhaps sensing a market opportunity for a purveyor of such works in the Dutch capital. *The Baker Blowing his Horn* (circa 1660–63) is a fine example of this trend. Its painstaking execution clearly recalls Dou, as does the characteristic *mise-en-scène* at a window niche.

While in Amsterdam, Metsu also began to assimilate the innovations of the major Delft School artists—Vermeer, Carel Fabritius, Pieter de Hooch and Emanuel de Witte—who captured the majestic beauty of natural light as few painters before or since. The handsome pendants *Man Writing a Letter* and *Woman Reading a Letter* (both circa 1664–66) seem clearly to be inspired by Vermeer—distinguishing Metsu, as the curator at Washington, Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., has noted, “as the only contemporary artist fully to understand the poetry of Vermeer’s personal style.” In turn, the pronounced emphasis on luxury and refinement in these pictures—especially as seen in the male figure, whose garments are depicted in lush, fluid brushstrokes of great painterly élan—points to at least one additional influence, namely a renowned artist from the eastern province of Overijssel, Gerard ter Borch, whose captivating high-life scenes enjoyed wide popularity in Metsu’s time and continue to do so today.

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atic artist in this area of work, as Descamps rightly noted, and the most difficult to categorize. The paradox prompts one of Waiboer’s paramount insights. “We tend to look at Dutch artists through a pair of Italian glasses,” he says. “In Italy there are truly regional schools, the Roman, the Venetian, etc. In Holland, this model may work a bit in the beginning of the 17th century, but not by the 1660s. Artists traveled a great deal within the Dutch Republic, constantly adopting subjects and styles from each other. It’s mind-boggling how many works by artists from outside his hometown—be it Leiden or Amsterdam—Metsu knew and responded to.”

In the exhibition catalogue, Waiboer laments Metsu’s reversal of fortune vis-à-vis Vermeer and asserts that, in recent years, admiration for the Delft master “has turned hyperbolic, largely due to a few exhibitions and a heap of publications.” Provocatively, he wonders if future tastes might yet surprise us: “Will Vermeer’s fame continue to grow in the next centuries, or will Metsu’s eventually supersede that of his contemporary again?”

Although imponderable, the question does raise significant issues concerning taste, past and present. Whether fairly or unfairly, in the current aesthetic climate certain qualities in Metsu’s most distinctive and characteristic paintings militate against a wholehearted embrace of the artist. *The Sick Child* (circa 1663–64) and *Old Woman Baking Pancakes* (circa 1655–58), for instance, are magnificently painted, with a bold and masterful touch, but both display a pronounced sentimental streak as well as an anecdotal impulse that borders on the illustrational.

This heady mixture seems to have been in sync with a specific line of development in 18th-century French painting (it also animates many works by Jean-Baptiste Greuze), a factor that may have played into Metsu’s onetime high reputation among Parisian dealers. But it is not quite so ardently appreciated today. A major shift in taste occurred during the middle of the 19th century and gained momentum in the 20th. Modern culture

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has often shown a bias toward non-narrative painting and, when confronted with narrative works, has generally held the more subtle and elusive ones in the highest esteem, from Manet’s *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1862–63) to Matthew Barney’s *Cremaster Cycle* (1994–2002). This revolution in taste helped open the world’s eyes to Vermeer and his enigmatic pictures of life’s stolen moments, but it has left many of Metsu’s works seeming merely quaint. At this point, such ingrained preferences are probably difficult to overcome. Yet, as Waiboer rightly argues, a painter as impressive and rewarding as Metsu certainly merits the effort. ■