



Gabriel Metsu
1629–1667

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON

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FIG. 1 *The Intruder*, c. 1660, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection

GABRIEL METSU (1629–1667), one of the leading Dutch genre painters of the seventeenth century, mastered a wide range of subjects, techniques, and styles over the course of his twenty-two-year career. Metsu was a gifted visual storyteller whose skill at evoking human emotions is particularly evident in works such as *The Intruder* (c. 1660, FIG. 1). The painting’s suspense and theatrical drama, along with the spatial clarity, harmony of colors, fluidity of the brushstrokes, and elegance of the figures, make it one of his finest masterpieces. The anecdotal character of the scene seems taken from life, and the outcome of the encounter is uncertain. We wonder why the officer has burst into the room, and which one of the two lovely young ladies is the object of his desire. Metsu often left his narrative paintings open ended, drawing the viewer into the engaging and lively moments depicted.

EARLY LIFE AND CAREER

Sources have left limited biographical information on Gabriel Metsu. He was born in Leiden in late 1629, some eight months after the death of his father Jacques Metsu, who had been a painter and a tapestry designer. Gabriel’s mother, Jacquemijntje Garniers, raised her son in the Catholic faith. No record of his artistic training exists, but he must have been a prodigy: a document describes him as “painter” as early as 1644, when he was only fourteen or

fifteen. Four years later he registered as a full-fledged master in Leiden's newly established artists' Guild of Saint Luke.

Metsu may have spent some of his formative years in Utrecht, a city with a strong artistic heritage that was also a bastion of Dutch Catholicism. His earliest paintings echo the work of two masters from Utrecht, Nicolaes Knupfer (1609 – 1655), a history painter known for his small-scale biblical scenes, and Jan Baptist Weenix (1621 – 1661), who painted genre and history scenes situated in Italianate landscapes. Weenix's influences on Metsu are particularly evident in the earliest painting by the artist in this exhibition, *The Dismissal of Hagar* (c. 1653 – 1654, FIG. 2) — for example, in the fluid, broad brushwork, the sturdy figures, and the mountainous landscape. Metsu's gift for conveying human emotion enlivens the poignant biblical story of Hagar, second wife of Abraham, who together with their young son Ishmael is expelled from the household at the insistence of his first wife, Sarah (seen at the window).

The booming art market in the Dutch Republic must have influenced Metsu's decision to pursue a career as a painter. International maritime commerce resulted in the explosive growth of the republic's economy in



FIG. 2 *The Dismissal of Hagar*, c. 1653 – 1654, oil on canvas, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden, acquired with the generous support of the Vereniging Rembrandt



FIG. 3 *Vegetable Market in Amsterdam*, c. 1657–1661, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures, Collection of Louis XVI, acquired at the Blondel d'Azincourt sale, Paris, 1783

the first half of the seventeenth century. The prosperity of Dutch merchants in general peaked exactly in this period. The commercial elite used their profits to build stately houses and to fill those showcases with works of art. Following the lead of wealthy collectors, the rising middle class also began to cover the walls of their homes with paintings. Those who could not afford to buy paintings bought prints. John Evelyn, an Englishman traveling through the Dutch Republic in 1641, recorded his amazement that “pictures are very common here, there being scarce an ordinary tradesman whose house is not decorated with them.”

Nowhere was art in greater demand and the pool of potential collectors larger than in Amsterdam, the commercial, economic, and artistic heart of the Dutch Republic. Like Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669) before him, Metsu left Leiden for Amsterdam — probably in 1654, at the age of twenty-four. A document from July 1657, addressing the theft of one of his chickens, confirms that Metsu then lived along the Prinsengracht (Prince’s Canal), one of the city’s main canals. The fact that Metsu owned chickens helps to explain how he was able to depict fowl with such accuracy, as with the rooster and hen in *Vegetable Market in Amsterdam* (c. 1657–1661, FIG. 3).

AMSTERDAM

In Amsterdam, Metsu moved away from painting biblical scenes and carved out a niche as a specialist of market scenes. The hustle and bustle of daily life inspired his rich visual narratives. His market scenes seem to be realistic portrayals of the urban landscape — a daily vegetable market similar to the one depicted in *Vegetable Market in Amsterdam* was, indeed, held across from his home on the Prinsengracht. Yet the recurrence of similar motifs and models in his paintings serves as a warning that Metsu took liberties with realism in his depictions of Dutch life.

Metsu married Isabella de Wolff from Enkhuizen, a port city in northern Holland, in May 1658, and the couple appears together in *The Artist as the Prodigal Son* (1661, FIG. 4). Dutch artists often made reference to the biblical story of an irresponsible young man who returns to the family fold in double portraits of themselves and their wives. In this tavern scene, Metsu portrayed himself as an amorous cavalier courting Isabella, who is clad in the traditional costume of her hometown and wears her hair coiled in the style of unmarried women. Isabella appears as a model in many of her husband's genre scenes, including *A Woman Artist*, also known as *Le corset rouge* (*The Red Jacket*, c. 1661–1664, FIG. 5). Given that Isabella's paternal grandfather, uncle, brother,



FIG. 4 *The Artist as the Prodigal Son*, 1661, oil on panel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden



FIG. 5 *A Woman Artist* or *Le corset rouge* (*The Red Jacket*), c. 1661–1664, oil on panel, Private collection



FIG. 6 *An Old Woman Baking Pancakes, with a Boy*, c. 1655 – 1658, oil on canvas, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, on loan from a private collection



FIG. 7 *An Old Woman at Her Meal*, c. 1654 – 1657, oil on canvas, Private collection, New York

and mother were artists, it is plausible that she had been taught to draw and paint as well. That Metsu captured his charming and capable spouse in her studio, holding a drawing board, seems to confirm her artistic training.

Metsu painted many genre scenes that focus on the daily life of the working class, such as *An Old Woman Baking Pancakes, with a Boy* (c. 1655 – 1658, FIG. 6). Sitting under a tarp thrown over an overhanging branch, the woman bakes an apple pancake, classic Dutch fare, for a boy who patiently awaits his treat. In addition to the human interaction, the scene incorporates still-life elements: embers smolder underneath the tripod, the pot with batter and six apples on a wooden platter await other customers, an unused set of scales is tucked in the fork of the tree, and four cured herrings tantalize the cat.

The skillfully rendered objects in Metsu's genre paintings demonstrate his artistic versatility and add to the layering of content for which he is so well known. At first glance, his genre scenes appear to be simple depictions of daily life — yet many of the paintings contain a deeper, symbolic meaning that contemporary viewers would have recognized and understood. Although *An Old Woman at Her Meal* (c. 1654 – 1657, FIG. 7) seems to be a straightforward painting of a woman in an interior, the objects Metsu included in the scene evoke the Eucharist, the Christian sacrament in which bread and wine are



FIG. 8 *An Old Couple Feeding a Dog*, 1654 – 1657, oil on canvas, Private collection held at Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute

consecrated. A beam of light draws our eyes to a simple glass of red wine on the floor, while a chunk of bread rests on a linen cloth. In *An Old Couple Feeding a Dog* (1654 – 1657, FIG. 8), Metsu included objects that hint at a couple reaching the end of long, once-busy lives. The woman’s spindle and winding rack lie unused on the bench, while the man no longer pays attention to the grindstone. Instead, they feed their dog, which represents fidelity. Metsu evoked their companionship and humanity with remarkable sensitivity.

HIGH-LIFE SCENES

Metsu’s style continued to evolve in the early 1660s. He drew upon the stylistic and thematic innovations of artists who created elegant “high-life” genre scenes with figures belonging to the upper-middle class. Particularly important for this stage of his career were the Leiden *fijnschilders* (fine painters) Gerrit Dou (1613 – 1675) and Frans van Mieris (1635 – 1681), who were renowned for their delicate brushwork; Gerard ter Borch (1617 – 1681) of Deventer, who created nuanced images of social interaction among the urban elite; and Johannes Vermeer (1632 – 1675) of Delft, who painted with a profound sensitivity to color and light. Each of these masters produced finely wrought and exquisitely textured paintings for an increasingly sophisticated and moneyed domestic art market.



FIG. 9 *Self-Portrait as a Painter*, c. 1659 – 1662, oil on panel, Lent by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

Metsu became the most famous of the Amsterdam *fijnschilders* by adapting his already assured style of painting to the evolving demands of the market, and his confidence is evident in his self-portraits (Metsu is seen in five works in this exhibition). In *Self-Portrait as a Painter* (c. 1659 – 1662, FIG. 9), Metsu presented himself as a master artist in full command of his creative talent. Framed by a stone arch, he is dressed in a flamboyant red coat and a shirt with extravagant sleeves — the garments of a gentleman. Turned away from the easel to engage the viewer, he holds his palette, brushes, and mahlstick while drawing on a board. Other artistic props lie on the ledge in front of him. Metsu showed off his ability to paint translucent glass and liquids by including the flask, probably filled with oil, hanging from a nail.

Metsu's technique became more refined in this mature period. He sometimes used tiny brushes to produce nearly invisible strokes, which yielded a meticulous finish. He began to feature the interactions of elegant people in richly furnished settings, combining his skills as a visual storyteller with his confident artistry, as in *The Hunter's Gift* (c. 1658 – 1661, FIG. 10). In seventeenth-century Holland, a man's present of a bird to a young woman had sexual connotations. Metsu subtly alluded to the hunter's solicitation by placing a sculpture of Cupid on the armoire behind the couple. The woman

gazes at the bird while simultaneously reaching for a small prayer book on the table. The viewer is left to ponder the moral choice that confronts the woman: will she acquiesce to the man's advances, or will she safeguard her maidenly reputation? Metsu rarely camouflaged the eroticism of his paintings and excelled at such multifaceted narratives.

In a number of these high-life encounters, such as *A Man and a Woman Seated by a Virginal* (c. 1664–1666, FIG. 11), Metsu introduced a clarity of light and color in addition to strong horizontal and vertical pictorial elements similar to those seen in works by Vermeer. In this case, Metsu placed his figures against a framework of geometrical shapes, including a type of small harpsichord known as a virginal, a black-framed painting on the back wall, and a checkered tile floor. Metsu positioned the couple close to the picture plane, thereby engaging the viewer in the couple's flirtation. Human interactions, combined with remarkable compositional refinement and sensitivity to light, make *A Man Writing a Letter* (c. 1664–1666, FIG. 12) and its companion piece, *A Woman Reading a Letter* (c. 1664–1666, FIG. 13), Metsu's greatest masterpieces. The reciprocal relationship of male writer and female reader in these two paintings is sensitively portrayed and suggests the bonds of love that hold them together. Yet in the latter work the maid has pulled back the curtain



FIG. 10 *The Hunter's Gift*, c. 1658–1661, oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, on long-term loan from the City of Amsterdam



FIG. 11 *A Man and a Woman Seated by a Virginal*, c. 1664–1666, oil on oak, The National Gallery, London, bought 1871



FIG. 12 *A Man Writing a Letter*, c. 1664 – 1666, oil on panel, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Sir Alfred and Lady Beit Gift, 1987 (Beit Collection)



FIG. 13 *A Woman Reading a Letter*, c. 1664 – 1666, oil on panel, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Sir Alfred and Lady Beit Gift, 1987 (Beit Collection)

covering the painting on the wall to reveal a ship in choppy waters, perhaps a symbolic reference to a stormier relationship between the couple than the serenity of both scenes might suggest.

LAST YEARS

Metsu was much more than a gifted genre painter. As a young artist, he created history paintings and biblical scenes, and in the mid-1660s he returned to religious themes. Together with his technical facility, this thematic versatility is what made — and continues to make — his artistic career so fascinating. Metsu combined his renewed emphasis on religious subjects, particularly those with a Catholic character, with the increased stylization and theatricality that marked this period of Dutch painting: witness the content, the execution, and the dramatic gestures of the Virgin, Saint John, and Mary Magdalene (for whom Metsu's wife stood model) in *Christ on the Cross* (1664, FIG. 14). The most striking painting of his late period, *The Sick Child* (c. 1664 – 1666, FIG. 15), reflects Metsu's heightened religiosity. In this powerful image of parental devotion, the mother's tender hold is reminiscent of the



FIG. 14 *Christ on the Cross*, 1664, oil on canvas, Pinacoteca Capitolina, Rome



FIG. 15 *The Sick Child*, c. 1664 – 1666, oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, purchased with support from the Vereniging Rembrandt

traditional theme of Madonna and child; combined with the child's wan face and slack limbs, this painting also recalls Pietà images of Mary cradling her crucified son. Metsu reinforced these religious associations with a Crucifixion scene on the wall.

Metsu died in 1667 at the height of his career, at the age of thirty-eight. His reputation, like that of Vermeer, has fluctuated over time, but in reverse: in the eighteenth century, demand for Metsu's work soared while Vermeer lapsed into obscurity. In 1800 a Parisian art dealer asked, "Why buy a Vermeer when a Metsu is available?" The art world's rediscovery of Vermeer in the second half of the nineteenth century coincided with a relative decline in Metsu's fame. Nevertheless, Metsu has secured his place among the masters of the Golden Age of Dutch painting through the fluidity of his brushwork, his realistic rendering of materials, and his gift for telling a gripping story. His ability to capture scenes of daily life with freshness and spontaneity gives Gabriel Metsu's work a timeless relevance.

LECTURE

Friday, April 22

3:00 pm

East Building Auditorium

Meeting Metsu: ANOTHER Dutch Master

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., curator of northern baroque paintings, National Gallery of Art; Pieter Roelofs, curator of seventeenth-century paintings, Rijksmuseum; and Adriaan E. Waiboer, curator of northern European art, National Gallery of Ireland

CONCERT

Sunday, June 12

6:30 pm

East Building Auditorium

Music and stories from seventeenth-century Netherlands

Texas Children's Choir
Thomas Hardaway, director
Anne-Marieke Evers, soprano

Sponsored by The Richard B. Marsten & Sarah J. Marsten Charitable Remainder Unitrust

GALLERY TALKS

For a complete schedule of gallery talks, please consult the Calendar of Events or www.nga.gov.

ON THE WEB

www.nga.gov/metsu

CATALOGUE

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated 210-page catalogue, *Gabriel Metsu*, by Adriaan E. Waiboer et al. Hardcover \$65, softcover \$40. Produced by the National Gallery of Ireland in association with Yale University Press.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Hours: Monday–Saturday 10:00 am – 5:00 pm; Sunday 11:00 am–6:00 pm

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 (TDD line 202.842.6176).

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

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This brochure was written by Henriette de Bruyn Kops, department of northern baroque paintings, National Gallery of Art. It was produced by the department of exhibition programs and the publishing office, National Gallery of Art.

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COVER *A Man Writing a Letter* (detail), c. 1664–1666, oil on panel, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Sir Alfred and Lady Beit Gift, 1987 (Beit Collection)

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