

EXHIBITS

## Gerrit Dou: The Lesson of Rembrandt

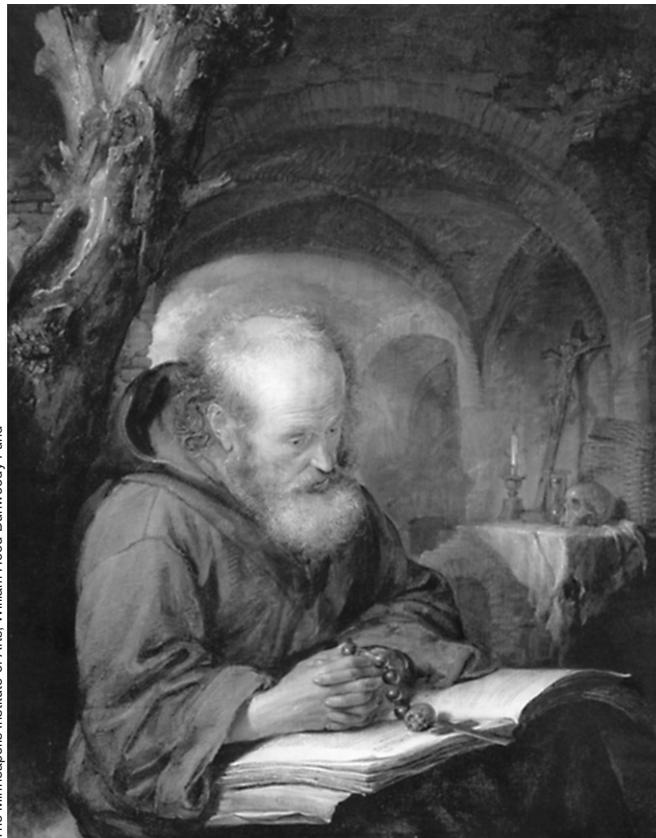
If there is a common thread running through the paintings of Gerrit Dou, it is the sense of a mission: to warn us that the things of this world, no matter how alluringly beautiful they may be—and he painted them so—are ephemeral. What endures is man’s creativity, expressed through man’s works, especially those of artists and scientists, and through man’s loving effort to share his knowledge with others.

Thirty-five of Dou’s paintings are on exhibit until August 6 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The show, which brings together works from many private collections and museums around the world, is the third in a series of exhibits mounted in the museum’s new Dutch Cabinet Galleries, contiguous to the permanent Dutch collections in the West Wing—thus inviting immediate comparison to the neighboring Vermeers, Halses, Rembrandts, and other, less familiar contemporaries.

### Social Nature of Creativity

Although little known to today’s general public, Gerrit Dou (1613-1675) was the first pupil of Rembrandt, with whom he studied for three years in Leiden, before the master moved to Amsterdam. In his day, Dou (pronounced “Dow”) was one of the most respected and successful painters in Holland. His works were sought by the great collectors of his time, and he was paid handsome sums for them.

Dou never reached the level of genius of his teacher, but his works are a beautiful affirmation of the *social* nature of creativity. While specialists, art experts, scholars, and academics argue endlessly about the provenance and attribution of Old Master paintings—for example, some years ago New York City’s Metropolitan Museum of Art had an exhibit, “Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt,” whose subject was the changing opinions as to which paintings were by Rembrandt himself, and which were by his students—this



The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, William Hood Dunwoody Fund

“Hermit Praying,” 1670.

attribution game really misses the point.

In any period of intellectual and artistic ferment, such as the Seventeenth-century renaissance in The Netherlands, a genius like Rembrandt—certainly the greatest painter of his age—will generate, directly through his workshop, as well as indirectly through the circulation of his works and copies, expanding circles of artists who assimilate the master’s ideas. Rembrandt taught many students, and his studio produced many fine painters of the period. Although none ever proved to be a genius of Rembrandt’s rank, their works were good enough in many cases—as the continuing attribution debates attest—to fool the experts into thinking they were by Rembrandt himself. In the case of Dou, we see not only the direct influence of his teacher Rembrandt, but

also reflections of Vermeer, Hals, and the other masters of the Dutch school.

### ‘The Quack’

The painting which, perhaps more than any other, reflects Dou’s individual qualities, is “The Quack” (1652), a satirical depiction of a medical charlatan hawking his cures to the gullible [SEE inside back cover, this issue]. Only a few short years before, Holland had been swept up in one of the biggest speculative financial bubbles in history—the great Tulip Bubble, when an

exotic bulb from Asia Minor could fetch a higher price than a fine home in Amsterdam. Ultimately, the unreality of the financial bubble collapsed down to the level of real economic activity, as all such bubbles must lawfully do. Dou might well have had the tulip mania in mind when creating this painting.

“The Quack,” set on the outskirts of Leiden, is filled with comic touches: A matronly housewife listens skeptically, as her pocket is picked by a small boy, while a second lad laughingly observes. On the quack’s table, beside the elixirs, a monkey mimics the gestures of the “doctor.” Meanwhile, a seated woman, cooking on an open stove, cleans her baby’s bottom; her conversation with a young girl distracts her from the trickster’s spiel. At the bottom left, a boy lures a bird toward him, echoing the

gesture of the quack, while a small dog in the foreground turns his tail on the charlatan, sniffing the ground for something more interesting.

Behind the quack, leaning out of a window, is the artist himself, with a bemused smile on his face; he is identified by the palette and paint brushes held in his left hand.

The many contrasts and juxtapositions in the painting help identify its ironic content: the quack's useless employment is contrasted to that of the farmer and hunter, shown with the products of their labors; the wary figure of the middle-class matron is set against the gullible young women taken in by the quack. Even the background scenery contributes to the joke: the distant church seems to scold the tavern, for providing a setting for such disreputable activity; the flowering tree, high above the heads of the crowd, is placed in opposition to the desiccated tree trunk in the left foreground. All these clues help lead us to the central irony of the painting: the conniving deceit of the charlatan, who uses illusory promises to fleece his victims, juxtaposed to the artist's power of illusion, employed to create and communicate the *truth*—but, a truth which can be discovered only by the exercise of the viewer's cognitive powers.

### Things Don't Matter

Considered to be the founder of the Leiden school of *fijnschilders* (fine painters), Dou so perfected his craft that his paintings were often admired for their painterly qualities and exquisite detail alone. But, Dou's meticulous attention to detail was employed to draw the viewer's eye, and then his mind, into the painting, so that the *idea* content could be perceived. Precisely this ironic counterposition of the superficial beauty of the objects in the painting, to the moral lesson of the narrative, tells us: *Things* don't matter in the long run, no matter how lovely and alluring; what matters is the use we make of our talents to uplift and improve the condition of mankind.

To see this in another context, look at the "Hermit Praying" (1670), which Dou executed when he was 57 years



The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

"Astronomer by Candlelight," 1665.

through the life of the mind, by living in such a way that what we do with our mortal lives will have meaning for posterity.

In many of Dou's works, the subject is light, which is used to create what the Italians call "chiaroscuro" (contrast of light and dark), to give form and plasticity to his figures, to create a sense of drama, and to highlight the ideas in the painting. Look, for example, at the "Astronomer by Candlelight." Here, the astronomer is surrounded

by deep shade, reminding us of a starless night. The only light comes from a candle he holds in his right hand, which casts a warm glow on his face, and lights a celestial globe and the book he is reading. The astronomer's left hand, which rests on top of the globe, also holds a compass, a traditional attribute of both geometry and astronomy, and thus helps exemplify the quest for knowledge. The hourglass is not only an astronomical instrument, but also, reminds us to make good use of the time we have.

old. A grizzled pilgrim is seated with his hands folded around a rosary, as they rest on an open Bible. He is seated among ancient ruins; there is a suggestion of Gothic arches, as in a cathedral, however humble. A strong light falls on the Hermit's head; his eyes are open and contemplative, and the traditional *vanitas* elements—extinguished candle, hourglass, and skull—are present to remind us of the ephemeral nature of mortal life. As in "The Quack," there is a desiccated tree trunk, lit by the same light source that falls on the Hermit; the tree leans over the Hermit at an angle that echoes that of a crucifix leaning against the opposite wall. The anomaly of the tree trunk in an interior space, and its association, however subtle, with the Crucifixion, is a broad hint that there is more to reality than mere appearances. It tells us that the Hermit, like ourselves, can overcome death

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Dou's paintings tell us something about ourselves. They gently, and often humorously, prod us to be better people; to look behind appearances, and superficiality, in order to see things as they really are. In this sense, Dou was a true student of his teacher Rembrandt.

—Bonnie James