



Masters of the Everyday

*Dutch Artists
in the Age of Vermeer*

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ROYAL COLLECTION TRUST



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The Paintings



6 Pieter de Hooch (1629–1684) *Cardplayers in a sunlit room*

1658
Signed and dated: P. D. H. 1658
Oil on canvas, 77.2 x 67.4 cm
RCIN 405951

Provenance: purchased by George IV in 1825 from John Smith for 700 guineas; recorded as an addition in the Inventory of Carlton House dated 1819

Literature: *Delft Masters* 1996, p. 124; Sutton 1980, pp. 19, 81–2, no. 28; White 1982, no. 85; *Masters of Seventeenth-century Dutch Genre Painting* 1984, pp. liii and 216; *Vermeer and the Delft School*, 2001, pp. 142–4

In 1425, Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) made a painting of the Florentine Baptistery, which he displayed in situ so that passers-by could allow the painted and the real view to overlap each other in order to appreciate their precise correspondence. From this moment perspective demonstrations became part of the repertoire of European painting. There is a distinction, though perhaps only one of degree, between the often perfunctory perspective that sets the stage for all painting and that which sought to revive the wonder of Brunelleschi's experiment. It is in this latter endeavour that so many Netherlandish artists were engaged during the seventeenth century and for which they were also known in Britain, as demonstrated by the success of Hendrick Steenwyck II and Gerrit Houckgeest (c.1600–61) at the English court (see p. 16).

Perspectival paintings are in effect scientific demonstrations and their point is to excite wonder and insight at the same time – like a conjuring trick followed by an explanation. In the ideal they require the viewer to enter into the method, and it is therefore worth rehearsing the basic principles of single-viewpoint perspective as explained by Brunelleschi's friend Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72).¹ A perspective painting is like a window: the reality seen through a window and the painted surface describing that reality may be identical in their linear geometry, providing only that each is viewed, preferably through one eye, from exactly the same position. One way of ensuring that a painting may only be viewed from this correct position is to

place it within a peepshow or perspectival box, like the one of approximately the same date as the present work by Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627–78) in the National Gallery, London. The other advantage of the peepshow is that by submitting their eye to the hole the viewer loses all reference to the world outside the box. This means that comparisons of scale become impossible: the illusionary space becomes life size whatever the actual size of the surfaces upon which it is painted. There is no reason why an ordinarily framed and displayed painting cannot be viewed and appreciated in the same way. Illustrations of seventeenth-century picture collections show that paintings were brought down from the walls and studied with the closest possible scrutiny.

De Hooch's *Cardplayers* is clearly a painting that asks to be appreciated for its space-creating perspective. It employs a classic single vanishing-point whereby the three axes of the architecture lie either parallel to the picture plane (in the case of the verticals and horizontals) or precisely perpendicular to it (in the case of the orthogonal lines leading into depth). Early in the painting process, De Hooch drew a perspectival grid, which may be reconstructed (fig. 45) from parts visible to the naked eye (especially on the wall immediately to the right of the door) and parts picked up by infrared reflectography, which incidentally, also reveals a dog curled up behind the chair of the nearest figure.² He chose an ideal viewing distance of about 70 centimetres, just more than the width of the painting and less than its height. This close viewing point corresponds to that found in a number of interiors of



11 Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667) *The Cello Player*

c.1658
Oil on canvas, 63 x 48 cm
Signed on the sheet of music held by the woman: G. Metsu
RCIN 405534

Provenance: purchased by George IV from Sir Thomas Baring as part of a collection of 86 Dutch and Flemish paintings assembled by the vendor's father, Sir Francis Baring; the paintings were brought to Carlton House, London, on 6 May 1814

Literature: White 1982, no. 101; C. Lloyd in *Edinburgh–London 2004–5*, pp. 95–7; Waiboer 2012, no. A-68; A. Waiboer in *Rome 2012–13*, pp. 154–5, no. 25; White 2015, no. 101

This charming painting is an early masterpiece by Gabriel Metsu. Oddly enough, it was only after relocating to Amsterdam some time around 1655 that the Leiden-born artist began to work in the refined style of the so-called Leiden *fijnschilders* (see cat. nos 3–4). Metsu has devoted particular attention in this painting to capturing the woman's shimmering white satin skirt, the brushwork of which can be made out only on very close examination. For many viewers, it is this painterly tour de force that prompts the greatest admiration for Metsu's immense skill, although the subject itself is also very appealing. Love is undoubtedly the central theme of this work. The man, from whom the painting takes its traditional, most likely nineteenth-century title, tunes his cello as the woman descends the stairs holding a sheet of music, her eyes fixed on him. The little dog waits impatiently for its mistress, its front paws on the first step. Metsu seems to have added the third figure as a kind of commentary on the scene: rather than watching the intimate moment between the couple, he daydreams in one of the openings on the landing, his melancholy pose hinting that the woman might have rebuffed him earlier. We find similar figures elsewhere in Dutch paintings of the Golden Age, including one by Johannes Vermeer in Braunschweig (Brunswick), which must have been done at more or less the same time as the scene discussed here (fig. 55).¹ Vermeer's work shows a woman sitting in the foreground, where she is courted by a standing male figure. Another man sits at a table

in the rear corner, resting his chin on his arm. The daydreaming gentlemen in the background of Vermeer's and Metsu's paintings may be interpreted as *minne-janckers* (literally 'love wailers'), as rejected lovers were called in Dutch contemporary literature.²

Metsu painted several scenes in which music brings a couple together, including *A Woman Seated at a Table and a Man Tuning a Violin* (London, The National Gallery).³ He turned frequently to the work of Gerard ter Borch (cat. no. 1) when devising his compositions. The direction of the figures' gaze, for instance, generates a certain tension in the painting discussed here, just as it does in a work by Ter Borch of around 1658, in which a woman plays the lute while a man listens attentively (fig. 54). Metsu's *Cello Player* is undated, but an ambitious painting of roughly matching dimensions, now in New York and depicting a musical party, bears the date 1659 (fig. 53). The greater interaction between the figures in that painting – the man and woman performing the music are surrounded by numerous secondary details, a third man is now fully involved, while a servant looks on from a back room – suggests that the panel under discussion should be dated somewhat earlier, perhaps to around 1658.

Metsu sets the action in a wealthy bourgeois home, as witnessed not only by the fine clothes, but also by the expensive virginals. The lid of the instrument has been raised and the front cover lowered, showing that it is ready to be played. Unlike the virginals in other Golden Age paintings, the underside of the lid



19 Godfried Schalcken (1643–1706) *A Family Concert*

late 1660s
Signed lower left: G. Schalcken fecit
Oil on panel, 57.9 x 47.3 cm
RCIN 405337

Provenance: acquired by George IV in 1810; recorded in the Dining Room on the Ground Floor of Carlton House in 1819 and valued at 350 guineas

Literature: White 1982, no. 179; Beherman 1989, no. 163;
The Conversation Piece 2009, no. 6; *Jean de Jullienne* 2011, no. 21

Godfried Schalcken's first master was the painter and biographer Samuel van Hoogstraten, whose perspectival box has already been mentioned (p. 71). Hoogstraten's *Man at a Window* of 1653 (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum) demonstrates another type of illusionism, which concentrates on the easier task of depicting the flat surfaces of an ordinary interior. Illusions of this type may literally deceive the eye because there is so little difference between the real and the painted thing. This is the point of the story told in Pliny of the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius, when Zeuxis advances to inspect his rival's entry and, reaching out to pull aside the curtain that covers the painted surface, discovers that this too is painted.¹ Pliny's story is frequently recalled by the curtains that hang across the front surface of Northern European paintings, from Holbein's portrait of *Sir Henry Guildford* (1527; RCIN 400046) to Rembrandt's *Holy Family* (1646; Staatliche Museen, Kassel). More generally, artists of this tradition are fascinated by what might be called the 'zone of uncertainty' that occurs where the frame and the illusion meet. Rembrandt's portrait of Agatha Bas (fig. 64) with her thumb and fan apparently overlapping the frame and projecting into our world provides a good example of the game. The elaborate fictive stone windows through which so many genre scenes are viewed – see cat. nos 4, 10, 14, 22 – show how many variations there are on this theme.

The curtain in this painting belongs to this tradition. It is difficult now to read because this arched painting was re-framed (most recently in the nineteenth century) in a gilded frame,

leaving the two upper unpainted corners exposed. For this exhibition a frame has been created following original Dutch seventeenth-century models, covering these unpainted spandrels beneath its arched top. When our reading is thus unencumbered, we see a curtain rail running across the top in a position that seems to lie in front of the painted surface. The chandelier, which clearly lies within the space of the roof, hangs from the same rail. The curtain on both sides is clearly drawn forward into our space, as if it has been hooked on to the front of the frame. In this way the junction between the real and the painted world is subverted. The rest of the illusion takes its cue from this effect – creating a system whereby objects become more realised the nearer they lie to the front of the painted stage. This is partly a matter of lighting. There is a De Hooch-like view through into the garden to the right, but it is very dark and indistinct. Otherwise, the light comes in through a window or lamp immediately behind the curtain to the left, striking every foreground object and seeping through the fabric of the left-hand curtain. When it comes to the rest of the room this light seems to spend itself crossing empty space – not something that occurs in nature. This observation draws attention to the fact that it is more difficult to establish a correspondence between reality and a painted illusion in the matter of light intensity and distribution than it is in visual geometry. The eye cannot perceive absolute values of light; the illusion of light in a painting is achieved by contrasts and patterns of distribution. This said, it is clear that De Hooch and Vermeer observe the distribution of light in nature much

