Introduction and biography

Gerrit Dou, also known as Gerard Dou, was born on 7th April 1613 in Leiden, where he became enormously popular, particularly among the social elite, and lived for the whole of his life. Leiden, whose university was founded in 1575, was a large commercial centre which attracted intellectuals and painters (including Aertgen [1498–1568] and Lucas van Leyden [1494–1533]), engravers, and stained-glass window designers, among these Gerrit’s own father, Douwe Jansz, himself a glazier and engraver. Dou was originally employed at his father’s workshop but went on to train under Pieter Cowenhorn, a stained-glass painter, until, when still only fifteen years of age, he was apprenticed at Rembrandt’s workshop, where he remained for three years until his master moved to Amsterdam in 1631. Although in subject matter, composition and use of chiaroscuro [figs. 1 and 2], Dou’s early work reflects the influence of his first master, also evident is the influence of Jan Lievens, with whom Rembrandt associated. Gerrit Dou founded the Guild of St Luke (Fijnschilders) in his native city.

Dou’s early work reveals the influence of Rembrandt and Vermeer, particularly where themes and the treatment of light are concerned, and consists mainly of self-portraits, pictures of hermits and scenes of women playing musical instruments [fig. 3]. In time he developed the style which brought him fame and fortune and is characterised, as we shall see in more detail, by the exquisitely meticulous, illusionist and refined technique that evolved in the course of his lifetime. By twenty-eight he had won acclaim as a master and, thanks to his first patron Pieter Spiering (the son of François Spiering, a well-known Delft tapestry-maker who was also an ambassador and financial adviser to Queen Christina of Sweden), had members of the royal family among his patrons. Cosimo III de’ Medici of Florence also owned paintings by Dou, while on the occasion of his ascent to the throne, Charles II of England was presented with works by Dou by governments of states such as Holland. Johan de Bye became a patron of Dou’s at a later stage in his career. In this respect one story goes that Dou’s exquisite technique and delicate images caused such amazement that de Bye decided to exhibit the artist’s paintings in a room opposite Leiden Town Hall and charge admission to see them. As a letter written in 1780 by the Duke of Rutland’s agent proves, the prices of Dou’s paintings were so high that only members of the upper classes could afford them.

Dou, who had no children, died a wealthy man and was buried in Sint Pieterskerk on 9th February 1675.
Themes, style and technique

Dou’s achievements in enriching pictorial language and extending artistic themes not only made him an innovative artist but also won him a large number of followers and disciples, particularly important in this respect being Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635–81) and Gabriel Metsu (1629–67). Initially Dou had mainly painted pictures of hermits and elderly people consonant with the themes and compositional techniques used by Rembrandt and it was only when his master moved to Amsterdam and Jan Lievens to England that he received a number of commissions (possibly due to the absence of both) and began to develop a style of his own, adding innovations to his themes. His first paintings were oval portraits with neutral backgrounds and diffused light entering the picture from the left, and from the 1640s genre scenes—the subject most characteristic of his work. However, he was also interested in religious themes and self-portraits [figs. 4 and 5], finding in the latter a means to bear witness to his social status, as he was eager to demonstrate the artist’s role in society and stress his importance as a communicator of ideas.

Dou was one of the first artists in Holland to depict everyday activities, many involving women, and often presented them as examples of moderation, virtue and spirituality. Sutton said that Dou’s paintings were like metaphorical abstractions and were precisely what distinguished the artist from his contemporaries.3 Dou’s genre scenes implicitly allude to the pleasures of the senses and the ephemeral, reminding the spectator that life is merely transitory. Ronni Baer suggested that Dou’s personages invite the spectator to view the artistic phenomenon as a reflection of the transience of life. With meanings more complex than meets the eye, these paintings often include allusions to the brevity and transience of life and to contentment in old age. Moralistic intentions also underlie his pictures in the form of references to virtue.

In time Dou began to specialise in small formats, painting on board in preference to canvas. He brought a modern approach to conventional themes with his use of light and compositional techniques and in the process achieved the illusionism that is so characteristic of his work. His initial training with his family’s stained-glass business may have been instrumental in the development of this painstaking approach to his paintings. Furthermore, he sometimes used magnifying instruments to capture greater detail and often adjusted planes, while trompe l’oeil plays an essential role in his work [fig. 6]. Dou’s form of illusionism is closely related to his themes, as the two are complementary.

Portraits of members of the professional classes, such as astronomers and physicians, are also common in Dou’s work. He
depicted these as scientists, including books in the painting in allusion to their quest for knowledge. As an allusion to the theme of perseverance [figs. 7, 8 and 13], the figures in some of his paintings are shown working at night. His pictures of physicians portray all three types characteristic of the 17th century: the qualified doctor; the tooth-puller/surgeon; and the folk practitioner. However, unlike some of his contemporaries, such as Jan Steen, who made fun of them all, Dou always portrayed them as tastefully dressed and evoking wisdom. He thus made his themes more meaningful through references to vanitas and the eternal struggle between science and divine will.

Gerrit Dou also portrayed musicians as personifications of the pleasures, delights and sensuality of life. Another aspect in which he took great interest and that is evident in a number of his paintings was the paragone of the arts: a firm believer in the supremacy of painting, he demonstrated this view through his highly refined technique. As we have said, illusionism is strongly present in his oeuvre in the form of technical artifices which make figures and objects seem to project out of the pictorial plane via windows [figs. 3–6], and curtains that serve as frames to draw the spectator into the scene. At some point between 1645 and 1650 Dou began including windows and window ledges in his paintings as a form of barrier between figure and spectator. In this respect, The Stallholder [fig. 9] gave rise to what has since become known as Dou’s “window niche” paintings, which feature scenes from everyday life seen through arched windows [figs. 9 and 10]. These may also contain curtains drawn back to reveal an interior scene of domestic or everyday life [see figs. 3–5]. Dou began using this method very early in his career and it may be connected with the contemporary habit of placing curtains in front of paintings to protect them from dust and sunlight. One of Dou’s favourite themes in the 1650s was of cooks or other females performing household chores in kitchens amid pleasant surroundings exemplifying feminine virtue. In pictures of this kind Dou finally reduced the number of figures to one, usually female [figs. 11–15].

In due course Dou turned his attention to lighting and contrasts of light and shadow (having inherited this interest from his master) and their effects. At the beginning of his career he often used chiaroscuro in his paintings and in his late period introduced artificial light from lamps or candles to create a nocturnal environment, the effect of which was to infuse his images with a greater degree of mystery [figs. 12–14]. Furthermore, Dou’s use of artificial sources of light underscored his obvious artistic virtuosity. Candles and oil-lamps had already been used by Flemish artists as sources of light at the centre of compositions and in this respect Dou’s can be said to stand between Rembrandt, who was more concerned with light than with colour or form, and Gerard van
Honthorst, whose light sources (generally out of sight) were harder and colder [fig. 16] than Dou's, which were more evocative and romantic.

There was little change or development in Dou's style throughout the course of his career as a whole. From the start he used a variety of green, ochre, lilac and flesh tones in conjunction with an enveloping chiaroscuro, although as time passed he used these ever more freely. Characteristic of his work is a meticulous representation of materials with barely distinguished and ever freer brush strokes, the texture of his fabrics (as with his curtains, whether of silk or brocade) and attention to detail verging on perfectionism. Thanks to technical analysis his painstaking method of working is known to have depended little on preparatory drawings and much more on applying delicate brush strokes over and over again to the surface. The result is a collection of small works with exquisite surfaces and highly convincing, wonderfully rendered trompe l’oeil effects applied to very attractive themes, reflecting Dou's mastery as a painter and providing insight into his spiritual and inner self.

Dou's reputation and appraisal by the critics

As Wheelock⁶ pointed out, it is curious how tastes change in different periods and how an artist of Dou's calibre, so highly-praised in his day and the centuries immediately after, should slip into oblivion in the 19th century. Yet it was precisely his achievements, his exquisite technique and stylistic and thematic innovations which led him to be regarded by 19th-century critics as a cold, impersonal artist, and even as peculiar. In a treatise of 1675⁷ the historian Joachim von Sandrart (1606–88) told how he had visited the artist at his studio and went on to describe Dou as punctilious for protecting his palette, brushes and paints from dust and dirt by storing them in a chest. He added that Dou would sit in silence waiting for the dust to settle before opening the chest and taking out his utensils, safe in the knowledge that they were clean. In a catalogue raisonné on Dutch painters, John Smith also discussed Dou's meticulous method of working.⁸ Subsequent researchers continued in the same vein, with the result that in his biographical dictionary of Dutch artists of 1842, Johannes Immerzeel⁹ described Dou as a “rare genius” and “gifted”; Thoré¹⁰ described him as a master of small compositions, thus demoting him in category; and Wilhelm von Bode compared him unfavourably with Rembrandt. By this time Dou's reputation was that of an artist with talent, albeit shallow and incapable of capturing human depths. It was not until the 1990s that experts once again made a study of Dou. Jan A. Emmens¹¹ was among the first to stress the importance of his work and point out the philosophical concepts of Antiquity reflected in it. From then on
interest in his oeuvre revived. At a 1989 exhibition in Amsterdam, the art historian Peter Hecht wrote that Dou’s artifices, like his windows and niches or backgrounds draped with fabrics, were ways of creating transitions within the pictorial plane whose purpose was to draw the spectator into the work. He also pointed out the pleasure and delight inherent in admiring works of art of this kind. The year 2000 saw an exhibition jointly organised by the Dulwich Picture Gallery of London and the National Gallery of Washington, whose catalogue contained the most recent research into Dou’s work. Wheelock remarked on the irony of the fact that Dou had been an artist who had put his soul into his art and had inspired subsequent generations of artists, yet had finally been dismissed as insensitive or soulless. So it was that Dou once more became acknowledged as a master outstanding for his fastidious, refined technique, study of the effects of light and shade, meticulous research into composition and command of illusionism.

Notes

9 Johannes Immerzeel, De Levens En Werken Der Hollandsche En Vlaamsche Kunstschilders, 2 vols., Amsterdam, 1842.
10 Théophile E. J. Théré (William Bürger), Les Musées de la Hollande, Paris, 1858, p. 5.
13 See Ronni Baer 2000, op. cit.