



# 400th Anniversary of the birth of Gerrit Dou

“Wonderful, lively, strong [and] powerful”

Joachim von Sandrart<sup>1</sup>

Dolores Delgado

Anonymous

*Gerrit Dou*, 18th century. Print from Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville, *Abrégé de la vie des plus fameux peintres*, Paris, 1745

## 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<sup>2</sup> 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.



Fig. 1  
Rembrandt  
*An Old Woman Reading*, 1631  
Oil on panel. 60 x 48 cm  
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



Fig. 2  
Gerrit Dou  
*Old Woman Reading*, c. 1631–32  
Oil on panel. 71 x 55.5 cm  
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



Fig. 3  
Gerrit Dou  
*A Woman Playing a Clavichord*,  
c. 1665  
Oil on panel. 37.7 x 29.8 cm  
London, Trustees of the Dulwich  
Picture Gallery



Fig. 4  
Gerrit Dou  
*Self-portrait*, c. 1665  
Oil on panel. 59 x 43.5 cm  
Boston, private collection



Fig. 5  
Gerrit Dou  
*Self-portrait*, c. 1665  
Oil on panel. 48.9 x 39 cm  
New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913, 14.40.607



Fig. 6  
Gerrit Dou  
*Still Life with Book and Purse*,  
1647  
Oil on panel.  
22.9 x 17.8 cm  
Los Angeles, University  
of California, The Armand  
and Hammer Collection,  
Fisher Gallery

### 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.<sup>3</sup> 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<sup>4</sup> 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



Fig. 7.  
Gerrit Dou  
*The Doctor*, 1653  
Oil on panel.  
49.3 x 37 cm  
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches  
Museum, Gemäldegalerie



Fig. 8.  
Gerrit Dou  
*The Doctor*, c. 1660-65  
Oil on panel. 38 x 30 cm  
Copenhagen, Statens Museum  
for Kunst



Fig. 9  
Gerrit Dou  
*The Stallholder*, 1647  
Oil on panel.  
38.5 x 29 cm  
Paris, Musée du Louvre, 1215

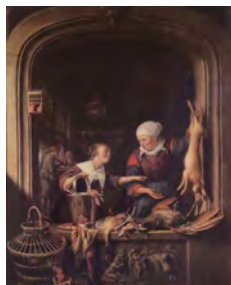


Fig. 10  
Gerrit Dou  
*A Poulterer's Shop*, c. 1670  
Oil on panel. 58 x 46 cm  
London, The National Gallery,  
NG825



Fig. 11  
Gerrit Dou  
*Old Woman with a Jug at  
a Window*, c. 1660-65  
Oil on panel.  
28.3 x 22.8 cm  
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches  
Museum, Gemäldegalerie



Fig. 12  
Gerrit Dou  
*The Dutch Housewife*, 1650  
Oil on panel.  
26.1 x 20.7 cm  
Paris, Musée du Louvre, 1218

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<sup>5</sup> can be said to stand between Rembrandt, who was more concerned with light than with colour or form, and Gerard van



Fig. 13  
Gerrit Dou  
*Astronomer by Candlelight*, c. 1665  
Oil on panel. 32 x 21.2 cm  
Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum



Fig. 14  
Gerrit Dou  
*Young Woman with a Lighted Candle at a Window*,  
c. 1658–65 Oil on panel.  
26.7 x 19.5 cm  
Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza  
132 (1930.21)

[\[+ info\]](#)



Fig. 15  
Gerrit Dou  
*Old Woman with a Candle*, 1661  
Oil on panel. 31 x 23 cm  
Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum

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 Wheelock<sup>6</sup> 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 1675<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> Subsequent researchers continued in the same vein, with the result that in his biographical dictionary of Dutch artists of 1842, Johannes Immerzeel<sup>9</sup> described Dou as a "rare genius" and "gifted"; Thoré<sup>10</sup> 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. Emmens<sup>11</sup> 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



Fig. 16  
Gerrit van Honthorst  
*The Procuress*, 1625  
Oil on canvas. 71 x 104 cm  
Utrecht, Centraal Museum

interest in his oeuvre revived. At a 1989 exhibition in Amsterdam, the art historian Peter Hecht<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> Wheelock<sup>14</sup> 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

- 1 Joachim von Sandrart, *Teutsche Academie der edlen Bau-, Bild-, und Mahlerey-Künste*, 4 vols. Munich, G. Hirth, 1925, p. 195.
- 2 Quoted in Willem Martin, *Het leven en de werken van Gerrit Dou*. Leiden, S. C. van Doesburgh, 1901, p. 157.
- 3 Peter C. Sutton, *Pieter de Hooch: Complete Edition*. Oxford, Phaidon, 1980, p. 49.
- 4 Ronni Baer, "The Life and Art of Gerrit Dou", in Ronni Baer (ed.), *Gerrit Dou 1613-1675*. [Exh. cat. Washington, National Gallery and London, Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2000; The Hague, Mauritshuis, 2001]. New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 36.
- 5 Justus Müller Hofstede: "Artificial Light in Honthorst and Trebruggen: Form and Iconography", in *Hendrick ter Brugghen und die Nachfolger Caravaggios in Holland: Beiträge eines Symposiums aus Anlass der Ausstellung "Holländische Malerei im neuen Licht, Hendrick ter Brugghen und seine Zeitgenossen" im Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum Braunschweig vom 23 bis 25. März 1987*. Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, 1988, pp. 18-26.
- 6 Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., "Dou's Reputation", in Ronni Baer 2000, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.
- 7 Joachim von Sandrart, *Teutsche Academie der edlen Bau-, Bild-, und Mahlerey-Künste*, 2 vols., Nuremberg, 1675-1679.
- 8 John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish, and French Painters*, 9 vols., London, Sands, 1829, vol. 1.
- 9 Johannes Immerzeel, *De Levens En Werken Der Hollandsche En Vlaamsche Kunstschilders*, 2 vols., Amsterdam, 1842.
- 10 Théophile E. J. Thoré (William Bürger), *Les Musées de la Holland*, Paris, 1858, p. 5.
- 11 Jan A. Emmens, "Natuur, Onderwijzing en Oefening. Bij een drieluik van Gerrit Dou", in Joshua Bruyn [et al.] (eds.), *Album Discipulorum F.G. van Gelder*, Utrecht, Haentjens, Dekker & Gumbert, 1963, pp. 125-36; and Jan A. Emmens, "A Seventeenth Century Theory of Art: Nature and Practice", in *Delta: A Review of Arts, Life and Thought in The Netherlands*, Amsterdam, Delta International Publication Foundation, 1969, pp. 30-40.
- 12 Peter Hecht (ed.), *De Hollandse Fijnschilders Van Gerard Dou tot Adriaen van der Werff*, [Exh. cat., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, 18 November, 1989-25 February, 1990], Maarssen, G. Schwartz/SDU, 1989.
- 13 See Ronni Baer 2000, *op. cit.*
- 14 Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., "Dou's Reputation", in Ronni Baer 2000, *op. cit.*, p. 14.