

Visual Arts



Gabriel Metsu,
Man Writing a Letter,
c. 1664-1666.
Oil on canvas, 52 x 40.5 cm.
National Gallery of Ireland,
Dublin.
Photo by Roy Hewson.

Gabriel Metsu Once More Famous than Vermeer

Nowadays, the name Gabriel Metsu (1629-1667) is not the first to be associated with the Golden Age of 'Dutch' painting, a period which more or less coincides with the seventeenth century. There was a time when things were different. In his day, Metsu was certainly one of the most valued painters and a trendsetter in Dutch cities. After his death his star rose even higher and during the eighteenth century Metsu's work was

considered to far outstrip - and as a result was much more expensive - than his contemporary Johannes Vermeer's. In those days one clearly wondered why one would buy a Vermeer if there was a Metsu available. Later on, appreciation for the old masters underwent drastic changes and for a long time Metsu faded into the background. The last time there was an exhibition dedicated to his work was back in 1966 in the city of his birth, Leiden. The last monograph on Metsu to be published was in 1974.

At the moment the artist is enjoying somewhat of a

Gabriel Metsu,
The Old Drinker,
c. 1663. Oil on canvas,
22 x 19.5 cm.
Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam.



comeback. In 2007 Adriaan Waiboer got his PhD from the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University with a substantial dissertation on Gabriel Metsu. As curator of North European Art at the National Gallery of Ireland, Waiboer put on an exhibition that included approximately forty works by Gabriel Metsu. Afterwards the exhibition travelled to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and from 17 April till 24 July 2011 it will be on show at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. Featuring some 35 paintings, this exhibition is the first monographic exhibition of Metsu's work ever

mounted in the United States.

Little is known of Gabriel Metsu's life. He was born in Leiden in 1629. His parents had arrived there separately as children, moving from the present border area between South West Flanders and Northern France. Gabriel's father was also a painter and a designer of tapestries but he died before Gabriel was born. Gabriel Metsu may well have inherited his talent from his father but learned the art of painting from others outside his immediate family circle. How this actually happened we do not know but one thing is

certain, the well known fine artist Gerard Dou from Leiden was influential in this respect, as was the work of the prominent genre painter, Gerard ter Borch, who worked in Deventer. It is possible that Metsu served a short period of apprenticeship in Utrecht.

In 1654 Metsu set himself up as a self-employed painter in Amsterdam. He specialised in genre scenes and paintings with a narrative, often moralist theme which people could emulate. These works probably allowed him to find a niche in the Amsterdam art market. He combined Dou's formal language with Ter Borch's subjects, as it were, but in this respect often chose more distinguished groups to portray than Ter Borch did. Metsu was a master at conveying light and shade as well as all sorts of different surfaces such as satin, linen, fur, pottery, glass and skin tones. Besides this, he succeeded wonderfully well in intimating the precision of Dou's fine artwork, despite the fact that his brushstrokes were much looser and his areas of colour almost abstract in their approach. It was as if Metsu managed to combine the best of all his contemporaries in his own work.

His contemporary, Johannes Vermeer, probably also knew Metsu personally. Because few of his surviving works were ever dated, it is difficult to determine who reacted to whom, but it seems certain that the two painters were inspired by each other. There is a great affinity between the two oeuvres, both thematically and in terms of technique. Anyone who sees Vermeer's and Metsu's works next to each other can understand more easily why art experts from the 1930s and 1940s mistook forgeries by the master forger Han van Meegeren for authentic work by Vermeer. To contemporary eyes these forgeries seem closer to Metsu's work than Vermeer's, but a few things illustrate how our perception of art changes with time and how we have been able to get a better understanding of the painting techniques of these old masters.

In 1658, Gabriel Metsu married Isabella de Wolff. Her mother, Maria de Grebber, came from Haarlem and was one of the rare woman painters to succeed in gaining renown in the male dominated seventeenth century. Isabella de Wolff has been identified as the model for a considerable number of Metsu's paintings,

but it is not implausible that she, just like her mother, was also an accomplished painter.

Lauran Toorians

Translated by Peter Flynn

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Gabriel Metsu has been published as a supplement to the exhibition and contains a wealth of illustrations. Edited by Adriaan E. Waiboer, the book also includes contributions by Bianca M. du Mortier, Pieter Roelofs and Marijn Schapelhouman (Yale University Press. ISBN 978 0300167245).