



CURATOR
Adriaan Waiboer

Double Dutch in Dublin

26



'Oh ... I thought they were by Vermeer!' This comment is frequently expressed by visitors to the National Gallery of Ireland upon seeing the wall text next to Gabriel Metsu's *Man Writing a Letter* and *Woman Reading a Letter*. Personally, I do not blame people for misidentifying the artist of these pendants, as they look more Vermeer-like than any other work by contemporary artists. In fact, I have sometimes wondered myself whether Metsu deliberately painted works that might be mistaken for Vermeer's.

The celebrated companion pieces have fascinated me ever since I started my Ph.D. dissertation on Metsu's work in 1999. Five years later, I was fortunate to take up a curatorial position at the museum that owns these works. Seeing them on a daily basis gave me ample opportunity to ponder what Metsu tried to achieve. It became clear to me that he combined several of what he considered to be signature elements of Vermeer's repertoire, including the division of the composition in geometrical shapes, the shallow interior, the checkered marble-tiled floor, and the natural daylight reflecting off a white plastered back wall. Metsu even painted some of Vermeer's typical *pointillés* on the lady's shoe in the foreground. Towards the end of the painting process, he made one change that encapsulates his strategy: he changed the colour of the lady's jacket from red (his favourite colour of such garments in the mid-1660s) to bright yellow. By doing so, Metsu replicated what he saw as a trademark of Vermeer's work.



Gabriel Metsu, *Man Writing a Letter*, c. 1664-1666, oil on panel, 52.5 x 40.2 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Sir Alfred and Lady Beit, 1987 (Beit Collection)



Gabriel Metsu, *Woman Reading a Letter*, c. 1664-1666, oil on panel, 52.5 x 40.2 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Sir Alfred and Lady Beit, 1987 (Beit Collection)

As I kept looking at the pendants, I realised however that Metsu did not copy or imitate, but merely approached Vermeer's style: his colouring is brighter, his natural light has fewer tonal values and his spatial relations are poorly defined; moreover, Metsu's superb brushwork aimed at carefully describing textures and surfaces bears little relationship to Vermeer's work. Furthermore, I should admit that after all these years I still cannot identify with certainty which of Vermeer's individual paintings served as direct sources of inspiration to Metsu. He certainly did not study Vermeer's *Astronomer*, now in the Louvre, in preparation of *Man Writing a Letter*, and *The Love Letter*, currently at the Rijksmuseum, to arrive at *Woman Reading a Letter*, as scholars have argued in the past. True, Metsu's and Vermeer's two pensive men seated at a carpeted table near a window and a globe look very much alike; and both other paintings depict ladies in fur-trimmed jackets, seated next to a sewing basket, having received letters from a maid standing in front of a marine painting. These similarities are hardly coincidental. Yet, Metsu completed the works two to four years before Vermeer finished his. It is far more likely that the Delft artist saw Metsu's pendants, which, although inspired by his own earlier works, provided him with ideas that he had not previously explored. Intriguing as this scenario may sound, I am afraid we are still a long time away from museum visitors in Paris and Amsterdam mistaking Vermeer's *Astronomer* and *Love-Letter* for works by Metsu...

