



**Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an
Artist's Atelier**

Gerrit Dou
(Leiden 1613 – 1675 Leiden)

1657

oil on panel

34 x 26.9 cm

signed and dated in brown paint along lower
edge: "GDou 1657"

GD-108

How To Cite

Dominique Surh, "Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an Artist's Atelier", (GD-108), in *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., Ed., New York, 2017

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Gerrit Dou, consummate master of artifice, was renowned for the illusionism of his niche pictures.^[1] As in this remarkable painting, Dou would place figural elements within the opening of a niche, a motif that served both as a framing device and an illusionistic construct. Dou not only situated these niches at the very front of the picture plane, but he also placed pictorial elements, like the tail of the cat in this picture, so that they extended into the viewer's realm. To reinforce the connection to the external world, Dou always placed his light source so that it appeared to illuminate the front of the niche, generally from the upper left. The niche motif, thus, allowed Dou to examine issues of reality and illusionism that were central to his artistic concerns, ones that he reinforced in the meticulous rendering of different materials and textures, ranging from hard stone to soft fur.

In this striking painting Dou portrayed a grey-and-white-striped cat crouching in profile on a stone niche opening into an artist's studio, a subject that is unique in the artist's oeuvre.^[2] The cat's individualized character and the specificity of the portrayal suggest that it was modeled after a particular animal.^[3] Using a brush consisting of only a few bristles, Dou applied countless minuscule strokes of multicolored paint to create the cat's plush fur (**fig 1**). With its tail that seems to twitch, alert eyes, and unmistakable curiosity animating its presence, the cat appears alive as it focuses its attention on something to the right of the picture plane.

Dou appears to have conceived this unusual painting with a quite different composition. X-radiographs have shown that Dou initially painted a young woman leaning forward toward the cat before painting the red curtain hanging from the niche [(**fig 2**) and (**fig 3**)].^[4] An infrared reflectogram reveals a small rectangular shape in the lower right corner of the windowsill that may have been a mousetrap [(**fig 4**) and (**fig 5**)].^[5] Technical



Fig 1. Detail of cat's head, *Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an Artist's Atelier*, GD-108

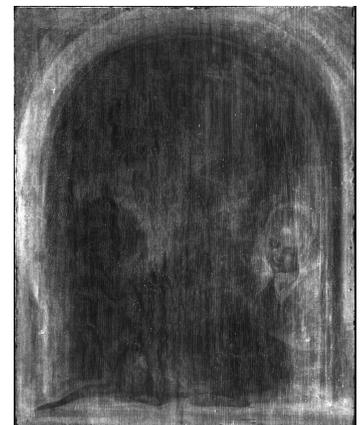


Fig 2. X-radiograph of *Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an Artist's Atelier*, GD-108



photographs also suggest that the niche once extended beyond the upper and right edges of the panel, suggesting that Dou initially began painting on a larger panel that he later reduced in format. This idea is reinforced by the fact that only a single bevel is found on the reverse of the panel, by which one can infer that the panel has been trimmed down on the other three sides.^[6]

Other composition changes may also have occurred. The X-radiograph and infrared photograph indicate that a curtain was initially gathered about two-thirds up the left side of the painting and that a circular object once existed in the center-left, perhaps a globe resting on a table (**fig 6**) and (**fig 7**)].^[7] Nevertheless, it is not certain whether or not these pictorial elements were part of a preliminary stage of the final composition or belonged to an earlier, altogether unrelated scene.^[8]

A painting focused on a cat is quite unusual in seventeenth-century painting.^[9] The most comparable image occurs not in a painting but in an engraving—Cornelis Visscher's (1629–58) *The Large Cat*, ca. 1657 (**fig 8**). Not only do the two works date from about the same year, they both portray a crouching feline in profile. Although Dou may have known of this print and it may have inspired his painting, a direct connection seems unlikely since the two works are quite different in character. The cat in Visscher's engraving is dozing and has not noticed a small mouse in behind it, whereas Dou's cat is alert and alive, intently gazing into the distance.^[10]

Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an Artist's Atelier relates to a very different iconographic tradition than that of Visscher's engraving, one that stems from the animal's reputation for extraordinary vision. This attribute was often exploited by late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century artists in their depictions of the Allegory of Sight (*Visus*).^[11] An engraving from 1595, *Sense of Sight* by Jan Saenredam (1565–1607) after a design by Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1617), shows a cat, possibly an exotic lynx, looking out at the viewer, while a woman wearing a plunging décolleté admires herself in the mirror as her suitor embraces her and gazes wantonly at her bosom (**fig 9**).^[12] This aspect of sight is further expressed by the poignant gaze of the feline crouching next to Adam and Eve in Hendrick Goltzius's *Fall of Man* in the National Gallery of Art, Washington (**fig 10**).^[13] Reinterpreted here with the familiarity and immediacy of daily life, Dou emphasizes the cat as the embodiment of sight by highlighting its intense gaze and alert demeanor.

Fig 3. X-radiograph of *Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an Artist's Atelier*, GD-108, with X-ray superimposed in registration with the visual image (composite: John Twilley)



Fig 4. Infrared reflectogram of *Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an Artist's Atelier*, GD-108



Fig 5. Detail of infrared reflectogram of *Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an Artist's Atelier*, GD-108, showing silhouette of what appears to be a mousetrap in the lower right corner



Fig 6. Infrared photograph of *Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an Artist's Atelier*, GD-108

As in many of his other niche scenes, Dou also includes a scene in the deep recesses of the background that enhances the painting's iconographic meaning. Here one sees an artist painting at his easel. Although Dou often included easels in the backgrounds of his paintings, nowhere else does he depict an artist actively engaged in painting.^[14] Near the artist is a violin resting on a table, a reference to the parallels that exist between a musician and a painter, both of whom use the imagination to create their works of art.^[15]

The prominent red curtain, beautifully depicted with subtle violet highlights shimmering in the cascading of light across the iridescent fabric, also relates to the painting's underlying concern for the interrelationship of illusion and reality. The depiction of such a dazzling curtain evokes the famous story from classical antiquity of Parrhasius, whose painting of a curtain was depicted in such a lifelike manner that it fooled his artistic rival, Zeuxis, who asked that it be pulled aside to reveal the supposedly-concealed painting beneath it. The story of artistic rivalry was retold by seventeenth-century art theorists such as Karel van Mander (1548–1606) in his *Schilder-Boeck* (1604) and by Phillips Angel (ca. 1618–62) in his *Praise of Painting* (1642).^[16] Dou explicitly referenced the anecdote in *Painter with a Pipe and Book* from ca. 1645 in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (**fig 11**).^[17] Dou was often praised for his convincing illusionism by contemporaries like the poet Dirck Traudenius, who referred to Dou in 1662 as the “Dutch Parrhasius.”^[18]

The question remains as to why Dou turned his iconographic focus from a figural group involving a cat, a mousetrap, and young woman to a simplified scene of a cat alone within an architectural niche. The iconography of the cat and mousetrap was relatively novel in genre painting in the 1650s, and with his initial layout of the composition, Dou may have intended to explore the symbolism of love's entrapment.^[19] The earlier compositional idea relates to paintings Dou made somewhat earlier in the 1650s, such as *Kitchen Scene* in Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, or *The Mousetrap* in Montpellier, Musée Fabre (**fig 12**).^[20] Dou's final image emphasizing the cat's sense of sight was an innovative way of reinterpreting this pictorial tradition to relate this theme to the status of the artist.

The present work is one of three known paintings by Dou featuring animals.^[21] King Augustus II acquired *Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an Artist's Atelier* in the early eighteenth century for the imperial house



Fig 7. Infrared photograph superimposed on X-radiograph with inverted density grayscale of *Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an Artist's Atelier*, GD-108 (composite: John Twilley)



Fig 8. Cornelis Visscher, *The Large Cat*, ca. 1657, engraving on laid paper, 22.1 x 31.5 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1995.72.1



Fig 9. Jan Saenredam, after Hendrick Goltzius, *Sight*, ca. 1595–96, engraving, 177 x 124 mm, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, RP-P-1884-A-7717

collections of the Royal Palace in Dresden, where it remained, with nineteen other autograph paintings by Dou, until the third decade of the twentieth century.^[22] In the 1920s the Gemäldegalerie in Dresden de-accessioned the painting, and handed the work over to the former Royal House of Wettin as part of a group of restituted artworks from the State of Saxony.^[23] It was subsequently acquired by a private collector in Germany. It remained in that collection until 2006, when it was acquired by the Leiden Collection.

-Dominique Surh



Fig 10. Hendrick Goltzius, *Fall of Man*, 1616, oil on canvas, 104.5 x 138.4 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., Patrons' Permanent Fund, 1996.34.1



Fig 11. Gerrit Dou, *Painter with Pipe and Book*, ca. 1645, oil on panel, 48 x 37 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-86



Fig 12. Gerrit Dou, *The Mousetrap*, ca. 1650, oil on panel, 47 x 36 cm, Musée Fabre, Montpellier, © Musée Fabre — Montpellier Agglomération / cliché F. Jaulmes

Endnotes



1. Dou painted these so-called “niche” pictures from the mid-1640s until the end of his career (see GD-103, GD-105, and GD-106). See Angela Ho, “Gerrit Dou’s Niche Pictures: Pictorial Repetition and Marketing Strategy,” *Athanas* 25 (2007): 59–67.
2. *Felis silvestris catus* descends from the wildcat. See Luke Hunter, *Carnivores of the World* (Princeton, 2011), 7, 16.
3. The portraitlike character of the cat was noted in 1859 in the given title, “Master Dou’s Housecat,” when it hung, beginning in 1817, in the northern gallery of the Royal Picture Gallery in Dresden. See W. Schäfer, *Die Königlische Gemälde-Gallerie zu Dresden zur Erleichterung eingehender Studien in der Geschichte der Malerei und deren Kunstkritik / Allen Jüngern und Freunden der Kunst nach der Ordnung der Räume beschreibend und erläuternd vorgeführt und mit einem resumirenden Verzeichnisse der Maler begleitet*, 2 vols. (Dresden, 1859), 2:672–73, no. 1077.
4. Ronni Baer has suggested that the young woman originally belonged to a separate composition and that when she was painted out, the cat and the curtain were painted in. Baer speculates that the young woman was intended as part of an independent kitchen scene and was shown leaning forward to pour from a jug. See Ronni Baer, “Of Cats and Dogs: Domestic Pets in Rembrandt and Dou,” in *Een Kroniek voor Jeroen Giltaij: Kroniek van het Rembrandthuis* (2012): 67–69. n. 19, fig. 4.
5. The object has a diagonal lever at the top and is strikingly similar to other mousetraps in paintings of the period, as seen, for example, in Domenicus van Tol’s *Boy with a Mousetrap by Candlelight*, from ca. 1664–65 (DT-100) or in Dou’s *Girl with a Cat and Mousetrap* (fig. 6). For a different interpretation of the changes visible in the X-radiograph, see Ronni Baer, “Of Cats and Dogs: Domestic Pets in Rembrandt and Dou,” in *Een Kroniek voor Jeroen Giltaij: Kroniek van het Rembrandthuis* (2012): 67–69.
6. On the beveling of the panel’s reverse on the left side, see Annette Rupprecht, “Gerrit Dou, *A Cat Crouching in a Ledge*, GD-108,” technical report dated March 2012, kept on file, The Leiden Collection, New York.
7. The infrared photograph was taken with a InGaAs camera with 1500–1680nm, bandpass filter (photograph: Shawn Digney-Peer). The globe appears not to have been painted but merely planned. See Dominique Surh, Ilona van Tuinen, and John Twilley, “Insights from Technical Analysis on a Group of Paintings by Gerrit Dou in the Leiden Collection,” *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 6, no. 1 (Winter, 2014).
8. For an argument that Dou incorporated the cat in the initial stage of the preparatory design because its silhouette was left in reserve and remained unchanged despite the other modifications to the composition, see Dominique Surh, Ilona van Tuinen, and John Twilley, “Insights from Technical Analysis on a Group of Paintings by Gerrit Dou in the Leiden Collection,” *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 6, no. 1 (Winter, 2014). Arthur Wheelock (verbal communication with Dominique Surh) has questioned this conclusion

since no evidence of a reserve is seen in the X-radiograph of the painting.

9. Cats were often included in painting as ancillary figures, with a wide array of associations and meanings. For a survey of the cat in Dutch seventeenth-century painting, see Susan Donahue Kuretsky, "Rembrandt's Cat," in *Aemulatio: Imitation, Emulation and Invention in Netherlandish Art from 1500 to 1800; Essays in Honor of Eric Jan Sluijter* (Zwolle, 2011), 263–76.
10. Susan Donahue Kuretsky, "Rembrandt's Cat," in *Aemulatio: Imitation, Emulation and Invention in Netherlandish Art from 1500 to 1800; Essays in Honor of Eric Jan Sluijter* (Zwolle, 2011), 263–76, fig. 4.
11. I would like to thank Eric Jan Sluijter for suggesting, back in 2008, that the present painting could be a reference to the Allegory of Sight. See Eric Jan Sluijter, "Venus, Visus, and Pictura," in *Seductress of Sight: Studies in Dutch Art of the Golden Age* (Zwolle, 2000) 87–159, esp. 90–91. On the wide range of meanings associated with the cat in the seventeenth century, see Susan Donahue Kuretsky, "Rembrandt's Cat," in *Aemulatio: Imitation, Emulation and Invention in Netherlandish Art from 1500 to 1800; Essays in Honor of Eric Jan Sluijter* (Zwolle, 2011), 263–76, esp. 266, n.7; for a discussion of the cat in the emblematic tradition, see Ronni Baer, "Of Cats and Dogs: Domestic Pets in Rembrandt and Dou," in *Een Kroniek voor Jeroen Giltaij: Kroniek van he Rembrandthuis* (2012): 67.
12. *The New Hollstein Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts 1450–1700: Hendrick Goltzius*, vol. 4, compiled by Harjolein Leesberg and edited by Huigen Leeflang (Ouderkerk aan den IJssel, 2012), 106–14, nos. 694–98. The inscription at the bottom of Saenredam's *Sense of Sight* reads: "Dum male lascivi nimium cohibentur ocelli / In vitium praeceps stulta ruit" (While wickedly wanton eyes are too confined / foolish youth falls headlong into vice [trans. David Ratzen]). The choice of a lynx in the Allegory of Sight is perhaps significant, since the word "lynx" comes from the Indo-European root of a word that means "light" or "brightness," in reference to the wildcat's reflective eyes. Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History* (8,28), regarded the vision of the lynx to be superior to all other animals, calling it "the most clear sighted of all quadrupeds." (8.28). See Elisabeth Piirainen, "Folk Narratives and Legends as sources of Widespread Idioms: Toward a Lexicon of Common Figurative Units," *Folklore* 48 (2011): 129.
13. A cat comingling with a monkey, referring to a sinful man who allows himself to be ruled by lust, appears in the central foreground of Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, *Fall of Man*, signed and dated 1592, oil on panel, 274 x 220 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. No. SK-A-129.
14. Other works by Dou with artists' easels in the background include his *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1635–40, Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museums, Cheltenham, England; *Painter with Pipe and Book*, 1645, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1645–48, Kremer Collection, Spain; *Self-Portrait*, 1647, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister Staatliche Kunstsammlungen,



Dresden; *Violin Player*, 1653, Princely Collections Vaduz Castle, Liechtenstein; *Self-Portrait*, 1658, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence; *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1665, Van Otterloo Collection, Boston; *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1665, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1665–67, Musée du Louvre, Paris. See Ronni Baer, *Gerrit Dou 1613–1675: Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; London, Dulwich Picture Gallery; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (Washington D.C., 2000), 70–71, nos. 7, 14, 16, 20, 29; Walter Liedtke, *Dutch Paintings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2 vols. (New Haven and London, 2007), 1, no. 37, 158–66; and Frederik J. Duparc, “Self-Portrait,” in *Golden Dutch and Flemish Masterworks from the Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo Collection* (exh. cat., Salem, MA, Peabody Essex Museum; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (New Haven and London), 134–35, no. 20. On the uniqueness of a scene of an artist actively painting, see Ronni Baer, “Of Cats and Dogs: Domestic Pets in Rembrandt and Dou,” in *Een Kroniek voor Jeroen Giltaij: Kroniek van he Rembrandthuis* (2012): 69, n. 22.

15. Peter Hecht, “Art Beats Nature, and Painting Does so Best of All: The Paragone Competition in Duquesnoy, Dou and Schalcken,” *Simiolus* 29 (2002): 184–201.
16. Eric Jan Sluijter, *Leidse Fijnschilders: Van Gerrit Dou tot Frans Mieris de Jonge 1640–1760* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 1988), 21, no. 9, 98–100; Ronni Baer, *The Paintings of Gerrit Dou (1613–1675)*, 3 vols. (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1990), no. 44; Eric Jan Sluijter, “In Praise of the Art of Painting: On Paintings by Gerrit Dou and a Treatise by Philips Angel of 1642,” in *Seductress of Sight: Studies in Dutch Art of the Golden Age* (Zwolle, 2000), 198–263, esp. 208–13; Ronni Baer, *Gerrit Dou 1613–1675: Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; London, Dulwich Picture Gallery; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (Washington D.C., 2000), 94–95, no. 16; and also Eric Jan Sluijter, “Didactic and Disguised Meanings? Several Seventeenth-Century Texts on Painting and the Iconological Approach to Northern Dutch Painting of this Period,” *Art in History, History in Art: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Culture*, ed. David Freedberg and Jan de Vries (Santa Monica, 1991) 175–201.
17. While Dou often included curtains as framing devices in his portraits of the early 1640s (see GD-116) the device takes on a heightened form of illusion as a trompe l’oeil element with the Rijksmuseum painting. Dou’s teacher, Rembrandt, similarly exploited the illusionistic effects of a fictitious curtain in his *Holy Family* of 1646, now in the Gemäldegalerie in Kassel, while Dou’s former pupil, Frans van Mieris (1635–81), paid tribute to the classical anecdote in his painting with Adriaen van der Spelt (1630–73), *A Trompe l’oeil with a Garland of Flowers and a Curtain*, dated 1658 and now in the Art Institute of Chicago. See Ben Broos, “A Trompe-l’Oeil with a Flower Piece and a Curtain,” in *Great Dutch Paintings from America* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; San Francisco, The Fine Arts Museums of San



Francisco) (Zwolle, 1990), 408–12; Eric Jan Sluijter, “In Praise of the Art of Painting: On Paintings by Gerrit Dou and a Treatise by Philips Angel of 1642,” in *Seductress of Sight: Studies in Dutch Art of the Golden Age* (Zwolle, 2000) 198–263, esp. 208–13. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., “Illusionism in Dutch and Flemish Art,” in *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l’Oeil Painting*, ed. Sybille Ebert-Schifferer (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Washington D.C., 1999), 77–87, and cat. no. 8, 126–27; Quentin Buvelot, “A Trompe l’Oeil with a Garland of Flowers and a Curtain,” in *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681*, ed. Quentin Buvelot (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (New Haven, 2005), 117–19, no. 16; Peter Hecht, “Art Beats Nature, and Painting Does so Best of All: The Paragone Competition in Duquesnoy, Dou and Schalcken,” *Simiolus* 29 (2002): 184–201, esp. 195–96; and Wayne E. Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting: Its Stylistic and Thematic Evolution* (New Haven and London, 2004), 122.

18. Cited in Eric Jan Sluijter, “In Praise of the Art of Painting: On Paintings by Gerrit Dou and a Treatise by Philips Angel of 1642,” in *Seductress of Sight: Studies in Dutch Art of the Golden Age* (Zwolle, 2000), 209, 332, n. 42.
19. The image of a cat watching a mousetrap was well-known in emblematic traditions. It first appeared in Daniel Heinsius’s popular book of love emblems from 1608, *Emblemata amatoria*, where it symbolized the ensnarement of love, with the weary, trapped mouse representing the lovestruck soul and the cat embodying the lust that ultimately consumes its prey. Heinsius’s twentieth emblem depicts a mouse inside a wooden trap, too frightened to come out for fear of the lurking cat who keeps watch beside it, while a mischievous Cupid with his bow and arrow iterates an underlying theme of love. The accompanying verse comments on the predicament of the mouse, “Il mal mi preme, et mi spaventa il peggio” (Evil pursues me and fear of worse haunts me), the first line of a love sonnet by Petrarch. Heinsius’s Dutch poem moralizes the emblem by drawing a parallel between the human entrapment of love and the ill-fated mouse, whose predicament leads to his demise.
20. Some examples of the subject include three paintings by Adriaen van der Werff (1659–1722): *Children with a Cat and Guinea Pig*, signed and dated 1681, oil on panel, 33.9 x 27.3 cm., London, Buckingham Palace; *Child with a Mouse and Mousetrap*, oil on panel, 19.2 x 13.3 cm., London, The National Gallery; and *Two Children Playing with a Cat and a Bird in its Jaws*, signed and dated 1678, oil on panel, 24.8 x 19 cm., Johnny van Haefthen, London. See also Eglon van der Neer (1634–1703), *Children with a Cat and Bird*, oil on panel, 21 x 17 cm., Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe; Willem van Mieris (1662–1747) and Pieter Cornelisz van Slingeland (1640–91), *Dead Mouse*, oil on panel, signed and dated 1693, 22.7 x 19.6 cm.
21. See the entry on GD-114.
22. I would like to thank Dr. Ute Neidhardt and her research intern Ulrike Müller for providing



copies of Steinhäuser's unpublished inventory of 1722. The inventory states that GD-108 was delivered by Raschke, who was Prime-Commissar to King Augustus II, and lists GD-108 as "Ein Cipper Katze" under number "587." This inventory number corresponds to the original number that appears at the lower right of the painting in tan-colored paint. See also Annegret Laabs, *The Leiden Fijnschilders from Dresden* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 2000).

23. See *Sächsisches Gesetzblatt. Gesetz über die Auseinandersetzung zwischen dem Freistaate Sachsen und dem vormaligen Königs-hause* (Dresden, 9 August 1924), no. 37.

Provenance

- Art market, Antwerp; [to Raschke, First Commissioner for King Augustus II].
- King Augustus II (1670–1733), Royal House Collections, Dresden, by 1722; Collection of the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden, by 1817; restituted to the House of Wettin, 1924; [P. Rusch, Dresden, 1927].
- Private Collection, Rheinland (sale, Lempertz, Cologne, 20 May 2006, no. 1040 [Johnny van Haeften, Ltd., London, 2006]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2006.

Exhibition History

- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, December 2009–January 2011 [lent by the present owner].
- Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, "Dutch Treat," 11 October 2011–6 January 2012 [lent by the present owner].
- Leiden, Museum de Lakenhal, "Gerrit Dou: The Leiden Collection from New York," 9 March–31 August 2014 [lent by the present owner].
- Ithaca, Cornell University, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, "An Eye For Detail: Dutch



Painting From The Leiden Collection,” September 2014–May 2015 [lent by the present owner].

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The support is a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular, slightly wedge-shaped Eastern Baltic oak derived from a tree felled after 1588.^[1] The unthinned and uncradled panel is bevelled along the thicker right side only, which could indicate the other three sides didn't require thinning to create a plank of uniform thickness or the plank may be a section cut from a larger bevelled board, such as a piece of room panelling.^[2]

Four overlapping circles with compass points at the centers have been inscribed along the lower quarter of the panel reverse are thought to be a form of workshop doodling.^[3] The panel has a paper label with a handwritten iron gall inscription dated 1841, which has been applied over and postdates the inscribed circles, a white chalk inscription, paper tape remnants along the outer edges, and machine tool marks, but there are no wax seals, import stamps, stencils or panel maker's marks.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied followed by paint built up in successive thin layers. The paint and ground extend over onto the thickness of portions of the upper panel edge, which indicates that if the panel was cut down, this occurred before the composition was executed. Drying cracks along the thickness of the niches's vertical walls, horizontal ledge, and table cloth and red drapery along the room interior suggest compositional changes which are confirmed by the X-radiograph and infrared images captured between 780–1700 nanometers. The changes revealed indicate the composition previously included a female figure and may have depicted a domestic scene.^[4]

Although it is not readily apparent which earlier compositional elements were present simultaneously, it is obvious that a change was made to the shape of the upper arch and the width of the niche's vertical walls, and that at least four elements present earlier are not present in the final composition. These include (1) a curved swag of curtain drawn back along the upper left quadrant which extended to the upper panel edge; (2) a spherical object, presumably a globe on a base located along the lower left quadrant; (3) a female figure standing facing the viewer gazing downwards along the lower right quadrant; and (4) an angular object along the right side of the ledge, perhaps a mouse trap which the cat previously focused on.^[5]

If we attempt to reverse engineer the painting's complex history, by adding one element at a time, a plausible sequence of the changes that occurred may be revealed. In the final composition we see a cat crouching on a ledge gazing right, looking toward nothing, an arched niche with corner spandrels, a red curtain drawn back along the right side of the niche, and a painter seated at an easel within the room.

Paint primarily spills over onto the thickness of the outer thirds of the upper panel edge.

This could support the theory that the triangular corner spandrels were added later and that the upper arch and ledge were originally wider and the vertical niche elements narrower similar to Dou's *Woman Peeling Carrots* from the Staatliches Museum Schwerin.



This wider niche would have allowed room for the curved drapery along the upper left quadrant and the mousetrap along the right side of the ledge. In the infrared image, the mousetrap overlaps the vertical walls of the niche of the final composition, which suggests the mousetrap was painted out at the time the niche was narrowed.

When we look at the female figure in the X-radiograph and infrared images, she too appears to overlap the vertical walls of the niche, which suggests she also predates the narrowing of the niche and the addition of the red curtain. Although no underdrawing is readily apparent in the infrared images, the images suggest the female figure's proper right upper arm may have extended out from her side bent at the elbow, perhaps pouring liquid from a pitcher, similar to the figure in the Musee de Louvre's *Woman Pouring Water into a Jar* from the 1640s.^[6] In the Louvre's painting, a young woman pours water from a jug into a shallow white bowl with a scalloped edge.

But how does the female figure relate to the cat on the ledge, and were the two ever part of the same composition? The cat appears larger in scale than the figure, when we compare their sizes to the figure and cat in Dou's *A Young Girl at a Window Ledge with a Cat and Mousetrap, Hung Duck and a Pewter Ewer Beside Her* and the figure and dog in *The Herring Seller* from 1675. In this light, it seems less plausible visually that the cat and female figure were contemporaneous.

Further investigation may provide more definitive answers regarding how the earlier compositional elements relate to the final composition of the cat on the ledge.

The painting is indistinctly signed and dated in dark paint along the center of the wall below the window ledge. An inventory number applied in light paint along the lower right corner corresponds with the inventory number for the Steinhäuser Collection inventory list dated 1722.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2006 and remains in a good state of preservation.

-Joanna Dunn