



Scholar in His Study

Godfrey Kneller
(Lübeck 1646 – 1723 London)

ca. 1668
oil on canvas
105 x 86 cm
GK-100



How to cite

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Sitting beside an open window with a warm light filling his darkened study, an elderly scholar wearing a dark blue velvet beret and an amber fur-trimmed *tabbaard*, the traditional dress of a scholar, quietly concentrates on sharpening his quill.^[1] His deep-set eyes are cast downward as his fingers nimbly guide the knife's blade across the tip of the pen. The open book lying before him suggests that that he will soon resume writing, possibly about worldly matters since a large terrestrial globe stands on the table to his left. Behind him, a thick brown curtain has been swept over the windowpane, its heavy folds rendered in broad, sweeping brushstrokes.

The pictorial character of *Scholar in His Study* reflects the influence of Ferdinand Bol (1616–80), with whom the German-born Godfrey Kneller apprenticed in Amsterdam in the mid-1660s.^[2] Bol represented a scholar in his study several times in the 1640s and 1650s, as in the Leiden Collection's *Man with a Book*, 1644 (FB-100), and *Old Man with a Globe*, ca. 1650, in the Hermitage (**fig 1**).^[3] Bol's intimate compositions, delicate rendering of the details of the scholars' dress and attributes, and his subtle use of chiaroscuro provided Kneller with a compositional and stylistic models. Kneller likewise took great care in rendering the various textures of fabric and the way that light falls over its surfaces, evident, for example, in the highlights that reveal the softness of the velvet beret. Kneller's tightly cropped composition and the frontal pose of the scholar contribute to the painting's immediacy, as does his assured, vibrant brushwork.

The theme of a scholar sharpening his quill was introduced to Dutch art in Leiden by Gerrit Dou (1613–75) in the late 1620s.^[4] Dou's pupil Frans van Mieris (1635–81) depicted the subject in the early 1650s (**fig 2**), a painting that Kneller may have known from his student years in Leiden.^[5] Much as with Kneller's scholar, Van Mieris's bearded, elderly scholar sharpens his quill with great concentration and patience. He is situated within a stone niche and is seated before a table with a large, open book and a globe. A curtain has been pulled aside to reveal the scene, evoking a sense of intimacy that Kneller has similarly conveyed. The theme of the quill cutter served as an emblem of diligent practice, forming, together with education and natural talent, the ideal components of a scholar's—or artist's—training.^[6] The diligence with which the scholar performs his task makes him a model of scholarly virtue.^[7]

Early in his career Kneller portrayed the theme of a scholar in his study on a number of occasions.^[8] In the Bader collection's *A Scholar in an Interior*, ca.

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Ferdinand Bol, *Old Man with a Globe*, ca. 1650, oil on canvas, 122 x 98 cm, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg



Fig 2. Frans van Mieris, *Old Man Sharpening His Pen*, ca. 1650–55, oil on panel, 34.5 x 24.5 cm, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden, inv. 1748



Fig 3. Godfrey Kneller, *Old Man*



1668, he similarly depicted the elderly scholar seated in the foreground of his image.^[9] Kneller also represented the scholar in his study in paintings in Lübeck and Paris (**fig 3**).^[10] In the Louvre painting the scholar looks thoughtfully into the distance, his gaze passing by a table filled with books, a globe, a musical instrument, armor, a skull and a candle. This work differs from *Scholar in His Study* in the complexity of its composition and in its *vanitas* connotations. The relative simplicity of the composition of the Leiden Collection painting suggests that this charmingly atmospheric work was among the first of Kneller's portrayals of scholars that he made in the late 1660s.

Meditating: Lesson in Vanity, ca. 1668, oil on canvas, 145 x 137 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. 1061, photo: Jean-Gilles Berizzi, © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

- Lara Yeager-Crasselt, 2017

Endnotes

1. For a discussion of the *tabbaard* in the scholarly tradition, see the essays for FB-100 and FB-107, as well as Marieke de Winkel, “‘Eene der deftigste dragten’: The Iconography of the *Tabbaard* and the Sense of Tradition in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Portraiture,” *Beeld en Zelfbeeld in de Nederlandse Kunst 1550–1750, Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 46 (1995): 146–66.
2. See the biography of Kneller in this catalogue. Albert Blankert has argued that Bol must have urged Kneller to paint images of a scholar in his study as part of his training. By the 1660s these images were old-fashioned, but they must have provided a suitable model for Kneller, who turned to the depiction of the scholar in his study on a number of occasions, as discussed below. Albert Blankert, *Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680): Rembrandt’s Pupil* (Doornspijk, 1982), 22.
3. See Albert Blankert, *Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680): Rembrandt’s Pupil* (Doornspijk, 1982), nos. 67, 69, and 70; and the essay for FB-100. For the Hermitage painting (*Old Man with a Globe*, ca. 1650, oil on canvas, 122 x 98 cm, The Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg), see the essay for FB-105, fig. 3. Whereas Bol emphasized the scholars’ intellectual contemplation, Kneller chose to portray the figure in an active pose in this work.
4. *Scholar Sharpening His Quill*, ca. 1628–30, oil on panel, 25.5 x 20.5 cm; see the entry for GD-104.
5. For Van Mieris’s work, see Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1: 39, 44, 122; 2: 8–9, no. 2; Sabine Schulze ed., *Leselust: Niederländische Malerei von Rembrandt vis Vermeer* (Exh. cat. Frankfurt, Schirn Kunsthalle) (Frankfurt, 1993), 246–48, no. 56; Quentin Buvelot, ed., *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), 72–75, nos. 1–2 (along with the drawing of the same subject). Other examples include Adriaen van Ostade, *Quill Cutter*, oil on panel, 33.2 x 26.7 cm, Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest; Adriaen van Ostade, *The Quill Cutter*, ca. 1645, oil on panel, 22.5 x 18.5 cm., Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe; Jan Lievens, *Quill Cutter*, ca. 1627, formerly Heinz Kisters Collection, Kreuzlingen; Salomon Koninck, *A Scholar Sharpening His Quill*, oil on canvas, 57.2 x 46 cm, Christie’s, Amsterdam, May 6, 2008. See, respectively, Sabine Schulze et al., *Leselust: Niederländische Malerei von Rembrandt vis Vermeer* (Exh. cat. Frankfurt, Schirn Kunsthalle) (Frankfurt, 1993), 248, fig. 56.2; and Werner Sumowksi, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 3: 1794, no. 1235.

For the theme of the scholar in his study, see Volker Manuth, *Wisdom, Knowledge, and Magic: The Image of the Scholar in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Exh. cat. Kingston, Canada, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen’s University) (Kingston, 1997), particularly

nos. 16 and 17.

6. See Jan Emmens, "Natuur, onderwijzing en oeffening bij een drieluik van Gerrit Dou," in *Album Discipulorum aangeboden aan Prof. de Gelder ter gelegenheid van zijn zestigste verjaardag 27 februari 1963* (Utrecht, 1963), 125–36. Emmens based his ideas on Aristotle's writings about education. Also see Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1:122.
7. An alternative view, which suggests that the physical activity of sharpening the pen distracts the scholar from his intellectual pursuits, does not resonate with this work. For this interpretation, see Bettina Werche in Sabine Schulze, ed. *Leselust: Niederländische Malerei von Rembrandt bis Vermeer* (Exh. cat. Frankfurt, Schirn Kunsthalle) (Frankfurt, 1993), 246–48.
8. In addition to the examples discussed in this essay, there are a number of other paintings of scholars attributed to Kneller: *A Scholar, Seated Three-Quarter Length at a Desk*, late 1660s, oil on canvas, 106 x 89 cm, Christie's, Amsterdam, 6 May 1998, no. 135; *A Scholar in His Study with Books and a Globe*, oil on canvas, 124 x 98 cm, Sotheby's, London, 8 July 1999, no. 165; *Mathematician or Astronomer Studying*, oil on canvas, 110.5 x 122.5 cm, Dorotheum, Vienna, 24 March 1999, no. 220; *Portrait of a Scholar*, oil on canvas, 101 x 90.2 cm, Sotheby's, New York, 25 May 2000, no. 207. See Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 3: nos. 972, 2333a, and 974.
9. *A Scholar in an Interior*, ca. 1668, oil on canvas, 100.3 x 93.3 cm, Collection of Drs. Alfred and Isabel Bader, Milwaukee. The scarf draped around the figure's neck resembles a general type of Jewish prayer shawl. Although not exactly identifiable, it has been suggested that the figure is a Jewish scholar. See Volker Manuth et al., *Wisdom, Knowledge, and Magic: The Image of the Scholar in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Exh. cat. Kingston, Canada, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University) (Kingston, 1997), no. 9; David de Witt, *The Bader Collection: Dutch and Flemish Paintings* (Kingston, 2008), no. 99. The unusual frontal pose and tightly organized composition of Kneller's work are also evident in Paulus de Lesire's *The Quill Cutter* (ca. 1628–29, oil on panel, 78.8 x 60 cm, Collection of Drs. Alfred and Isabel Bader, Milwaukee). Lesire's figure is characterized by a sense of disorder, and other than a messy pile of books and papers on the table the scene is devoid of scholarly attributes. See Bettina Werche in Sabine Schulze ed., *Leselust: Niederländische Malerei von Rembrandt bis Vermeer* (Exh. cat. Frankfurt, Schirn Kunsthalle) (Frankfurt, 1993), 248 n. 10; Manuth et al., *Wisdom, Knowledge, and Magic*, no. 17; and De Witt, *The Bader Collection*, no. 107.
10. *Scholar in His Study*, 1668, oil on canvas, 133 x 173 cm, St. Annen Museum, Lübeck; *Scholar in His Study*, 1668, oil on canvas, 132 x 174 cm, St. Annen Museum, Lübeck. Kneller's *Old Man Meditating* in the Louvre was attributed to Ferdinand Bol until Blankert identified it as being by Kneller in 1982. See Albert Blankert, *Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680)*:

Rembrandt's Pupil (Doornspijk, 1982), 22.

Provenance

- (Sale, Sotheby's, London, 3 July 1985, no. 64, as by Salomon Koninck).
- [Noortman Master Paintings, Maastricht, 1991].
- Anonymous private foundation.
- [Jack Kilgore & Co., Inc., New York, 2007].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2007.

Exhibition History

- Gouda, Stedelijke Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, 1999–2005 [lent by an anonymous private foundation].

References

- Sumowski, Werner. *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*. 6 vols. Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94, 3: 1487, no. 974a, 1497.

Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of fine, plain-weave fabric with tacking margins removed, has been lined. The upper edge has a sloped cut, and cusping is visible along the upper and lower edges. Various paper labels have been adhered to the stretcher, but no wax collection seals, stencils or import stamps are located along the lining or stretcher reverse.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied. The paint has been smoothly and opaquely applied with no use of impasto but with visible brushwork through the figure's fingers and face and with glazes of brown paint to create the fur trim. Short beard hairs along the figure's chin have been scratched into the wet paint with the pointed end of a brush.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images. The images reveal minor compositional



changes to the edge of the rolled paper beneath the bookstand, along the upper edge of the globe and its vertical spine, and a change in shape to the lower left side of the figure's cap.

The painting is unsigned and undated but has two words inscribed in block letters in light and dark paint along the globe.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2008 and remains in a good state of preservation.^[1]

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. Entry based in part on a 2013 examination report by Simon Howell and Rachel Casey-Thomas of R. M. S. Shephard Associates, Wimbledon, UK.