



Gerrit Dou  
Dutch, 1613 - 1675

## *The Hermit*

1670

oil on oak panel

overall: 46 x 34.5 cm (18 1/8 x 13 9/16 in.)

framed: 60.3 x 50.1 cm (23 3/4 x 19 3/4 in.)

Inscription: lower center on book strap, GD in ligature: GDou 1670; on right page of book, GD in ligature: GDou

Timken Collection 1960.6.8

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### ENTRY

An old hermit dressed in a Franciscan habit kneels before a crucifix, his clasped hands resting on a well-thumbed page of the open Bible. He is situated in an outdoor setting before a grottolike edifice consisting of large brick arches. The book and crucifix lie on a large rock that is covered by a frayed cloth woven from brightly colored threads. At the base of the crucifix is a human skull and beside it an hourglass. The crucifix itself leans against a large wicker basket, which in turn rests against an old moss-covered tree stump that arches over the scene. The stump appears dead, although sprigs with green leaves emerge from its withered form. Hanging from the stump, above the crucifix, is a lantern, its door opened and the candle within extinguished. In the foreground right a large thistle grows from the marshy soil. Lying on the ground is a water pouch, an overturned earthenware jug, and the remains of a horse's skull.

The intensely spiritual gaze on the hermit's face and the fervor with which he clasps his hands as he stares toward the crucifix indicate that he is contemplating the mysteries of Christ's death and resurrection. Dou has reinforced his message with reminders of the brevity of human life: the skull, hourglass, and extinguished light of the lantern. He has alluded to the hermit's constancy in his devotions with the thistle, a common symbol in Dutch painting for this virtue. [1]

The tree has complex symbolic associations. As Susan Kuretsky has argued, the dead tree in conjunction with the Crucifixion implies life through death. [2] Traditionally the cross was believed to have been constructed of wood from either the Tree of Knowledge or the tree that grew from the seeds of the forbidden apple

that sprouted from the skull of Adam. Only through Christ's sacrifice on the cross was it possible for man, through death, to gain everlasting life. The symbolism of life through death is reinforced by the living branches that sprout from the dead tree stump.

The basket against which the crucifix leans contains references to the life of Christ that can be understood through its appearance in another painting from Dou's workshop. In *An Artist in His Studio*, formerly attributed to Dou and dated 1635, the same basket, with its lid askew, appears in a scene of the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* that is shown on the aged artist's easel [fig. 1]. Although the basket undoubtedly served as the baby's bed in this scene, it has been argued that, placed as it is in front of a low archway before a dark recess, the empty basket also prefigured Christ's empty tomb. [3] Such religious symbolism for the basket is also appropriate in this painting, for it reinforces the central theme: the hermit's contemplation of the death and resurrection of Christ.

Dou painted this scene near the end of his life, but the subject had occupied him throughout most of his career. Indeed, Martin lists eleven hermit scenes that Dou painted between 1635 and 1670. [4] Examination using Dendrochronology has revealed that Dou used a panel from a tree that had been felled in the early 1630s, a fact that may suggest he kept a supply of panels in his workshop. [5] Since *The Hermit* contains various *Pentimenti*, it is also possible that Dou began this painting in the 1630s and reworked it in 1670. Too little information, however, is available about his working methods to be certain about the reason for the chronological gap between the felling date and the final year of the painting's execution. Many of the objects found in this painting appear in different combinations in other works, indicating that Dou must have owned them and painted them from life. The horse's skull, for example, also appears in *An Artist in His Studio*. The skull, as well as the water pouch and overturned jug, presumably had specific allegorical meanings in his hermit scenes beyond their obvious generic ones, but they are presently unknown.

Dou's inspiration for his hermit scenes was probably a painting by Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606 - 1669) of *St. Jerome in Prayer* that is known today only through an etching from 1631 by Johannes van Vliet (Dutch, born c. 1610). [6] Although Dou's hermit scenes contain many of the same objects found in this etching, he rarely painted attributes that could identify the figure as a specific saint. His intent was not to represent an actual moment from church history, but to suggest the virtue of the *vita contemplativa*, the contemplative life. This subject is frequently

alluded to in Dutch seventeenth-century portraits, still lifes, and genre scenes. In numerous paintings Dutch artists called the viewer's attention to the brevity of life and the importance of preparing oneself for the eventual Last Judgment. Although Dou's focus on the spiritual bond between a Franciscan hermit and the crucified Christ would seem to have Catholic overtones, he emphasized the importance of the written word in his scene, a significant component of Protestant belief, and it is unlikely the subject was viewed in specific denominational terms. That the Bible was of considerable importance to him is evident from the x-radiographs [see X-radiography]. Originally the book was turned in a different position, as though supported in the hermit's arms. The initial shape of the Bible is vaguely visible under his arm and can be further distinguished by a change in the Craquelure pattern on the present Bible.

The moralizing function of such a painting in Dutch society can be deduced from a work traditionally attributed to Dou in the Brooklyn Museum, *Burgomaster Hasselaar and His Wife* [fig. 2]. [7] On the back wall of their home hangs a painting of a hermit that is similar in conception to *The Hermit*. The burgomaster, quill in hand, is seated before a table on which lie an open book and a globe. The woman rests her hand on an overturned lute. The objects on the table refer to the arts and letters, humanistic endeavors. The suspended glass sphere was metaphorically meant to represent heaven. [8] The Brooklyn painting, therefore, can be interpreted to mean that humility and prayer, exemplified by the hermit, combined with intellectual endeavor are the means to transcend mortality. Only by balancing humanism with piety can one lead a full and truly virtuous Christian life. [9]

Much of Dou's fame as an artist derives from the exquisite refinement of his painting technique. This work is no exception. The care with which he has painted the hermit's features, hair, and beard as well as the various colored threads of the woven cloth covering the rock is remarkable. Dou's delicate yet spirited touch lends great visual interest to this scene of intense spiritual contemplation.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Leiden school, *An Artist in His Studio*, 1635, oil on panel, Milwaukee Art Museum. Photo: John R. Glembin



**fig. 2** Circle of Gerrit Dou, *Burgomaster Hasselaar and His Wife*, c. 1635, oil on panel, Brooklyn Museum

## NOTES

- [1] For a discussion of the symbolism of the thistle, see Eddy de Jongh and P. J. Vinken, "Frans Hals als voortzetter van een emblematische traditie. Bij het Huwelijksportret van Isaac Massa en Beatrix van der Laen," in *Oud-Holland* 76 (1961): 117–152; also Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, ed., *Wadsworth Atheneum Paintings: The Netherlands and the German-Speaking Countries, Fifteenth–Nineteenth Centuries* (Hartford, 1978), 1:157, no. 83. The thistle can also relate to the crown of thorns.
- [2] Susan Donahue Kuretsky, "Rembrandt's Tree Stump: An Iconic Attribute of St. Jerome," *Art Bulletin* 56 (December 1974): 571–580.
- [3] Artemis Group, *Ten Paintings by Gerard Dou, 1613–1675* (London, 1980), 15–17. Dou used the basket motif in a complex vanitas painting where it had a comparable meaning: *A Vanitas Still Life with a Boy-Angel Blowing*

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*Bubbles*, c. 1635–1636 (National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo; inv. no. P1981–1). See Artemis Group, *Ten Paintings by Gerard Dou, 1613–1675* (London, 1980), no. 3.

- [4] Wilhelm Martin, *Gerard Dou: Des meisters Gemälde in 274 Abbildungen*, *Klassiker der Kunst in Gesamtausgaben*, vol. 24 (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1913), 5–11, repro.
- [5] Letter from Peter Klein of the Ordinariat für Holzbiologie, Universität Hamburg, January 28, 1987, in NGA curatorial files. Klein has determined a felling date of 1633.
- [6] See Susan Donahue Kuretsky, “Rembrandt’s Tree Stump: An Iconic Attribute of St. Jerome,” *Art Bulletin* 56 (December 1974): 578.
- [7] While universally accepted as by Dou since first published by John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters*, 9 vols. (London, 1829–1842), 9:23, no. 76, the attribution of this picture has been rejected by Ronni Baer, who has kindly provided me with a draft of her entry on the painting, which is in the Brooklyn Museum.
- [8] Eddy de Jongh, “Pearls of Virtue and Pearls of Vice,” *Simiolus* 8, no. 2 (1975–1976): 74.
- [9] I would like to credit Ronni Baer for this interpretation of the meaning of this theme for Dutch society. She worked on the painting as a research project when she was an intern at the National Gallery of Art. For her further thoughts on Dou, see Ronni Baer, “The Paintings of Gerrit Dou (1613–1675)” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1990), as well as Ronni Baer, *Gerrit Dou, 1613–1675: Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Washington, D.C., 2000).

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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The original support is a vertically grained oak<sup>[1]</sup> panel with an arched top. At a later date it was squared off with a horizontally grained oak board attached with a half-lap join that overlaps the arched area on the back of the original panel. Both the original and extension panel are attached to a cradle. Dendrochronological examination has revealed that the original panel came from a tree that had been felled in the early 1630s.<sup>[2]</sup>

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## PROVENANCE

*The Hermit*

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Probably Kurfürst Karl Albrecht [1697-1745], Munich, by 1742.[1] (Kurfürstliche Galerie, Munich);[2] Alte Pinakothek, Munich, by the mid-eighteenth century; deaccessioned in 1927;[3] sold to (Galerie van Diemen, New York and Berlin);[4] William R. Timken [1866-1949], New York; by inheritance to his wife, Lillian S. Guyer Timken [1881-1959], New York; bequest 1960 to NGA.

[1] On the back of the painting are two wax seals that were detached from the original panel when it was cradled and then reapplied. According to Dr. Susan Neuburger (letter, 6 November 1981, in NGA curatorial files), one of these seals is that of Kurfürst Karl Albrecht, and this seal was used until 1742. The other seal may also be that of Karl Albrecht, or alternatively of Kurfürst Maximilian II Emmanuel (1662–1726).

[2] Franz von Reber, *Katalog der Gemälde-sammlung der kgl. Älteren Pinakothek in München*, Munich, 1884: 86, no. 399 (also reprint, 1904: 93, no. 399).

[3] Dr. Susan Neuburger (letter, 6 November 1981, in NGA curatorial files) wrote that a painting by Dou that appeared in an auction in Amsterdam in 1779 (May 19, no. 49; a sale by Van der Schley, De Winter, Hosteyn, and Yver for a “Mr. V...”), traditionally thought to be *The Hermit*, was another work, as the NGA painting must have already been owned by the Alte Pinakothek. She also provided the information about the deaccession and sale of the painting.

[4] In 1935 the Berlin branches of van Diemen and its affiliated galleries were liquidated by order of the Nazis, with sales organized by Graupe on January 25 and April 26. This painting was not in either of those sales, and thus had been sold from the Berlin branch or sent to the New York branch before 1935.

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## EXHIBITION HISTORY

1997 *Rembrandt and the Golden Age: Dutch Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*, The Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, 1997, unnumbered brochure, repro.

1998 *A Collector's Cabinet*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1998, no. 16.

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1999 *A Moral Compass: Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Painting in the Netherlands*, Grand Rapids Art Museum, 1999, no. 5, repro.

2000 *Gerrit Dou (1613-1675): Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Dulwich Picture Gallery, London; Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague, 2000-2001, no. 34, repro.

2003 *Rembrandt and the Rembrandt School: The Bible, Mythology and Ancient History*, The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, 2003, no. 57, repro.

2005 *Time and Transformation in Dutch Seventeenth Century Art*, The Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie; The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota; The Speed Art Museum, Louisville, 2005-2006, no. 74, repro.

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- 1984 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Rev. ed. New York, 1984: 291, no. 381, color repro.
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