

**IN THE FOREGROUND:
OBJECT STUDIES**

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

**“AN ALLEGORY OF REPRESENTATION”:
BYRON OTIS ON
GABRIEL METSU’S *VIEW INTO A HALL WITH A JESTER,
A BOY, AND HIS DOG***



Gabriel Metsu, *View into a Hall with a Jester, a Boy, and his Dog*, c. 1667. Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada, Given in memory of Mrs. W. Redelmeier, by her family, 1968.

Season 2, Episode 2
Recording date: August 18, 2021
Release date: January 25, 2022

Transcript

Caitlin Woolsey (host)

Join us for an immersive personal encounter with a single work of art as seen through the eyes of an art historian. You're listening to *In the Foreground: Object Studies*, a podcast series from the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute.

In this episode we hear from Byron Otis, a student in the Williams Graduate Program in the History of Art, and a curatorial intern at the Clark Art Institute. Byron walks us into a painting by Gabriel Metsu from around 1667, called *View into a Hall with a Jester, a Boy, and His Dog*, which subtly upends expectations of Dutch genre painting from this period by reflexively calling attention to the constructed nature of the scene and implicating the viewer within it.

Byron Otis

My name is Byron Otis, and today I'll be talking about a Dutch painting from around 1667 attributed to Gabriel Metsu, titled *View into a Hall with a Jester, a Boy, and His Dog*. When I first saw this painting in 2019, I was immediately struck by how unusual the situation we're being shown here is. The picture places us in front of an open door. Inside is a young boy pointing to a dog that's standing on its hind legs for him. And along the left-hand edge of the picture, a jester pokes his head out from behind a doorframe, peering out at us. Further into the home, a woman walks from the hallway into another room, and even further, we can see a door at the other end of the house, at which a man stands with a horse, talking to someone. Through the doorway we can see the arch of a courtyard, beyond which is a long, straight, tree-lined road that extends as far as we can see.

Dutch painting of this era is generally remembered for evoking the quotidian atmosphere of the everyday lives of Dutch townspeople. This type of painting is perhaps most recognizable in the work of Vermeer, which might typically show a woman in a quiet domestic environment, engaging in daily tasks like waist work or reading male. What we're showing in *View into a Hall*, though, doesn't seem

to have the depiction of a placid everyday domestic life as its aim. The picture appears too knowingly or self-consciously constructed for that. There are many interesting things happening in the painting, but the way it's arranged is particularly notable. A lot of Dutch genre paintings from this period made use of complex perspective programs. But it's rare to see an image arranged so fundamentally around perspective. In *View into a Hall*, we're given a starkly clear line of sight all the way through the house to the vanishing point in the far distance, in the upper center of the painting: the point at which the two lines of trees on either side of the road in the distance meet. This single point perspective is the simplest kind, what you would see if you were to look down along straight sidewalk. It's also the kind that makes its artifice most known to the viewer. We can clearly see how the artist put the image together the level of intentionality and its perspective program. If it were more complicated, we might forget that the perspective of arranged for us has been put together by an artist, that it isn't just a pure depiction of the world.

Looking at *View into a Hall*, we can almost imagine a perspective drawing undergirding it with lines extending from the vanishing point, arranging the checkerboard tiles on the hallway floor. We're aware of the artists intention in crafting the image. And many Dutch artists in this period were making paintings that betray a kind of reflexive self-awareness. Around the time that this painting was produced the painter and art theorist Samuel van Hoogstraten produced his major work called *Introduction to the Academy of Painting, or the Visible World*. Hoogstraten was preoccupied by the illusionistic quality of painting, the fact that a picture can perfectly represent something, while always being short of what it represents. His treatise, which is one of the only sources we have to illuminate the mindset of Dutch artists in the late 17th century, outlines his belief not only in the importance of paintings illusionistic quality, but also of illusionism as a central feature of vision itself. The way he illustrates this is by describing one-point perspective, how something like a line of trees extending infinitely, would appear to the human eye to converge at a certain point. This is an illusion. Just as the depiction of physical surfaces with paint is an illusion. This doubt in the truth of our visual experiences is at the core of *View into a Hall*.

In the foreground of the image, a strange set of relationships is established between the three central figures: the boy, the dog, and the Jester. Which, juxtaposed against the noticeable prospective program behind them, suggests an allegory on the limitations of images and the ability of our site to be tricked. While artists of this period often embedded messages within their paintings, a veneer of plausibility would cover the coated meetings, so that the image could function both as a skillful representation of the everyday and also offer more complex meetings to those who could discern the underlying messages.

In *View into a Hall*, this veneer of merely showing everyday life is disrupted by the somewhat surreal intrusion of the jester. To understand the role of the jester, though, we have to look a bit closer at the central activity of the picture: the young boy pointing at his dog. Like the jester, this young boy is turning to look at us. He's brightly lit against the rich brown of the door, wearing a glimmering dress of light blue silk and a fashionably tilted cap. At this time, all young children wore dresses, but this boy makes his masculinity evident in his posture. With his back sharply erect, he places the back of his wrist against his hip. This distinctive gesture can be seen replicated in many Dutch representations of elegant wealthy men. The era's guidebooks for mannered behavior even included this gesture in their lexicon as a signifier for class and power, specifically masculine power. So with one hand on his hip, the boy uses his other hand to point commandingly down to the little dog in front of him who obediently sits with his two front paws in the air, looking up at its owner.

The boy's gaze is directed at us over his shoulder, confident and self-assured, with a little smile playing at the corner of his mouth. It almost seems as though the child is communicating to us saying, "look at how well-trained my dog is, how much power I have over him." The jester's gaze has a very different quality to it. He looks amused, his eyes are narrowed, his eyebrows raised, and his cheeks shine against his ruddy skin. His presence informs us of the way in which we should read the encounter that he seems to comment on the little display of

power between the boy and the dog. This childish display of masculinity is comedic.

The comedy of children's arrogance is not the central point of this image, though—I believe it's a means to a larger end. The framing of the image within an open doorway, the two most important figures of the painting staring at us, and the image's distinct spatial arrangement—its central one-point perspective—highlight the viewer's presence within the image. In this painting we are not a ghostly, voyeuristic nonentity, like in so many of Vermeer's intimate genre paintings—we are a distinct presence, perhaps even an interrupting one. There is a direct relationship between the viewer's eye and the depicted vanishing point, a point that is distinct to every viewing entity. Just as the whole world streams out to us from this vanishing point in *View into a Hall*, the gazes of the two main figures extend to us, trapping us, making us aware of our relationship to the world depicted in the painting. Our own forced self-awareness in looking at this painting prevents us from getting lost in the depicted world, keeping us aware of its artifice, its illusionistic quality.

[musical interlude]

In being aware of the trickery at work in image-making, as viewers we're also becoming aware of the artist, and their role in making the picture in front of us. In the eyes looking out at us from the painting, the points of the painting which provoke our self-awareness and our awareness of the painting *as a painting* rather than as a scene, the artist is able to comment on his own work and its relationship to the viewer. Read in this light, the boy and his dog can be seen as symbolic of the relationship between the artist and the viewer of his work. We can't help but find ourselves taken in by the illusionistic representation in front of us in this image. We can't help but be the person who is standing in front of this door, rather than be whoever we actually are. We can't help but see this infinitely receding depth on a flat surface. We're obeying the painter's whim just as the dog obeys the boy. The boy's commanding hand at the center of the

painting, on the same central axis as the vanishing point. The relationship between this commanding hand and the perspectival program points to the centrality of perspective to the creation of visual illusion, portraying in allegory exactly what Samuel van Hoogstraten described in his contemporaneous book.

This painting is distinctive for another reason, though. Despite its symbolism, it doesn't glorify art the way many allegories of painting do. Using a haughty child as the allegorical core renders the scene more of a comedy appoint driven home even more overtly by the presence of the gesture. The gesture is a figure that traditionally stands adjacent to power able to point out its flaws while remaining unscathed. In this painting, the gesture plays this traditional role, letting us know through his mocking gaze that the little game of power in front of us, both between the dog and the boy, and between us and the artist, is comical, and by extension impotent. Rather than reveling in his ability, the artist seems to be pointing out the inherent comedy and representation, the gesture like cunning in making what isn't real appear to be, and the foolish childishness of artists to believe it grants the real power. While it initially appears to be a bizarre slice of life, *View into a Hall* is an intricately constructed self-allegory that points to the limitations of the illusionism that define the aesthetic of its era.

Caitlin Woolsey

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Objects Studies*. For more information on this episode and the artwork discussed, please visit clarkart.edu/rap/podcast. *Object Studies* is created and produced by me, Caitlin Woolsey, with editing and musical interludes by John Buteyn, theme music by lightchaser, and additional support provided by Annie Jun, Jessie Sentivan, and Caroline Fowler. The Clark Art Institute sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community. As we learn, speak, and gather at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors past and present, and to future generations, by committing to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.

