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A footnote on the provenance of Vermeer’s ‘Young woman standing at a virginal’ in the National Gallery, London

by FRANS GRIJZENHOUT

THERE ARE UNCERTAINTIES in the early provenance of Johannes Vermeer’s Young woman standing at a virginal, which has been in the National Gallery, London, since 1892. The painting may well be identical to ‘A young woman playing on the harpsichord, by the same’ (‘Een speelende juffrouw op de clavecinbael van dito J. vander Meer van Delft’) in the sale in Amsterdam of the collection of Jacob Abrahamsz. Dissius in 1696.1 However, doubt is cast on this by references to ‘Een stukken met een jouffrou op de claveseling spelende met bewerk van Vermeer’ (‘A small painting with a lady playing the harpsichord with accessories, by Vermeer’) in the stock of the Antwerp art dealer Diego Duarte, as documented between 1682 and 1691, and to ‘A young woman playing on the harpsichord by Vermeer’ (‘Een juffr spele op de clavecinbael door Vermeer’), which was probably already in the possession of the widow of Nicolaes van Assendelft in Delft by 1692.

The painting may next have appeared in an anonymous Amsterdam sale on 11 July 1714 as ‘A woman playing on the harpsichord in a room, by Vermeer of Delft, artfully painted’ (‘Een clavecinbaelspeeler in een kamer, van Vermeer van Delft, kunsig geschildert’). The painting is then lost track of until it resurfaces on 16th August 1797 at the public sale of the collection of the Amsterdam art collector Jan Danser Nijman, where ‘Young woman standing at a virginal’ (‘Een juffrouw, staande voor een clavecinbael te spoelen’) was sold for 49 guilders to a buyer called ‘Bergh’. The painting is then lost sight of again until 1845, when it appears on the London art market. It passed through various British collections until it was acquired by the art critic Thiéophile Thoré, alias William Bürger, by whose heirs the painting was sold at auction in Paris on 3rd December 1892, following which it was purchased by the National Gallery.

It is now possible to identify the mysterious ‘Bergh’ who bought the Young woman standing at a virginal in 1797.2 In 1825 ‘A girl standing at a piano forte, by the Delft van der Meer’ (‘Een Meisje staande bij een piano forte door den Delftschen van der Meer’) is listed in the probate inventory of the Amsterdam banker Otto Willem Johan Berg.3 This confirms that he was the purchaser at the Danser Nijman sale, when he also bought a family portrait by Frans Hals and other paintings.4 Berg came from a noble family, originating in Estonia, with a long-standing military tradition.5 Both his grandfather Otto Willem and his father, Ernst Willem, were talented draughtsmen.6 In 1751 Ernst Willem married Agatha Agnes Bagelaar, and their son Otto Willem Johan Berg was born on 9th March 1752 in ’s-Hertogenbosch. Originally, young Otto was destined to become a military officer, like his ancestors, but his parents soon decided in favour of a different career.7 In 1768 he left his grammar school in Den Bosch, and four years later he graduated, aged only twenty, as doctor of law at the University of Utrecht. He was admitted as an advocate in the same year, 1772.8 His marriage in 1776 to Catharina Johanna Goll van Frankenstein introduced him to the haute voile of the Amsterdam banking scene. His bride was a daughter of the immensely wealthy Johann Goll van Frankenstein Sr, who ran one of the most important banks and trading firms
in Amsterdam. Goll van Frankenstein owned a huge and highly regarded collection of prints and drawings and was an accomplished amateur draughtsman. His son, also named Johann, would pursue his father’s activities as a collector, extending his field of interest to painting. Berg became a business partner in the Goll firm and remained so after the death of his first wife in 1788 and his marriage to Jeanne Arendine Changuion in 1793.

In the 1780s Berg was actively involved in the nationwide anti-Orangist movement of the so-called patriots. He was one of the highest-ranking patriots in Amsterdam, usually working in the background, in close collaboration with other senior figures. From an art-historical perspective, Berg’s role in the funding, commission and realisation of a national monument for the leader of the first phase of the patriot revolt, Joan Derk van der Capellen (1741–84), by the Roman sculptor Giuseppe Ceracchi, is of importance. After the failure of the patriot revolt and the subsequent restoration – with help from the Prussian army – of Prince William V of Orange as Stadholder in autumn 1787, Berg cautiously moved to Antwerp for a time. On his return to Amsterdam, by the end of November, he was put on trial for his political estate included some two hundred paintings. By the notary Willem van Homrigh, Berg’s house ‘Messina’, at Amsterdam Herengracht inventory taken on 22nd March 1825 of Berg’s possessions, valued at almost one million guilders, the entire art collection was put on trial for his political estate included some two hundred paintings. By the notary Willem van Homrigh, Berg’s house ‘Messina’, at Amsterdam Herengracht inventory taken on 22nd March 1825.

Berg’s collection contained works by artists that were popular in the late eighteenth century. The highest estimate (5,000 guilders) was for a still-life of flowers and fruit by Jan van Huysum, followed by a painting by Ludolf Bakhuysen of a stormy sea with yachts, estimated at 700 guilders, which had taken pride of place in the Saal, the formal reception room of ‘Messina’. A landscape by Adriaen van de Velde was valued at 450 guilders, as was a cityscape with an ox by Jan van der Heijden and Adriaen van de Velde, and another storm at sea by Bakhuysen. A landscape by Jan Hackaert and Van de Velde was valued at 300 guilders, as were a landscape by Jan van Huchtenburg and a farmhouse interior by Jan Miense Molenaer. With a painting of birds by Melchior d’Hondecoeter (150 guilders), a military camp by Philips Wouwerman, a view of Dam Square in Amsterdam by Johannes Lingelbach and a woman in a niche by Godfried Schalcken (all 100 guilders), this all adds up to a rather conventional collection. Berg appears also to have bought works by eighteenth-century and contemporary masters, such as Tibout Regents (a grocery market, 60 guilders), Joseph Laquy (an interior, 100 guilders), Jan ten Compé (three city views, 50, 10 and 20 guilders), Josephus Augustus Knip (an Italian landscape, 100 guilders), George Pieter Westenberg (a landscape and a city view, each 200 guilders), Jan Hulswit (a city view, 50 guilders) and Gerrit Zegelaar (a man trimming his pen, 150 guilders).

Together with a large quantity of prints, some sculptures and a cabinet of coins and medals, worth 600 guilders, the entire art collection was valued at 16,677 guilders before the auction. ‘A girl standing at a piano forte, by the Delft van der Meer’ (‘Een Meisje staande bij een piano forte, door den Delftschen van der Meer’) was moderately estimated at 150 guilders. It had hung in the zijkamer, the side room at the front of the house, the usual setting for paintings to be shown to guests. It was accompanied there by some thirty other paintings, including, evidently as the room’s centrepiece, the other Bakhuysen storm scene, together with Rachel Ruysch’s flower painting, Hackaert’s ‘A woman, clad in white satin, stands at a harpsichord in an interior; two paintings hang on the wall’.

The public auction of Berg’s paintings took place in the ‘Huis met de hoofden’ on the Keizersgracht and was organised by the valuers Brongeest and Engelberts with the auctioneers Jeronimo de Vries and Cornelis François Roos. The Van Huysum exceeded expectations by far, selling for 2,700 guilders to Jeronimo de Vries, who was also an art dealer; the two Bakhuysen storm scenes changed hands for 900 and 800 guilders. In total, the paintings fetched almost 23,950 guilders, more than 5,000 guilders over the estimate.

Young woman standing at a virginal was offered as lot 121 with the following description: ‘A woman, clad in white satin, stands at a harpsichord in an interior; two paintings hang on the wall.’ The auctioneers had overlooked the signature ‘IVMeer’ on the side of the virginal and decided to change the picture’s attribution, from ‘de Delfsche van der Meer’, as in the Danser Nijman sale and in the valuation made by Brongeest and Engelberts only a few days before, to ‘Jacob van Uchterveld’ (Jacob Ochtervelt). In hindsight, this may seem odd, but one must realise that there was then no sharply defined image of Vermeer’s oeuvre, as his works were more than once confused with those by Gerard Terborch, Gabriel Metsu and Pieter de Hooch, as well as Ochtervelt. More or less comparable paintings by Ochtervelt of music-making young women, dressed in white or red satin, had appeared on the Amsterdam art market several times in the decades around 1800.

The painting was acquired for 196 guilders by ‘de Lelli’. This was Jan Adriaan Antonie de Lelli (1788–1845), a moderately successful painter and draughtsman of portraits and genre scenes as well as a picture restorer and art dealer. At the Berg sale he bought nine pictures by various artists, including Bakhuysen’s A quiet sea by evening (lot 4: 271 guilders) and Farmers outside an inn by Jan Steen (lot 107: 351 guilders). Following his death, his collection was sold in Amsterdam on 27th July 1845 and subsequent days. Vermeer’s painting does not appear in the catalogue, even under the name Ochtervelt.

That is not surprising, because ‘The interior of an apartment, in which a young lady richly habited is standing by a harpsichord’ by ‘Van der Meer, of Delft’ had been sold in London a few months earlier, on Friday 11th July 1845, in an auction of ‘Flemish, Dutch, French, and English pictures, of the highest class’ from the collection of Edward W. Lake Esq. The ‘excellent example of this rare master’ with a sunlight ‘effect of de Hooghé’, which was said to have been purchased by Lake from Edward Solly, was sold for 15 guineas to Farrer. Presumably De Lelli had
sold his ‘Ochtervelt’ to Solly, either directly or indirectly, sometime between 1835 and 1845, and the picture had regained its rightful attribution to Vermeer in the process.

As this example demonstrates, as late as 1835, more than thirty years after Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun’s groundbreaking publication of some of Vermeer’s paintings, connoisseurs in the international art market were still confused about the characteristics of the artist’s work. Although his Milkmaid, Little street (both Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) and View of Delft (Mauritshuis, The Hague) were by then already highly acclaimed in Holland,26 even knowledgeable art dealers and auctioneers hesitated when attributing and selling works by him. The art market had to await the publications by Théophile Thoré – the later owner of Young woman standing at a virginal – in the 1850s and 1860s before Vermeer’s reputation began to rise to its present heights.

I would like to thank Theo Gölcher for sharing his information on the Berg family with me.


4 See Portrait of a Dutch family, by Frans Hals, Cincinnati Art Museum, inv. no.1927.399.


6 Drawing and a water colour by Otto Willem Berg (1886–1773), and sketchbook by Ernst Willem Berg (1721–77), BFA, nos.11 and 32.

7 Documents relating to Otto’s birth; and an act of dismissal from military service, BFA, nos.76 and 84.

8 Various acts concerning Otto’s school and university career, and his admission as an advocate, BFA, nos.85–89.


10 Lists of notifications of Otto’s marriages in 1776 and 1793, BFA, no.78; and documents concerning Otto’s activities in the Gulf firm, BFA, nos.90–95.

11 Various acts concerning political issues in Amsterdam (1787), BFA, nos.100–2.

12 Grijzenhout, op. cit. (note 2), with earlier literature on the subject. Since Ceracchi was never fully paid, the monument remained in Rome and is now in the collection of the Museo Pietro Canonica, Villa Borghese.

13 Act of citizenship of Antwerp (1787), BFA, no.104.

14 Acts concerning Otto’s trial (1787–88), BFA, nos.105–06; and ‘Schoutenrol’ (13th November 1787, 27th November 1787 and 15th January 1788), City Archives, Amsterdam, Archives of the sheriff and aldermen, no.193.

15 Extract from a diary of Otto’s journey through France, Switzerland and Germany (1788), BFA, no.79.

16 Acts concerning Otto’s involvement in the regime change (1813), BFA, nos.107–08.

17 For instance, Lugt 7430, Amsterdam, 13th–14th June 1808, where Berg bought nine lots, and Lugt 9106, Amsterdam, 21st–22nd April 1817, where he bought a picture by Pieter de Hooch.

18 Otto Willem Jan Berg, dead of preliminary division of his goods, Amsterdam, 26th August 1825 (notary Willem van Homrigh), BFA, no.116.

19 Document cited at note 3 above.

20 There are annotated catalogues of all three auctions in the BFA, no.117.

21 Detroit Institute of Arts, inv. no.38.31.

22 Document cited at note 3 above.

23 Lugt 10944.

24 ‘In een Binnenvertrek staat een in wit satijn geklede dame aan een clavecimbaal, aan de muur hangen twee schilderijen’. The size of the canvas is mistakenly given as 5 p[alm] 1 d[uim] height and 1 cor[responds] to 5 p[alm] 1 d[uim] width, which corresponds to 51 by 15 (in fact 45) cm.


26 For details of the known provenance of Young woman standing at a virginal – in the 1850s and 1860s before Vermeer’s reputation began to rise to its present heights [OK].27 A gap of thirty years in the provenance of Young woman standing at a virginal has now been filled by archival research. It is to be hoped that more such findings will one day complete our knowledge of the historic whereabouts of all Vermeer’s paintings.

27 See S. Donahue Kuretsky: The Paintings of Jacob Ochtervelt, 1634–82, Oxford 1979, pp.19, 28 and 92, and cat. nos.85–89.

28 See, for example, R. van Eijnden and A. van der Willigen: Geschiedenis der vaderlandsche schilderkunst, sedert de hefft der XVIIe eeuw, Haarlem 1816–40, I, pp.164–88, where it is said that ‘all art lovers know that his paintings are regarded as equal in rank to those of the most eminent artists of the Dutch school and fetch very considerable sums!’