

Honthorst, Gerrit van

Also known as

Honthorst, Gerard van

Gherardo della Notte

Dutch, 1592 - 1656

BIOGRAPHY

Gerrit van Honthorst was born in Utrecht in 1592 to a large Catholic family. His father, Herman van Honthorst, was a tapestry designer and a founding member of the Utrecht Guild of St. Luke in 1611. After training with the Utrecht painter Abraham Bloemaert (1566–1651), Honthorst traveled to Rome, where he is first documented in 1616.[1] Honthorst's trip to Rome had an indelible impact on his painting style. In particular, Honthorst looked to the radical stylistic and thematic innovations of Caravaggio (Roman, 1571 - 1610), adopting the Italian painter's realism, dramatic chiaroscuro lighting, bold colors, and cropped compositions. Honthorst's distinctive nocturnal settings and artificial lighting effects attracted commissions from prominent patrons such as Cardinal Scipione Borghese (1577–1633), Cosimo II, the Grand Duke of Tuscany (1590–1621), and the Marcheses Benedetto and Vincenzo Giustiniani (1554–1621 and 1564–1637). He lived for a time in the Palazzo Giustiniani in Rome, where he would have seen paintings by Caravaggio, and works by Annibale Carracci (Bolognese, 1560 - 1609) and Domenichino (1581–1641), artists whose classicizing tendencies would also inform Honthorst's style. The contemporary Italian art critic Giulio Mancini noted that Honthorst was able to command high prices for his striking paintings, which decorated both private residences and churches including Santa Maria della Scala and Santa Maria della Vittoria.

Utrecht artists celebrated Honthorst's return to his native city in 1620 with a raucous party held at the inn called "Het Poortgen" (The Little Gate), and quickly established a large workshop.[2] In the same year, Honthorst married Sophia Coopmans and moved into a house on the Snippevlucht, near the home of Hendrick ter Brugghen (Dutch, 1588 - 1629).[3] In 1622 he joined the Utrecht Guild of Saint Luke and served as its dean in 1625, 1626, 1628, and 1629.[5] Honthorst's international reputation was such that in 1621, Dudley Carleton, the British ambassador in The Hague, sent one of Honthorst's paintings to Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel, who praised Honthorst for his mastery of "Caravagioes

colouring.”[4] Joachim von Sandrart (1606–1688), one of his students, wrote that Sir Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577 - 1640) visited Honthorst’s studio during a trip to Utrecht in 1627.

Honthorst joined fellow Utrecht painters Ter Brugghen and Dirck van Baburen (c. 1595–1624) in applying the Caravaggesque manner to genre subjects like merry companies and musicians. Honthorst’s paintings, however, tend to exhibit greater classicizing clarity than those of his fellow Utrecht Caravaggisti, and his works are often characterized by even lighting, smooth modeling, and slightly idealized figures.

Honthorst’s smooth and elegant approach to allegorical and portrait painting helped him establish a very successful career as a court painter. He went to London between April and December 1628 to paint for the court of King Charles I. By 1630, Honthorst had moved to The Hague and was working as a court painter for the exiled monarchs of Bohemia, King Frederick and Queen Elizabeth, as well as for the Stadholder Frederick Hendrick and his wife, Princess Amalia van Solms. He purchased a house in The Hague, where he joined the Guild of Saint Luke in 1637.[6] His courtly commissions also extended to King Christian IV of Denmark, for whom he painted a suite of works between 1635 and 1639. In 1649, he contributed to the paintings in the Oranjezaal of the Huis ten Bosch. In 1652, Honthorst returned permanently to Utrecht, where he primarily painted portraits until his death on April 27, 1656.

[1] His earliest signed and dated artwork is a 1616 drawing, now in the Nasjonalgalleriet in Oslo, after Caravaggio’s 1600 *Martyrdom of St. Peter* in Santa Maria del Popolo.

[2] The Utrecht humanist Aernout van Buchell described the event in his diary; *Notae Quotidianae van Aernout van Buchell*, ed. J. W. C. van Campen, Utrecht, 1940, 1, 2.

[3] Joneath Spicer and Lynn Federle Orr, *Masters of Light: Dutch Painters in Utrecht During the Golden Age* (Exh. cat: San Francisco, Baltimore, London, 1997), 88–89.

[4] William Noel Sainsbury, *Original unpublished papers illustrative of the life of Sir Peter Paul Rubens, as an artist and a diplomatist*, (London, 1859), 290–292.

[5] Samuel Muller, *De Utrechtsche archieven, I: schildersvereeingen te Utrecht*
(Utrecht, 1880), 116, 119, 128.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

June 14, 2014

To cite: Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Gerrit van Honthorst," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/constituent/4378> (accessed January 10, 2025).