

7 The master's signature

The Physician is one of three signed and dated versions of this work; a fourth is by Jan Adriaensz van Staveren, one of Dou's students. The painting believed the original, in Vienna, is on oak; the others are on copper. While it was unexceptional for artists of Dou's stature to make copies of their own work, the involvement of pupils in his workshop is also possible, with copying a standard part of a painter's training. If of sufficient quality, such works were signed and under the master's authorship.



Top left: Gerrit Dou *The Physician* 1653. Oil on oak. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Top right: Gerrit Dou *The Physician* 1653. Oil on copper. Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, Heathcote Helmore Bequest, 1965

Bottom left: Gerrit Dou *The Physician* 1653. Oil on copper. The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow

Bottom right: Jan Adriaensz van Staveren *The Physician* 1653-9. Oil on copper. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



The first established owner that we have for Gerrit Dou's *The Physician* is an early Canterbury settler named Henry Francis Gray, though it is unlikely this extremely fine painting was part of his luggage when he disembarked at Port Lyttelton as an eighteen-year-old in 1856. The painting is also unlikely to have graced the walls of the sod house that he and his younger brother Albert built two years later on their property at Avonhead, Christchurch, given that it was "plastered inside with cow dung and sand", as Albert later recalled. Family circumstances allowed the Gray brothers to increase in land holdings and gentlemanly status as they established themselves in Canterbury. Their wealth also increased exponentially in 1870 with the death of their father in England, who left an astonishing £25,000 to each of his nine children. Eleven years later, almost certainly linked to this inheritance, Henry Gray was applauded in Christchurch as the owner of a valuable painting which he allowed to go on public display, on loan for the Canterbury Society of Arts' first exhibition in 1881. As the city's local paper commented: "It is not often we have the chance of seeing such a picture in Christchurch, and we cannot help congratulating Mr Gray on being the possessor of a work of such sterling merit."

Henry Gray left New Zealand for South Africa in 1899, and the painting passed through family lines to his grand-nephew Heathcote Helmore, a prominent Christchurch architect. *The Physician* was given to the city through Helmore's bequest in 1965, and remains a celebrated treasure in the collection.

Ken Hall

Cover and left:
Gerrit Dou
The Physician (detail) 1653
Oil on copper
Collection of Christchurch
Art Gallery Te Puna o
Waiwhetu, Heathcote
Helmore Bequest, 1965



Take a closer look at
Gerrit Dou's *The Physician*

**CHRISTCHURCH
ART GALLERY
TE PUNA O
WAIWHETU**

Exhibition copy. Please do not remove



Gerrit Dou's *The Physician*

Gerrit Dou's *The Physician* is recognised as one of the greatest treasures in this city's art collection. Many elements in this incredibly detailed painting seem to contain a hidden, coded message.

Gerrit Dou (1613–1675) was Rembrandt van Rijn's first student, and started training with him in Leiden while in his teens. They collaborated on some works and often used the same models. After Rembrandt's departure for Amsterdam in 1631, Dou went on to become the most famous painter in Leiden and for a long time eclipsed Rembrandt's wider reputation.

Dou was one of the most famous painters of his day, and Leiden with its university an important centre of medical learning. Reflecting this, Dou has presented his physician as a practitioner of knowledge and skill; his fine, expensive clothing as well as elements in the painting emphasise this idea.

Dou is also recorded as the first artist to have a solo exhibition in his own lifetime. Held in Leiden in 1665, it consisted of many works belonging to one collector. His extraordinarily detailed paintings were sought by the wealthiest collectors, including European royalty and aristocracy; the price of one painting is said to have been equivalent to the price of a house.

Gerrit Dou *Self Portrait as a Young Man/Self portrait* c.1631. Oil on panel. Brooklyn Museum, New York



1 A self portrait?

Dou created his detail with a brush consisting of just a few hairs, and with a magnifying glass; the physician's face is just three centimetres high.

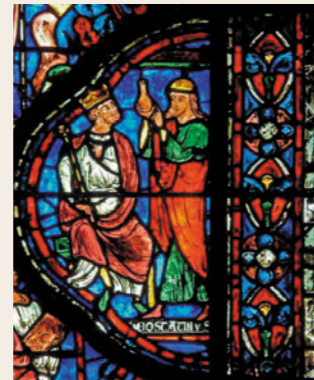
Wearing the same hat as seen in many of his self portraits, *The Physician* is believed based on Dou's own likeness.

Gerrit Dou *Man with a Pipe/Self Portrait* c.1645. Oil on panel. The National Gallery, London

2 A gleaming jar of...

The doctor with a jar of urine was established from the thirteenth century onwards as a typical image of a European medic – the equivalent today to a doctor wearing a stethoscope.

Dou's physician is an expert *piskijker*, one specialised in uroscopy, or studying urine to diagnose – in this painting most likely related to a pregnancy test. Dou, who revisited this theme many times, is credited with starting a fashion for images of doctors studying urine in Dutch painting.



Constantine has leprosy and consults a doctor c.1210–15. St Silvester window, Chartres Cathedral, France

3 Painting vs sculpture

The original for the sculptural relief at the base of Dou's composition is by Flemish sculptor François Duquesnoy. The (now damaged) relief once included a putti (cherub) with a bearded mask, teasing the goat, which is restrained by the other putti. Dou is thought to have worked from a plaster copy of Duquesnoy's sculpture, many of which found their way into artists' studios. Its inclusion is believed to reflect Dou's desire to position painting above sculpture, through his impressive powers of illusionism. The putti relief appeared in a number of Dou's window niche paintings.



François Duquesnoy *Putti Teasing a Goat* 1626. Marble bas-relief. Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Rome
Image: The Web Gallery of Art



4 Stargazing

To our physician's left is a celestial globe covered with mythological beings and creatures, symbolising the heavenly bodies. Following the translation into Latin of ancient Arabic texts in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, astrology became an integral part of medical learning and diagnosis throughout Europe.

The same celestial globe appears in other works by Dou, including another possible self-portrait, *Astronomer by Candlelight*.

From medieval times, astrologers in Europe believed that the movements of the stars could affect events on earth, including weather, crop growth and the workings of the human body. European doctors learned to check positions of the stars before making a diagnosis; by the late 1500s, they were also required by law to calculate the moon's position before performing medical procedures like surgery or bleeding.

5 Coded symbols

As well as being admired for their unbelievable detail, Dou's paintings were also intended to be analysed for their layers of meaning.

Among the puzzles to be read in *The Physician* is a mysterious silver-stoppered bottle that he included in a number of his paintings. It is thought to symbolise female anatomy in relation to seventeenth century medical understandings around conception and childbirth.

The original owner of this painting would have enjoyed decoding its layered meanings and messages with a privileged circle of friends and acquaintances.



Gerrit Dou *Astronomer by Candlelight* Late 1650s. Oil on panel. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



Willem Janszoon Blaeu *Celestial globe* After 1621. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, purchased by Friends of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts Gifts, 1990

6 Memento mori

The presence in this painting of Andreas Vesalius's *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libri Septem*, an engraved anatomy textbook published in 1543, confirms the physician as a man of learning.

The skeleton with its gravedigger's spade also appears the ultimate symbol of vanitas, made doubly expressive in a painting representing a pregnancy test. Focused on the anticipation of a child to come, the painting appears an elaborate yet matter-of-fact invitation to meditate on the wonder and fragile brevity of a human life.

Andreas Vesalius *Humani Corporis Ossium* 1543 from *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libri Septem*

