

## An Altered Painting by Pieter de Hooch

The name of Pieter de Hooch is most closely associated with paintings depicting serene and neatly ordered middle class Dutch homes and courtyards, peopled with only a few figures. Usually more important to the modern viewer than the activities of the figures in such works is de Hooch's rendering of light, atmosphere, and clearly defined space. It is as a creator of such scenes that he has come to be regarded, along with Vermeer, as a principal painter of the Delft school of the late 1650s and 1660s.

However, in the early 1650s, before he painted the colorful masterpieces for which he is best known, de Hooch painted quite different subjects, depicting tavern and stable interiors. In these rather dark, nearly monochromatic paintings, his figures are more often peasants and soldiers shown in moments of relaxation. The emphasis in these early de Hoochs tends to be more on the figures than on their surroundings, and the narrative quality seems of greater significance than it was to be in his mature years.

One of the best known of de Hooch's early efforts is the painting of *A Man with Dead Birds, and Other Figures, in a Stable* in the National Gallery in London (Fig. 1). Although it bears no signature, this panel clearly foreshadows the mature works of de Hooch in its figural treatment and includes the motif of a mother and child that will appear so frequently in his art. Actually it is especially close in style to the signed painting of *Backgammon Players* in Dublin, which is also an example from the early period of his development (Fig. 2). Both paintings are probably to be dated in the mid 1650s, not many years before his earliest signed and dated works of 1658, which are already in his mature style.

The London panel depicts a stable interior with a seated male figure in the left foreground, generally assumed to be a hunter, who faces in profile toward the center of the composition and directs his attention to a dead game bird he holds in his right hand and plucks with his left. Lying in a pile in the right foreground are several dead birds seemingly awaiting their turn in the hands of the hunter, while just behind them stands a spaniel who was perhaps instrumental in flushing them for his master. Directly behind the plane formed by the hunter, his dog, and his booty, stands a young woman with an infant in her arms. Her gaze is directed downward toward the dog and the game. To the woman's left is a post on which hangs a man's cape, while still further to her left a man's jacket is draped across a partial barrier that runs parallel to the picture plane. Further back and entering through a door at the rear of the stable is a man with a wide-brimmed hat.

The history of the painting has been traceable no further back than May 19, 1900, when it appeared in the Madame de Falbe sale in London and was attributed to Jan Baptist Weenix, presumably on the basis of the subject with its still life interest

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Pieter de Hooch.  
*A Man with Dead Birds, and  
Other Figures, in a Stable.*  
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*Trustees of the National Gallery,*  
London.



in dead game<sup>1</sup>. Later that same year it came to be regarded as a joint effort by Weenix and de Hooch. By 1906, the association with Weenix was dropped, and the painting has ever since been assigned to the early period of de Hooch. In 1924 it entered the collection of the National Gallery.

An 1825 catalogue of an auction held in Amsterdam describes a painting by de Hooch,

<sup>1</sup> The provenance of the painting beginning in 1900 is found in Neil MacLaren, *National*

*Gallery Catalogues: The Dutch School* (London 1960), pp. 190-191.



2  
 Pieter de Hooch.  
 Backgammon Players.  
 Courtesy of the *National  
 Gallery of Ireland*.

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presumably from his early years, which has some significant features in common with the London panel:

Eene Stal, van binnen, op den voorgrond ligt een gekwetst man, welke door den heelmester verbonden wordt, nevens hen staat eene vrouw met een kind, achterwaarts door eene openstaande deur komt een heer in; door P. de Hooge. Paneel, h. 5p. 3d., br. 5p.<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Auction catalogue 7/8 July 1825, Amsterdam (O. W. J. Berg) number 51.

[A stable interior, in the foreground lies a wounded man who is being bandaged by a surgeon, beside them stands a woman with a child, at the rear a gentleman enters through an open door; by P. de Hooch. Panel, h. 53 cm., w. 50 cm.]

This description of 1825 seems to bear a definite relationship to the scene depicted in the London painting, for it too is a stable interior that includes a standing woman with a child as well as a man entering through an open door at the rear. In addition, the measurements given for both height and width are within a half centimeter of those of the London panel. However, while there are important points of agreement, there remains a major difference, for the National Gallery painting does not contain the central element of a reclining man being treated for his wound. An infra-red photograph, however, reveals that much of the center and right foreground of the London panel has been overpainted, including the spaniel and the entire dead game still life (Fig. 3). In addition, an X-ray photograph of the center and right foreground (Fig. 4) brings to light a male figure reclining on the floor of the stable, with his head near the right edge of the panel and his body almost parallel to the plane of the picture<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 5). Both his head and torso are tilted toward the viewer. His head is thrown back and his eyes and mouth are closed. A sack or cushion, partly propped against the partition near the right side of the painting, supports his head and shoulders. His left elbow is bent at his side, and his left forearm rests across his waist, while the position of his right arm is uncertain. He wears a loose-fitting blouse that is open in a deep V at the neck, and his open shirt cuff exposes his left wrist and part of his forearm. Some form of cover, perhaps a blanket, lies across his waist and upper legs. His right leg protrudes from the cover at the lower thigh and is slightly bent at the knee. His right calf rests in the palm of the right hand of the seated man, whose left hand attends what appears to be a bullet wound just below the knee on the inner side of the leg. The right foot and ankle of the reclining figure are concealed by the right leg of the seated man. The position of the wounded man's left leg remains unclear in the X-ray photograph.

The appearance of the wounded man in the London panel explains the presence of the yellow jacket at the right, which is undoubtedly his. It perhaps also explains the costume of the seated man, which is that of a soldier. His coat is identical, for example, to that of the standing soldier in the early de Hooch in Dublin. And the gaze of the standing woman now takes on more meaning as it is directed toward the victim.

The presence of the reclining figure dramatically changes the subject of the London painting. Instead of depicting a hunter plucking his game, the panel takes on a tragic note as a soldier cares for the wound of a companion in the presence of what may be the victim's wife and child.

Although paintings illustrating soldier life during the struggle with Spain were popular in Holland, especially during the second quarter of the seventeenth century, they usually depicted the lighter side of that life, with the figures playing backgammon in the barracks or drinking in the inns. Less frequently was the unpleasant side of war depicted; battles, starvation, the dead and the wounded, were aspects of war that were usually by-passed by the painters of soldier life.

The subject of the wounded man, however, is not unique in de Hooch's oeuvre, for he depicted it in at least one other work. His painting of the *Wounded Soldier* (Fig. 6) is a somewhat smaller painting on canvas<sup>4</sup> that bears a remarkable resemblance

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to the staff of the National Gallery in London who furthered the investigation of this painting by taking the infrared and X-ray photographs.

<sup>4</sup> Although W. R. Valentiner in *Pieter de Hooch*

(Berlin and Leipzig, 1929), p. 106, indicates that this painting is on panel, auction catalogues record it as being on canvas. The painting is properly assigned to the early period of Pieter de Hooch, as was suggested by C. Briere-Misme in 'Tableaux inédits ou peu connus de Pieter de



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to the National Gallery work. Both scenes take place in the foreground of a stable interior with bits of straw strewn across the floor. The mother with a young child, apparently a significant ingredient to the theme, is also present in the smaller work directing her gaze toward the reclining figure. In both cases the head of the standing female is the top of a triangular grouping that is placed essentially parallel to the

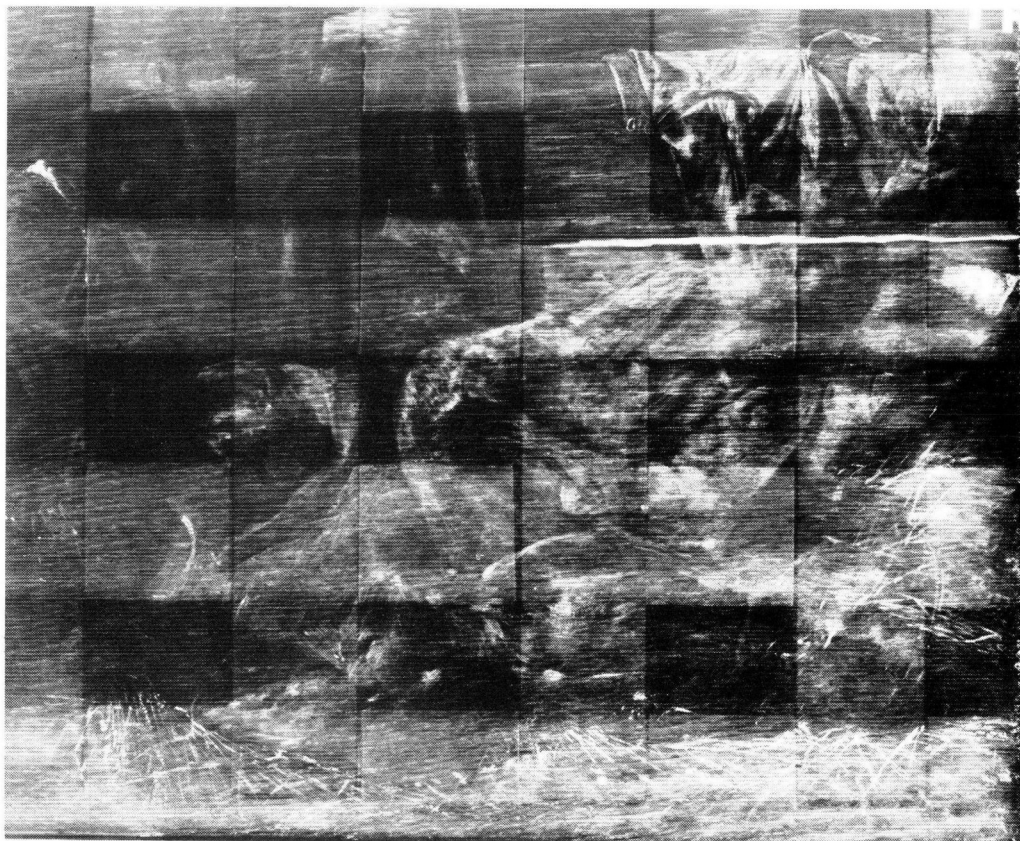
Hooch', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (June 1927), pp. 374-375, instead of to the much later date given

to it by Valentiner. It is probably quite close in date to the London painting.

3  
Infra-red photograph of  
Figure 1.  
Published by courtesy of the  
*Trustees of the National Gallery,  
London.*

4  
X-ray photograph of the  
center and right foreground  
of Figure 1.  
Published by courtesy of the  
*Trustees of the National Gallery,  
London.*

5  
Line drawing of Figure 4.



4

5





6  
 Pieter de Hooch.  
 Wounded Soldier.  
 Whereabouts unknown.  
 Photograph courtesy of the  
*Rijksbureau voor Kunst-  
 historische Documentatie,  
 The Hague.*

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picture plane. Although the positions of the wounded figures in the two paintings are not identical, they are remarkably similar, and their loose-fitting blouses, open down the front, as well as the use of a covering across the waist and upper legs, are found in both works. Even the patient's moustache, clearly visible in the smaller version, is apparent in the X-ray photograph of the National Gallery painting. And in both works the reclining figures suffer from leg wounds, although the locations of the wounds differ slightly. One further parallel is found in the clothing that is draped across the partition immediately behind the victim. In the smaller version the soldier treating the wound faces the viewer in contrast to his counterpart's profile position in the National Gallery picture. However, his female assistant occupies a position similar to that of the seated man in the larger work.

The circumstances that led to the overpainting of the National Gallery panel are not known, but it seems safe to assume that the subject of a wounded soldier was less to the liking of its nineteenth century owner than that of a hunter plucking his fowl. While the change in the subject could have been made any time between the summer of 1825, when the panel with a visible wounded man was sold at auction in Amsterdam, and the spring of 1900, when it reappeared as a hunter with his booty, the style of the overpainted area suggests that the alteration took place in the third quarter of the century.

The condition of the London picture presents a considerable problem, for the paint has been worn quite thin over much of the surface, making it doubtful at this point that the overpainting can ever be safely removed without further damage to the panel. Even if the nineteenth century additions were to be removed, it seems questionable that the figure beneath could be satisfactorily revealed without substantial restoration.