



Many Hands make Light Work:

The seventeenth-century

Antwerp ‘Interior with figures

before a picture collection’

Maartje Witlox

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Introduction

The *Interior with figures before a picture collection* (fig. 1), in the Mauritshuis in The Hague,¹ represents an exceptional case of collaboration between at least seventeen Antwerp artists of the second half of the seventeenth century.² The *Interior* has been in the collection of the Mauritshuis since before it opened as a museum in 1822, as it was part of the foundation collection from the former Dutch stadholders and was acquired for Stadholder Willem IV at an auction in Antwerp in 1741. Its quality, subject matter, and the fact that it was executed by a large group of painters, made it a valuable addition to Willem IV’s collection: the painting is a collection in itself.



Fig. 1 Gonzales Coques (1614/18-1684) and others, *Interior with figures before a picture collection*, canvas 176 x 210.5 cm. Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, Den Haag, Netherlands. After restoration

The painting belongs to the genre of *Kunstkamers*, or interiors with art collections, a subject often depicted by seventeenth century Antwerp artists. Although the central figure group has not been signed, there has never been any doubt in the literature about its attribution to Gonzales Coques (1614/18-1684), the most famous Antwerp portrait painter of his time.³

The painting's restoration in 2001 offered an excellent opportunity to study its technique in relation to its art historical context.⁴ Research focused mainly on the practicalities of such a large collaborative project; the organisation of the artists' contributions, and the design and execution were all addressed. This article also considers questions related to the choice of artists, to the modification of the artists' technique to comply with the needs of the collaboration, and to the dating of the painting.

The painting and its context.

• Paintings of collections

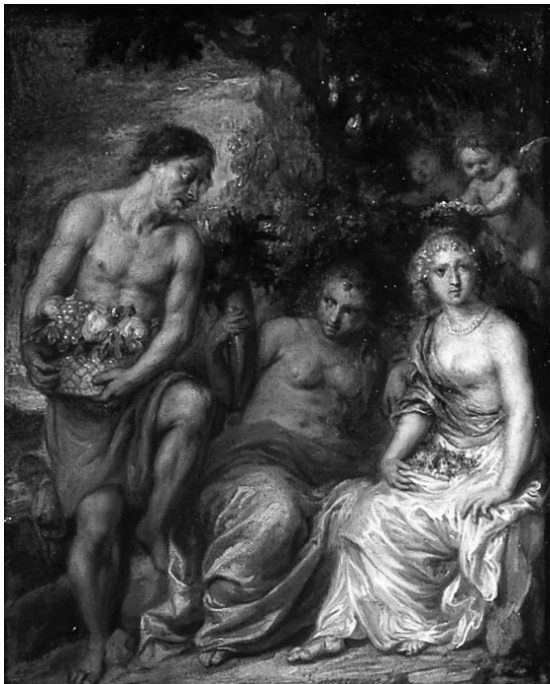
The painting shows an (imaginary) interior of a magnificent house or castle with in the foreground figures positioned around a table (fig. 2); the room creates a sumptuous stage for this central group: a woman dressed in sixteenth and seventeenth-century fashion with some imaginary details⁵, two young children, and a man wearing an ermine-lined blue velvet mantle. This mantle is a surprising choice - rarely depicted in this period and only worn by the highest nobility; the painting therefore hints at the wearer's noble background or aspirations.⁶ The table is adorned with art works and what seem to be copies of classical and renaissance sculptures, with the bust of Homer in a central position. An arched doorway leads through to a room with an



Fig. 2 Central figure group, attributed to Gonzales Coques, after restoration



Fig. 3 Jan Ykens (1613-1679), *Centurion before Christ*, after restoration



impressive chimneypiece, coffered ceiling, and walls covered in paintings. There are numerous classical features in the decoration of the walls; they reflect the transition from renaissance-inspired detailing to the classical style which took place during the seventeenth century. Comparable grandeur can only be found in the paintings of interiors of grand palaces or in allegorical compositions such as the *Allegorical scene with the union of the St. Luke Guild with 'De Violiere' and 'De Blomme'*, by Dirk van Delen (1605-1671) and Theodor Boeijermans (1620-1678).⁷ Usually, however, the settings in *Kunstkamers* are simpler, with more subdued classical ornamentation.

The genre of *Kunstkamer* paintings was established in Antwerp in the early seventeenth-century and remained its speciality, with hardly any examples from outside the city.⁸ Frans Francken II (1581-1642) and Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625) are both credited with introducing art collections into paintings.⁹

Different sources for the genre are mentioned in the literature: portraits of art collectors, often including art works; sixteenth-century Dutch engravings of famous Italian art collections; and the so called 'Preziosenwände' (walls of treasures): still lifes filled with paintings and natural specimens, painted by Frans Francken II and others.¹⁰

Painted collections show clear similarities with the real collections established in Europe in the late sixteenth century.¹¹ These early collections were encyclopaedic in character and showed the universal intellectual curiosity of the collector. Later, more specialised collections of paintings became an important status-symbol for rich burghers rising in the society of seventeenth century Antwerp and wishing to identify themselves with the nobility.¹² The genre of *Kunstkamer* paintings mirrors this development: a gradual transition took place from paintings with allegorical meaning to paintings in which the collection is a subject in itself.¹³

Most painted interiors show imaginary collections consisting of miniature replicas of famous pictures, either copied by one painter, or the work of the artists who had painted the full-size originals. Another and rarer type mainly shows pictures that cannot be identified with any existing original. The *Mauritshuis Interior* belongs to this last group.

Fig. 4 Theodor Boeijermans (1620-1678), *Allegory of the four seasons*, after restoration



Fig. 5 Anton Goubau (1616-1698), *Italian landscape*, Charles Emmanuel Biset (1633-1693), *Aesculape changed into a bird*, and decorative band with Erasmus II Quellinus (1607-1678), *Allegory on the city of Antwerp*

The paintings within the painting

• (Un)signed originals

The *Interior* contains a total of forty two paintings, of which nine are of unknown attribution. Eight represent portraits of nobility and are anonymous copies after famous paintings by Titian, Velázquez, Rubens and Van Dyck (see figure 14 for a complete list and reference numbers).

The arrangement of the paintings does not seem to suggest a specific iconographic program.¹⁴ They cover many different genres: allegorical, biblical, mythological, a hunting scene, still lifes, seascapes, landscapes and pastoral scenes. Each artist contributed a painting typical of his own speciality; special emphasis was given to classical or allegorical subjects. Filipczak noted that this great variety of genres accorded with the desire of contemporary collectors to cover as many subjects as possible.¹⁵ Apart from the portraits in the far room, no matching full-size counterparts have been found, although in some instances existing large-scale compositions do bear a resemblance to a painting in the *Interior*. Ykens' *Centurion before Christ* (no. 10, fig. 3) is comparable in parts to his large *Religious scene* of the same subject in the Church of St. Margareta in Lier, Belgium. The *Boar hunt*, attributed to Peeter Boel (1622-1674, no. 16), is very similar to boar hunt paintings by Jan Fyt (1611-1661), Boel's former master. Boeijermans, a painter of historical, allegorical and religious scenes and follower of Rubens, re-used a *River God* from his large-scale composition of *Antwerp, Nurse of Painters* in the *Mauritshuis* painting (no. 23).¹⁶

There is evidence that many of the painters of the *Mauritshuis Interior* contributed to other similar collab-

orations. For example, a *Cabinet of Pictures*, signed by Jacob de Formentrou (dates unknown, active around 1659; Windsor Castle), contains paintings by Goubau, Quellinus II, Peeters, Boel and Van Kessel the Elder.¹⁷ Also, the *Interior* appears to have exerted some influence, as certain elements are repeated in later works: a *Painter's studio* by Gerard Thomas (1663-1720) which contains copies (probably by Thomas himself) of Peeter Gysels's (1621-1690) *Still Life*, Boeijermans's *Four Seasons*; and Thomas' *The (Tax) Receiver*, where he copied (with some changes), the painting attributed to Charles Emmanuel Biset (1633-1693, no. 13, fig. 5).¹⁸

A large number of the paintings were signed. Theodor Boeijermans, to whom as many as four paintings can be attributed, signed two of them (the *Four Seasons*, no. 24, fig. 4: 'Tboeyermans' and the *River God*, no. 23: 'TB'). Jan van Hecke (1620-1684) painted five landscapes (nos. 7, 8, 21, 27, 31) and one *Pietà* (no. 26) and signed three. Many painters signed with their initials, such as Erasmus II Quellinus (1607-1678), who signed his *Allegory on the city of Antwerp* (no. 11, fig. 5) 'EQ', and Jan Peeters (1624-1676/80), who signed his *Sea View* (no. 2) 'IP'.

As some artists dated their paintings, it is possible to establish a time-frame for the *Interior*. The earliest date appears on the *Centurion before Christ* on the architrave of the white building (no. 10, fig. 3). Hardly legible, it was overlooked in past examinations: 'IOANNES YKENS FEC. Ao 1667'.¹⁹ The second date '1671' appears in the lower left corner of *Cimon and Iphigenia* (no. 1), signed by Jan de Duits (1629-1676). A third date can be found on the hearth-plate in the far room: '1672'.

The painting of *Venus and Adonis* (no. 4, fig. 15) in the lower right corner, is signed and dated by Kaspar van Opstal the Younger (1654-1717): 'Van Opstal 1706'. This probably represents a later addition to the composition, about which more will be said later.

There are two instances where biographical information about the painters' lives gives a 'terminus ante quem'. The *Bacchus* (no. 22, fig. 7) must have been painted before 1671, when the artist, Jan Cossiers, died; and Peeter Boel must have executed the *Boar hunt* and the *Fruit still-life* (nos. 16, 28) before late 1668, when he left for Paris to design tapestries for the Gobelins factory.²⁰

These dates point to a painting campaign that lasted at least five years, between 1667 and 1672. We can only guess why the work took so long. However, the number of contributors could easily have led to logistic problems, causing delays. Indeed, some radical changes in the composition, which will be discussed later, support the assumption that things did not go smoothly.

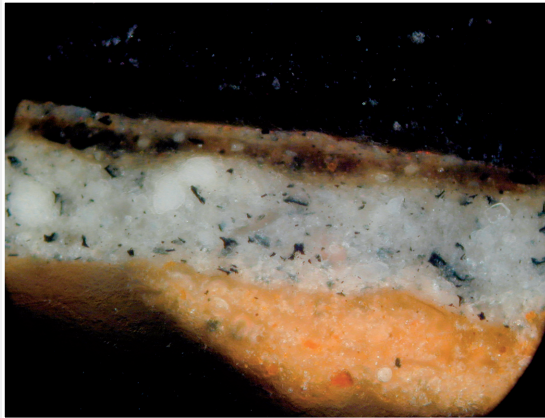


Fig. 6 Cross section of line in architecture. (sample no. 238 x 03, location: 9.7 cm from top, 9.8 cm from right)
 Layer 1: lower ground layer
 Layer 2: upper ground layer
 Layer 3: thin beige layer with earth pigments, lead white and black
 Layer 4: dark brown layer, relatively transparent, containing earth pigments, black, red pigment, a little lead white. (Layer of architecture lines)
 Layer 5: beige layer: lead white, black, small red and orange particles.

Fig. 9 Cross section taken in the blue mantle of the man (sample no. 238 x 12, location: 29 cm from bottom, 64.4 cm from left)
 Layer 1: Lower ground layer
 Layer 2: upper ground layer, with two very large agglomerates of lead white
 Layer 3: white layer with traces of a dark blue (probably indigo)
 Layer 4: glaze of pure ultramarine

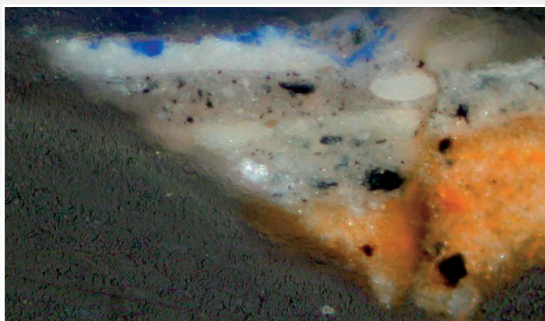


Fig. 7 Jan Cossiers (1600-1671), *Triumph of Bacchus*, after restoration

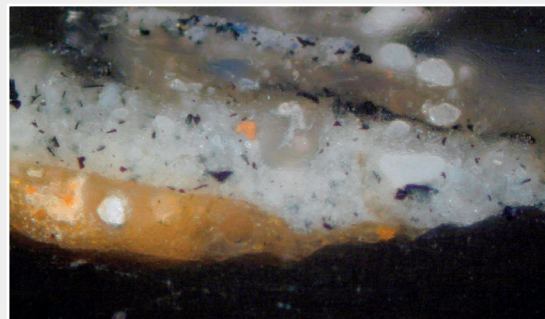


Fig. 8 Cross section of the sky in Cossiers's *Triumph of Bacchus*. (sample no. 238 x 15, location: 46.5 cm from top, 43 cm from right)
 Layer 1: lower ground
 Layer 2: upper ground
 Layer 3: black line
 Layer 4: blue layer, containing discoloured smalt, some lead white and some red lake particles
 Layer 5: upper layer of sky, containing lead white, black, ultramarine, small orange/red particles

• A project leader

A project of this scale must have had an organiser, a person who was dealing with the commissioner, made decisions regarding the composition, contracted the contributors and arranged all practical and financial matters. A very likely candidate for project leader can be found in Gonzales Coques. Not only is the central figure group attributed to him²¹, but Coques was responsible for the organisation of such a project in at least one other instance.²² In 1641, after training with Pieter Breughel III and David Ryckaert II, Coques was entered as a master in the Antwerp guild of St. Luke. He was nicknamed

'little Van Dyck' because of his style of portrait painting.²³ Coques played an important role in the Antwerp artists' community in the second half of the seventeenth century. Apart from dealing in paintings and graphic works by his fellow townsmen²⁴, he also had various social functions. In 1664 and 1679 he was dean of the rhetoric chamber of the 'olyftak', and in 1665/1666 and 1680/1681 dean of the guild of St. Luke. He also played an important role in the Antwerp Academy of painters, which was established in 1663.²⁵ Van der Stighelen demonstrated that sometimes art dealers took on such organising roles.²⁶ Although this research con-

cerned smaller scale paintings executed for the open market, it is interesting to note that Coques himself was also an art dealer.

The painting itself gives evidence of one general compositional idea or vision, as the distribution of the paintings is very symmetrical: on each side of the central axis the compositions roughly mirror each other, and in some cases even the subjects show a certain symmetry. For instance, the size of the paintings placed in the centre and on both sides of the axis, as well as the scale of the figures in them - the figure groups in Ykens' *The Centurion before Christ* (no. 10), in Boeijermans's *Judgement of Paris* (no. 20) and in the *Triumph of Bacchus*, attributed to Jan Cossiers (1600-1671, no. 22, fig. 7) - are uniform. The paintings by Biset and Boeijermans (nos. 13, 23), placed opposite each other, also show similar size figures.

The light comes from the front left in all the paintings, which gives harmony to what is otherwise a quite colourful and busy composition.

It is not clear whether the painting was moved around the artists' studios so that each could make his contribution, or whether they came to the painting. As all the contributors came from Antwerp, the latter would seem more likely than that the project's organiser toured the city with such a large canvas containing areas of fresh and easily-damaged paint.

However, archival research has revealed some examples

of collaborative paintings brought to the studios of the different artists, although it must be said that this concerned paintings produced for the open market with only two or three collaborating artists.²⁷

The execution of the picture

• Preparations for painting

The painting is executed on a single piece of plain weave canvas.²⁸ It measures 174.5 x 210.4 cm and is presently about 0.5 cm wider on the left and right sides, since part of the original tacking margins have become visible on the front of the painting after a lining treatment in 1902-03.²⁹ On all four sides the tacking margins are partially preserved. On at least three sides primary cusping is visible in the x-radiographs, which corresponds with the original tacking holes.³⁰ Presumably the canvas was stretched onto an oversized frame while the ground layers were applied. A painting by Coques, *Painter in his studio* (Staatliches Museum Schwerin), shows an artist painting on a canvas stretched with strings onto such an oversized strainer.³¹

The canvas has a double ground, consisting of an ochre-coloured layer with a slate-grey layer on top (fig. 6). The first layer contains chalk and earth pigments, while the second layer consists mainly of lead white and coarsely-ground charcoal black with the addition of some fine orange-red pigment particles (vermilion or minium). In the x-radiographs, the second ground layer is clearly visible as wide streaks, resulting from application with a spatula or knife.

Grey grounds of this type were widely used for canvas paintings during the seventeenth century in the Southern and Northern Netherlands.³² Contemporary documentary sources give recipes for such double grounds consisting of a lower layer of earth pigments, covered with a grey layer of lead white and black.³³ Economic reasons may have dictated this layer build-up: the first layer, consisting of cheap earth pigments, was used to fill the interstices in the canvas weave, whereas the grey ground, containing the more expensive lead white, was applied to provide an even surface and a base colour for the painting.³⁴

• Setting the stage: the architecture.

The first step in the painting process was to lay-in the architecture. So far no certain attribution to one of the known architectural painters of the time has been made.³⁵



Fig. 10 Jan van Kessel the Elder (1626-1679), *Butterflies and other insects*

A central perspective was used, with its vanishing point situated just above the hearth-plate of the chimney in the far room. A hole, measuring about 2.5 mm in diameter and clearly visible in the x-radiograph (fig. 18), is present in the canvas at this point. It probably resulted from a pin stuck through the canvas; one or more strings would have been attached to it and used as guide lines to create a realistic perspective. Black or white powder rubbed into the string(s) would be transferred to the ground when the stretched string(s) were flicked against the surface.³⁶

The Mauritshuis *Interior* is the only *Kunstkamer* known from this period with such an emphasis on a central perspective. Contemporary interiors usually place the vanishing point left or right of the centre. The central vanishing point made the *Interior* even more impressive, but also created a slightly static composition.

With the perspective organised, the architecture was indicated in painted black lines which are clearly visible in near infrared (IR) examination.³⁷ Due to the increased transparency of covering paint layers, the black painted lines have become visible to the naked eye in some areas (fig. 16), especially in the architectural elements. One of the paintings, the *Triumph of Bacchus* (no. 22), also shows horizontal and vertical construction lines in the sky (figs. 7-8).³⁸

A paint cross section of one of these black lines, consisting of finely ground black and earth pigments, taken in the upper right corner, shows that they were not painted directly on top of the grey ground (fig. 6). Beneath the black line is a thin layer of cream-coloured paint. Similarly thin paint layers, usually close in tone to that applied in the final paint layers, are present in other areas of the painting. They represent a first local lay-in of colour. The fact that coloured areas are present under the black lines suggests that there must have been an earlier underdrawing or sketch, and that these black lines should be seen as a reinforcement or adjustment of an earlier underdrawing which is not visible with IR. Possibly it was executed in a material that cannot be detected with IR.³⁹ A remnant of this first underdrawing may still be present in the outer margin of the anonymous *Landscape with a tree*, where a faint red line can be discerned parallel to the present left margin of the painting.

• *The execution of the figure group*

Coques painted his figure group in a straightforward manner, with a layer build-up reflecting current practice. In some areas, a transparent brown of the first lay-in can be seen. Most of this has been covered by later

paint layers. In the faces, colours have been blended wet-in-wet with flowing brush-strokes following the form. Some shadows have been intensified in a second layer, when details such as the pupils of the eyes were also added.

The clothes are laid in opaquely in a first layer, with highlights and the deepest shadows added in a second layer. Transparent glazes have been applied both locally and as full layers, as in the man's blue mantle (fig. 9). Here the folds are modelled in the lower layer, consisting of lead white and probably indigo. Over this, a glaze of pure ultramarine has been applied, thinly over light areas, thickly over the darks, increasing its three-dimensionality. According to Van Eikema Hommes, this method was used widely in the seventeenth century.⁴⁰ Coques used a similar method in the *Survivanti*, (Oranjezaal, Paleis Huis Ten Bosch, The Hague). Although different pigments were used here in the scarf of the allegorical figure of Hollandia, the paint layer build-up was similar: a glaze of azurite applied in varying thickness over an opaque layer of lead white and smalt, creating a similar three-dimensional effect.⁴¹

• *Different painting methods*

Boeijermans, Quellinus II, De Duits, Cossiers, Boel, Goubau, Van Bredael, Van Hecke, Spierinckx, Peeters and the unknown painters of nos. 5-8, 14, 17, 19, 29 and 32 all made frequent use of the grey ground as a middle tone.⁴² This has unified the overall tonality of the painting. All of these painters seem to have first sketched their compositions in a transparent brown paint.

A warm lighter brown was used by (for example) Boeijermans, Goubau and Quellinus, whereas Van Hecke used a very dark brown, which he reinforced after working up his figures in colour.

Another characteristic of this group of painters is their loose brushwork - paint strokes applied freely next to one another. Figures were painted with planes or strokes of colour, giving them a convincing three-dimensionality.⁴³

This free and open manner, where use is made of the colour of the ground, is a direct continuation of the methods employed by Rubens (1577-1640) and Van Dyck (1599-1641), and continued by Jacob Jordaens (1593-1678) during the second half of the century. The influence of Van Dyck on Coques has already been noted; Quellinus was a pupil of Rubens and Cossiers worked under Rubens on the town decorations for the Triumphal entry of Archduke Ferdinand into Antwerp in 1635.⁴⁴ Although for the other artists it is more difficult to establish a direct relationship, the term 'Rubensian

baroque', used by Vlieghe when referring to the starting point for most Antwerp artists around 1650, describes the situation accurately.⁴⁵ While during the second half of the century classicism gradually entered the style of many painters, they continued to employ the methods and visual language so admired in Rubens' and Van Dyck's paintings, an influence clearly present in the *Mauritshuis Interior*.

Painting wet-in-wet in only a few layers seems to have been the generally preferred method. Paintings such as Goubau's *Italian landscape* (fig. 5) were painted in a single layer, with only a few details added later. Although this reflects current practice influenced by Rubens, it also raises the question of whether the painters simplified their technique because they were working on such a small scale.⁴⁶ For some, this seems to have been the case, especially for those decorating the dado and decorative bands; the techniques used for these paintings are indeed greatly simplified.

A comparison between Boeijermans' *River God* (no. 23) and its prototype, the more than life-size river god in the large *Antwerp, Nurse of Painters* (1665, 188 x 454 cm), shows that the figure has been adapted to the small scale: the left arm has been shortened and the position altered to fit into the rounded format. However, instead of making a detailed copy of the original river god, Boeijermans chose to paint, albeit with smaller brushes, in the same loose style of brushwork he used for the large painting. This resulted in a more roughly-shaped figure and simplified draperies, but completely in line with Boeijermans' 'handwriting' as seen in the larger painting. It is truly remarkable how Boeijermans succeeded in retaining his own style in such a different format.

Even in the relatively large paintings, simplification can be seen. Ykens' *Centurion* is very similar in composition to his large *Allegorical glorification of the birth of a Prince* (1659, 176 x 232 cm).⁴⁷ For the *Centurion* the painter chose to simplify the figures, yet there are clear similarities between the large and small painting, and his 'handwriting' can be recognised in both. The same brown-red contour lines were employed to outline the figures against the background, and the consistency and opaqueness of the paint are comparable. However, in the *Allegorical glorification*, Ykens seems to have made use of the drab cream-coloured ground, left visible along some contours. This contrasts with his decision to cover the (grey) ground in the *Mauritshuis Interior*. Ykens possibly modified his technique to eradicate a colour that was not his own choice.

These two examples show how the smaller size of the canvases prevented painters from using 'all the weapons in their armoury'. They reduced the paintings to their essence whilst trying to retain the paint handling and brushwork that characterised their personal styles. It is not difficult to imagine that other contributors to the *Interior* dealt with scaling-down in a similar way. In some cases, as in Ykens' *Centurion*, the painter, used to a different support or ground, may have modified his technique in other ways.

Some subjects and styles demanded a more 'finished' technique. Jan van Kessel the Elder's *Butterflies and other insects* (1626-1679, no. 15, fig. 10) was executed in minute detail in rather opaque paint layers. In contrast to the free and open manner described above, Van Kessel's technique involved a more complex layer build-up. He covered the grey ground completely with the opaquely-painted landscape. Insects were painted in two layers on top of the sky. Their base colours were laid out first, with the spots and veins on the wings and their delicate legs and antennae added in a final layer.

Peeter Gijssels's *Still life with hare and birds* (no. 3, fig. 11) and Boel's *Fruit still life* (attr., no. 28) were also executed in great detail. Both used very fine brush strokes that are barely visible to the naked eye. However, these paintings still retain some transparency, as the ground can be seen to shimmer through in the background and was sometimes used as a half-tone.

Jan Ykens (1613-1679), known principally for his biblical and secular history scenes, covered the ground completely in a painting which represents yet another style. In his *Centurion before Christ* (fig. 3) he has used sharp contour lines, brown-red for the figures, different colours in other areas of his painting. These contours, combined with a strong contrast between light and shadow and the use of opaque paint layers, have diminished the three-dimensionality of his painting. Instead of using the grey ground for transitions between light and dark, Ykens has used different shades of a single colour (for instance: deep red, light red and pink). He employed a rather complicated layer build-up in the sky (fig. 12). Over the ground, a layer of a greenish blue was applied, consisting of azurite mixed with lead white; this was covered with a second blue composed of ultramarine and lead white. The azurite is seen through the ultramarine layer, whose transparency may have increased with time, creating a rather patchy effect. Ykens' *Centurion* is placed opposite Cossiers' *Triumph of Bacchus* (fig. 7), its figures at a similar scale so as to create



Fig. 11 Peeter Gysels (1621-1690), *Still life*



Fig. 13 Chimney in back room, after restoration

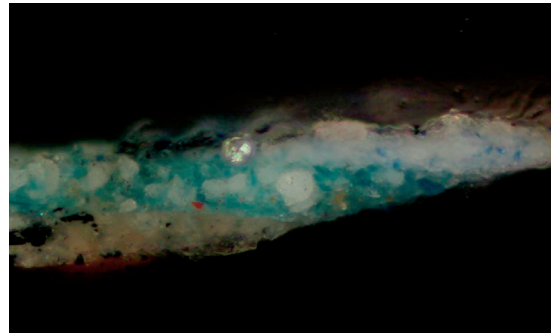


Fig. 12 Cross section taken in the sky of Ykens *Centurion before Christ* (sample no. 238 x 01, location: 48.5 cm from top, 44.7 cm from left)

Layer 1: upper ground layer

Layer 2: blue layer consisting of azurite, lead white, some red and black particles

Layer 3: blue layer consisting of ultramarine and lead white

a compositional symmetry on either side of the central axis. For the same reason, one would expect a similar colour to be used for the sky. However, Cossiers' sky is now rather grey in appearance and suggests that he chose a cloudy grey day, in strong contrast with the triumphant atmosphere of the dancing nymphs and satyrs. But a cross section (fig. 8) shows that this was not his intention. The sky consists of a first thick layer of smalt, followed by a thin layer of ultramarine mixed with other pigments. The originally blue smalt has discoloured almost completely, explaining the now patchy, irregular, and dull appearance of a sky which once must have been a much brighter blue. Perhaps the second ultramarine-containing layer in the sky in Ykens' *Centurion* was applied in order to balance the originally blue sky in Cossiers' *Triumph of Bacchus*.

An exceptional case

For some reason unknown to us, one painter contributed to the *Interior* in a very different way. Charles Emmanuel Biset (1633-c. 1693) painted his *Aesculape changed into a bird* (no. 13, fig. 5), on a separate piece of canvas (30.1 x 33.2 cm).⁴⁸ The scene itself measures about 25 x 28 cm. This separate canvas, with a different weave, has been sewn into an opening cut into the large canvas.⁴⁹ In the x-radiographs, the coarse stitches used to attach the small canvas are clearly visible, as is primary cusping, indicating that its ground layers were applied before it was inserted (fig. 17). Biset has executed his painting in a very smooth manner with hardly any visible brushwork in the flesh tones. The ground layer build-up is similar to that of the big canvas, which can be explained by the fact that this

type of ground layering was very common at the time. At first glance he seems to have used the grey ground as a middle tone in the transition between light and dark areas of flesh paint, but examination with the stereo microscope revealed that Biset covered the ground and made these transitions by mixing a dark, probably black, pigment with his flesh paint, thus creating a cool transition area. Even in the background, the ground layers have been covered with subsequent paint layers. Presumably the little painting was completely finished by the time it was sewn in.

It is unlikely that Biset's painting replaced an earlier composition, as this would not have required the insertion of a new piece of canvas. Also, as the size of Biset's painting exactly matches that of three other paintings occupying similar positions, it is clear that it was painted especially for the *Interior*, and had not been re-used. Biset's canvas is about 2.5 cm wider on all four sides than his actual composition. Bordering paintings and architectural details have been painted on top of the inserted canvas, indicating that Biset's contribution was sewn-in quite early in the execution of the painting. Only the decorative band above the painting was finished earlier, since it had to be partially repainted after the insertion. The poorer quality of this area of decoration is evident (fig. 5).

Boel's *Boar Hunt* (no. 16), painted before he left Antwerp in 1668, is one of the paintings applied on top of the inserted canvas, indicating that Biset's mythological scene was executed before that date.



Fig. 15 Kaspar van Opstal the younger (1654-1717), *Venus and Adonis*. Detail of signature and date



Fig. 16 Lines in architecture which shine through upper paint layers. Detail in the upper right corner

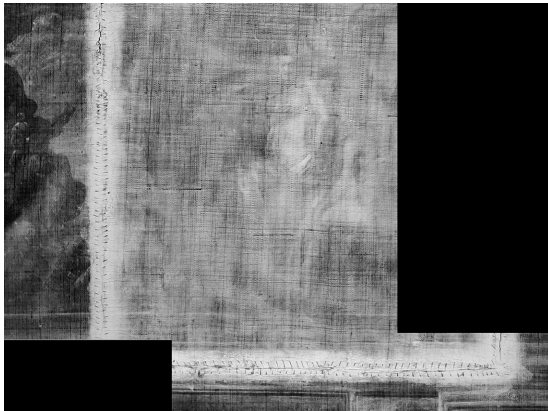


Fig. 17 X-radiograph of the inserted canvas with Biset's *Aesculape* changed into a bird

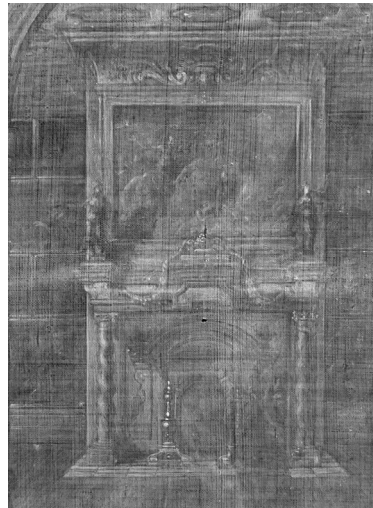


Fig. 18 X-radiograph of the chimney in back room. A hole in the canvas is situated at the top of the hearth plate

Compositional changes

• A mystery man

However straightforward the general layer build-up, there are many areas, such as in the architectural setting, the central figure group and in the paintings in both foreground corners, where a more complex layering system is present due to compositional changes. Although there is no complete explanation for these changes, it can be assumed that they point to an important change in the concept of the painting.

The changes with the greatest impact on the appearance and meaning of the painting are to be found in the foreground. Examination using UV radiation and IR shows that the original composition included a man standing in front of the table (fig. 19). This man was dressed in knee-breeches with ribbons at the sides of his calves, and was wearing a wide cape, a style of dress that went

out of fashion after 1670.⁵⁰ He stood facing the viewer, his head positioned just to the right of the present location of the head of the woman sitting behind the table. The x-radiograph of this area indeed shows a second face; and though it seems rather small to belong to the large figure of the man in front of the table, from the location it must be his. The man must have been present in the early stages of the painting, when the composition was set up in black paint. He was probably over-painted soon afterwards, as he is crudely executed and very sketchy in appearance.

The pentimenti in this area have resulted in a complicated paint layer build-up for the red velvet tablecloth. The tablecloth we now see consists of two layers – the first, of vermilion, covered by a second, of red lake. However, beneath these is another rather thick layer of vermilion, mixed with what is probably a red lake pigment.⁵¹

Fig. 14 Table of paintings and sculptures in *Interior with figures before a picture collection*.



- 1 Jan de Duits, 1629-1676, *Cimon and Iphigenia* (signed: F. de Duijts f.1671)
- 2 Jan Peeters, 1624-1676/80, *Sea view* (signed: JP)
- 3 Peeter Gysels, 1621-1690, *Still life* (signed: P.-gijssels)
- 4 Kaspar van Opstal the Younger, 1654-1717, *Venus and Adonis* (signed: K van opstal 1706)
- 5 Anonymous, *Sea view*
- 6 Anonymous, *Battle scene*
- 7 Jan van Hecke, 1620-1684, *Landscape*
- 8 Jan van Hecke, 1620-1684, *Landscape*
- 9 Peeter van Bredael, 1629-1719, *Landscape*, (signed: P.V.B.f)
- 10 Jan Ykens, 1613-1679, *Centurion before Christ* (signed: Ioannes ykens feci Ao 1667)
- 11 Erasmus II Quellinus, 1607-1678, *Allegory on the City of Antwerp* (signed: EQ)
- 12 Anton Goubau, 1616-1698, *Italian landscape* (signed: A Goubay F)
- 13 Charles Emmanuel Biset, 1633-1691, *Aesculapius changed into a bird*
- 14 Anonymous, *Moonlit landscape*
- 15 Jan van Kessel the Elder, 1626-1679, *Landscape* (signed: J V K)
- 16 Peeter Boel, 1622-1674, *Wild boar hunt*
- 17 Anonymous, *Landscape*

- 31 Jan van Hecke, 1620-1684, *Bathing men* (signed: I V Hecke)
- 32 Anonymous, *Landscape with ruins*
- 33 Theodor Boeijermans, 1620-1678, *Leda and the swan*
- 34 Anonymous, *Hero and the nereids*
- 35 After Titian, *Portrait of Emperor Charles V*
- 36 After Van Dyck, *Double portrait of Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel, and his wife, Alatheia Talbot*
- 37 After Diego Velázquez, *Portrait of Philip IV, King of Spain*
- 38 After Van Dyck, *Double portrait of Mountjoy Blunt Earl of Newport and George, Lord Goring*
- 39 After Van Dyck, *Portrait of Philip II, King of Spain*
- 40 After Rubens, *Portrait of Charles the Bold*
- 41 After Rubens, *Portrait of Ferdinand, Cardinal-Infant of Spain*
- 42 After Rubens, *Portrait of a man in armour*

- 18 Jan van Kessel the Elder, 1626-1679, *Butterflies and other insects*
- 19 Anonymous, *Sea view*
- 20 Theodor Boeijermans, 1620-1678, *The judgement of Paris*
- 21 Jan van Hecke, 1620-1684, *Landscape* (signed: J.V.HECKE.)
- 22 Jan Cossiers, 1600-1671, *The triumph of Bacchus*
- 23 Theodor Boeijermans, 1620-1678, *A river god (Allegory on the Schelde River)* (signed: TB (in ligature))
- 24 Theodor Boeijermans, 1620-1678, *The four seasons* (signed: TBoeijermans F. (TB in ligature))
- 25 Anonymous, *Italian landscape*
- 26 Jan van Hecke, 1620-1684, *Pieta* (signed: IVH)
- 27 Jan van Hecke, 1620-1684, *View of a fortress at night* (signed: IVH F)
- 28 Peeter Boel (attr.), 1622-1674, *Fruit still life*
- 29 Anonymous, *Landscape*
- 30 Peter Spierinckx, 1635-1711, *Village fair* (signed: PvsPirincx (r'n in mirror image))



Fig. 19 IR image with in the foreground the man who was later overpainted

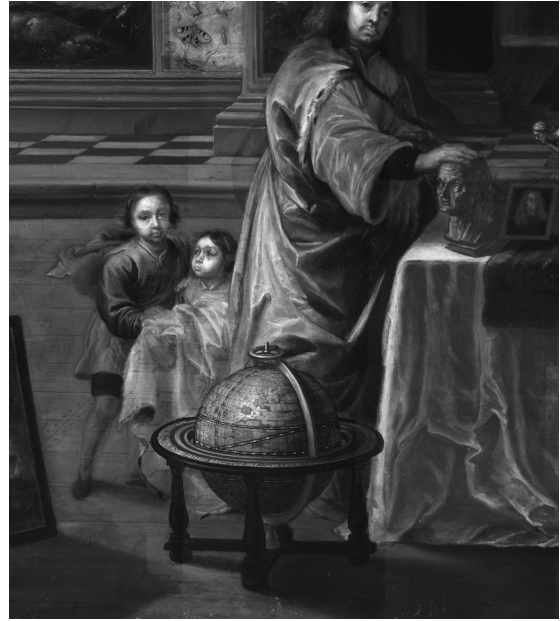


Fig. 20 IR image of the children.
The black and white tiled floor is visible in the area of the mantle. Part of the lion sculpture can be seen in the left of the image



Fig. 21 X-radiograph of the woman behind the table.
She has been painted on top of the tiled floor.
To the right of her head, the head of the man standing before the table is visible

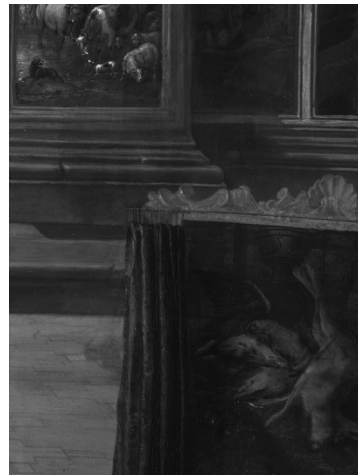


Fig. 22 IR image with the left leg of a man who is admiring the paintings set into the wall

During these earlier stages the floor was not covered by the present wooden floorboards but by two successive floor-tile designs. Both followed the central perspective with the same vanishing point used in later stages, but have different patterns and pigment compositions. An elaborate configuration of black and white tiles, visible in IR, corresponds to the stage of the black painted lines (fig. 20). In the x-radiographs, a second stage is visible, consisting of large tiles in a chessboard pattern of white and blackish tiles. Interestingly, this pattern is not visi-

ble in IR, which indicates that no black pigment was used for the dark tiles. In both tile patterns, a space was allowed for the man with the blue robe standing left of the table, confirming his inclusion in the early stages of the composition. The two boys standing to his left, however, are painted over both tiled floors, as the x-radiograph shows that the black and white pattern continues below their bodies and the part of the mantle they are holding up. The figure of the man has undergone changes after the

composition was laid out in black paint (fig. 20). Originally, his left arm extended onto the table, where his hand rested on some books. A fold in his mantle, just left of his right arm, visible in IR as a dark shadow, did not survive the design stage. Since the man, originally placed in front of the table, would have obstructed the woman sitting behind it, she cannot have been part of the original plan. This is confirmed by the x-radiograph, which shows that she too was painted over the floor tiles (fig. 21).

The attribution of all four figures to Gonzales Coques, whose style is clearly recognisable in all of them, has never been doubted. So even if it is likely that some time elapsed between the execution of the man with the blue mantle and that of the other figures, they were all by his hand.

- *From Interior with Visitors to Family Portrait*

The changes to the composition of the figure group reveal that the painting was begun with an entirely different concept in mind. In the early stages, the figure group consisted of just two men. When we imagine the painting like this, it seems quite similar to several paintings of connoisseurs visiting art collections.⁵² Such paintings are usually populated by several groups of people walking around and admiring the works of art. And indeed, x-radiography and IR research revealed that, during its earlier stages, the *Mauritshuis Interior* included at least three other groups. In the passageway, a man and a woman can be distinguished who seem to have just come in from the left. In front of the fire place in the far room, some dark shapes shimmering through the paint can be identified as one or two figures painted out at a later stage. Near the top left of Gysels' painting, IR shows the foot of a figure who was probably admiring the paintings set into the back wall (fig. 22). The presence of these figures supports the assumption that the original composition was a more typical seventeenth-century interior of a collection with visitors.

Naturally such a change had its effect on other parts of the painting. At the front, both the left and right corners have undergone major compositional changes. In the left corner, IR and x-ray research revealed the contours of what was probably a table, a statue of a lion (or ornamental table) and paintings (fig. 20). The overpainted composition on the right side is harder to decipher, as thick lead containing paint in Van Opstal's painting obscures all x-ray and IR images. Around this painting, fragments can be seen of a similar lion on a pedestal and a sculpted table stand.

The chimneypiece in the far room was also modified (compare figs. 13 and 18). The original was decorated in a simpler style with renaissance details like the statues on either side of the mantel, and a cove-shaped transition to the ceiling. Later the cove was painted out and garlands and picture frame added. These changes, combining baroque and classicist features, call to mind the chimneypieces designed around 1665 by Pieter Post (1608-1669).⁵³

Probably at the same time as the chimney alterations, the ornamental frames of the paintings were embellished with more gilding. The originally ultramarine blue medallion over the central doorway was painted black. Medallions like these in other paintings often carry the coat of arms of the family depicted. In this painting, no trace of any coat of arms could be found, either on the earlier blue or on the final black medallion.⁵⁴

The reason for the dramatic change in composition remains a mystery. Did the patron who commissioned the painting suddenly change his mind or was the painting adjusted to fit a new client? Several attempts have been made to identify the sitters, who may also have been the commissioners. So far none has been wholly convincing.⁵⁵ Only one theory will be discussed here, since the information revealed by the present technical study may shed new light on its plausibility. From documents in the Antwerp city archives mentioning an *Interior with a paintings collection*, it was assumed that it was executed as a reward for solicitor Van Bavegem, who assisted the Guild of St. Luke in a dispute between two guilds.⁵⁶ The male sitter of the *Mauritshuis Interior* was thought to be Van Bavegem. However, more recent publications refute this, as the time frame did not appear to match. This dispute took place between 1668 and 1680, and the painting was not presented to Van Bavegem before 1683, although there is evidence that it was begun by 1674.⁵⁷ This still seemed too late for the *Mauritshuis* painting, which carries 1667 as a first date.

The results of the technical investigation of the *Mauritshuis Interior* may be a reason to re-examine the Antwerp documents. Possibly Van Bavegem was not presented with a new painting but with an older interior, adjusted to his taste and/or to represent his family. This would certainly explain the early date of 1667. It would therefore be worthwhile to explore this possibility, all the more so as the archival research was carried out before 1883 and has not been reviewed since 1915.⁵⁸

- *A late addition*

Even after the painting reached its 'finished' state, a major alteration was made. In 1706, Van Opstal's paint-

ing of *Venus and Adonis*, in the lower right corner, was painted over an unknown depiction (no. 4). There are other instances of additions of paintings to similar interiors; even Van Opstal himself seems to have added to a much earlier cabinet of paintings on at least one other occasion.⁵⁹ *Visitors in a Castle* painted by Coques and others had paintings added in 1681 to the undated earlier composition; and paintings were added to the *Interior of the Palace of Granvelle* by Coques and Wilhelm von Ehrenberg some time after 1675, almost ten years after the initial date and signature by Von Ehrenberg ('1666').⁶⁰ The addition of Van Opstal's painting was probably an attempt to adjust the painting to the fashion of the day. Since then, apart from signs of ageing and various restorations, the *Interior* has been unchanged down to our own times.

Concluding remarks

Paintings like the *Mauritshuis Interior* reveal information on the working relations between artists. The evidence of an overall vision provided by the symmetry and scale of the different compositions supports the assumption that one painter led such projects, instructing others on the details of their contribution. Some interesting

insights into the practicalities of such large group collaborations were obtained. That the logistics of this complex project led to problems is born out by the fact that a separate piece had to be sewn into the large canvas. The length of the period of painting (at least 1667–1672) and the many *pentimenti* also point to the fact that the process may not have been straightforward.

The examination of the *Mauritshuis Interior* has resolved some uncertainties regarding its commission and execution, although it has not proved possible to provide a firm explanation for the dramatic changes. It seems most likely that at some time during the long period of its creation, a change in the commission resulted in a partially-finished painting of an interior with collectors being transformed into a stately and elegant family portrait of a unique character.

The painting resembles no other *Kunstkamer* painting or family portrait of that period, as no other instance of such a combination of genres is known. This can perhaps be explained by the complicated history of the painting. Though the concept of a family group in such a setting may have seemed rather unusual, it can be understood as the solution to a half-finished painting that needed a new *raison d'être*.

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Notes

1. Presently, the painting is on loan to the Noordbrabants Museum in 's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands, until the end of 2006.
2. Although collaborations are by no means an exception in seventeenth-century Antwerp. Many cases are known where painters combined their efforts in one painting containing elements of their different specialities. See for instance K. van der Stighelen, 'Productiviteit en samenwerking in het Antwerpse kunstenaarsmilieu, 1620-1640', *Driemaandelijks*

tijdschrift gemeentekrediet, (1990), 5-15, who describes collaboration in the circle of Cornelis de Vos (1584/5-1651) and in the studio of Andries Snellinck (1587-1653).
3. Q. Buvelot, *Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis: A Summary Catalogue*, (The Hague/Zwolle, 2004), 96.
4. Several examination methods were available. The painting itself was studied in normal light, with ultraviolet radiation and with Infrared reflectography. X-radiographs were made. Samples were taken, some of which were studied as cross sections or dispersed for pigment determination using polarised light microscopy. On one sample SEM-EDX examination was carried out.
5. During the 17th century antique and fantasy costumes were often chosen for portraits. They were considered to provide a 'timeless' quality, in contrast with current fashion which would quickly become outdated.
6. All information on the clothes and jewellery worn by the sitters has been kindly provided by Marieke de Winkel, email, 7-1-2005.

7. Dirk van Delen, Theodor Boeijermans, *Allegorical scene: the union of the St. Luke Guild with 'De Violiere' and 'De Blomme'*, Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, inv.no. 378.
8. H. Vlieghe, *Flemish art and architecture 1585-1700*, (New Haven/London, 1998), 202.
9. Z.Z. Filipczak, *Picturing art in Antwerp 1550-1700*, (Princeton, 1987), 62-64.
10. Vlieghe 1998, 203.
11. Quoted in Filipczak 1987, 64.
12. Filipczak 1987, 65-68.
13. Filipczak 1987, 68; Vlieghe 1998, 202. A gallery of paintings by Wilhelm Schubert von Ehrenberg and other Antwerp painters, dated 1666, contains an allegory of painting, with Poetry, Apollo and Mercury (attributed to Jacob Jordaens), next to visitors dressed in contemporary fashion. (Alte Pinakotek, Munich, inv.no. 896).
E. Langenstein, *Spurensuche - Bilder der Alten Pinakothek in neuem Licht*, (Munich, 1997), no page nos.
14. Although it must be noted that because of its position over the arched doorway, most attention is given to the Judgement of

Paris, attributed to Theodor Boeijermans (1620-1678, no. 20 in fig. 14).
15. Filipczak 1987, 66.
16. Theodor Boeijermans, *Antwerp, nurse of Painters*, (1665), Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, inv.no. 23.
17. Information kindly provided by Professor Christopher White.
18. Gerard Thomas, *A painters workshop*, inv.no. 782; *The (tax) receiver*, inv.no. 5107, both Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor de Schone Kunsten.
19. Before the present research this painting was attributed to his son Pieter Ykens (1648-1695).
20. P.C. Sutton, *The age of Rubens*, [exh.cat. Museum of Fine arts, Toledo Museum of Art] (Boston, Massachusetts, 1994), 572.
21. In a drawing after this painting, the central group is identified as being painted by Gonzales Coques: 'Dit alles van Gonsael' ['This all by Gonsael'].
Anonymous, *Interior with collection of paintings*. drawing, around 1706, New York, The Cooper Union Museum.
This attribution has not been

- questioned by any of the authors writing on the painting, for example: S. Speth-Holterhoff, *Les peintres Flamands de cabinets d'amateurs au XVII^e siècle*, (Brussels, 1957), 174. Buvelot 2004, 96, gives an overview of earlier literature on the painting.
22. Speth-Holterhoff 1957, 172.
23. M. Lisken-Pruss, *Studien zum oeuvre des Gonzales Coques (1614/18-1684)*, [PhD thesis Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität] [Bonn, 2002].
24. Lisken-Pruss, 2002, 33-34.
25. Lisken-Pruss 2002, 308-310.
26. Van der Stighelen 1990, 14.
27. Van der Stighelen 1990, 14.
28. Closed weave, threads irregular thickness (between 0.25 and 1.5 mm), and 12 x 16.5 (h x v) threads per cm². Threads in horizontal direction thinner than in vertical direction, which points to the horizontal threads being warp threads.
29. Wax-resin lining by De Wild, reported in the *Mauritshuis Jaarverslag*, (The Hague, 1903), 42-43.
30. No x-radiograph exists of the top of the painting and no cusping is visible with the naked eye.
31. Gonzales Coques, *Painter in his studio*, 65 x 81 cm. Schwerin, Staatliches Museum.
32. For instance: Daniël Seghers (1590-1661), *Flower garland with statue of virgin and Child*, (Mauritshuis, The Hague, inv.no. 256) has a similar double ground. See for more examples: P. Noble, 'Technical Examinations in Perspective', in B. Broos and A. van Suchtelen, *Portraits in the Mauritshuis*, Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, (The Hague, 2004), 329-335.
33. Two recipes in the De Mayerne manuscript of 1620-44 describe a similar layer build-up. J. A. van de Graaf, *Het De Mayerne manuscript als bron voor de schildertechniek van de barok*, (Mijdrecht, 1958), 138, 141.
34. Prices are probably comparable to those in the Northern Netherlands around 1670. In an estate at Dordrecht in 1667 (Municipal archives, Dordrecht, not. A. de Haen, N.A. no. 20/224, fol. 114) yellow ochre is described as costing 5 guilders per 100 pound, white lead 14 — guilders per 100 pound. E. van de Wetering, *Studies in the workshop practice of the early Rembrandt*, [PhD thesis University of Amsterdam] (Amsterdam, 1986), 43 (note 50).
35. Former attributions for the architecture are: Dirk van Delen (1605-1671) [Speth-Holterhoff 1957, 174], Wilhelm von Ehrenberg (1637-1676) [Mauritshuis catalogue raisonné, 1935, 53-65].
36. Ykens used the pin and string method in his *Centurion* (no. 10), which contains a similar small hole in the left arm of the centurion. It was also used in the Northern Netherlands by a.o. Johannes Vermeer, G. Houckgeest and others. J. Wadum, 'Vermeer in perspectief', in *Johannes Vermeer*, [exh. cat., Mauritshuis, National Gallery Washington] (The Hague, Washington, 1996), 67-78.
37. IR imaging with Artist camera (Art Innovation, Hengelo) mounted with CCD progressive scan image sensor (1360 x 1036 pixels) and Schneider Kreuznach Xenoplan 1.4/23 mm CCTV-lens in NI2 with long wave pass filter 1000 nm. Images captured with Artist Software (release 1.2) and stitched with PanaVue Image Assembler.
38. Here the sky has been painted in two layers, the lower layer consisting mainly of smalt. This smalt layer has discoloured, which may have resulted in increased transparency, causing the vertical dark line to become more visible. (For more information on the build-up of this sky see paragraph on the different painting methods.)
39. An example of the use of chalk for underdrawing has been reported in the seventeenth-century Antwerp inventory of Jasper Becx from 26 March 1637: 'Een paneel wesende een guldenmaet daerop geteekent is met krijt'. K. van der Stighelen, 'Van zelfbeeld tot ezel: kunstenaarsalaam op zestiende- en zeventiende-eeuwse zelfportretten', in H. Vlieghe, A. Balis, C. van de Velde eds., *Concept, design & execution in Flemish painting (1550-1700)*, (Turnhout, 2000), 250.
40. M. van Eikema Hommes, *Changing pictures. Discoloration in 157h-17th-century oil paintings*, (London, 2004), 133-135.
41. L. Speleers and M. van Eikema Hommes, 'entry for G. Coques, de Survivanti', R. Ekkart, *Forthcoming book on the Oranjezaal by the Netherlands Institute for Art History* (RKD), (The Hague).
42. All paintings in the far room also contain many areas of uncovered ground.
43. The pigments used in the *Interior* reflect the variety of pigments available to artists in Antwerp in the seventeenth century. So far the following pigments have been identified with polarised light microscopy and SEM-EDX: lead white, chalk, charcoal black, ultramarine, smalt, azurite, earth pigments such as ochres and umbers, vermilion, red lake (cochenille or kermes, according to pink fluorescence).
44. *Catalogue*, Koninklijk Museum voor de Schone Kunsten, (Antwerp, 1988), 296, 95.
45. Vlieghe describes artistic trends in Antwerp during the years 1648-1700. Vlieghe 1998, 92-104.
46. If the painters indeed had to go to a certain location to add their painting, they may also have wanted to finish in one visit.
47. Koninklijk Museum voor de Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, inv.no. 795.
48. Unfortunately, not many details are known from Biset's life. He was born in Malines in 1633, entered the Antwerp guild in 1661, left Antwerp in 1686, lived in Breda where he died after 1693.
49. More open weave than the large canvas, thread thickness between 0.2 and 0.8 mm, about 11 x 11.8 threads per cm².
50. Marieke de Winkel, email 7-01-2005.
51. SEM-EDX by Annelies van Loon, FOM-Amolf, has identified mercury and sulphide (vermilion), but also chalk and aluminium in this layer. The aluminium is present as a base for a (red) lake.
52. For example: Jacob de Formentrou and others, *A cabinet of Pictures*, dated 1653, Windsor Castle.
53. Information kindly provided by Prof.dr. W. Fock, Leiden University, Letter, dd. 8-7-2002.
54. The bright blue of the original medallion may have been the base colour for such a coat of arms. (Layer build-up of two blue layers, the lower with lead white, probably indigo and black, the upper thick layer consisting of pure ultramarine.) Medallions carrying coats of arms can be found in for example: Willem van Haecht, *The picture gallery of Cornelis van der Geest*, 1628, Antwerp, Rubenshuis; David Teniers II, *The picture gallery* of Archduke Leopold-Wilhelm, c. 1651, Madrid, Prado.
55. Speth-Holterhoff argues that the male is Antoine van Leyen (1628-1686) with his wife and two of their daughters. Van Leyen, a wealthy Antwerp magistrate, is known to have supported many contemporary artists and an inventory of his estate in 1691 mentions an *Interior* in a dark wooden frame. Speth-Holterhoff's comments of the visual resemblance between an engraving of Van Leyen in Cornelis de Bie's *Gulden Cabinet van de edele vrij schildersconts of 1661* and the man in the Mauritshuis painting is not fully convincing, since the males are not particularly similar and even the dimple in the male sitter's chin is not present in De Bie's engraving. Speth-Holterhoff 1957, 175-178.
56. *Mauritshuis catalogue raisonné*, (The Hague, 1935).
57. The architecture had been set up, some attributions had been made. L. Cust and F.J. van den Branden, 'Notes on pictures in the Royal Collections - XXX', *Burlington Magazine*, (1915), 150-158.
58. Initial research published in: F.J. van den Branden, *Geschiedenis der Antwerpsche schilderschool*, (Antwerp, 1883). Van den Branden published again about this subject in Cust and Van den Branden 1915.
59. Speth-Holterhoff 1957, 179.
60. *Interior of Palace of Granvelle* (Leeuwergerm, collection of Barones Idès della Faille), Speth-Holterhoff 1957, 169-170; *Visitors in a castle* (Brussels, collection of count Thierry de Beaufort), Speth-Holterhoff 1957, 170-172.