

SALOMON KONINCK

(Amsterdam 1609 - Amsterdam 1656)

A Scholar Sharpening his Quill

oil on canvas
57.2 x 46 cm (22½ x 18 in)

Provenance: Hubert, The Hague.

SALOMON KONINCK'S, *A SCHOLAR SHARPENING HIS Quill* charmingly captures the moment when a scholar breaks from his writing to quickly, though fastidiously, sharpen his quill. His haggard features, furrowed brow and wispy white beard suggest that he is an elderly, educated scholar nearing the end of his academic career. Laid down in front of him is a large tome - presumably the text he is studying - with an ornate bookmark marking a page of interest.

Several other books are piled around him, as is his quill pot, and perched on top of one the books is a sand timer. His dress is thick and layered - an angular red felt hat, green brocade undershirt and red velvet tunic all offer evident warmth to the aging scholar as he works quietly in the darkened room.

The depiction of learned men, whether scholars, astrologers or physicians, was a popular form of genre painting amongst seventeenth century Dutch artists. The formation of the Dutch Republic in 1581 had created a climate of religious and intellectual tolerance and though Calvinism was the predominant belief, Catholics, Protestants and Jews



Salomon Koninck, *An Old Scholar*, between 1609 and 1656, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Collection of Count von Brühl, Dresden, 1769 (Figure 1)



Jan van Eyck, *St. Jerome in his Study*, 1435-1440, Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan (Figure 2)



all lived within the relatively accepting Dutch milieu. Furthermore, the humanist teachings expounded by the scholar and theologian Desiderius Erasmus (c.1466-1536) were widely read and further contributed to the sentiment of intellectual acceptance. Indeed, when Hans Holbein the Younger (c.1497-1543) painted Erasmus in 1523 the resulting portrait showed 'an idealised picture of a sensitive, highly cultivated scholar, and this was precisely how Erasmus wanted to be remembered by future generations'.¹

Scientists and thinkers from all over the world, attracted by the climate of tolerance, came to the Dutch Republic - particularly to the renowned University of Leiden - as well as Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, Huguenots from France, prosperous merchants and printers from Flanders, and economic and religious refugees from the Spanish controlled parts of the Low Countries who found safety in the city. The additional influx of Flemish printers coupled with the city's intellectual tolerance made Amsterdam a centre for the European free press.

Due to the numerous scholars, theologians and scientists who found themselves in Amsterdam, as well as the intellectual renaissance of the written word, it is unsurprising that artists such as Koninck embraced the opportunity to capture these respected men of letters either deep in thought or hard at work in the natural environment of their studies.

However, the image of the scholar in his study was not a wholly novel concept in sixteenth and seventeenth century art. In earlier religious iconography, the Doctors of the Church, the great theologians of the early Church, were sometimes portrayed scholastically in their studies; St. Jerome is commonly represented as a pensive scholar, diligently working on his translation of the Bible into the Latin Vulgate.² One can see the compositional similarities between Jan Van Eyck's (c.1395-1441) interpretation of St. Jerome and Koninck's *A Scholar Sharpening his Quill*, particularly as Van Eyck shows the scholar-saint in his study apparently fatigued from excessive study, surrounded by his books and writing materials (fig. 2). Although the present work is undoubtedly a secular portrait of an elderly scholar at work, the close similarities suggests that artists such as Koninck were appropriating an earlier iconography for a contemporary audience in post-Reformation Amsterdam.

There was clearly an appetite for paintings - either commissioned portraits or genre scenes - of learned men engaged in study in the



Caravaggio, *St. Jerome in his Study*, 1605-1606, Galleria Borghese, Rome (Figure 3)



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of a Scholar*, 1631, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Collection of Count von Bruhl, Dresden, 1769 (Figure 4)

seventeenth century Dutch Republic. *An Old Scholar* in the Hermitage is another example of Koninck's foray into this sub-genre of scholarly the opened manuscript, an elderly scholar pensively muses on the work virtue (fig. 1). Within a similar darkened studio, with light strewn across at hand. As in *A Scholar Sharpening his Quill*, the scholastic setting of the scene is exacerbated by piles of reference books surrounding the old man.

It is interesting to compare *An Old Scholar* to Caravaggio's (1571-1610) composition of *St. Jerome in his Study* completed just before Koninck's birth (fig. 3). Though there is no suggestion that Koninck would have ever seen this work, he would have been aware of the Roman artist's innovative painting methods. Both figures pour over an open text and the effective, deliberate use of light from unknown source is pivotal. For Caravaggio the harsh lighting highlights St. Jerome's sinewy muscles and reminds us of his - and our own - mortality, while the softer lighting applied by Koninck helps conjure the impression of a learned scholar working late into the night, the gentle touch to his beard showing him lost in thought.

Throughout his career, Koninck followed the artistic and stylistic development of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) with great interest and Koninck's *oeuvre* clearly reveals the influence of his famed contemporary.

¹ Buck, S., *Hans Holbein*, (Cologne: Könemann, 1999), p. 50; see *Portrait of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam with Renaissance Pilaster*, 1523, National Gallery, London, on loan from Longford Castle, Wiltshire.

² St. Augustine of Hippo - a fellow Doctor of the Church - is also shown working in his study. See for example: Sandro Botticelli, *St. Augustine in his Study*, 1480, Ognissanti Church, Florence.

Koninck adopted his sometime preference for depicting hermits, old men and philosophers at their studies.

Both *A Scholar Sharpening his Quill* and *An Old Scholar* closely resemble Rembrandt's *Portrait of a Scholar* in style, execution and mood as both artists seek to provide a glimpse of psychological insight (fig. 4). Though Rembrandt's scholar is, relatively, a younger man, he pours over his books, firmly gripping his quill, in an equally dedicated manner. Furthermore he has paid great attention to the texture of the thick tablecloth and the heavy bindings of the books.

However it was not only Koninck who displayed the influence of the Dutch master in his intimate, personal representations of elderly scholars and philosophers. Rembrandt had numerous pupils throughout his career and the artists in his circle produced various interpretations on this theme; often barely distinguishable from the hand of their teacher. Artists such as Ferdinand Bol (1616-1680), see figure 5 and Gerbrand van den Eeckhout (1621-1674) (fig. 6) - both pupils of Rembrandt - painted scholar-genre scenes in a style closely associated with Rembrandt's own.

Among the more prominent characteristics of Rembrandt's style - and, subsequently those artists in his immediate circle - was the poignant use of *chiaroscuro* employed to create a theatrical presentation of light and shade. This derived from the art of Caravaggio, see figure 3, but was more likely adopted and adapted by Rembrandt from the Utrecht Caravaggisiti.³ For Rembrandt and his circle, the skilful application of light and a warm colour palette allowed for a more emphatic, compassionate representation of humankind, irrespective of age or wealth.



Ferdinand Bol, *Portrait of a Scholar Sitting at the Table*, c.1650, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Collection of the Comte de Baudouin, Paris, 1781 (Figure 5)



Gerbrand van den Eeckhout, *Scholar with his Books*, 1671, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest (Figure 6)

Koninck began his artistic training in 1621 with David Colijns (c.1582-after 1668) and was later apprenticed to François Venant (1591-1636) before finishing his training with Claes Cornelisz (c.1591-1655). He was particularly renowned for his fine painting detail and devoted special attention to the exact rendition of fabrics and cloths, many of which were oriental or unusual in appearance. Furthermore, in his scenes of scholars and church fathers reading or writing, men weighing their gold, counting their money or trimming quills, accessories such as books, papers or money play an important role and are depicted with great precision and evident enjoyment. In addition to these genre scenes, Koninck was also a painter of historic and religious scenes as well as more general morality tales such as the *Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard* in the Hermitage (late 1640s, Collection of Johann Gotzkowski, Berlin, 1764).

We are grateful to Professor Werner Sumowski for confirming the attribution on the basis of photographs (written communication, 9 March, 2008).

³ The Utrecht Caravaggisiti were a group of Baroque artists - primarily active in Utrecht - who had been in Rome in 1610-162 when Caravaggio's later style of *chiaroscuro* was particularly influential. See for example works by Dirck van Baburen (c.1595-1624), Gerard van Honthorst (1592-1656) and Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588-1629).