

Ter Borch

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Masters of Art

Gerard ter Borch

(1617-1681)



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Masters of Art Series

Gerard ter Borch



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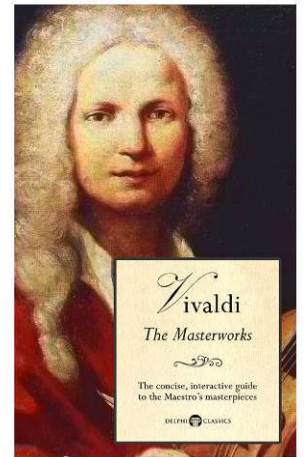
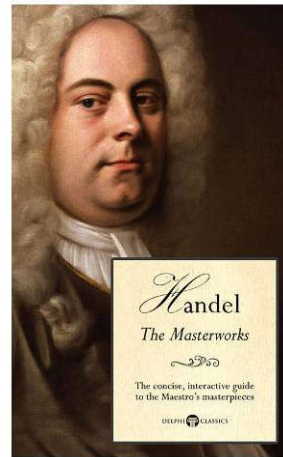
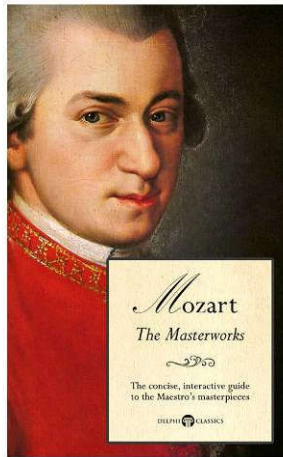
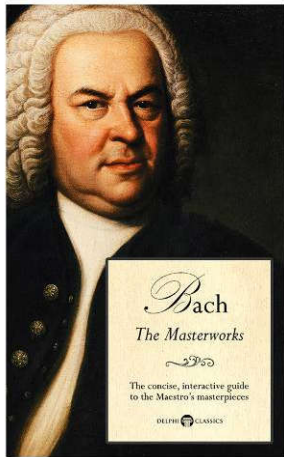
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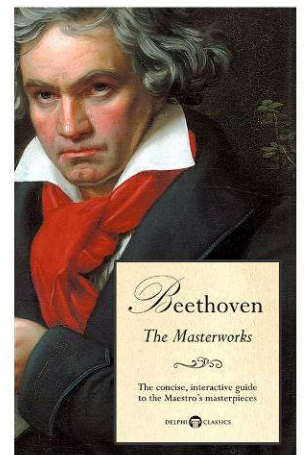
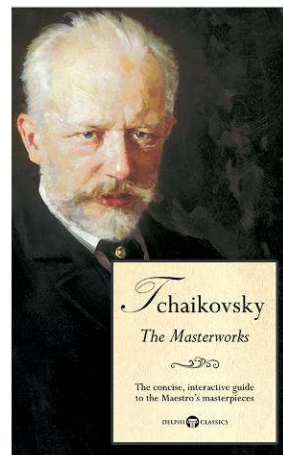
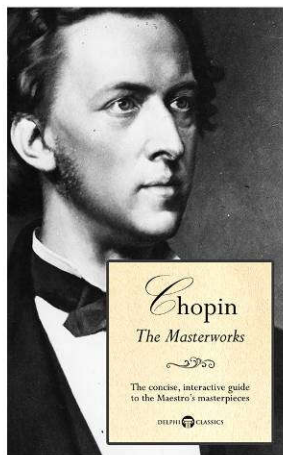
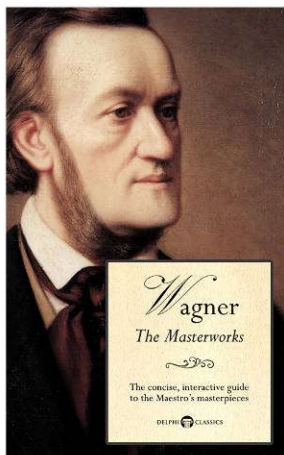
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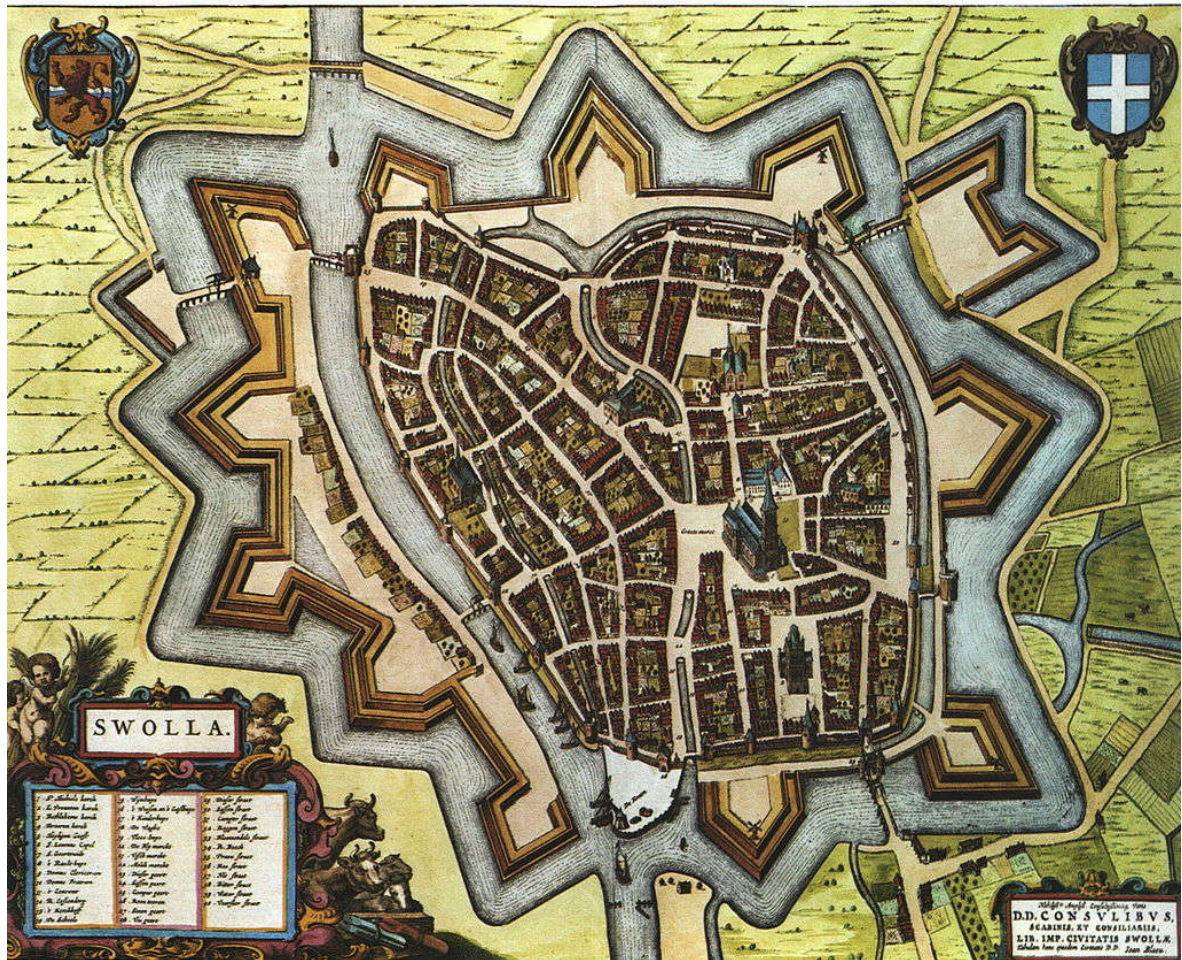


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The Highlights



Map of Zwolle by Joan Blaeu in 'Toonneel der Steden', 1652 — Ter Borch was born in December 1617 in Zwolle, in the province of Overijssel in the Dutch Republic.



Zwolle today

The Highlights



In this section, a sample of Ter Borch's most celebrated works is provided, with concise introductions, special 'detail' reproductions and additional biographical images.

Man on Horseback (1634)



A leading exponent of the Dutch Golden Age of art, Gerard ter Borch was born in 1617 in Zwolle. Unlike for many painters of his era, there is a surprising amount of surviving documentary material regarding his life and early career. Firstly, he trained at the age of eight with his father Gerard ter Borch the Elder (1584-1662), an accomplished artist that had spent several years in Rome. Many of his childhood drawings were annotated with notes and dates by his father, adding to the wealth of biographical knowledge of the artist's early period.

He was not precocious in his talent, but slow to mature, becoming assured in his work in the late 1640's in his mid-twenties. His early work reveals little of the sensitivity of expression and understanding that would later permeate his major portraits and genre paintings. The youthful works also lack the skillful mastering of texture and sheen of fabrics that would go on to win him great renown. Nonetheless, they laid a foundation for an extraordinary burst of creativity, producing a series of intensely personal and timeless works, which captured human ideals and moods, resonating far beyond their setting. In time, they would inform the work of Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) in Delft and Frans van Mieris (1635-1681) in Leiden.

Apart from the technical guidance given by his father, Ter Borch also received invaluable instruction in the business requirements of running a studio and forming important and lucrative contacts. Zwolle was an important trading centre, though it was largely provincial as a city, having never attained a considerable artistic tradition. Indeed, Gerard the Elder would have learnt under no prestigious teacher in the city and had to complement his training through long and expensive studies in Italy and Spain. The father's aspirations to become a professional artist were doomed to fail, as he was never financially secure to support his large family on the income he earned from his art. In 1628 he accepted a steady income of an administrative post in Zwolle, effectively ending his dreams of becoming a great artist, yet safeguarding the livelihood of his children. His role was to collect taxes on commercial traffic passing through the city for the States General in The Hague — a time-consuming task, as the city's trade from Germany and Holland was bustling, due to its position at the juncture of two rivers. Although his new role precluded opportunities of pursuing his art, he no doubt held great hopes for his son, who demonstrated an innate talent for drawing.

Due to the large number of drawings that have been preserved in the family archives, we can glimpse the teaching process that the young Ter Borch underwent. In his earliest years he was encouraged to study prints made by Hendrik Goltzius (1558-1617) and Aegidius Sadeler (1555-1609), from which he learned how to manage his pen strokes and to apply ink with a brush for *chiaroscuro* effects. Next, he was instructed to draw from sculptures, especially casts of antique models, which taught him to model the human form with light and dark components. In the early 1630's, Ter Borch was studying prints by Pieter Quast (1605-1647) and Jacques Callot (1592-1635), producing technically assured copies of these masters, whose work revealed how to exaggerate human features for effect, while using body language to propel narrative.

By 1631, at the age of fourteen, Ter Borch was already working with a sketchbook, completing landscape drawings that included representations of buildings in Zwolle and farmsteads in the nearby countryside. These pen and ink drawings reveal compositional sensitivity, a good understanding of perspective and a recurring interest in exploring *chiaroscuro* effects. His interest in examining nature and human figures, both in motion and rest, was in keeping with the development of Dutch art during the 1620's and 1630's. Already, the son was exploring and progressing further than his father; realising this, Gerard the Elder unselfishly sent his son to Amsterdam and then Haarlem to study with new masters, who could better provide guidance in new artistic approaches.

It has been suggested that he studied either under Pieter Codde (1599-1678) or Willem Duyster (c. 1598-1635), who both were known for their painted scenes of soldiers in barracks or drunkenly idling away their time in inns — subjects that Ter Borch would gravitate toward in the early years of his career. In 1634 he arrived in Haarlem, where he studied with Pieter Molijn (1595-1661), a highly respected draftsman and painter, who was also active in the administration of the city's Guild. Molijn had embraced the stylistic innovations of the time and was able to provide his pupil with guidance in a range of subjects, including market scenes, dune landscapes and cavalry battle scenes. The immediate impact of this new teacher is clearly evident in the stylistic transformation of Ter Borch's landscape drawings. He no longer used pen in his sketchbook, opting instead for black chalk — the master's preferred medium. The soft and broken lines produced by chalk enabled him to convey atmospheric effects of dune landscapes with greater detail. His successful apprenticeship under Molijn culminated in 1635, when he was named a master in his own right in Haarlem's Saint Luke's Guild.

Man on Horseback (1634), housed today in the Museum of Fine Arts, after a 1961 purchase from the estate of the collector Martha Dana Mercer, portrays a rider slumped in the saddle, moving away from the viewer. The Dutch War for Independence had taken place over much of Ter Borch's early career and many of his early works concern military themes, even in drawings made when he was eight years old. Represented from behind, the cavalier's posture, with downcast head and slumped position, convey an apt expression of the struggle and loneliness of war. This is no heroic paragon, represented in action in the midst of battle, but instead the daring portrayal of a jaded victim, trudging across the fields of an undefined and loveless landscape. The viewer regards the horseman from a low vantage point, making us feel the full weight of the composition's gloomy overtones. Save for a lone yellow feather in his hat, the palette is sombre and stark, formed of greys and browns. The horse and rider are starkly silhouetted against a cloud-laden sky, with no hope of sun nor better times. Alone, the soldier must endure the endless misery of war. His unseen facial features only heighten the sense of alienation.

There are two other versions of the painting, hinting at the artist's use of a manikin model to produce similar depictions of the same posture over a long series of studies and oil paintings. These painterly props were invaluable for artists of the time and we know that Ter Borch's father was a keen advocate of their use. Although manikins were not helpful for artists in remembering facial expressions, for this particular canvas that was of course no concern. *Man on Horseback* is an impressive achievement for the young artist and there is no precedent for such a strikingly original depiction of a horseman from behind.





Detail



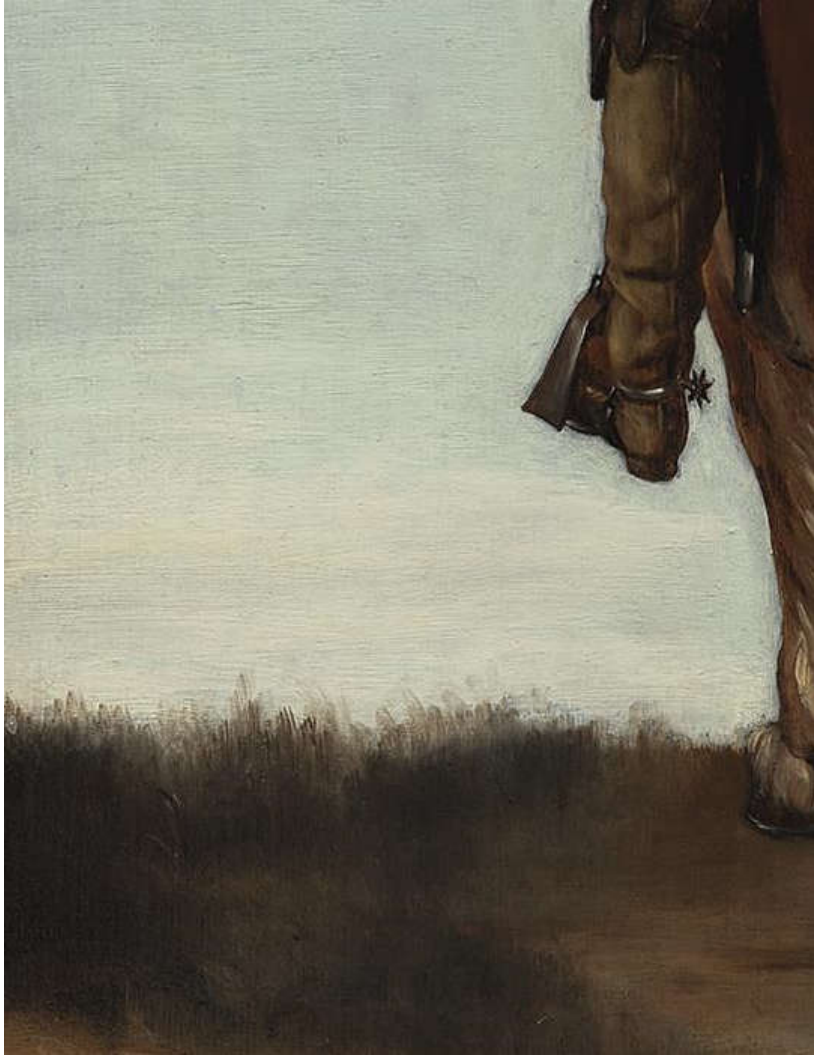
Detail



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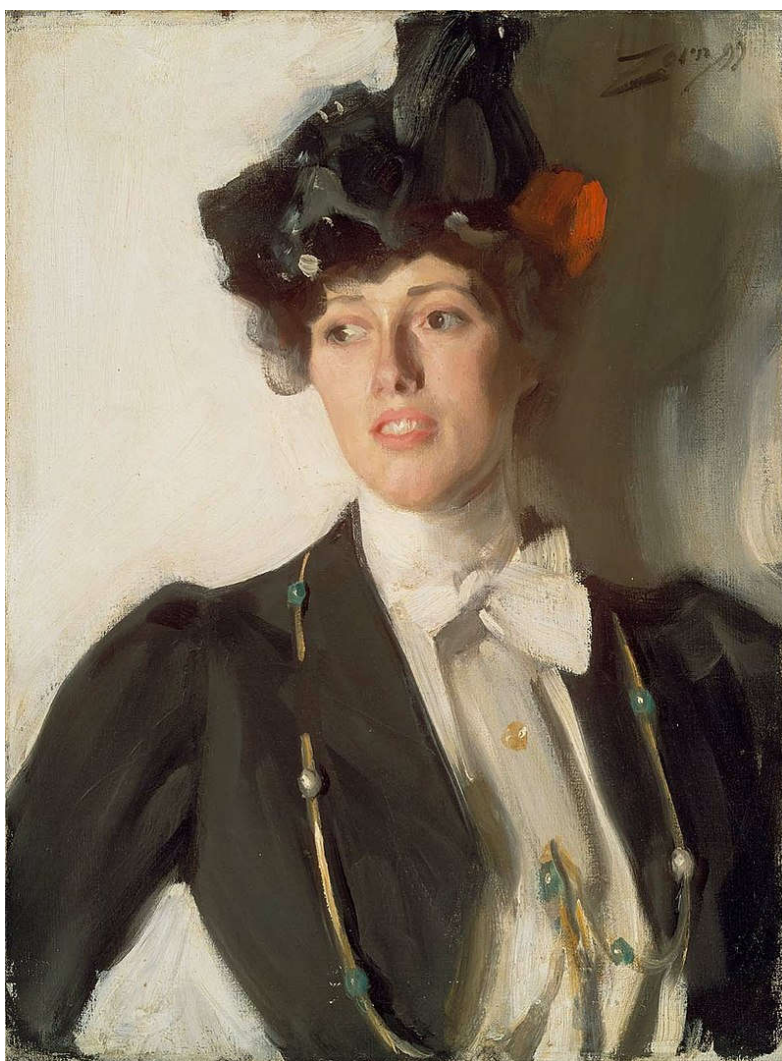
Portrait of the artist's father, Gerard ter Borch the Elder, by his son Moses, 1660



Eighteenth century engraving of Pieter Molijn, Ter Borch's first great master



'Landscape with Peasants' by Pieter Molijn, Budapest, Szépmvészeti Múzeum, 1640



Portrait of Martha Dana Mercer by Anders Zorn, 1899 —Mercer (1872 – 1960) was a famed art collector and philanthropist, who bequeathed this canvas to the Museum of Fine Arts of Boston.

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