Volker Manuth

A Note on Carel Fabritius’s *Sentry* in Schwerin

The purpose of this article is to address two questions connected with Fabritius’s painting of the so-called *Sentry* in Schwerin which is signed and dated 1654 (fig. 1).¹ The first is related to the provenance of the painting, the second to whether or not the depiction of the city gate is a product of the artist’s imagination or whether it includes a reference to a specific topographical situation. In other words: does the relief above the archway showing St Antony Abbot with his pig refer to the Saint as a model of diligence and a kind of moral counterpart to the sentry, as has been suggested?² Or, is it possible that it is simply used to identify the name of the gate as one of the very few Sint Antoniuspoorten still existing in the United Provinces during Fabritius’s lifetime? It should be emphasized that this article does not intend to provide a new interpretation of the Schwerin painting. The following observations are simply meant to add information to the current state of research into what Christopher Brown has called “the most mystifying of all Fabritius’s paintings.”³

The Provenance of the Painting

Little is known of the early history of the painting before it was acquired by the dukes of Mecklenburg-Schwerin in the eighteenth century. It has been suggested that the painting could have been identical with “Een stuc schilderij, gedaen door Fabritius, afbeeldende een jager” (A painting done by Fabritius, depicting a hunter) mentioned in a notary’s document in Leiden dated December 5th 1677, which records the sale of that picture.¹ However, the Schwerin painting provides enough evidence to doubt the identification with the one from the Leiden document. Hunting was reserved to noblemen and a couple of privileged and wealthy regents who performed this noble undertaking while spending time at their buitenplaatsen outside the cities. It is well-known from paintings and documents that these hunters dressed according to their social status and ambitions and therefore hardly like the rather shabby looking man on the Schwerin painting. Furthermore, he is armed with a type of musket which is much too heavy to be used for hunting. Finally, it seems very unlikely that a Dutch notary in 1677 would not have known that a helmet was a very improbable headgear for a hunter.

The unlikely connection between the Schwerin painting and the one described in the 1677 document leaves us with the first mentioning of the picture more than one hundred years later in 1791. In the Schwerin catalogue of that year it is attributed to the monogramist A.S. This attribution might have been based, as Gero Seelig has suggested, on a misinterpretation of the similar looking letters on one of the posted notices on the column.¹ The attribution clearly indicates that by 1792 the prominent
Fabritius signature in the lower left corner of the painting must have been covered. This is confirmed by the French catalogue of 1809 which mentions the original signature as being discovered during the recent cleaning of the painting which had been removed from Schwerin by Napoleonic troops, brought to Paris and exhibited there in 1807. When exactly before 1792 the Fabritius signature was covered is not known. This however must have happened before the watercolour copy was made which today is part of the Amsterdam Six Collection (fig. 2). It shows differences in comparison with the painting. Most important is the omission of the signature, the dog and the sentry's sword. In 1964 Werner Sumowski was the first to mention the watercolour. He attributed it to the not very well-known Dutch landscape painter Theodoor Wilkens who died in 1748. Unfortunately, Sumowski did not communicate the reasons for this attribution. The provenance of the watercolour can be traced back to 1756 when it was part of the Duc de Tallard sale in Paris. In the sale catalogue it is attributed to Van den Eeckhout and described as "A very beautiful coloured drawing, a watercolour which represents a soldier sleeping on a bench at a city gate..." This coincides with the fact that the verso of the watercolour shows an inscription: "Gerbrand van den Eeckhout." The lower right corner shows the collectors mark of Cornelis Ploos van Amstel (1726-1798). In 1800 the watercolour was part of the sale of his famous collection. As lot number 21 in Album D "Containing beauti-
fully coloured drawings by the most famous Dutch masters" we find "A soldier with a gun, sitting in an old building [...] with watercolours, after G. van den Eeckhout, by T. Willekens (sic)." The same information and attribution was repeated when the watercolour was sold again in Amsterdam in 1819 as part of the collection of Hendrik Willink.

From this provenance we can deduce that already in 1756 it was no longer known that Carel Fabritius was the painter of the Schwerin picture. The date of the Paris sale of the watercolour copy provides a terminus ante for the covering of the signature and the figure in the background which came to light during the recent cleaning of the painting in preparation of the exhibition in The Hague and Schwerin. Secondly, it is very likely that the attribution of the watercolour to Theodor Wilkens does not go back any further than to the time around 1800 and to Cornelis Ploos van Amstel who – as is well known – was not always reliable in his attributions.

Let us return to the painting's provenance. The exact date of its acquisition for the Schwerin collection is unknown. We do know however that the painting is not mentioned there in the 1752 inventory. Therefore, the Sentry must have been acquired between 1752 and 1792 and obviously not as a work by Carel Fabritius. It has gone unnoticed so far that the painting is mentioned in the 1753 sales catalogue of the collection of Gerhard Michael Jabach (Cologne-Leghorn 1751). Gerhard Michael,
born in Cologne, was the grandson of the famous collector Everhard Jabach (1618-
1695) who settled in Paris in the 1630s and who in 1671 was forced to sell his huge
collection of more than 600 hundred paintings and most of his legendary collection
drawings to Louis XIV. His grandson who settled in Livorno (Leghorn) as a
banker inherited parts of the remaining drawing collection. He died there on May
26th 1751 and his collection of around 90 paintings, more than 1000 (mostly Italian)
drawings and some curiosities where sold at auction through the art dealer Hendrik
de Leth in Amsterdam on 16 October 1753. Most of the drawings were acquired by
the Amsterdam collector Antoni Anthonisz. Rutgers (1695-1778). Jabach’s collec-
tion of paintings included works by Italian masters such as Parmigianino, Sebastiano
Ricci, the Carracci, and Luca Giordano. But he had Flemish and Dutch pictures as
well. Remarkable is a group of 11 paintings by Adriaen Brouwer. As one of four paintings
attributed to Rembrandt, lot number 37 is described as: Een Soldaat in de Poort
zittende en syn Geweer schoon maakende, van den zelven, h.2v. 3 ½ d., b.2v (A soldier
sitting in a gate cleaning his gun, by the same [i.e. Rembrandt]). The given measure-
ments convert to 65.6 x 56.6 cm. The Schwerin painting measures 68 x 58 cm. The
description of the painting as well as the measurements leaves hardly any doubt that
the painting must have been identical with the Schwerin Sentry by Carel Fabritius.
A similar painting by Rembrandt is neither known nor documented.

The annotated copy of the sales catalogue at the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische
Documentatie in The Hague mentions that the painting was bought by a
certain “Winter” for 32 guilders and 10 stuivers, the highest price for any of the Rem-
brandts in the sale (fig. 3). The name is most probably referring to the Amsterdam
draftsman and art dealer Hendrik de Winter (1717-1790) whose family on father’s
side was related to the German painter Balthasar Denner (1685-1749), also known
as “Pore-Denner”. During a visit to the buitenplaats Zoetendaal in the province of
Utrecht in 1739, Denner portrayed Hendrik de Winter (fig. 4). From Johan van
Gool who in 1751 included De Winter in his Nieuwe Schouburg we know that he
was a pupil of Cornelis Pronk until around 1745 De Winter traveled
extensively through Holland and the North of Germany where he produced topo-
 graphical drawings. From the 1750s onwards he concentrated more and more on his second career as "kunstmakelaar". He was well-known in the Amsterdam auction rooms, buying and selling prints, drawings and paintings. In 1753 at the Jabach sale De Winter either bought the Fabritius for himself or in commission. Taking this into consideration one wonders how reliable Ploos van Amstel's attribution of the watercolour to Wilkens is. Could it be that it was Hendrik de Winter himself who copied the painting he had acquired in 1753? We know of at least one other watercolour copy by him after a seventeenth-century painting. In 1758 he copied a painting by Egbert van der Poel (1621-1664) depicting Delft after the explosion of the powder magazine in 1654. Did De Winter produce these watercolours after seventeenth-century paintings to send them to potential buyers of these paintings? This might explain why the drawing of the Sentry turned up in the Duc de Tallard sale in Paris in 1756.

When exactly after 1753 and whether Hendrik de Winter sold the painting directly to the duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin can only be answered with the help of the Schwerin archives. So far, no information regarding the date of acquisition has turned up. Duke Christian Ludwig of Mecklenburg-Schwerin (1683-1756) and his son Friedrich (1717-1785) both visited the Low Countries and were both keen collectors of Dutch paintings. Because the painting was auctioned in Amsterdam only three years before the death of Duke Christian Ludwig, it is more likely that it was his son Friedrich who acquired it.

Nothing is known about the painting's provenance before it was sold in Amsterdam in 1753 as part of Gerhard Michael Jabach's collection. In any case the painting did not come with the works of art Gerhard Michael inherited from his grandfather or, to be more precise, the painting is not mentioned in Everhard Jabach's inventory of 1696. That the painting was sold as a Rembrandt in 1753 is less surprising considering the absence of reliable information about Fabritius's life and the lack of knowledge
about his style during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Around 1750 a painting attributed to Rembrandt would obviously fetch a higher price than a signed work by Carel Fabritius.

The Location of the City Gate

It has often been pointed out that the architectural setting of the Schwerin picture contains a number of strange elements. Most uncommon is the column in front of the gateway with a raised portcullis. The column marks the end of the diagonally running wall behind the sentry. It has no obvious function and even obstructs the full use of the opening of the gateway. Furthermore, its position in relation to the space between the two arches of the gateway and the length of the sunlit wall is not rendered convincingly. Another strange feature of the setting is the situation outside the gateway. In 1882 Friedrich Schlie described it as a "shallow vaulted archway with a view of an open field, a long flat tiled roof and a higher building surrounded by trees." However, a closer look reveals that there is a wall and a narrow path just outside the archway. This wall which obscures most of the view, does not consist of stone but of earthwork. Behind this wall one sees a tree and a reddish rooftop. The triangular beige form between the roof and the tree can be identified as part of a second house. In order to function properly as part of a city's security precautions most city gates were built in such a way that approaching individuals and groups could be seen from far away. An obstructed view like in Fabritius's painting would leave the sentry or the members of the civic guards no time to react to unexpected intruders. This as well as the unlikely position of the column and its combination with a gateway seems to confirm that Fabritius based the architecture on invention rather than on observation. But can we be really sure about this? Is it possible that Fabritius has combined invented with observed elements or even with architectural structures painted from memory?

Above the inner arch of the gate Fabritius has prominently included a relief depicting Saint Antony Abbot with his attribute, a pig. Apparently the artist considered it important to identify the gateway as a Sint Antoniespoort. Saint Antony-confraternities and city gates named after this popular saint whose help protected against the
plague were no exceptions especially in the Lower Rhine area. In the United Provinces however, we know of no more than three city gates of that name. The one in ’s-Hertogenbosch was destroyed in 1624 already. Another one was located in Amsterdam. In 1593 it was built at the end of the Breestraat (exactly where the Mr. Visserplein is today) replacing the old Sint Antoniespoort (today the Waag) on the Nieuwmarkt. It was close to Rembrandt’s house where Carel Fabritius studied in the early 1640s. Jan van Kessel’s drawing from 1664 shows the Amsterdam Sint Antoniespoort before it was demolished in 1670 (fig. 5).26 The situation of the city gate which was partly built of brick and partly of sandstone and which showed pediments with the coat of arms of Amsterdam on both sides is very different from the situation in the Schwerin picture. Similarities between the two are restricted to their name.
The third Sint Antoniespoort can be found in the city of Nijmegen. The gate has a certain fame in the city's history because it was here that in 1589 Maarten Schenk (1549-1589) tried in vain to force his way into Nijmegen with his troops to free the occupied city (since 1585) from the Spaniards. The modest gate is facing the river Waal and is located at the end of a narrowing path connecting the Lage Markt with the Waalkade (fig. 6). It is medieval by origin but was radically changed in 1609-1610. The last restoration took place in 1987 and today it consists of a rectangular two-storied gate house with a saddle roof. The gateway is covering most of the lower storey. It is flanked by two houses which are also late medieval by origin with changes and additions dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Despite the recent restoration of the gateway and the adjacent houses the basic structure is fairly well preserved. There is, however, no indication whatsoever that the city gate in Nijmegen originally featured a column like the one in the painting. If this is the city gate the artist depicted we have to conclude that this element is very likely a product of the artist's imagination. However, in addition to more general similarities it is also the very specific situation outside the gateway that strongly resembles the one painted by Fabritius. Like in the Schwerin painting in Nijmegen a wall raises immediately behind the gateway's field side leaving just enough space for a little path running parallel with this wall (fig. 7). This situation is not the result of a recent restoration but goes back to the seventeenth century. In order to protect the city from flooding the embankment of the river Waal was raised in 1638. The newly created elevated space between the river and the first row of houses including the Sint Antoniespoort was used to plant trees and built some houses. A watercolour from 1878 by Rudolphus Lauwerier (1797-1883) indicates that even at the end of the nineteenth century the Waalkade featured trees and some buildings (fig. 8). This unique situation comes close to what Carel Fabritius painted in his Schwerin picture. The recent cleaning of the painting has even revealed that originally he had planned to include a man walking on the wall behind the gateway. There is still no convincing interpretation of this figure. The depiction of the figure walking on the wall immediately behind the city gate does, however, confirm that Fabritius had rather some kind of elevation in mind which was suitable for strollers. What the Sint Antoniespoort in Nijmegen and

the one Fabritius painted share is their specific and unique deviation from other city gates in the United Provinces.

However, the Sint Antoniespoort in Nijmegen could hardly have served as the direct model for Fabritius. The reasons for this are related first of all to the history of the city gate. We know that after the rising of the embankment in 1638 the gateway was closed and bricked up. It was only in 1987 that it fully re-surfaced. Unfortunately, we do not know exactly when the gateway disappeared underneath the ground. It must have happened around the middle of the seventeenth century. On the bird’s-eye view of Nijmegen published in Blaeu's Stedenboek of 1649 and designed by Hendrik Feltman who received the commission in 1647, the Sint Antoniespoort is still visible and even mentioned as S. Theunis poortjen under number 18 in the legend of the map (fig. 9). In the painted bird’s-eye view which Feltman produced in 1668-1669, however, the gateway is obscured by trees (fig. 10).

Whether or not the gate was visible in 1654 when Fabritius painted the Schwerin Sentry is hard to say and cannot be proven with certainty. It is also questionable whether the protestant city council of Nijmegen would have allowed a relief of a saint in such a prominent place. Furthermore it is known that the gate in Nijmegen had two sets of doors of which the original hinges can still be seen (compare fig. 6). Finally, there is no indication that the gate had a portcullis during the seventeenth century. These elements differ from what Fabritius depicted in his Schwerin painting. What the two Sint Antoniespoorten do share, however, is their specific and unique deviation from the other city gates in the United Provinces. This seems more than just coincidence. So far there are no documents confirming a connection between Carel Fabritius and the city of Nijmegen. However, we do know of many other seventeenth-century painters who visited Nijmegen. It was the city's favorable geographical situation between the rivers Maas and Waal which attracted travelers from the provinces in the west. Not only landscape painters were fascinated by the impressive medieval architectural ensemble known as the Valkhofburcht which dominated the city until its demolition in 1795-97. Jan van Goyen (1596-1656), Anthonie Waterloo (ca. 1610-1690) and Lambert Doomer (1624-1700) visited the city more than once, and many others artists traveled through Nijmegen. It cannot be ruled out that Carel Fabritius was one of them. So far there is no documentary evidence to prove a relation between Fabritius and the city of Nijmegen. However, further research into the artist's family background preceding the time in Middenbeemster and the origin of his patrons might be able to establish a connection between the artist and the city.
I am grateful to G. Lecmmens and J. van der Hoeve for discussing the history of the Sint Antoniespoort in The Hague. From an engraving and was not visible (verbal communication).

A painting which was carried out by R. Kränz (Hamburg) were presented to the public on the occasion of a conference organized by the Staatliches Museum Schwerin on May 26th 2005 (R. Kränz, Zur Restaurierung des Gemäldes Die Torwache). On Gerhard Michael Jabach and his collection of drawings see F. Lugt, Les Marques de Collections de Dessin, Amsterdam (Ph. van der Schley, J. de Bosch v. der Schley, K. Nijhoff), 1815-1835. Des dessins de l'inventaire de 1815, Paris 2001, esp. pp. 19-20, and M.C. Plomp, Histoire d'Art, Verzamelde 18e-eeuwse Hollandse verzamelingen van tekeningen en kunstcollecties, Paris/Bussum 2001, p. 49.

For this see the introduction by Cornelis Ploos van Amstel to the catalogue of Rutgers' sale in 1778. Sale Antiquites. Rutgers, Amsterdam (van der Schley, C. van Ploos van Amstel [...] J. Yver), 1 December 1778 [Lugt 1918 (note 9), no. 1950]. For Rutgers' and his collection see Plomp 2001 (note 14), passim.


Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum (inv. no. FM 9435). The watercolour is inscribed by De Winter: 'Het springe van het Krytmaggeseyn tot Delft den rz Octob. 1754. H. de Winter, 1758 naar Egbert van der Pool, 1644.'

For this compare E. Korthals Altes, 'The art tour of Friedrich of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, Simiolus 31 1977, pp. 177-177 ("flach gewölbter Durchgang, welcher einen Blick auf ein freies Feld zulässt, wo in der Ferne ein langes niedriges Ziegeldach und ein höheres von Bäumen umgebenes Haus sichtbar sind")

For the history and development of city gates in the Northern Netherlands see H. Janse, Th. van Straalen, Middeleeuwse Stadswallen en Stadspoorten in de Lage Landen, Zaltbommel 1974.


F.J. Duparc has rightly emphasized the fact that – as far as we know – only two other paintings now recognized as being by Fabritius were recorded on the art market during the eighteenth century: the Warsaw Raising of Lazarus as a work by Rembrandt and the Salzburg Hagar and the Angel as by Ferdinand Bol. See for this The Hague/Schwerin 2004-2005 (note 1), pp. 68-72.

F. Schlic, Beschreibendes Verzeichnis der Werke älterer Meister in der Grossherzoglichen Gemäld-Gallerie zu Schwerin, Schwerin 1883, p. 177 ("flach gewölbter Durchgang, welcher einen Blick auf ein freies Feld zulässt, wo in der Ferne ein langes niedriges Ziegeldach und ein höheres von Bäumen umgebenes Haus sichtbar sind").

29 For the artist and the watercolour see Brinkhoff/Lemmens 1986 (note 28), pp. 80, 95.

Research into the city archive of Nijmegen has shown that the date of when exactly the gateway was walled up cannot be established. Payments to gate-keepers are mentioned during the seventeenth century. Unfortunately, not in all cases the names of the city gates are specified. I am grateful to C.C. van der Woode from the Municipal Archive in Nijmegen who checked some of the city's account books regarding payments to gate-keepers in Nijmegen around the middle of the seventeenth century (written communication 15 May 2003).