

Finding David: the Identity of the *Portrait of a Boy* by Govert Flinck



A Portrait of a Boy, Govert Flinck, 1640, oil on canvas, 73.3 x 91.8 cm,
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

Transcript

Hello and welcome to this online Tuesday Talk, part of a series presented by staff at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, at the University of Birmingham. My name is Robert Wenley, and I'm the Deputy Director and Head of Collections. In this talk, I will be discussing our charming *Portrait of a Boy*, painted by one of Rembrandt's most talented and successful pupils, Govert Flinck. Perhaps at odds with the fresh-faced innocence of the boy himself, it's a painting with several secrets that have only recently been revealed.

First among these is the name of the boy, dressed like an adult but clearly still a child - maybe eight or nine years old. When the painting was acquired for the Barber Institute in 1940, his identity was unknown, having been lost at some point since it was painted. The painting itself provides the most important clues. In the lower right corner, it is signed 'g.flinck' and dated 1640. We know that by this date, Govert Flinck, born in the German Duchy of Cleves (Kleve) in 1615, had already been working for several years in Amsterdam, where he had come to study under the famous Rembrandt. We can reasonably assume that the boy also came from this city or its immediate surroundings.

The boy is shown full-length, albeit on a canvas that is just 130cm, or about four foot, high, so appropriately shorter than most adult full-length portraits. He is standing in a landscape painted with seemingly effortless bravura. This features a bush and the remains of a fence on the right, but opens out on the left to water, trees and a church spire in the far distance. It is probably not meant to refer to a specific location, since Flinck placed several other sitters in similar settings, but our boy is very much presented as though 'owning' the space in which he is situated. Because portrayal in full length was unusual and expensive at this time, we can be sure that the boy – and his parents, who presumably commissioned the painting – came from a wealthy background.

He stands to the left with his head turned towards the viewer. His right hand is gloved and holds the left glove of the pair. By this date, holding one or both gloves seems to have become a fashionable convention based on traditional etiquette and was an indication of status. His right hand also

rests on a long, thin cane, with the characteristic segmentation that identifies it as bamboo. This precious and exotic material was imported to Holland from the Far East through the trade activities of the Dutch East India Company, and soon bamboo canes became fashionable accessories in portraits of gentlemen. While charmingly indicating the immature height of the boy, in the Barber portrait the cane also references the social prestige and power of his family.

The boy wears a wide-brimmed hat and a brown doublet with a row of buttons ending in a knot of dark ribbon. His flat white collar is edged with a small band of lace and a dark cloak is draped over his right shoulder and arm. His breeches are knee-length and garters hold up his dark stockings with knots just below the ends of the trouser-legs. While this is very much the costume of an adult gentleman of the day, his tiny leather shoes accentuate the fact that he is only a child.

Soon after 1640, Flinck would move away from Rembrandt's manner of painting, adopting a slicker, more fashionable style, but the Barber portrait is still indebted to the bold handling of his master. The brushstrokes are very loose in some areas of the painting, such as the costume, the cane, the landscape, and the vegetation on the right. In some parts the paint is so thin that we can see the ground, or underneath layers. The face and left hand, however, are very refined and detailed, pointing the way to Flinck's future development as a portraitist.

Recent technical analysis has shown that Flinck generally made only minor changes during the painting process, but it has uncovered one further secret. Some time after completing the picture, Flinck went back to it and overpainted the collar. This was originally wider and would have extended to the boy's shoulder, and it was also decorated along its edge with lace picots (or raised loops). Why he did this we shall consider in a moment.

The Barber portrait is very close in general appearance to Flinck's *Portrait of Dirck Jacobsz. Leeuw* of 1636, now on loan to the Rembrandt House Museum in Amsterdam. Dirck was Flinck's cousin and would become his neighbour in Amsterdam. In his portrait, Dirck wears a dark costume with a large cloak draped over his left shoulder and holds a glove

comparable to the one in our *Portrait of a Boy*. He is likewise shown full-length in a landscape. These similarities suggest that for the identification of the Barber boy, we need to look for someone in the same social circles.

These circles concentrate around the Leeuw family in Amsterdam, most of whom were members of a religious group called the Mennonites, and included several rich merchants. Indeed, one early account records that Flinck moved to Amsterdam because ‘some of his wealthy family members were living there’, generally identified as the Leeuw family. An important figure during Flinck’s early days in Amsterdam was the Mennonite art dealer Hendrick Uylenburgh, who had close connections with both the Leeuw family and Rembrandt, and this connection may have helped lure Flinck to the city.

The Leeuw family were members of a relatively moderate Mennonite congregation. Mennonites required baptism during adulthood after a personal statement of confession. After this confession, Mennonites were supposed to renounce earthly excesses as much as possible. Their preachers warned against ostentation in their clothing, accessories and hairstyles, and the evidence suggests that most Mennonites were obedient to these strictures. Dirck Leeuw’s modest appearance in his portrait has been regarded as a typical example of a Mennonite costume, and that worn by the Barber boy is very close.

Dirck’s half-brother Ameldonck Leeuw was a wealthy merchant and apparently also a patron of the arts. His collection included paintings by, among others, Simon de Vlieger, Pieter Claesz, and Rembrandt. Moreover, he owned a number of works by his cousin Flinck, including at least three portraits. Crucially, we learn from a legal document of 1653 that Ameldonck’s son, David, was allocated one of them, his own portrait. Could this be the Barber portrait, and David Leeuw, born in 1631 or 1632, therefore the little boy?

This identification seems likely because our portrait shows a boy aged about eight or nine in 1640, which matches David Leeuw’s age in that year. When boys reached the age of about eight, a significant event in their lives took place: until then they were dressed in long dresses, but

thereafter they were allowed to wear breeches. The boy in the portrait has clearly passed that age and is showing off his new attire. Furthermore, Ameldonck owned a rural estate with pastures and a bleachery, so it's perhaps not so surprising that he would have his son portrayed in the countryside.

In the early 1640s, Flinck painted several other portraits of children. He often dressed them in fantasy or historicising costumes, sometimes with pets, or as shepherds, according to the fashion of the day. But this would have been rather inappropriate for a boy from a Mennonite background, and we can thereby exclude all Flinck's other surviving child portraits as candidates for Ameldonck Leeuw's portrait of his son, David. On the other hand, when wearing contemporary costumes in their portraits, children were often dressed according to the latest fashion, because their clothes were usually purchased shortly before their portraits were commissioned. So while the original wide collar worn by the Barber boy does indeed tie in with the fashion of around 1640, it must have been updated around 1645, when the smaller collar had become fashionable.

In 1653, David Leeuw inherited his portrait by Flinck, and presumably retained it until his death in 1703. The hope and ambition expressed in the painting was admirably fulfilled. David became a successful merchant trading with Russia and ultimately one of the richest individuals of the entire Dutch Golden Age. He owned a fine and fashionable Amsterdam town house and a country estate. His family lived in great prosperity, and inherited a huge fortune after his death. They were all portrayed together in a magnificent group portrait painted in 1671 by Abraham van den Tempel, now in the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum. Are the Barber boy and the man in the family portrait the same person? I certainly believe so as do most experts, but only the discovery of the complete provenance or history of the *Portrait of a Boy* could prove for certain that he really is David Leeuw. Unfortunately, we lose all trace of the portrait's likely whereabouts between the early eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries, when it resurfaces in the collection of the famous British surgeon, etcher and Rembrandt connoisseur Sir Francis Seymour Haden. It stayed in his family until 1940, the year it was acquired for the Barber, exactly three hundred years after its creation.

The portrait is now one of the most popular works in the collection, and I hope it won't be too long before you can enjoy it in person once again.

Thank you for joining me on this Tuesday Talk. I am grateful to Milou Goverde for her research into the painting and to Jack Davies for his music. Come back next week for further insights into our collections.

If you have any questions or would like to continue the conversation, please get in touch with the Barber (info@barber.org.uk) or use our social media platforms.

Speaker info

Robert Wenley has been Head of Collections and Deputy Director at the Barber Institute since 2010. He was previously a curator at the Wallace Collection, London, and for Glasgow Museums. He has published and lectured extensively on Dutch and Netherlandish painting and curated the exhibition, *Flinck in Focus: A Question of Identity in 17th-century Dutch Portraiture* at the Barber Institute (23 October 2015 – 24 January 2016).

Music

Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.

Select reading list

Bubb, Ruth. 'Technical examination of Govert Flinck's *Portrait of a Boy* (1640) in Birmingham', in Stephanie S. Dickey (ed.), *Ferdinand Bol and Govert Flinck: New Research*. Waanders: Zwolle, 2017, pp. 140-53

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Goverde, Milou. 'Imitation and Ambition: The Relation between Dutch Adult and Child Portraiture 1620-1650', MA Thesis. Utrecht University, 2011 (available online at <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/207896>)

Goverde, Milou and Robert Wenley. 'Finding an identity: Govert Flinck's *Portrait of a Boy* (1640) in the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham', in Stephanie S. Dickey (ed.), *Ferdinand Bol and Govert Flinck: New Research*. Waanders: Zwolle, 2017, pp. 132-39

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