

# The consultation in art

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The *Oxford Dictionary* defines a ‘quack’ as an ignorant pretender to medical knowledge who professes a skill or treatment. In bygone days quack doctors were much in evidence because there were in fact few effective treatments – and no doubt the general public was also more gullible than nowadays. Certainly the subject attracted the attention of many artists in the past, including William Hogarth (1697–1764) in Britain and several Dutch genre painters of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, most notably Gerrit Dou (1613–1675) of Leiden. Dou was first apprenticed to his father, a glass engraver, then became associated with the young Rembrandt, though their styles and subjects diverged considerably in later life. In 1648 he became a founding member of the Leiden Guild of St Luke, which emphasized the historical links between the physician and the painter.

In *The Quack Doctor* (1652), the artist has actually portrayed himself seated in a window looking at the viewer. Dou was much admired in his day and counted among his patrons Charles II of England, Queen Christina of Sweden and Archduke Leopold Wilhelm of Austria. But despite his international reputation he rarely left his native city. He remained a bachelor all his life and died in Leiden in 1675.

His work is characterised by meticulously crafted portraits, still-lives and genre pieces, often quite small, for which he used a concave glass system of his own design as an aid. In *The Quack Doctor* he depicts the quack selling potions under a Chinese umbrella, and to enhance his credibility, the quack is dressed in the academic robes associated at the time with a qualified physician. The gathering crowd depicts the varying responses to the quack’s claims. The hunter seems convinced of the potion’s value, but a housewife on the right seems more skeptical. Perhaps this is a love potion, as behind the hunter a young man appears to be attempting to convince his partner of its possible value.

As one looks more closely at the painting it becomes clear that Dou is also concerned with other issues: the mother cleaning the baby’s bottom is possibly a scatological commentary on the doctor’s exalted claims, and could the little boy trying to catch a bird imply the elusiveness of trying to find an effective cure? As in all such genre paintings there is much more than a cursory glance would suggest.

**The Quack Doctor (1652) Gerrit Dou.**

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