Vermeer’s Robe: Costume, Commerce, and Fantasy in the Early Modern Netherlands

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An important feature of shifting boundaries and identities in Dutch visual culture of the seventeenth century is the representation of costume. An intriguing example is the *japonsche rok* or simply *japon*, the Japanese silk robe portrayed, most famously, by Vermeer’s *Astronomer* and *Geographer*. These rare spoils of Asian trade were first presented annually by Japanese shoguns to VOC officials and thereafter were made available as Western copies. By the end of the seventeenth century, similar robes made of chintz or batik, also known as banyans, were imported from India and went through the same transformation to domestic product. All of these long, loose garments possessed a novelty and cachet unmatched by more abundant imports such as spices, lacquer, porcelain, and precious metals.

In art, forms of Asian dress appear not only in portraits of prominent men but also in genre images of scientists and scholars. The resemblances among these garments suggest that Vermeer and other seventeenth-century Dutch painters developed a generic form of costume specifically for portraying men of learning. Scholars, scientists, and doctors, as well as artists, are depicted in variations, or combinations, of Asian and Western garments, mingling associations of imported luxury, work, education, and the classical past. The type of the robed scholar/distinguished man, displayed in portraiture and genre alike, offers a fantasy of class, intellect, and materialism. Its representation in art creates an interplay between exotic consumption and artistic invention, fuelled by the unprecedented power of global trade.

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During his forty-three years, Johannes Vermeer may never have travelled more than an hour’s distance from his modest city of Delft. Yet in his two unusual pictures known as *The Geographer* and *The Astronomer*, in 1668–69, he composed interiors
replete with materials intimating the vast scope of the Dutch seaborne empire (Figures 1 and 2). These are the only two of his thirty-six surviving works that feature solitary men. Little is known about the paintings aside from the fact that Vermeer used the same model, and that they are apparently pendants. These restless men are caught in moments of urgent insight directing them out of their crowded studies: one looks out of the sunlit window, the other reaches to spin a globe of the heavens. They are so compelling it is not surprising that much speculation has arisen about their identities as portraits or even self-portraits, despite lack of firm evidence.¹


Photo: R. G. Ojeda. Photo Credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY. Louvre, Paris, France
Unlike the globes, books, maps, and measuring instruments, which have been studied and identified, these men’s beautiful garments have received little penetrating attention. In fact, their subtly coloured robes of wadded silk are crucial to their notional, if not literal, identities. The astronomer’s blue-green garment envelopes him in luxurious folds, the curve of his rounded sleeve echoing the globe he touches, while the geographer’s deeper blue robe reveals a salmon-coloured neckband and is belted at the waist. These are the robes of scholars; at the same time, their fabric and unusual design mark them as rare Asian goods.

Figure 2  Jan Vermeer van Delft (1632–75), The Geographer, 1669. Oil on canvas, relined. 52 × 45 cm. Inv. no. 1149. Städel Museum, Frankfurt. Photo: © Städel Museum-ARTOTHEK
Vermeer often depicted beautiful fabrics. His father was in the caffa weaving business. Caffa was a fancy damask made of a silk/cotton/wool blend of Flemish origin, requiring a high level of skill. Michael Montias suggested a link between Vermeer’s knowledge, and witnessing, of his father’s weaving, and the elaborate textile designs in his paintings (Montias, 1989: 193–94). These robes, however, appear nowhere else in his surviving work, nor are they mentioned in the 1676 inventory of his household goods. They were expensive, rare Japanese imports available only through auctions held by the Dutch East India Company (VOC). It is possible, as Walter Liedtke has suggested, that the paintings were commissioned by a newly minted director of the VOC in Rotterdam (Liedtke, 2008: 152). This might have been the occasion for such specific subject matter. On the other hand, it is hard to say where Vermeer would have acquired these particular robes; they might have been borrowed or rented.

In fact, the robes belong to a whole class of garments, derived from various sources, which appear in the pictorial arts particularly in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The robes worn in portraits and genre scenes by scholars like Vermeer’s, eminent gentlemen, and historical figures, are actually varieties of Asian, Turkish, and old-fashioned and classicizing styles. Collectively, these garments created an idealized costume of social and intellectual prestige. Their frequent occurrence in portraiture and allegorical pictures reveals much about their significance in the formation of early modern masculine identities. Behind this exotic garment and its variations are the interactions among the forces of class, fashion, fantasy, exoticism, and, above all, the extraordinary taste-making power of the VOC (Israel, 1989: 186–87).

These robes were gifts to Dutch traders in Japan, given out at the annual visits with the Tokugawa shogun in Edo. Gift-giving between the Dutch and Japanese courts had begun with the 1611 VOC expedition to the Japanese court, when stadthouder Maurits thanked the shogun Hidetada for permitting the Dutch to trade with Japan. Such gifts tended to be military items such as weapons and suits of armour. The latter were custom-made and often impractical, in other words, purely ceremonial (Zandvliet, 2002: 102–07). After several decades of lucrative trading, military objects gave way to the gifts of robes, which were not only part of ceremonial custom among Japanese rulers, but represented the fruits of this trade. The earliest Dutch description of Japan, François Caron’s Beschrijvinghe van het Machtigh Coninckryck Japan und Siam of 1636, relates the giving of gowns as the final stage of a ceremonial visit from a lord to the imperial court: the young emperor gave the Daimyo ‘two hundred Japan gowns’, while the old emperor gave him ‘one hundred Indian gowns richly wrought’ and ‘two hundred pieces of red silk’, and his secretary gave him ‘twenty Indian gowns’ (Caron, 1636: 120).

Acquiring these rare and costly robes was an arduous task for the VOC agents. They would take a month-long journey to Edo from Deshima, the artificial island first built in the bay of Nagasaki for the Portuguese, then leased to the Dutch after 1639. Unlike diplomatic couriers, these agents had no political status; instead, they
would be treated as curiosities. Along with offering any intelligence about Asian trade, they would be asked to speak in Japanese, perform tricks, and answer questions. Engelbert Kaempfer, a German physician with the VOC in the 1690s, wrote a detailed account of his sojourn in Japan, finally published in 1727. This ritualized encounter culminated in a traditional gift: a number of silk robes, offered and received with great ceremony. Kaempfer carefully itemizes the robes given by each Japanese official they encountered: from the shogun, thirty. Bingo (Makino Narisada, Grand Chamberlain, who controlled Westerners’ access to the shogun) and the four senior councillors, ten each. Each of the junior councillors, six. Each of the commissioners of temples and shrines, five. Each of the two Edo magistrates, two. That makes a total of 123 robes. Of those, the company is sent the thirty robes from the shogun, and the remaining ninety-three are for the captain (i.e. the Dutch trade representative in Japan, known to the Japanese as kapitan). Then they were dismissed (Kaempfer, 1998: 416).

After the week-long sojourn in Edo, the traders would return to Deshima with their gifts. Not all the robes given as gifts made it back to the Netherlands. Kaempfer writes, ‘the goods [the director] brings back consist of silk garments received as gifts from the shogunal councilor, which he, in turn, must present to others’. These recipients would have included various officials at the Deshima factory (Kaempfer, 1998: 220). The robes were hung up in the warehouse to dry, then wrapped up in linen and oiled paper and packed into canassers (osier or rush baskets, hence the English word ‘canisters’) and sent to Batavia for shipping on the homebound fleet. The shogun’s robes — just fifty, of the highest quality — were reserved for the VOC public auctions, held every September, after the trading ships returned in late August (Liu, 2007: 15).

The story of how these robes arrived in the Netherlands shows how events conspired to make them extraordinarily precious: the difficulties involved in obtaining them; the choice quality of the fabric, the problems with its shipping and later maintenance, and the high rank associated with them (Smith, 2002: 47). The robes eventually auctioned in a given city would have been few in number and matchless in quality. This is significant: Kaempfer makes it clear that the robes varied in quality, and that only the most beautiful were shipped back home (Kaempfer, 1998: 1416). These finished silk garments were a far cry from the far more abundant Asian fabrics available in bolts, or even from the vast amounts of raw silk used for producing regular garments (Israel, 1989: 337). Thus they possessed a rarity and novelty unmatched by other, more abundant Asian imports such as tea, spices, camphor, lacquer, porcelain, gold, copper, and silver.

One irony here is that the raw silk which the Japanese master weavers, dyers, and tailors used to create these robes was, after mid-century, supplied by the Dutch themselves, acquired from China and India. Japan had lost its own sericulture during the sixteenth-century civil war, so most of the VOC silk trade from 1640 onward consisted of bringing the finished textile to Japan by way of China and India (Kennedy, 1990: 28–32). The Dutch domination of the raw silk trade increased after the
Portuguese, whose pirate ships had been depleting the Dutch stores of silk, were banned from Japanese waters in 1639.

The Japanese specialized not so much in patterns and embroidery — which they adopted from foreign textiles — but in extraordinary dyeing techniques. Dyeing involved not just dipping in a single or different colours, but painting. The famous dyeing technique known as yuzen involved entirely freehand painting and resist patterns in rice-paste applied directly onto the silk, sometimes combined with multiple dipping (Dusenbury et al., 2004: 201–03). ‘The Japanese are extremely skillful in this matter of dyeing their robes of silk and other cloth’, wrote a Portuguese interpreter; ‘they intermingle gold among the flowers painted in diverse ways, and they are especially clever in their use of crimson and even more, of violet’ (Cooper, 1965: 206). These reds and violets are often featured in the solid-colour japons worn in Dutch paintings, such as the warm purplish-blue worn by Vermeer’s geographer (see also Figure 5).

Thus the ‘aura’ of these beautiful and comfortable garments — to borrow Walter Benjamin’s term — contained the stubborn elusiveness of Japan, the power and reach of the VOC, and, more generally, the complexity of early modern globalization. In Michiel van Musscher’s 1686 portrait of Johannes Hudde (1628–1704), we can see how these rarefied spoils of the Asian textile trade were worn and displayed in a formal portrait (Figure 3). Hudde was a formidable figure. He served as burgomaster of Amsterdam for twenty-one years, and like his father, was on the board of directors of the East India Company. He was also an eminent mathematician and translator of Descartes, did research on optics, made convex lenses, and used his scientific knowledge to reform Amsterdam’s water supply (Phillips, 2008: 32). As a VOC representative, politician, and scholar, Hudde was probably one of the most apt — or over-determined — men to wear a japon. Van Musscher portrays him seated in his study. Hudde wears a wadded robe of shiny violet silk, similar to the colour of the robe worn by Vermeer’s geographer, but far more sumptuous, and lined in chocolate brown. Its decoration features a highly refined floral pattern in threads of gold alternating with green, yellow, and brilliant blue, nicely complimenting the patterns on the red imported rug covering the table next to him. Van Musscher surrounds him with images of learning and authority: books; globes behind him on a shelf; and a paper with an official seal. Van Musscher’s portrait essentially encapsulates the status and significance conferred by his exotic garment (Smith, 2002: 35).

A comparison of this portrait with a Japanese portrayal of robes shows how the japon was somewhat altered for Western taste (Figure 4). The robe in question is a kosode, the silk version of the canonical garment worn by all classes. Wrapped and belted with an obi (a cord or narrow sash), it featured sleeves of varying widths with narrow openings for the wrists; the remaining fabric of the sleeves was often used as pockets. On fancier kosode, the neckband, or eri, was often in a contrasting colour, like that worn by Vermeer’s geographer. In Okumura Masanobu’s early eighteenth-century screen painting, Yukihira, a debonair young man, is accompanied by three
women. The robe hangs softly from the wearers’ bodies in gentle, graceful folds, making it easy to walk and kneel. Yukihiro’s parting gift to the women, whom he abandons, is a court robe, hanging gracefully from a tree branch. While the winter versions of *kosode* were padded, they still maintained this softness.

As an outer garment, the *kosode* was worn in all weathers, and made in three varieties: in the spring and autumn, it was lined with another layer of silk (and known as an *awase*); the winter version would be padded with bundles of coarse silk. In the summer, it had no lining and was known as a *katabira*. Sometimes the hem of an

FIGURE 3  Michiel van Musscher, *Portrait of Johannes Hudde, Burgomaster of Amsterdam*, signed and dated 1680. Oil on canvas, 57 × 49 cm. 
*Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam*
FIGURE 4  Okumura Masanobu, *Yukihiira and the Salt Maidens*, c. 1716–35. Hanging scroll; ink and colour on silk.

awase or katabira was weighted with padding to create a better draping effect (Kennedy, 1990: 3–77; Dalby, 2001: 38–40). Wearing different types of kosode was strictly codified. A Portuguese missionary observed: ‘They have a fixed day on which they all change into their summer clothes and another on which they put on their winter clothes. And the date is so definite that nobody mistakes the day’ (Cooper, 1965: 209).

The social codes of clothing were far more rigid and highly developed in Japan than in the West. Clothing as a status symbol reached its peak among the Tokugawa warriors and merchant classes. The leader Hideyoshi owned over three thousand robes. According to a report of 1614: ‘Not only the great warlords of today but warriors of every class are concerned with beauty, wearing colorfully woven and embroidered fine silks. They […] spend all their pay on clothing’. While Westerners were attracted to the exoticism of Asian clothing and goods, the Japanese were equally interested in the clothes of Europeans. Rain capes, and anything made of wool, were popular styles; the shogun Hideyoshi was fond of wearing Portuguese clothes (Kennedy, 1990: 16–25, 25–28).

When preparing the imperial robes for shipping back to the Netherlands, Japanese tailors would sew absorbent cotton or silk wadding into the fabric to prevent water damage during transport. Since the shogun visits took place between February and May, culminating in an April visit with the shogun, the gift robes were probably lightly lined spring robes, made thicker with the wadding. Presumably because of its softness and warmth, the wadding was retained, and thereafter became part of the style. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, the gowns began to be pulled apart and the padding and cloth shipped separately, for greater ease of transport (Peeze, 1986: 85). The wadding itself became a significant factor in the Asian textile trade: one French report from 1664 lists: ‘2,332 pieces of Japanese silk wadding for gowns’ shipped separately from India to Europe (Lubberhuizen-Van Gelder, 1947: 146). There was such demand for silk wadding that during the 1680s the VOC set up a separate business for its manufacture (Peeze, 1986: 46).

The wadding is clearly evident in Hudde’s portrait, as it is in Vermeer’s scientists. It is also clear that obi were not included with the gift robes. Dutch men wore their japons unbelted, like Hudde, or wrapped with striped or tasselled sashes from Turkey.6 Hudde’s sleeves show a further adaptation: the excess fabric of the wide sleeves was usually removed toward the wrist openings. Among the fashion changes taking place in the later seventeenth century was the dramatic widening of sleeves; there may have been considerable re-tailoring in Japan before the robes were shipped (Dalby, 2001: 42–43). In typical fashion, Hudde wears his robe over his regular clothes, sporting not only a wig, but the starched cravat and prominent ‘akertjes’ (shirt tassels) of a well-turned-out gentleman. It is interesting that these robes were never intended to replace regular clothes, but to supplement them. Vermeer’s scholars wear white scarves, which came into fashion in the second half of the century as a more modest alternative to the cravat worn by Hudde. They appear frequently in pictures of men, sometimes tucked into the eri, sometimes loosely knotted and
elegantly draped around the throat (Cunnington, 1951: 28–31). Clearly, one aspect of
the robe’s appeal was the intriguing contrast between the stark black and white of
regular clothes, and the luxurious, colourful silk partially hiding them.

There developed a huge demand for Japanese robes as a result of the VOC
auctions. The Dutch soon devised other ways of acquiring them. They began produc-
ing the robes domestically from raw silk, then, beginning in 1689, from Indian chintz.
Chintz was a heavy, glazed cotton, printed with a dye that was not only brilliant, but
colourfast, owing to a special dyeing technique. This versatile fabric, far cheaper and
easier to maintain than silk, enabled many more people to buy an exotic Asian-style
garment. Another import, becoming hugely popular toward the end of the seven-
teenth century, was the Indian banyan, usually made of chintz. The banyan was a
popular men’s robe meant for informal at-home wear. It differed from the kosode in
having a narrower silhouette, and sleeves tight all the way from wrist to shoulder. It
was worn over regular shirt and trousers, unbelted: either open, or with fastenings
like a Turkish kaftan.

Dutch and English merchants and their clients had already seen and admired
Indian patterns, both on some silk garments and also in bolts of chintz imported from
south India. (The beautiful pattern on Johannes Hudde’s robe is Indian in origin.)
When the merchants realized that these cottons would be valuable commodities that
would sell well, the patterns became more Westernized. While Turkish and Persian
textiles products tended to retain their native patterns, Indian and Chinese fabrics
were decorated with Dutch patterns. European patterns were sent out to be copied
by Indian textile makers. Floral designs were especially popular, due to the boom in
Western flower painting. The patterns were sent in the form of engravings and often
even the stippling of the engravings would end up reproduced in the painted cotton

The VOC also brought Turkish wares into the Dutch repertory of exotic clothing.
In 1612, the first Dutch embassy was established in Istanbul to handle trade relations.
Turkish garments arrived in the Netherlands as travellers’ souvenirs and also gifts.
Like the Japanese shoguns, the Ottoman sultans had a longstanding tradition of
awarding garments of honour (khil’at), and kept large stocks of khil’at robes on
hand. Just as in the case of the rare Japanese robes, these garments would have been
received by merchants and diplomats following official audiences with the sultan and
other persons of authority. These khil’at robes, kaftans, or caffetaens as the Dutch
called them, were made by a select group of court tailors, who had an atelier outside
the palace. Special fabric was used, double-woven and stiffened with metallic thread,
in a pattern reserved for foreign traders (Breukink-Peeze, 1989: 135). Garments such
as kaftans were included in costume books showing clothing from a range of places
within the Ottoman Empire. Artists could copy from the costume books or from the
garments themselves, if they could acquire them. The draughtsman Lambert Doomer,
for example, owned some Turkish fabrics that he used for copying (De Winkel, 2004:
170).
The Turkish kaftan was also called a *sjamberloek* or the Frenchified *chamberlouc*, from the Turkish word *yagmurluk* or raincoat. (A kaftan is sported by Thomas Hees, who represented the States General in Algiers, in his portrait, also by Van Musscher; Hees wears a typical style of kaftan over wide trousers, a sash with a dagger through it, and a patterned handkerchief.) The kaftan's wide cut and supple fabric was popular with men and women. (Inventories reveal that women occasionally owned *japons*, though they were not often portrayed wearing them. One rare example is Jan Steen's pendant portraits of Gerrit Gerritsz. and Geertruy Gael Schouten, 1665, private collection; both wear silk robes.) The *chamberlouc* was worn in the seventeenth century as sumptuous finery; its later imitations came to be associated with leisure and sedentary activities such as writing and reading, as well as sleep. Like the Japanese robes, the Turkish silk kaftans were also supplemented by the arrival of Indian cotton later in the century.

Few of these Japanese and Turkish robes have survived. The best physical evidence for how they would have been worn and what they looked like can be found in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century doll's houses. These were not made for children, but rather as miniature art collections for ladies in the highest social circles. They were meant to provide an exact reflection of reality on a miniature scale; hence they offer useful evidence about home furnishings and clothes (Pijzel-Dommisse, 2000: passim). In one such doll's house, the master of the house sits in his *kunstkamer*, a modern gentleman of culture, learning, and leisure. Two art collectors are visiting him. He is dressed in a *japon* with a scarf loosely knotted around the neck, while the two connoisseurs wear regular clothes. 8

The 1690s English doll known as Lord Clapham wears a robe in typical fashion: open, so as to better display the contrasting colours of the robe and its neckband over his splendid shirt and trousers. The robe is embroidered in a Western design. Worn open, belted, accompanied with various types of collars or a knotted scarf: these are variations of use apparent in portraits and genre images alike. The various terms found in inventories and other literature suggests that, by 1700, terminology such as *chamberlouc*, *japonsche rok*, *japon*, *nachtrok*, and *nachttabbaard* all referred to the same type of garment: wide, floor-length, with usually wide sleeves, worn open or with a sash. At the same time, the term ‘japon’ or ‘gown’ in English could mean any one of several Asian or Asian-style garments. Samuel Pepys famously noted in his diary (30 March 1666) that he had his portrait done by Hayles in ‘an Indian gowne’ or, later, ‘a morning gowne’, which he rented for the occasion. His free use of terms was typical of the casual Western attitude towards Asian goods; terms like ‘gown’ and ‘japon’ were often used interchangeably.

Images of learned men in their studies became quite popular after the middle of the seventeenth century. Jaap van de Veen’s work on studies or offices reveals that the men depicted in these settings did not necessarily own such rooms or attributes, as Pepys’s diary makes clear. These depictions were based on how people in general believed a learned man ought to be portrayed (Van de Veen, 2001). Scholars’ clothes were also stereotypical. Scholars frequently appear wearing exotic robes, sometimes recognizable as Japanese, sometimes closer to the Turkish kaftan or Indian banyan.
This adaptation of Asian exotic dress appears not only as a sign of leisure and status, but became a kind of specialized costume in pictures of learned men. They replaced another garment entirely, with its own associations of learning and sobriety: the traditional long robe known as a tabbaard. The tabbaard was an ankle-length gown, often trimmed with a fur broad shawl collar, long wide sleeves with a slit at the elbow, and belted at the waist. It had existed for centuries as a feature of academic dress, and was associated with scholarly pursuits. Learned men were so often portrayed in the sixteenth century in a sleeveless tabbaard with a skullcap, along with the millstone or square clerical collar fashionable at that date. By the late seventeenth century, the cloak evolved into a full gown with a square flap collar, open in front, the arms coming through slits in the wide sleeves. Marieke de Winkel has observed that by 1600 the tabbaard connoted authority and tradition — often used with the term ‘deghelijk’, which meant virtuous, grave, or honest.

In spite, or perhaps because, of these august associations, students abandoned academic gowns early in the seventeenth century. In 1634, Sir William Brereton on his visit to Holland observed that only divinity students went ‘in the habit of scholars’, that is, black cloaks. Otherwise students dressed as they pleased: ‘some as gallants, some as soldiers, some like citizens, some like serving-men; all in colours for most part’ (Brereton, 1884: 39–40). Always the leaders in fashion trends, students also took to wearing the far more desirable Indian chintz gowns suitable for both at-home and leisure. The authorities, or rather, established older gentlemen, considered these gowns inappropriate for formal wear: in 1725 at the centenary of Leiden University, students were explicitly forbidden to show up at church ‘in habitu asiatico’. In 1743, an English traveller noticed that Dutch students in all the universities he visited wore ‘morning gowns’ with their swords. This was, as he put it, a slovenly habit introduced from Germany (Hargreaves-Mawdsely, 1963: 176–78).

During the same period that academic dress was rejected by students in favour of silk robes, scholarly activity itself ceased to be limited to universities. The general trend among natural scientists in particular was toward independence from institutions (Manuth et al., 1997). Christiaan Huygens, for example, started his career as a diplomat before being elected to the French Academy of Sciences. Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, on the other hand, was never connected with academia (and never went to university himself) but worked as a civil servant in Leiden. None the less, both prominent gentlemen had themselves portrayed in silk robes.9

The robed scholar also suggests contemporary views about knowledge. As Klaas van Berkel has shown, during the seventeenth century, science was associated with Moses, who was sometimes referred to as ‘the oldest geographer’, exemplifying a type of science seeking wisdom in ancient philosophy (Berkel, 1996). (Vermeer has included a painting of the finding of Moses in The Astronomer.) Gerard Dou’s doctor, painted in 1653 (Vienna, Kusthistorischmuseum) is dressed in a tabbaard, which recalls its past as an academic robe; Heijman Dullaert’s allegorical doctor/scientist (Groningen, Museum voor Stad en Lande) wears a thinner, looser version of the tabbaard, with simple wide sleeves substituting for the stiff, trimmed sleeveless...
panels in Dou’s picture. While the academic-style *tabbaards* in these pictures evoke Mosaic antiquity and general *gravitas*, both men wear striped sashes, recalling the exoticism of Vermeer’s Japanese robes.

The robe endowed the learned men with a social rank beyond the eminence formerly conferred by the academic gown. Philosophers, who were engaged with the theoretical aspects of the material world and its laws, were admired for the ideas expressed in their treatises. They were considered to be of a higher social standing than the mechanical inventors, or *engeneren*. Scientists who had themselves painted wearing the Japanese robe or its variants were aspiring to a nobler status. Daniel Schultz’s 1677 portrait of the eminent Polish astronomer Johann Hevelius features the typical elements of such portrayals: the piled books and scroll on the table, the loosely worn silk robe — this one with rather wide sleeves — the quasi-theatrical drape pulled aside over the image, and Hevelius’ white cravat, slackly knotted and draped around his throat. The three varieties of draped fabric, echoed by the hanging scroll and standing out against the rows of books and the globe, express at once antique grace and fashionable disarray. In comparison, Hendrik Goltzius’ portrait of the mathematician and astronomer Nicolaus Petri, in his stern fashionable black, serves as a reminder that scholars could look quite different if they chose to be portrayed in their regular clothes. Yet images of scientists in genre scenes are nearly always robed.

The succession of typical masculine types in Claesz Jansz. Visscher’s *Trap Des Ouderdoms* of the mid-1620s suggests that in pictures, the long robe — in this case, a more traditional *tabbaard* — was a canonical costume for an elderly man. Yet younger men are frequently shown wearing similar robes. The most conspicuous artist/costumer is probably Rembrandt, who used the garment for portraits, genres, and histories alike. A frequent wearer of the *tabbaard* was his figure of the allegorical artist, often with his own likeness. In his period of study with Rembrandt, Gerard Dou adopted these habits of costuming. Rembrandt’s *Artist in his Studio* of 1629 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) and Dou’s doctor from the 1663 *Dropsical Woman* (Musée du Louvre, Paris) are dressed almost alike, in an elaborately trimmed costume belted with a Turkish fringed sash. They also both wear the sixteenth-century flat hat, a theatrical costume that persisted throughout the next century as a fictive, romanticizing element of dress in portraits and genre scenes.

De Winkel posits that the term ‘tabbaard’ in a given artist’s inventory may refer to his actual working clothes: a loose utilitarian garment in simple fabric, like that worn by the painter in an engraving by Vincent van der Vinne, or by Rembrandt himself in his 1652 self-portrait and his sketch of around 1650, dressed in a calf-length belted robe. Yet it is difficult to determine. While the dull colour of Rembrandt’s robe here might indicate its similarity with the *tabbaard* in Van de Vinne’s engraving, the suggestion of tight undersleeves, layers, and the flat sixteenth-century hat, may indicate another fictional variation.

A very early image of a painter by Dou, c. 1630 (private collection) explores the same ambiguity. The painter wears a robe of modest brown, evidently not silk, with
very wide cuffed sleeves and buttons down the front, belted with a narrow striped sash. Is this fanciful version of an artist’s at-home work garment an allegorical reference to learning and antiquity, or both? (He wears fanciful headgear, the sixteenth-century beret typical of such representations, derived from Rembrandt.) In the course of the seventeenth century, the tabbaard as a sign of learning, also adopted for self-images of artists, was superseded by the japon/kaftan/banyan in its various iterations. According to his inventory, Michiel van Musscher owned several ‘antique clothes’ he used for copying, just as Lambert Doomer owned exotic fabric. Van Musscher also had a purple satin japonsche rok which he appears to depict in two self-portraits (De Winkel, 2004: 158; van Thiel, 1974). The best-known one is Self-Portrait in a Studio, 1679 (Rotterdam, Museum Rotterdam het Schielandhuis). As it happens, Van Musscher appears to have painted more portraits of men wearing Asian gowns than any of his contemporaries.

The problem with the portrayal of artists in various types of robe is that we cannot always assume that artists actually wore them while they worked. Despite the ennobling conceit of the elegantly clothed artist, which had persisted since the Renaissance, it seems highly unlikely that they would actually wear expensive clothes to work in. It is useful here to consider Erin Griffey’s account of the artist’s studio depicted as a fantasy, what she calls a site of play: both role-playing and enactments of leisure (Griffey, 1999.) She observes that the quasi-academic garments of learning worn by sixteenth-century artists changes to a more exotic and informal costume. Even before the dominance of Asian robes, the artist’s costume of the 1630s is already a form of fantasy garment: Dou’s artist, for example, is wearing not only a version of outdated academic dress but a Turkish sash as well as the quasi-theatrical beret. During the seventeenth century, the shift from academic robe to the exotic robe, whether Japanese, Indian or Turkish, derived in part from changes in men’s fashion, but both forms of garment were tinged with fantasy.

The use of a robe as a status garment reflects the general draped look of seventeenth-century fashion. Alison Kettering has described how this classically tinged looseness was adopted by the bourgeois elite in imitation of aristocratic manners (Kettering, 1997). A drape could be achieved through a cloak gently resting over one shoulder, but best of all was the robe, the classical/Mosaic costume signalling a duet of masculine virtues: distinguished leisure and lofty intellect. Many portraits by Van Musscher, along with Jan Verkolje and Nicolaes Maes, show gentlemen in open robes that often are almost indistinguishable from pieces of drapery. The classical column, pioneered by Rubens and van Dyck as an accessory for aristocratic portraiture, doubles as a reference to antiquity, accompanying the sitter’s quasi-drapery. The whole extraordinary effect is one of casual splendour, exoticism, and Olympian timelessness. It is worth noting that these men are shown leaning elegantly against a column rather than sitting stiffly in their chairs like Hudde and others.

Finally, to complete the network of complicated relationships between different kinds of exotic garments, the long, wide-sleeved garment intersects with the costume of history painting. Oriental dress used for history paintings was usually an amalgam
of antiquarian and Asian or Middle Eastern styles, borrowed most often from Italian Renaissance art. As we know from the effects of Lambert Doomer, for example, artists kept bolts of fabrics around their studios to copy their patterns and texture, and the way they draped, rather than using them as actual models for clothes. In Jan Victors’ *Isaac Blessing Jacob*, painted in 1640, we can see two variants (Figure 5). Jacob wears the belted version, remarkably similar to the Japanese robe worn by Vermeer’s astronomer almost thirty years later. The elderly, ailing Isaac wears the fur-lined version in bed as a house garment. Underneath we can glimpse the kind of sixteenth-century jacket commonly used by Rembrandt and his students.

By the 1660s, the aura of wisdom surrounding Isaac’s *tabbaard* became the more directly classical reference of the Japanese robe, particularly when both were worn open. Unbelted, padded looseness expands the body’s outline, not only evoking the classical toga, but suggesting the physical substantiality of wisdom. (The soft pyramidal shape of Vermeer’s astronomer is a good example of this effect.) Anne Jensen Adams has recently shown how portraits in the seventeenth century functioned as *exempla* for the self-discipline and thoughtfulness believed to be the best trait for a model citizen, based on ideas about knowledge and education. She observes

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 5** Jan Victors (1620–76), *Isaac Blessing Jacob*, 1640. Inv. no. 1285. *Photo: Jean-Gilles Berizzi. Photo Credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY. Louvre, Paris, France*
that the frequent pose of sitters in the midst of a movement, such as rising from a
chair, or looking up from work, was generally restricted to men, who represented
active rational thought (Adams, 2009: 110–11). As Vermeer’s astronomer leans
forward to touch the celestial globe — to set it spinning, perhaps — he rises out of
his chair and urgently grips the table with his other hand. The geographer, already
standing, pauses in his measurements to look out the window. As Liedtke observes,
the scattered maps and papers suggest that he may have been moving around the
room (Liedtke, 2008: 150). We are looking at moments of thought. The leap of their
minds is balanced by the thick masses of silk enveloping their bodies. Instead, the
clamour of intellectual excitement and discovery is evoked by the complex, rampant
folds of patterned carpets on their desks.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the Asian-inspired garment — banyan,
kimono, kaftan — had become *de rigueur* for a man of eminence and learning. The
robed scholar and gentleman became an entrenched masculine type in portraits and
genre alike. The costume marks him, whether scholar or merchant, as prosperous yet
sober, contemplative and classical, while endowed with worldly and material knowl-
dge. In Joseph Wright of Derby’s scenes of scientific demonstrations conducted in
middle-class households, the philosopher is the only person in the domestic gathering
to wear such a garment. Alexander Pope chose to be depicted in robe and turban
when he sat for William Hoare in the early 1740s.

In 1786, the colonial scientist and physician Benjamin Rush had his portrait painted
by Charles Willson Peale in a mauve silk robe. A few years later, he wrote:

> Loose dresses contribute to the easy and vigorous exercise of the faculties of the mind.
> This remark is so obvious, and so generally known, that we find studious men are always
> painted in gowns, when they are seated in their libraries [. . .]. It is from the habits of
> mental ease and vigour which this careless form of dress creates, that learned men have
> often become contemptible for their slovenly appearance, when they mix with the world.
> (Rush, 1972: 96)

The open, untailored garment could therefore invoke different, often overlapping,
ideas. Rush suggests that the active mind requires a comfortable, casual body. At the
same time it blends with the Van Dyckian splendid ease of drapery, that is, careless-
lessness as a fashion statement. During the Renaissance, when academic garments were
in full use, a floor-length garment on a man could be seen as feminizing. In Edmund
Spenser’s *View of the Present State of Ireland* (1598), Eudoxus remarks that clothing
is important:

> for men’s apparel is commonly made according to their conditions, and their conditions
> are oftentimes governed by their garments, for the person that is gowned is by his gown
> put in mind of gravity, and also restrained from lightness by the very inaptness of his
> weed.

There follows an anecdote about Cyrus overcoming the warlike Lydians by clothing
them in long gowns, thus ‘in short space their minds were so mollified and abated
that they forgot their former fierceness and became tender and effeminate’ (Spenser, 1970: 69–70). Echoing this idea, early eighteenth-century Dutch references to these leisure garments considered them not only slovenly, but foppish and emasculating (Peeze, 1986: 85).

Imported or homemade, manly and rational or disorderly and feminizing, the scholar’s robe in art springs from the varied realms of class, materialism, and fantasy. When tracing the variants of the scholar’s robe, we can observe the curious interplay between exotic consumption and artistic invention, fuelled by the unprecedented power of global trade. Vermeer’s scientists embody the intellectual activity behind the power of Dutch global commerce (Brook, 2008: 84–87). Geography involved the creation of maps; astronomy was essential to navigation. The two disciplines were considered interdependent. While there is no real evidence that these men are self-portraits, they can easily put us in mind of Vermeer. On the one hand, the man paused while making his measurements on paper, glancing at the tide of daylight flooding his window. On the other, the man rising urgently from his chair, gripping a book, whose right hand reaches to touch the globe of the heavens. The thick silk robes enveloping their bodies are not only attributes of knowledge and distinction, but objects, like the others — globes, maps, patterned carpet — bringing the entire global reach into Vermeer’s small room in Delft.

Notes

1 Liedtke summarizes the scholarship (Liedtke, 2008: 148–62, nos 27, 28); Binstock proposes that they are in fact self-portraits (Binstock, 2009: 185–89).

2 Montias remarks: ‘No one would have been so consistent in his choice of physical objects who did not work in their close proximity. The variations that Vermeer, like most of his contemporaries, played on these realistic elements were needed to enhance the beauty of the composition or to present a greater appearance of reality’ (Montias, 1989: 193). I agree; and I would apply this to Vermeer’s treatment of clothes as well as the furnishings to which Montias refers.

3 He did once participate in an exchange involving two Japanese robes: he was a guarantor of a loan and the robes were put up as collateral; such was their value (Montias, 1989: 173 and 317).

4 On Samuel Pepys renting a silk robe, see below.

5 Peeze notes that in 1708, for example, the VOC exported 15,000 chests of copper ingots, over 64,000 chests of camphor, 94,000 pieces of porcelain and only 50 robes. By this date, however, the domestic production of japonsche rokken was well established (Peeze, 1986: 85).

6 These sashes, which also appear frequently in history paintings and the fantasy costumes of genre scenes, are sometimes referred to in inventories as ‘veils’ (sluijers), edged with fringes or tassels. For example, ‘Twee sjider sluijers met valse franje, en een nieuwe oranje sjerp met goud en zilver doorwekt dogh sonder franjen’ (Kinderen-Besier, 1950: 223).

7 This can be traced to a specific occasion. In 1689, Commissioner-General Van Rheede visited the Coromandel coast, the centre for the production of chintz. He sent six chintz gowns ‘in the Japanese style’ (presumably this meant their cut) back to the Netherlands, announcing that, if they were approved, he could get a thousand made the following year. Thenceforth most Japanese gowns were made in Indian chintz for the Netherlands (Jacobs, 2006: 90–103).

8 The originals of these garments are missing. They are recorded in photos from the 1950s: one in damask, the other in striped silk. The striped one has creases around the middle that indicate it was originally fitted with a sash.

9 Jan Verkolje’s portrait of Leeuwenhoek, c. 1672 (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) and Caspar Netscher’s portrait of Huygens, 1670 (Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague) were well known through numerous engravings. They feature standard elegant portrait style for robed men and probably set an aspirational example for images of scientists. I plan to study further the relationship between this shift in the social context of science and the disappearance of the academic gown.
In one notable variation, Heijman Dullaert’s young scholar (Milwaukee, Bader collection) wears a knee-length striped gown with a standing collar, presumably belted. The sleeves have been cut or rolled up to reveal a full sleeve with small slashes, in sixteenth-century style. He also wears a tall Phrygian-style cap, like Rembrandt’s Faust (Dullaert was a Rembrandt student).

De Winkel points out that Rembrandt, for example, while he owned and copied north Indian miniatures, he did not explicitly use them as a costume source. He got ideas from Lastman, prints of works by Rubens, Lucas van Leyden, and others. Venetian art was an especially rich source of oriental clothing images, since Venice was a centre along the trade routes. Costume books used for theatrical productions also tended toward standard types rather than authentic or trustworthy information; their sources were also earlier pictorial arts rather actual garments (De Winkel, 2004: 255–61).

Bibliography


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