In 1631, the fifty-eight year old Nicolaes Ruts had himself portrayed by Rembrandt wearing a fur hat and a fur lined gown (fig. 1). The ankle-length gown had a broad, turned down shawl-collar and long, rather wide sleeves with a slit at the elbow for the hand and lower arm, the rest of the sleeve hanging down. The Dutch contemporary terms used for this garment were tabbaard or rock.

In the first half of the seventeenth century many elderly men, like Nicolaes Ruts, had themselves portrayed in this by then quite outmoded garment. Simultaneously with this appearance as a motif in portraiture, there seems to have been a transition in the perception of the garment itself. During this period, the rather old-fashioned house garment acquired associations with learning, tradition and even antiquity, so that by the end of the century it had evolved into standardized conventional wear for certain professions. The formalized use of this gown persisted and survives today in Dutch legal, academic and ecclesiastical dress, having ‘fossilized’ in these strata of society in the early seventeenth century. In this article I would like to examine the possible reasons why this specific garment came to be depicted in portraiture and what its different associations were during this crucial period.

I.

The origins of the tabbaard lay in the fifteenth century. The term tabbaard is first encountered in Dutch inventories from the mid-fifteenth century onwards and appears for the first time in works of art in the last quarter of the century. By 1500 the tabbaard had become the main fashionable outer garment for men and it continued to dominate men’s fashions until 1550. During this early period the sleeves and length of the garment varied, according to fashion or the personal taste of the wearer. Another feature of the early tabbaard was the use of quite sumptuous materials like cloth of gold, brocades and expensive furs, as is illustrated by the inventory of Philip of Burgundy, bishop of Utrecht, from 1524, which lists eleven very lavish tabbaards, like a long tabbaard of cloth of gold lined with ermine and a black satin tabbaard lined with fine sables. In 1531, however, the wearing of such tabbaards, made out of cloth of gold or brocade, was prohibited by the