The Wooden Body: Representing the *Manikin* in Dutch Artists’ Studios

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When Gerard ter Borch (1617-1681) was in London, at age 18, his father shipped him a trunk filled with ‘garters, shoes, shoelaces, hatbands, 6 shirtbands, 6 handkerchiefs, 2 caps’ and lengths of cloth with which to repair his ‘best suit’ and daily clothing. It also contained ‘a brush holder… new long brushes, 2 books of paper, black chalk, an assortment of beautiful colors’, and a leeman, a lay figure or jointed wooden manikin. The elder ter Borch’s (1584-1662) accompanying letter of 3 July 1635 begins:

Dear child, I am sending you the leeman, but without a stand because it is too large and too heavy to put in the trunk. For a small amount of money you can have a stand made there. Use the leeman and do not let it stand idle, as it has done here, but draw a lot: large dynamic compositions [ordonantien], like those you have taken with you.¹

The father’s two concerns, that his son keep his suits in repair and that he use the lay figure, were not unrelated. The teenage Gerard had gone to London to work for his stepuncle Robert van Voerst (1597-1636), royal engraver to Charles I and one of the principals employed by Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641) in the production of his series of portrait prints, *The iconography.*² Just as ter Borch Senior cared that his son dress properly, especially in such courtly proximity, so, too, was clothing key to representing the elite in portraits and genre paintings.

Since the Renaissance, lay figures and other kinds of manikins had aided naturalistic representation, whether of drapery, individual figures, or light effects in compositions. The new naturalism of the seventeenth century – what Gerard de Lairesse would call ‘modern’ painting – entailed an unprecedented attentiveness to daily life and observed reality. One advantage of a lay figure was that it could hold a pose long enough for the painter to render the fashionably clothed body in precise and convincing detail. Yet it is hard to reconcile the stiff, wooden *leemannen* with the living, breathing people in seventeenth-century Dutch paintings. Their use seems so implausible it is no wonder that, until recently, the father ter Borch’s admonishment might have been taken as reflecting the outmoded practice of an earlier generation, whereas the young Gerard’s leaving his leeman idle seemed forward-looking. Now, however, an increased understanding of studio practice suggests that far from being the end of the story, Gerard ter Borch’s lay figure