Introduction: ‘The Netherlander has intelligence in his hand’

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In the *Lute-Playing Painter* (fig. 1), a work of the 1650s by the Leidener Johannes Cornelisz. van Swieten (c. 1635-1661), contrasting figures of the artist vie for our attention. We are drawn, first, to the painter in the foreground, who has set aside his palette to strum a lute. Honoured and theatrically framed by a curtain draped over monumental architecture, he wears a black doublet and an elegant shirt with flowing white sleeves, enlivened by red ribbons at the wrists. His fanciful garb, especially the red stockings, prefigures that of the painter shown from the back in Vermeer’s *Art of Painting* (fig. 10) of the following decade. More forthrightly than the Delft master, Van Swieten has portrayed his lute-player as an elite artist through his attitude, clothes, array of accoutrements and setting. The figure’s heavenward gaze – which parallels that of the hermit in the painting on his easel – suggests that this artist is divinely inspired. The black beret, an accessory of the learned painter, sports a feather, symbol of the *poetische geest* or poetic spirit that linked the visual and the verbal arts in humanist discourse. Music, too, was thought to induce creativity and was associated with love, the first of the three classic motivations for art, encompassing and surpassing honour and profit. The ideal ‘work’ of art is a labour of love.

Wine was another form of creative stimulation and the tall wine glass on the table in Van Swieten’s work is paired with a timepiece indicating the virtue of moderation. Unlike the notoriously unruly community of Netherlandish artists in Rome, against whom Karel van Mander warned prospective travelers, this fortunate artist enjoys the transformative fruits of Bacchus without abandoning intellectual control and social restraint. While the painting on the easel depicts an ascetic, focused on God, the elegant figure beside this image – identified with it in part through visual juxtaposition, in part through the established trope that ‘every painter paints himself’ – also enjoys and is inspired by the pleasures of this world.

The informal still-life on the table extends to the floor, where a skull evokes the artist’s intimate and ambivalent relationship with death. His quasi-divine capacity to create, enliven and immortalize are inseparable from the consciousness of absence and loss that render representation necessary. Beside the skull, a book and a globe, familiar from the many studio scenes painted in Leiden by Gerrit Dou (1613-1675) and others,