Reconstructing the first tentative steps of an artist's career is an engrossing challenge for the art historian: one has only to think of the many recent exhibitions and studies devoted to the young Rembrandt, for example, to gauge the magnetic appeal of the subject. How did an artist become that artist and not another? What were the decisive circumstances and opportunities that steered him down a particular path? Unfortunately, this crucial period of absorption and focused experimentation is often the least well documented, and therefore least well understood, portion of an artist's career. The addition or elimination of a single work from the corpus might result in a completely different image of the artist’s development. The unexpected discovery of Caspar Netscher’s signature on four canvasses from the suite of ten Craeyvanger family portraits (see pp. 7, 11-12, figs. 2, 8-10), and the re-emergence of the fine Portrait of a Young Man (fig. 5), have dramatically expanded the number of works that can be reliably attributed to the fledgling painter, and as a result have broadened our understanding of his earliest career.

Just a handful of paintings – about a dozen at most – can be dated to the late 1650s, when Netscher was active in the studio of Gerard ter Borch in Deventer. They are a diverse group of works, encompassing portraits and genre scenes, faithful replicas and independent compositions, and presenting a bewildering spectrum of styles and degrees of technical proficiency. The new discoveries have prompted a reassessment of this phase of Netscher’s career, and in particular a closer examination of the working relationship that existed between him and his mentor Ter Borch: they were master, pupil, independent artists and occasional collaborators. This is admittedly rocky terrain. There is much we do not know about the day-to-day realities of workshop practice and collaboration among painters in the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century – and indeed we know frustratingly little about the specific workings of Ter Borch’s studio in Deventer. However, the additional evidence presented by these newly revealed paintings helps construct a clearer picture of Netscher’s activities in Ter Borch’s studio and his gradual development towards becoming an independent master.

Based partly on the existence of a copy after Ter Borch’s Gallant Company (the so-called ‘Paternal Admonition’, fig. 2), signed and dated 1655 (fig. 1), and partly on the evidence of Netscher’s own likeness in several genre paintings by Ter Borch dating from the mid- to late 1650s, it is generally agreed that he was present in the latter’s studio from about 1655 until about 1658 or 1659, when he departed for Bordeaux. Netscher was not a complete neophyte when he came to Ter Borch; according to Houbraken, he had first studied with Hendrick Coster (1610/1620 - 1664 or later), an Arnhem painter of portraits, still lifes, and the occasional candlelight scene. It is not clear what – if anything – Netscher might have appropriated of Coster’s style or technique; indeed, this phase of his education is likely to have been of a rather basic nature, devoted to gaining technical facility rather than inculcating the refinements of a particular style. Coster’s move to Groningen...
in the mid-1650s probably precipitated Netscher’s own move to Deventer and his induction into the studio of Gerard ter Borch.

Netscher’s apprenticeship with Ter Borch was probably fairly typical, a mutually beneficial relationship that exchanged practical training for workshop assistance. We do not know what sort of contract (if any) was negotiated between the young aspirant and the master painter, but a hypothetical reconstruction of such a document could provide a key to making sense of the diverse group of paintings that Netscher is credited with producing during these years. Ronald de Jager’s study of existing seventeenth-century contracts between master painters and their would-be pupils suggests that although there was a fair amount of variation, each contract covered the same basic points: the duration of the contract and its cost, the type of instruction to be imparted and the desired outcome for both master and student. As each point was open to negotiation, it was effectively possible to customize an individual pupil’s experience in accordance with his needs, skills, and financial capability, whilst still conforming to local guild regulations. Typically, the period of tuition averaged about three or four years; it was not unusual for a pupil to then complete his education with one or two years’ additional study with a different master. While most contracts stated in general terms that the pupil was to learn painting and ‘related skills’, and sometimes [life] drawing, only occasionally do they stipulate that the pupil was to be trained in the same kind of painting as practiced by the master. Some