The name of Pieter de Hooch is most closely associated with paintings depicting serene and neatly ordered middle class Dutch homes and courtyards, peopled with only a few figures. Usually more important to the modern viewer than the activities of the figures in such works is de Hooch's rendering of light, atmosphere, and clearly defined space. It is as a creator of such scenes that he has come to be regarded, along with Vermeer, as a principal painter of the Delft school of the late 1650s and 1660s.

However, in the early 1650s, before he painted the colorful masterpieces for which he is best known, de Hooch painted quite different subjects, depicting tavern and stable interiors. In these rather dark, nearly monochromatic paintings, his figures are more often peasants and soldiers shown in moments of relaxation. The emphasis in these early de Hoochs tends to be more on the figures than on their surroundings, and the narrative quality seems of greater significance than it was to be in his mature years.

One of the best known of de Hooch's early efforts is the painting of *A Man with Dead Birds, and Other Figures, in a Stable* in the National Gallery in London (Fig. 1). Although it bears no signature, this panel clearly foreshadows the mature works of de Hooch in its figural treatment and includes the motif of a mother and child that will appear so frequently in his art. Actually it is especially close in style to the signed painting of *Backgammon Players* in Dublin, which is also an example from the early period of his development (Fig. 2). Both paintings are probably to be dated in the mid 1650s, not many years before his earliest signed and dated works of 1658, which are already in his mature style.

The London panel depicts a stable interior with a seated male figure in the left foreground, generally assumed to be a hunter, who faces in profile toward the center of the composition and directs his attention to a dead game bird he holds in his right hand and plucks with his left. Lying in a pile in the right foreground are several dead birds seemingly awaiting their turn in the hands of the hunter, while just behind them stands a spaniel who was perhaps instrumental in flushing them for his master. Directly behind the plane formed by the hunter, his dog, and his booty, stands a young woman with an infant in her arms. Her gaze is directed downward toward the dog and the game. To the woman's left is a post on which hangs a man's cape, while still further to her left a man's jacket is draped across a partial barrier that runs parallel to the picture plane. Further back and entering through a door at the rear of the stable is a man with a wide-brimmed hat.

The history of the painting has been traceable no further back than May 19, 1900, when it appeared in the Madame de Falbe sale in London and was attributed to Jan Baptist Weenix, presumably on the basis of the subject with its still life interest.
in dead game. Later that same year it came to be regarded as a joint effort by Weenix and de Hooch. By 1906, the association with Weenix was dropped, and the painting has ever since been assigned to the early period of de Hooch. In 1924 it entered the collection of the National Gallery.

An 1825 catalogue of an auction held in Amsterdam describes a painting by de Hooch,

1 The provenance of the painting beginning in 1900 is found in Neil MacLaren, National Gallery Catalogues: The Dutch School (London 1960), pp. 190-191.