

**Age UK Lewisham and Southwark, Creative Conversation  
Transcript for *Reframed: The Woman in the Window*.**

**3 November 2021**



**Discussing: Gerrit Dou, *Old Woman at a Window with a Candle*, 1671**

Image courtesy of The Leiden Collection, New York

**Present:**

Wendy Garwood

Ruth Eldridge

Anonymous

Rosie Mills Eckmire

Josephine Berry

Facilitator

(Josephine)

I think she's looking. She's looking at a bird. It looks like, you know a dead...chicken. Yeah. Okay. Probably about to do something to it.

(Facilitator)

Okay, so Jo's saying that she feels that this woman is looking at what she has identified as a chicken or fowl and that she is about to do something to it.

(Josephine)

She is taking a good look at it anyway.

(Facilitator)

And what do you see that makes you think that she might be doing something with this?

(Josephine)

She is holding a candle close to it. Trying to get some light. This is in a very dark, dark room.

(Facilitator)

Thank you, Jo. So, Jo feels that this woman is interested and about to, maybe, do something to this fowl or chicken because she's got this light source, which she's bringing close to it. Maybe to see it better. Okay, thank you.

(Anonymous)

Well, it's a mystery, isn't it. What is going on? Why is there that piece of paper under the candlestick? What's that all about? And is that an empty birdcage above?

(Facilitator)

Is this here?

(Anonymous)

Yeah, but there doesn't seem to be anything in it. Yeah, it's a mystery.

(Facilitator)

Thank you, Anonymous. So, Anonymous is identifying the mysterious aspects of this. Leaving her with questions. Firstly, what is this piece of paper here underneath the candle? And a question about is this a bird cage? And if so, why is it empty?

(Josephine)

I think that it has a date on that piece of paper - 1620s? I think that it is the date. Like a cargo, like a delivery of something...? A box in a cellar. Not in a cellar, but in a storage area. It looks like a storage area.

(Facilitator)

And what do you see that makes you think that?

(Josephine)

I don't know because it's so dark!

(Facilitator)

Ok. Alright. So, Jo has identified that there's writing on this paper piece of paper and thinking it might be a date? Possibly the date of the painting? Is that what you said?

(Josephine)

No, I think it's on the...on a box or on a crate.

(Facilitator)

So identifying this here and possibly a crate?

(Josephine)

When the box was delivered or....

(Facilitator)

So, thinking that this might represent the delivery date of this possible box, and you talked about this space, maybe being a storage area, and you thought that that might be the case because of the box possibly? And also because it's quite a dark, dark space. So maybe a basement space? Thank you, Jo.

(Wendy)

Looking at the other side of it, she looks quite poor. She's got a hood up and it's dark. Perhaps she's stealing it. And she's just checking that there's nobody watching.

(Facilitator)

Ok

(Wendy)

Especially with the hood up, or like her head covered.

(Facilitator)

Thank you, Wendy. So, you are thinking there might be some sort of narrative going on here. And this figure is not wanting to be seen - talking about the headcovering - made maybe to be hidden, and that maybe she's up to no good possibly and stealing something. And are you thinking about the fowl or the chicken?

(Wendy)

Yeah. Because if she's poor, she has perhaps just seen it. Well, people had to make where they could and if it's just left there perhaps she felt - well! Waste not, want not.

(Facilitator)

Thank you, Wendy. So yeah, so you've identified this figure as possibly being poor. Based on...? What do you see that makes you think that?

(Wendy)

Well, it's just her clothing and her face and that. She looks...yeah.

(Facilitator)

Okay, so we are sort of thinking about the figure and maybe who she is and you're feeling that maybe she is poor because of her clothing and her face. Okay. Thank you.

(Josephine)

I'm thinking of smuggling. Thinking about smuggling, smuggling and making a story in my head.

(Facilitator)

Can you tell us more?

(Josephine)

Well, they've smuggled a big crate of something and she's just investigating. See what's in it.

(Facilitator)

So, we've got another narrative going on here, which is similar to Wendy in this idea of kind of robbery, thinking more elaborately that it's, it could be... what did you just say? Smuggling?

(Josephine)

Because it's stowed away. You know that smugglers have sort of secret places in the house. And then people you know, get the stuff from the boats and then they hide it. Hide it away from the taxman, the revenue.

(Facilitator)

So, Jo, came back to this idea of this crate and that this space is maybe a kind of underground basement.. a sort of area for stolen goods. Okay.

(Ruth)

I think that she's a servant, but maybe she is a smuggling servant.

(Josephine)

I think a lot of people were smuggling

(Wendy)

Could the bird not have fallen out of the cage and that is why the cage or whatever is empty and she is thinking "What do I do now?"

(Facilitator)

Okay. Thank you

(Wendy)

It's somebody's pet or..

(Josephine)

I think it's the dinner that she's got to cook.

(Ruth)

I think it's the dinner.

(Wendy)

So, making dinner? Oh, well.

(Facilitator)

So, Ruth was sort of thinking that maybe she's a servant. Maybe at work? And what do you see that makes you say that?

(Ruth)

There's people in the background. I can see other people and she's one of the servants getting the food prepared for the master or the mistress where she lives. Yeah, I thought literally she was a servant.

(Facilitator)

So, Ruth has a different view and feels that this is the servant and one of the reasons she is saying this is because, possibly, the activity that the figure is undertaking - which looks like kind of preparing possibly...

(Ruth)

Dinner. For a master or a mistress.

Unknown Speaker

Can you see a knife or...?

(Facilitator)

Something for these unidentified people in the background so that this figure isn't alone in this space. There are people around.

(Unknown Speaker)

Do you think she is plucking it?

(Ruth)

Yeah, that's what I thought when I first saw it. That she is going to get the bird ready for the people that she works for.

(Facilitator)

Okay, so coming back to this bird. So we have got two different ideas maybe. This bird is here for preparation for dinner and Wendy you were saying that possibly this bird is why the cage is empty because the bird has come from the cage and fallen down here and she's wondering what she will do in this case. What more can we find?

(Josephine)

I wonder why it's so dark. Because if that is a preparation area, you would expect it to be in a big kitchen area. Somewhere that you can see what you are doing. And she's holding a candle to see what she is doing.

(Facilitator)

Jo is wondering why, if this is an area to prepare food, why is it so dark?

(Josephine)

It doesn't seem suitable to me.

(Wendy)

Well, she's carrying a basket, isn't she? In the other hand from the candle, she's got a basket. So, she might be looking for somewhere to

put her basket. I don't know. And a safe place to put her candle to do...She might be plucking the bird to put the feathers in the basket for use for something else.

(Facilitator)

So, back to the bird and you've identified this sort of basket in her hand and possibly working out where to place it and coming back to this prepping this chicken or fowl for a meal by plucking it?

(Josephine)

I think they probably use the feathers because it's quite outdated and you know, they could be using the feathers for quills. So, perhaps she first of all takes those off before...

(Wendy)

She might be plucking it for feathers for ladies' hats and things like that.

(Facilitator)

Alright, so thanks. Thank you Jo. So, Jo is sort of expanding on this idea of plucking the chicken and maybe what these feathers might be used for - writing implements. And Wendy, you were saying that the feathers at this time were possibly used for women's hats or clothing. Thank you. So, can we find any more?

(Rosie)

I was thinking about light as well. So, I think Jo said it was very dark. So, it makes me automatically think it's night-time. And we're talking about windows, but the main source of light in this work is the candle, but you've got it on the... at the back on the left-hand side, you can very, very faintly see a window and someone - I think it's a girl - sitting in the window. If you look very carefully with a magnifying glass. I didn't see it at first until I held the magnifying glass. And yeah, just thinking about windows are what let the light in. Except at night-time when there's no light outside. Yeah, just found it interesting how the lights coming from the candle and casting shadow.

(Facilitator)



Okay, thank you, Rosie. So, Rosie's kind of curious about the light within this painting. Considering it's so dark. She is particularly interested in the light source, which is the candle itself, feeling that it's night-time, because generally it's very dark, but also identifying...she feels that this is a kind of window over here and identifying a figure that's possibly sitting by the window. And that windows generally are kind of light sources in themselves, but it's night-time and therefore the light source is coming from this candle - casting shadows.

(Josephine)

You were saying this bit about women behind windows. So is the painting about the woman rather than about what she is doing or...

(Facilitator)

Well, what do you think?

(Josephine)

It's that all the paintings are women framed or women behind windows.

(Facilitator)

Yeah, within the within the exhibition, the themes are often female figures and there are windows within the artworks but I guess it can maybe mean lots of different things. So, what do we think about the window? So, do we think that the window...Why do we think there is a window?

(Unknown speaker)

I can't see the window.

(Facilitator)

Well, I think Rosie sort of feels that maybe there's a window here...

(Rosie)

I only saw it with a magnifying glass. So...

(Facilitator)

Do you think that the window has any significance or anything to tell us? Do we think that there is a window?

(Rosie)

I think that there is because it is in the exhibition.

(Unknown Speaker)

Well, I suppose it probably tells us that she's doing it at night-time...

(Facilitator)

So, the window is telling us something about time of day.

(Rosie)

If it is an illegal activity, as well, then like the person in front might be doing the activity and the person at the window might be keeping watch.

(Facilitator)

So, the window might be adding to this story, this narrative we are talking about in terms of doing something kind of - some illegal activity and that these two figures might be working together. One doing the action and the other keeping watch through the window. Thank you, Rosie.

(Anonymous)

So what is that drape on the right then? Is that a window behind or...

(Ruth)

Is that a secret area? Is that why there's a drape there in the archway?

(Wendy)

Could it all be one room and that be the sleeping area? Curtained off. Because people did live in one room - I mean, people do live in one room - so it might just be to curtain off the eating area / prep area from the sleeping area.

(Facilitator)

Thank you, Wendy. So, Anonymous first drew our attention to this curtain and wondering if this, in itself, is a window. This space here. Wendy is thinking that maybe the curtain is a separation of spaces, living areas, and that's maybe what this curtain is representing. So,

what is your impression of the figure? What are your feelings? Do you have any feelings about the figure?

(Ruth)

She is really small. And I think she has really small feet. I'm not sure why I thought of that! I think she's really small but really small feet.

(Facilitator)

Okay, thanks. Ruth is really taken by her size and it interested in how small this figure is and her head has gone straight to the idea of small feet. Anyone else's impressions?

(Josephine)

I just think she is a woman with another job to do.

(Facilitator)

So, Jo is sort of thinking this is a woman with another job to do.

(Josephine)

Yeah, well, she gets a lot of... she is always working.

(Facilitator)

What do you see that makes you say that?

(Joseph

Well, I think she's got to do something with this... she's got to prepare the bird and I just think it's one of those, you know... one of her tasks.

(Facilitator)

So, Jo thinks this is a busy woman. Specifically looking at the things around her and particularly at the chicken / the fowl. She's got a job to do.

(Rosie)

Yeah, I don't know what gave me that impression. But yeah, I thought she was poor or a servant or what, you know, working - working woman. Because if you had money back then you wouldn't prepare your own chicken. And I thought as well, she had a lot to do. She was very busy. I'm not sure. I wasn't sure initially, what made me think that,

but looking further, she's still in motion. She hasn't set the candle down and she hasn't set the basket down. So, she's in the middle of doing something because you wouldn't stand awkwardly posed like that. So yeah, I thought the same thing.

(Facilitator)

Okay, so thank you, Rosie. Rosie's sort of, again, responding to this idea of who is she. Thinking that she is a servant - somebody who works and that she is busy. And you kind of identify this idea of her being busy because she's in motion. She hasn't set down the candle. She hasn't set down this basket or bucket. And she's in the middle - in the middle of doing.

(Anonymous)

I think - is her expression a bit thoughtful?

(Facilitator)

What do you see...

(Anonymous)

She doesn't really, you know, she's not purposeful in her own space, is she? She's not "Oh, right. Here's the chicken. I've got to pluck it". Or I've got to put it in the basket. She's a bit quizzical about it.

(Facilitator)

So, Anonymous is looking at the figure's face and her expression - using the word quizzical and that, that she's not seeming like she's focusing so much on the task, that she's maybe thinking about something. Sorry, was that what you said? Yes, okay. So, that her.. maybe she's, she's active. She's carrying things not yet set down, but her mind maybe is elsewhere. In thought, deep in thought. Okay, and can any of you relate to this figure in any way? Is there anything about her that you recognize?

(Rosie)

When your mind is somewhere else and you have like loads of work to do, but your brain is thinking of something else entirely not related to work and someone could come up to her and ask her and she would

be like "oh, yes, yes, the work", but she's thinking. Her brain is somewhere else, maybe?

(Facilitator)

So, thanks, Rosie. Rosie is recognising this idea of being busy, but your mind being elsewhere and recognising that feeling. And that ties in with what is Anonymous is sort of saying as well.

(Rosie)

Well, I see myself coming home from work in the dark, I've got my work bag, putting it down, turn the light on above the stove, start cooking and it's just like moving from one task to another. Especially in winter. It's so dark. It's getting dark so early now. Yes, so I kind of see myself in her.

(Facilitator)

So, Rosie's sort of saying that she recognises some of what's going on here - particularly to do with the sort of darkness in the painting and kind of linking it with kind of feelings of coming home at night, when especially now that it's getting darker. And this idea that you're coming in and you're getting on - straight on - with your task. There's things to be done. Right? Anyone else relate to the figure?

(Josephine)

Yes. I can see, she's just got to get on with the job. And yes, her mind might not want to be on it.

(Facilitator)

So, thanks, Jo. So, Joe, is sort of recognizing this feeling of just having to get on with the job. And maybe you're kind of not completely engaged with it, but it's something that's...

(Josephine)

It's unpleasant, maybe. Put the radio on. Put your mind off it. Because if there's something unpleasant you have to do sometimes you put the radio on, just distract yourself, put your mind off. So you can actually do this unpleasant job.

(Facilitator)

So, thinking about all the tasks we have to do that are unpleasant, and finding ways to get it done. It has to be done. And you say, listening to the radio helps you. Okay, so let's see how we're doing for time. Okay, so we've run over slightly, so it's, it's five past 12. So, so thank you for that. I think it was great to get your feedback and kind of hear about your views and sort of the connections you were making and building this sort of picture up together of kind of what you thought about the painting. A lot of you really sort of honed in on the fact of the darkness within the painting and what that was telling us about time of day, or maybe a story behind kind of what this figure is doing and the space she's in. We talked about who she might be - feeling that there might be something suspicious going on...

Unknown speaker and (Ruth)

Dreariness.

(Facilitator)

Dreariness. And this woman brings that sort of a worker and in the middle of a task, and kind of maybe what that means to us. A lot of us recognising this, this kind of business, this stuff that has to be done and your mind or your heart's not quite, quite in it. And we talked about trying to find the window some of us...

(Ruth)

There isn't, no. Do you think that is where it taken from? If you go past and you're watching getting dinner ready. That's what I think - it's someone's going past. Obviously, they don't have a camera and are just watching. But like you've walked past her wherever she's living and then you're taking a picture but you're taking a painting rather than... that's where I think the window is. It's where we're looking from. The window is outside and we are looking in.

(Ruth)

Ruth, feels that window is here?

(Ruth)

Yeah.

(Facilitator)

And we are on the outside looking in at this woman doing what she's doing. We're looking at her.

(Ruth)

Yeah, we're in.. Yeah, that's the window there. That's the window picture.

(Facilitator)

Thank you. Wonderful.

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