



The Goldfinch's travels

Fact and fiction

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Carel Fabritius
The Goldfinch, 1654
Oil on panel, 33.5 × 22.8 cm
The Hague, Mauritshuis, 605

[Acquisition details?](#)

ONE OF THE SMALLEST TREASURES IN THE MAURITSHUIS HAS recently become an international literary celebrity – the mainspring of an eponymous bestseller Pulitzer prize-winning novel and reportedly to star in a forthcoming film. I refer to Carel Fabritius's *The Goldfinch* dated 1654 – the year in which the thirty-two year old artist lost his life in the massive explosion of the powder magazine of the city of Delft. The miraculous survival of this tiny panel (33.5 × 22.8 cm) is especially poignant, as technical evidence suggests that at the time of the explosion it was still drying in the artist's studio.

In Donna Tartt's 2013 novel, the small panel, then on loan to the Metropolitan Museum in New York, once again miraculously survives a massive explosion – only to be abducted and taken on an improbable (albeit compellingly readable) series of convoluted adventures lasting some fourteen years – and 864 pages. It lands up in a murky and violent art underworld before eventually being restored to its rightful home, the Mauritshuis.

Besides the main plot, there are digressions on art history, on techniques of furniture and fine-art restoration, on forgery, and on *The Goldfinch* itself: its technical and painterly qualities, and its range of possible meanings. Further philosophical reflections on how we value and interpret art (both financially and spiritually) serve either to elevate or to burden the small chained bird (depending on the reader's predilections).

The hazardous peregrinations of *The Goldfinch* back to the Mauritshuis are not, however, complemented by any historical information about how or when it had reached the museum in the first place (to the dismay of this reader). There is only one mention of its provenance – a dismissive and ill-informed comment by one of the novel's less salubrious characters about the “collector art critic, the Frenchman” who rediscovered and desired to own it: “Found it buried in some nobleman's store room back in the 1890s.” Not quite so.

The “Frenchman” was, in fact, Théophile Thoré (1807–1869) who by the late 1850s had become the leading historian and connoisseur of seventeenth-century Dutch art. He was at the time in political exile from France, living mostly in Brussels and writing under the pseudonym W.[illiam] Bürger. As Peter Hecht has shown, Thoré-Bürger was notable both for his persuasive interpretation of the vital role of the Dutch school in the history of European art and for his pioneering researches and reassessments of individual Dutch artists. He viewed the construed naturalism of the art of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic as exemplary for the art of his own era, and as the legitimate ancestor of modern art. His scholarly connoisseurship resulted in his most celebrated ‘rediscovery’ of Vermeer (whose *Woman with the Pearl Earring* has also been fêted in

recent fiction and film), and he also brought to light the rare and little known works of Carel Fabritius.

His first encounter with Fabritius's *Goldfinch* was indeed in a nobleman's collection – that of the Chevalier Joseph-Guillaume-Jean Camberlyn, an avid collector of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings and prints who befriended Bürger in Brussels during his exile and with whom Bürger spent long hours discussing their shared passion. Camberlyn (1783–1861), who held a post in King Willem I's service between 1815 and 1826, was based in The Hague, where he may have acquired the painting. Deeply distressed by the separation of Belgium in 1830, he withdrew to his vast residence in Brussels, where Bürger met the reclusive collector in his latter years.

Bürger's first mention of Camberlyn's *Goldfinch* dates from his widely read account of the Arenberg Collection of 1859, and is in the context of his tentative revelations about his nascent rediscovery of Vermeer. He explains how he was alerted by the tiny signed and dated panel:

I have never heard any mention of paintings by Carel Fabritius in Holland, and I have only ever seen one – a mere trifle [lit. “a little piece of nothing”], but excellent and especially precious owing to the signature of the man who is associated with Jan van der Meer of Delft. It is in Brussels in the collection of chevalier Camberlyn. It is a simple studio sketch, or rather a study, after nature, of a goldfinch perched on his little caged box, attached to a pale wall which recalls the light backgrounds that van der Meer seems to have favoured. It is painted in beautiful brushstrokes, with very firm tones and luminous colour.

According to a much later – but partly fanciful – account written by Bürger's close friend Félix Delhasse, the little panel had been found in a dusty attic among the paintings which Camberlyn dismissed as “his daubs” (“*ses croutes*”). Delhasse recollected that Camberlyn viewed Bürger's keen interest with tolerant amusement, and allowed him to take the painting home with him:

And throughout the night, in the little room that he occupied, rue de Trône, in Ixelles, Burger applied himself to a task of dissection, investigating flesh and bones, moistening, cleaning the painting, removing the overlaid dirt, reviving the dull areas with his breath, eventually restoring life to the little winged creature which seemed condemned to perpetual reclusion in an attic.

Léopold Flameng
Portrait of Thoré-Bürger, 1870
Etching



Delhasse even remembered Bürger's jovial exclamation:

Two centuries on his perch – a veritable Simeon Stylite, what! But Felicio, do admire his plumage: its colours are as fresh as on the first day. ... It is a splendid goldfinch that he has given me. ... But let's not disturb him, he is shaking his wings, he is going to fly away; let's close the window.

Delhasse's vivid reminiscences of Bürger's enthusiasm and his loving attentions to “the little winged creature” (“*le petit être ailé*”) are plausible. However, Delhasse's assertion that the tiny painting

was given by the elderly Camberlyn to Bürger, who subsequently brought the cherished painting to Paris on his return from exile in 1860, is apocryphal (and a cautionary example to historians of the unreliability and fictional possibilities of personal reminiscences!).

Incontrovertible documentary evidence shows that although Bürger hoped to purchase the painting at the time of Camberlyn's death in 1861, he finally acquired the painting only in 1865. It was indeed a gift, but from Camberlyn's heirs as a token of appreciation for the preface Bürger wrote for the catalogue of the posthumous sale of Camberlyn's collection of prints and drawings.

As he wrote to his friend, the collector Barthold Suermondt in Aachen:

I now have the famous Goldfinch signed C. Fabritius 1654, which I mentioned in the Arenberg gallery and elsewhere. ... Since I kindly wrote a piece in memory of the old chevalier whom I much loved ... the nephew, his heir, the young chevalier Camberlyn has sent me, also in memory of his uncle, this little piece of nothing at all, but which is a masterpiece.

Bürger's pioneering article "Notes sur les Fabritius" (*Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1865) initiated modern art-historical literature on the artist (and his brother Barent), and the following year he introduced *The Goldfinch* to the Parisian public at the popular Exposition Retrospective from private collections (Palais des Champs-Élysées, adjoining the current Salon exhibition).

Bürger, as organizer and lender, used the opportunity to launch several rediscovered paintings by Vermeer (deemed a huge success – "*un succès fou*") and also to display his recently acquired *Goldfinch*, now safely rescued from the dusty attic. According to one prominent critic, Zacharie Astruc, the tiny panel both entranced and puzzled its new audience:

I have a bird to present to you, my dear reader – the strangest, the most piquant, the most terrible of birds – a goldfinch! ... Poor little creature! ... Is this a sphinx; a moralist, a winged pamphleteer? ... All of that perhaps. This work, very rare and very energetic, extremely curious ... is signed Fabritius. And who is this Fabritius? Yet another neglected artist [lit. "disinherited"] – virtually unknown. And nevertheless, illustrious pupil of Rembrandt, he was also the master of this glorious Jan Van der Meer (of Delft).

The following year *The Goldfinch* had its second public showing when it was introduced to a Dutch audience at an exhibition of Old Masters

in Amsterdam. "Isn't my goldfinch a marvel?" ("*N'est-ce pas que mon chardonneret est une merveille?*") Burger asked his friend and colleague, Carel Vosmaer, who in turn described it as a "superb, beautifully painted goldfinch".

Bürger never considered selling his *Goldfinch*, which he treasured as much as works by his most revered Dutch artists – Hals, Rembrandt and Vermeer. According to all accounts it hung near his bed where he could gaze at it during his last hours. He died on 30 April 1869.

After his death, the *Goldfinch* (with most of the rest of his collection) remained in the home of his sole heir, Mme Apolline Lacroix, until 1892, when the collection was sold at public auction. In the preface to the catalogue, Paul Mantz paid affectionate homage to Thoré-Bürger's achievements as art historian, critic and collector, concluding with special reference to *The Goldfinch*: "Fabritius's charming bird has sung much for him, but one knows the sad path of life; one knows how everything comes to an end: it is under another roof that the *Goldfinch* will henceforth scatter the pearls of his song"

Four years would pass before *The Goldfinch* was retrieved from the art market for the sanctuary of a public collection. Purchased at the 1892 auction by a French dealer and put up for sale again in Paris in 1896, it was finally acquired by Abraham Bredius for the Mauritshuis, where "the charming bird" continues to scatter the "the pearls of his song" to an enthralled audience.