

# Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

Vol. 20, No. 1    Autumn, 2015

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog  
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# VERMEER'S RUCKERS MUSELAR VIRGINAL: Vermeer's Painting Of A Ruckers Muselar Virginal In *The Music Lesson* c. 1662-65

## New Evidence: The Smoking Gun

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by Dominic Eckersley

Since the Spring 2015 edition of this magazine went to print, new evidence has emerged. We are finally able to demonstrate that some of the damage to the woodblocks used for printing decorative papers for Ruckers instruments such as is found on Vermeer's Ruckers instrument, can be found on all Ruckers instruments with these papers until 1640 but not after. This new evidence is able to provide absolute proof that the instrument painted by Vermeer was painted from life and that it was an instrument made by the Ruckers shop no later than 1640.

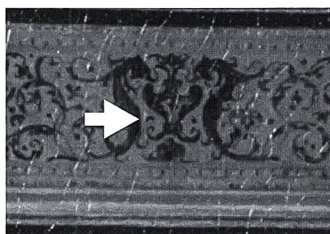
In the conclusion to the article *Vermeer's Ruckers Muselar Virginal*<sup>1</sup> we were advised that "[a]lthough time accumulated damage to the original woodblocks used for the keywell dolphin paper has been used by others to detect which Ruckers instruments are older or newer, the detail in the Vermeer painting does unfortunately disappoint us here. It would be too tenuous to claim to be able to tell today how damaged the woodblock was at the time of the Vermeer painting." However, one known damaged area of the woodblock paper is clear in both surviving Ruckers instruments and in Vermeer's painting. As this damage appears in all examples of the "Type 3 early type" woodblock papers of Ruckers instruments, it was not considered relevant for precise dating purposes.

To the right side of the vase situated between the two dolphins on the woodblock papers which Grant O'Brien refers to as "Type 3 early type" we can clearly see a round circle. However, to the left of the vase we see only a crescent shape which appears to have been a circle too but has had part of the wood chipped off from its lower portion.



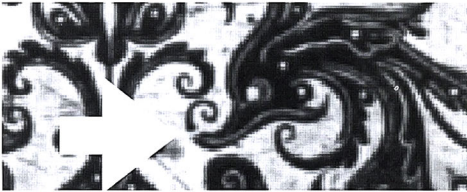
Grant O'Brien's "Type 3 early type" Ruckers paper with left circle damage visible<sup>2</sup>

This same feature is to be observed in Vermeer's painting in diagram 2.



Vermeer "The Music Lesson" 1662-65; detail.

A smaller area of damage can be seen in the form of an interruption in the line of the curled tip of the right dolphin's nose (see diagram 3). Unfortunately, this feature cannot be demonstrated in the Vermeer painting. It could be that this damage was not yet there; another possibility is that it was visible but Vermeer decided to correct it in the painting.



Diag. 3: Broken line of dolphin nose

Standing on their own, however, the two images of the broken circle, that of Ruckers and that of Vermeer, tell us only two things; namely that Ruckers used papers which had been printed with damaged blocks and that Vermeer's painting is definitively one of a Ruckers instrument. However, it does not date the instrument directly.

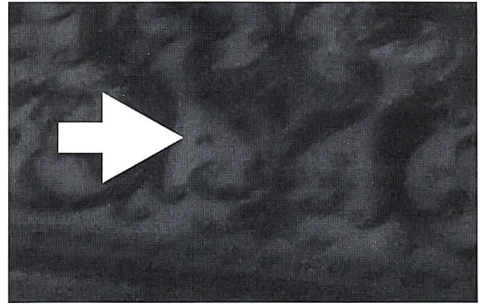
We might safely assume that no self-respecting printer would sell papers to makers in Antwerp which had imperfections unless these imperfections were intentional. Yet, when compared with "Type 3 late type" as in diagram 4, it becomes clear that symmetry had been the intention.



Diag. 4: Ruckers "Type 3 late type"<sup>3</sup>

The spinet virginal by Hans Ruckers of 1591, currently in the Gruuthuse Museum at Bruges,

is the oldest known instrument by Ruckers with dolphin papers (see diagram 5).



Diag. 5: Hans Ruckers spinet virginal 1591 with damage visible, Gruuthuse Museum, Bruges<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

The spinet virginal by Hans Ruckers of 1591, currently in the Gruuthuse Museum at Bruges, dates with accuracy the earliest known use of the woodblock for printing the "Type 3 early type" papers. The earliest known Ruckers instrument is the mother and child muselar virginal of 1581, now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Hence, the date of 1591 can only be approximate in dating the first use of the papers., as we cannot know exactly if or when the papers were printed before that date or if these papers were used on possibly missing earlier built instruments.

We can finally and clearly demonstrate that the papers were not printed by a printer with an intentional mistake but were printed from woodblocks which were damaged. We have seen that the damage was visible already in 1591, the earliest known appearance of the papers. We can also posit with reasonable clarity then that the papers were printed in the Ruckers shop, rather than a printing house and that they were printed in or before 1591, and for the next 49 years, until they were replaced in 1640 by "Type 3 late type" papers.

Although conjecture, it is quite possible that the woodblocks were carved in the Ruckers shop

either from their own design or that of a pattern book and that some or all of the damage was sustained during the carving of the woodblocks rather than through use. It is interesting to consider that Ruckers would have tolerated the substandard papers for at least 49 years and this adds weight to their having been printed in Ruckers' shop; the cost of re-carving the blocks for printing would have outweighed the need for better papers. It is also interesting to consider that Ruckers did not simply pen in the missing portion of the circle.

Although this evidence cannot date the Vermeer Ruckers any more accurately than we have already

done, at c. 1598, it does prove beyond all doubt that the instrument was made by the Ruckers shop and that it was made demonstrably at least as early as 1591 but no later than 1640.

Intentional mistakes are often found on instruments by 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century makers. Such small errors allowed the makers to maintain their humility in not being able to produce perfect work. These mistakes can take the form of a missing notch on a natural key touch plate, or some other almost invisible intentional error. Perhaps this damage to the papers was a happily accepted naturally occurring visible example of human foible.

1. Dominic Eckersley, "Vermeer's Ruckers Muselar Virginal: Vermeer's painting of a Ruckers Muselar Virginal in *The Music Lesson* c. 1662-65", *Harpsichord and Fortepiano* 19/2( Spring 2015 ).
2. Grant O'Brien, *Ruckers: A Harpsichord and Virginal Building Tradition* (Doctoral dissertation) (Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh, 1983), 406. We would like to thank Dr. Grant O'Brien for permission to use the photos from his dissertation. Volume 1 may be viewed online at [www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/](http://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/) using a search of the title.
3. *Ibid.*, 407.
4. Spinet virginals by Hans Ruckers 1591, Gruuthuse Museum, Bruges. Photo by Gérard Janot, Online, "Wikimedia Commons, 2011", <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EpINETTE\\_Ruckers.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EpINETTE_Ruckers.jpg)>, accessed 5 July 2015.

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