



## Short notice

# ‘Who this Portrait Depicts is (yet) Unknown’: John Greenwood and his Portrait of a Captain Sailing to Suriname

• EVELINE SINT NICOLAAS\* •

In 1984, the Stichting Cultuurgeschiedenis van de Nederlanders Overzee (CNO, Foundation for the Cultural History of the Netherlands Overseas) purchased a portrait of a then unknown captain from one ‘Dhr Simonsz’ in Hilversum, painted by John Greenwood (1729-1792) in 1760 (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The artist signed and dated the painting on the map held in the captain’s right hand; in his other hand, the sitter holds a large monocular. At the time of the acquisition, the expectation was stated that the captain’s identity would soon be discovered. Ten years later, when the foundation was dissolved and the painting entered the care of the Rijksmuseum, the question was still unresolved. It has remained so ever since. In part through the study of an archival document in the collection of The New York Historical, it appears a name has now been found to match the face.

The painter John Greenwood, born into a merchant family in Boston, was interested in painting from an early age. After an apprenticeship with a local painter named Thomas Johnston, the young artist departed for Suriname. From 1752 to 1758, Greenwood lived and worked in the Dutch colony. He then moved to Amsterdam, where

< Fig. 1  
JOHN GREENWOOD,  
*Portrait of Captain  
Dirk Simonsz  
(1727-1768)*, 1760.  
Oil on canvas,  
81.5 x 63 cm.  
Amsterdam,  
Rijksmuseum,  
inv. no. SK-A-4905.

he remained for a number of years, and was thereafter active as an artist and art dealer in England up until his death in 1792.<sup>2</sup> The archival document – a manuscript written by the artist himself, later supplemented with notes by his son, John Greenwood – is an important biographical source.<sup>3</sup> The notebook consists of individual diary sections, accompanied by remarks and lists. The sections concerning Amsterdam and England have largely been lost, but the notes the artist made in Suriname have been preserved. Because Greenwood painted the captain’s portrait in 1760 – after he left for Amsterdam – the manuscript at first seemed irrelevant to the identification of the sitter. However, a closer examination of the portrait revealed that the map in the captain’s hand shows the coastline of Suriname (fig. 2). This prompted a more in-depth investigation of Greenwood’s notebook and the time he spent in this Dutch colony in the hope of ascertaining the identity of the man portrayed.

### Suriname: ‘The Advantages of Practice and Profit’

Greenwood was twenty-five years old when he departed Boston for Suriname.<sup>4</sup> Regarding this perhaps



*Fig. 2*  
Detail of the map showing the coastline of Suriname in the captain's portrait (fig. 1).

rather unconventional destination, son John made the following written annotation in his father's notebook:

I do not perceive, neither have I ever heard the motive that induced him to choose South America in preference to Europe. He perhaps justly concluded that a change of place and people could not fail of bringing an increase of knowledge, and that so remote a situation from the more polished nations would better answer his purpose in regard to Painting, than had he immediately gone to Italy, France or England, where the inhabitants, by being accustomed to the works of the best Artists, would have received with indifference his juvenile productions, whereas by going to Surinam he would combine the advantages of Practice and Profit.<sup>5</sup>

In short, Suriname offered a rich supply of potential clientele for a beginning artist, with minimal competition from other painters and therefore the opportunity to gain experience and make some money.

In Paramaribo, Greenwood was accepted into the relatively small European community, which also proved to be his greatest source of customers. Where he precisely lived and whether he made his arrival known, and if so by what means, are unclear. News would have spread quickly enough.

The notes that Greenwood took during his six-year sojourn in Suriname cover a wide range of topics. It is not a consistently maintained notebook, but rather a loose collection of observations on matters such as the eating habits of Europeans versus those who were enslaved, the composition of the red paint made by the 'Indians of the Amazon' and the pros and cons of the practice of covering the streets of Paramaribo with shells. Without further elucidation, Greenwood interspersed these observations with, for example, a description of the Spanish buck (a severe form of corporal punishment) and a compelling but factual account of the execution of seventeen enslaved men on 23 March 1753, accused of poisoning their master.<sup>6</sup>

> *Figs. 3, 4*  
Pages 174 and 175 of Greenwood's notebook, with a list of the persons, including size, technique and prices, that he portrayed. New York, The New York Historical, Archive of the Greenwood Family, 'Original Memorandum Book of the Artist John Greenwood', vol. 2.



*An Act of Pictury Spainted at Surinam - 1757*

Mach. Dick. 172	1000	Mr. Greening	1/2	100	Capt. Fry	70	81
Rhindrop 1/2	110	his Lady (1757)	1/2	100	Capt. Duran	70	66
Raindrop 1/2	110	Mr. Tolink	1/2	200	C. Peic	60	64
Cellis Kk	80	Mr. J. P. Phis	1/2	110	Mr. Westbroth	60	69
Cellis B	80	Mr. J. P. Phis	1/2	110	Capt. Sworis	60	69
Cellis Kk	110	Demari Klein	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	90
Cellis Kk	110	his Lady	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	70	71
Cellis Kk	80	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	50	72
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	73
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	74
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	75
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	76
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	77
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	78
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	79
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	80
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	81
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	82
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	83
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	84
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	85
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	86
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	87
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	88
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	89
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	90
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	91
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	92
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	93
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	94
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	95
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	96
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	97
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	98
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	99
Cellis Kk	110	Mr. Gande	1/2	110	Mr. J. J. J. J.	60	100

Greenwood also liked to compile lists. These include enumerations of the plantations he visited, which English ships arrived in Paramaribo during his stay and what portraits he produced in the colony. On pages 174 and 175 in his notebook, Greenwood provided a list of the names of 113 people whose portraits he painted in Suriname (figs. 3, 4). This list of names in the manuscript is a unique source, though up to now, not one name has been matched to a surviving portrait. On the first page, divided into three columns, Greenwood recorded the names of his clients, also often mentioning format (a half-length or quarter-length portrait), technique and price. The last fourteen names are listed on the next page, together with the calculation of the total amount he received for all these portraits: 8,025 Dutch guilders. It can therefore rightly be said that Greenwood's years-long sojourn in Suriname was indeed a period of 'Practice and Profit'.

**Greenwood's Clientele**

The names on Greenwood's list show his clientele largely consisted of individuals living (permanently or temporarily) in Suriname in connection with the ownership of a plantation or because they held a function in the colonial administration. Although many of the sitters were Dutch, the names on Greenwood's list also reflect the international community's presence in the colony. Greenwood painted his patrons in Paramaribo or he visited them on their plantations outside the city, as is evident from the plantations listed in his notebook and several separate annotations. On 28 September 1757, for example, Greenwood departed for Jodensavanne, where he 'Staid from home 7 Days. Elegantly treated every Where we went.'

Greenwood's clientele also included captains and sailors who called at Paramaribo.<sup>8</sup> It was sometimes weeks or months before a merchant ship was loaded with enough cargo to embark on

173

Mr. Vanderlooy	1/2	30	77	6070
Mr. Rindrop	1/2	50	100	1165
Mr. J. J. J. J.	1/2	40	100	790
Mr. J. J. J. J.	1/2	150	100	8025
Mr. J. J. J. J.	1/2	60	60	
Mr. J. J. J. J.	1/2	35	35	
Valliant	1/2	100	100	
W. J. J. J.	1/2	60	100	
W. J. J. J.	1/2	80	100	
W. J. J. J.	1/2	40	100	
W. J. J. J.	1/2	35	100	
W. J. J. J.	1/2	80	110	
W. J. J. J.	1/2	80	110	
W. J. J. J.	1/2	60	100	
W. J. J. J.	1/2	70	100	
W. J. J. J.	1/2	30	10	
W. J. J. J.	1/2	10	11	
W. J. J. J.	1/2	0	12	
W. J. J. J.	1/2	3	13	
W. J. J. J.	1/2	2	14	

the return journey. There were few storage warehouses in Paramaribo where goods could be kept in stock. Ship's captains were often obliged to seek out plantation owners themselves and negotiate agreements concerning the delivery of goods, but also to arrange the wood for constructing the barrels and crates on-site at the plantation to transport these goods.<sup>9</sup> During these extended stays, local pubs provided both entertainment and a distraction. Greenwood's painting *Sea Captains Carousing in Surinam*, as far as we know the only surviving painting from his sojourn in Suriname, shows a scene of the waiting captains and the unruly atmosphere in the bars of Paramaribo (fig. 5).<sup>10</sup> Precisely in this work Greenwood has included his own likeness, seen in the company of several seafaring captains from Rhode Island. The artist's records indicate that several of the captains indeed filled their time by having their portrait painted. At least twelve of the 113 names on Greenwood's list of the people he portrayed are accompanied by 'Cap' or 'C'.<sup>11</sup> These names often appear in clusters, which evokes an image of a group of seamen sitting together in the pub and taking turns to have their portrait painted by the artist.

For years, Greenwood's client base – plantation owners, administrators and seamen – was 'refreshed' on a regular basis, providing him with a steady stream of work. Once the majority of potential clients in the colony were served, however, the time would eventually have come for Greenwood to broaden his horizons. On 15 April 1758, he boarded the Dutch merchant ship *De Coffijboom* and departed for Amsterdam in the company of his friend and compatriot Paul Wentworth (1728 or 1736-1794).<sup>12</sup>

In Amsterdam, Greenwood further developed his skills in mezzotint, a graphic technique he had applied in Boston years before. He was also involved in the reinstatement of the city's

Akademie der Tekenkunst in 1758.<sup>13</sup> For a while, Greenwood maintained his list of portrait commissions in the Netherlands as well, but the notes become increasingly less complete and do not seem to fully cover his stay in Amsterdam up to the time of his departure in 1763. During this period, he recorded a total of twenty-four portraits, for which he received lower amounts than for those he painted in Suriname. The word 'crayon' appears after one name, a notation that clarifies the lower price. Based on this list, Greenwood's earnings as an artist appear to have declined considerably in Amsterdam. By then, he was probably making most of his money working as an art dealer.

### Captain Dirk Simonsz

The Amsterdam list, on the lower half of page 175 in the notebook (fig. 4), contains one entry relevant to the identification of the captain's portrait: the portrait of 'Symons', which Greenwood noted as number 12, followed by a zero. Remarkably, this is the only portrait in the entire list for which Greenwood charged no fee. The ship *De Coffijboom*, on which Greenwood travelled from Suriname to Amsterdam in 1758, was under the command of Dirk Symons.<sup>14</sup> Was the portrait perhaps some kind of remuneration paid to the captain in exchange for free passage? Greenwood does not come across as an artist willing to produce portraits free of charge based on friendship – as indicated on the list, his friend Paul Wentworth, on two separate occasions, had to pay to have his portrait painted.<sup>15</sup>

After this discovery of a connection between Greenwood and Captain Simonsz, the archives of the CNO Foundation were consulted and the hypothesis regarding the captain's identity was further substantiated. After all, the limited information provided by the foundation states that the portrait was purchased from one 'Dhr Simonsz (Hilversum)'. Moreover, the mention of a pencilled inscription



Fig. 5  
JOHN GREENWOOD,  
*Sea Captains  
Carousing in  
Surinam*, c. 1755-58.  
Oil on bed ticking,  
95.9 x 190.5 cm.  
Saint Louis (MO),  
Saint Louis Art  
Museum, inv. no.  
256:1948.  
Greenwood has  
depicted himself  
in the right upper  
corner, leaning on  
the doorpost in the  
act of vomiting.

on the painting's canvas frame also clearly establishes that the seller was unaware of the sitter's actual identity.<sup>16</sup> The inscription in question – 'Charles Simonsz. Commander of St. Eustatius W. Indies 1700-1714' – in no way corresponds to the date 1760, nor does the lifespan of either the mentioned commander or John Greenwood. Although recorded by personnel in the CNO records at this time, the notation was clearly understood as an implausible identification. 'Who this portrait depicts is (yet) unknown', as worded in a 1991 CNO publication.<sup>17</sup>

Dirk Simonsz, the captain of the ship on which Greenwood sailed from Paramaribo to Amsterdam, is mentioned in several archival documents. His life story matches the clues in the portrait.<sup>18</sup> The Simonsz family archive in the Gemeentearchief Zaanstad proved to be a particularly valuable source.<sup>19</sup> Captain Simonsz was born under the name Dirck Siemers in 1727, on a farm in the vicinity of Bremen. He was the youngest of nine children. The earliest mention of his name in the Dutch archives appears in the register of the Lutheran church in Zaandam on 27 September 1746.

Under the name 'Dirck Simonsz', he subsequently married Catharina Maria Crebast in 1751. Starting in 1749, he attended the *Algemeen Zeemans College* in Amsterdam, thereafter putting his theoretical knowledge to use when departing for Suriname as a helmsman on board the merchant ship *De Valk* in 1753. In the ensuing years, Simonsz was promoted from helmsman to first mate and eventually to the rank of captain. In this latter function, he sailed on the merchant ships *De Coffijboom* and *De Isaac*, and lastly, the *Vrouw Johanna Baldina*. Simonsz is known to have sometimes stayed in Paramaribo for several months at a time before returning to the Netherlands with a ship fully laden with coffee beans, cocoa and cotton. Certain is that he was in Paramaribo from August 1753 to January 1754, and again, from May 1755 to March 1756. During these years, there would clearly have been ample opportunity for Simonsz to cross paths with Greenwood in one of the city's pubs. And even if this was not the case, the two men sailed together on Simonsz's ship bound for the Netherlands in April 1758.



Greenwood painted Simonsz's portrait in 1760 and thus did not immediately fulfil his promise of payment. There would have been few opportunities to do so. At the end of 1758, Simonsz again sailed to Suriname on *De Coffjboom*, followed by the same journey as captain of *De Isaac* in November 1759. In 1760, however, Simonsz was at home for the greater part of the year, possibly also for the baptism of his daughter, Maria Geertruida, in May. It was not until December that he again departed for Suriname. At some point in that year, Greenwood painted the captain's portrait, incorporating the map of the coast of Suriname in reference to Simonsz's recurring destination and the place that connected them.

On 15 January 1768, Dirk Simons, sailing under full sail on his ship the *Vrouw Johanna Baldina*, ran aground on a rock formation just off the coast of neighbouring French Guyana. The ship sank so quickly that twenty-six of

the thirty people on board drowned, among them Simonsz himself. The four survivors managed to salvage some of the captain's papers, which they then handed over to the governor in Paramaribo, via whom they came into the possession of his widow, Catharina Crebast, in Amsterdam.

In 1984, the captain's portrait was purchased by the Stichting CNO from 'Dhr Simonsz'. And while the family papers had been passed down in the Zaandam branch of the Simonsz family, the painting appears to have entered the possession of another branch of the family through inheritance early on, resulting in the loss of knowledge regarding the portrayed ancestor.<sup>20</sup> The search to ascertain the captain's identity – for which the most important clue was the captain's surname, already mentioned in the paper records accompanying the painting's acquisition by the CNO in 1984 – has now been resolved.

## NOTES

\* I wish to thank my colleague Jeroen ter Brugge for his valuable advice.

- 1 The present portrait is registered in the administration of the Stichting Cultuurgeschiedenis van de Nederlanders Overzee (CNO) under inventory number CNO-153. The CNO foundation was established in 1961 with the goal of advancing the knowledge and conservation of those objects, monuments and documents recalling the sojourn of Dutch people and the Dutch settlements outside Europe or those that were created under Dutch influence. The following annotation was made on the CNO inventory card at the time of the portrait's acquisition: 'aankoop, Dhr Simonsz (Hilversum)'. There is no further information regarding this seller in the foundation's archive. The portrait was published in *CNO: Foundation for the Cultural History of the Netherlands Overseas: berichten, een uitgave van de Stichting Cultuurgeschiedenis Nederlanders Overzee*, Amsterdam 1991, n.p., accompanied by the remark: 'Wie dit

portret voorstelt is (nog) onbekend.'

- After the CNO's dissolution in 1994, the portrait was purchased by the Rijksmuseum.
- 2 Gerhard de Kok, 'An American Party in a Dutch Colony', in Alice Insley and Martin Myrone (eds.), *Hogarth and Europe*, exh. cat. London (Tate Britain) 2021, pp. 128-31; Katelyn D. Crawford, *Transient Painters, Traveling Canvases: Portraiture and Mobility in the British Atlantic 1750-1780*, Charlottesville (VA) (dissertation University of Virginia) 2017.
  - 3 Greenwood's notebook, also referred to as 'Memorandum Book', is preserved in New York at the New York Historical (previously the New-York Historical Society, henceforth USA-TNYH), Archive of the Greenwood Family (acc. no. 59), John Greenwood, Diaries, 2 volumes: 1752-58 (No. 2; with additions by his son John Greenwood in 1797 and later additions by Isaac J. Greenwood in 1888); 1763-65 (No. 4). My thanks to Wim Klooster, Aviva Ben-Ur and Jared Hardesty for their assistance in accessing the manuscript. It was Nathalie Zemon Davis (1928-2023)

- who first drew my attention to the Greenwood notebook in 2014. I look back on our contact with fond memories.
- 4 Greenwood arrived in Paramaribo on 9 December 1752 on the ship *Rebecca*; see The Hague, National Archives of the Netherlands (henceforth NL-HANA), Sociëteit van Suriname (henceforth SVS, acc. no. 1.05.03), inv. no. 202, 9 December 1752.
  - 5 USA-TNYH, John Greenwood, Diaries, No. 2, p. 152.
  - 6 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
  - 7 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
  - 8 For more information regarding those with access to Paramaribo, see Karwan Fatah-Black, 'Paramaribo as Dutch and Atlantic Nodal Point, 1650-1795', in Gert Oostindie and Jessica V. Roitman (eds.), *Dutch Atlantic Connections, 1680-1800: Linking Empires, Bridging Borders*, Leiden 2015, pp. 52-71.
  - 9 Robert W. Kenny, 'Sea Captains Carousing in Surinam', *Rhode Island History* 36 (1977), no. 4, pp. 107-17.
  - 10 See also De Kok 2021 (note 2) and Crawford 2017 (note 2). Greenwood makes no specific mention of a group portrait in his annotations. Nevertheless, Crawford cites two perspective drawings that can perhaps be linked to the painting; see p. 55.
  - 11 The captains 'Hopkins and Wanton' depicted in *Sea Captains Carousing in Surinam* (according to a document compiled in 1878 by Edward A. Wild, in which he identifies ten individuals based on tradition, see Kenny 1977 (note 9)), are probably 'K. Hopkins' and 'W. Wanton', both of whom (also) had their own individual portrait painted by Greenwood. In the case of these two portraits, however, Greenwood did not state the sitter's function. The possibility exists that there are other seafaring captains and seamen whose portraits he painted, whose function is not specifically stated as such in his administration. See Crawford 2017 (note 2), p. 41.
  - 12 'Met Capn Dirk Symons den 15 dezer [april 1758] Sijn als Passagiers vertrokken Jan Pieter de Reuter, John Greenwood en Paul Wentworth.' (With Capn Dirk Symons on the 15th of this [April 1758] have departed as Passengers Jan Pieter de Reuter, John Greenwood and Paul Wentworth). NL-HANA, SVS, inv. no. 204, fol. 341, 22 April 1758.
  - 13 Greenwood was present at the reinstatement of the academy on 5 October 1758. See Jacob Otten Husly, *Redevoering over de lotgevallen van de Academie der Tekenkunst te Amsterdam, gedaan ter gelegenheid van 't uitdeelen der prijzen, enz. Op Woensdag den 5 October 1768*.
  - 14 See note 12.
  - 15 Wentworth paid 60 guilders for the first portrait and 80 guilders for the second portrait. That Greenwood and Wentworth were friends is affirmed in USA-TNYH, John Greenwood, Diaries, No. 2, p. 173: 'Mr Paul Wentworth, an old friend of our father'.
  - 16 'Charles Simonsz. Commandeur van St. Eustatius W.Indie 1700-1714'. The inscription cannot be viewed due to the protective covering on the reverse side. This inscription is mentioned in an annotation made by M.P. Wolff, secretary of Stichting CNO, 1 April 1985. In 1986, damage to the canvas sustained from a bullet during World War II was restored.
  - 17 See note 1.
  - 18 In the various sources, one encounters various spellings of the captain's name. The most customary spelling, 'Dirk Simonsz', has been used here.
  - 19 I have made grateful use of the genealogical research of J. Simonsz (1916-1999), preserved in the Gemeentearchief Zaanstad (henceforth NL-ZdGAZ), Archive of Simonsz, familie en houthandel Zaandam (acc. no. PA-0191). The archive contains transcriptions of the original ships' logbooks and the instruction book of Dirk Simonsz. The original pieces are in the possession of a direct descendant. In the footnotes, I have only included supplementary references to Simonsz in the archives. See also H.J. Simonsz, 'Van Texel naar Suriname en terug in de 18e eeuw', *Gens Germana*, March 2024, pp. 9-14.
  - 20 It was very likely Johannes (Jan) Simonsz (1907-1989) who sold the portrait to the Stichting CNO. He was a descendant of Dirk Simonsz from the Montfoort branch of the family. He died in Hilversum after an active life working in Singapore and elsewhere, which may perhaps explain his connection with the Stichting CNO; NL-ZdGAZ, Simonsz, inv. no. 2.1-587 Stamboom. I wish to extend my thanks to the employees of the Gemeentearchief Zaanstad and H.A.J. Wandel.