Woman Reading and a Man Seated at a Table
Frans van Mieris
(Leiden 1635 – 1681 Leiden)

probably 1676
oil on panel
33.1 x 27.8 cm
inscribed along upper edge of map, on background wall: “CVR A PN DA(?) AD ... Leyde.” Alternate reading: “(ABOAVA PI ...VA(?)) AD ... Leyde.”

FM-107
Frans van Mieris was not only a master at rendering different materials, but also in depicting the relationships of people in domestic settings. Here he has portrayed a young woman quietly immersed in reading the letter she carefully holds in her hands while, opposite her, a man with a finger resting against his forehead in a thinking pose looks directly out at the viewer.[1] Even though the two individuals are in close proximity, their activities and body language suggest that they are in their own separate worlds. There is a comparable difference of emphasis in the way they are depicted. The woman’s smooth skin is fully illuminated, and the artist carefully captured the folds and shimmering surface of her beautiful silk deep red jacket and copper-colored dress with numerous bright highlights. The man’s black outfit, however, is barely visible, which helps underscore the importance of his head and gesture. Van Mieris visually connects the two individuals with the exquisitely depicted glass of red wine and silver dish on the table between them.

Behind the couple is a monumental arched doorway leading to another room with a large map on the wall. Passing through the doorway is a young boy who carries a lute and some sheet music, motifs that suggest a romantic interlude may be on the gentleman’s mind. The composition, in this respect, is similar to Young Woman Playing a Harpsichord to a Young Man, ca. 1659 (London, National Gallery) by Jan Steen (1625/26–79).[2] Lutes can be found in numerous paintings and prints from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, either as signs of intimacy or as references to women or the female genitals. Indeed, “to strike the lute” was a Dutch expression for sexual intercourse,[3] something that would explain the pointed look on the man’s face.

The main protagonists in this painting are Van Mieris himself and his wife, Cunera van der Cock (1629/30–1700), called “Kniertje,” whom he had married in 1657, shortly after the birth of their first daughter, Christina.
The couple later had two sons and two more daughters, Anna (1658–1723) and Cornelia (1665–1751). The sons, Jan (1660–90) and Willem (1662–1747), both became artists, and perhaps one of them was the model for the boy in this painting. Later eighteenth-century descriptions of the painting, such as an entry in the 1768 catalogue of the Leipzig collector Gottfried Winckler (1731–95), confirm that collectors were aware of the fact that Van Mieris had used himself and his wife as models, something he did in no less than a quarter of his painted oeuvre.

The stone window-framing device, which occurs in many of Van Mieris’s works, is considered the trademark of the Leiden fijnschilders. Nevertheless, this window frame is a later addition and was not part of the artist’s original concept. This added surround can be seen clearly in an X-radiograph (fig 1) and even with the naked eye. Remarkably, the X-radiograph also shows that Van Mieris painted his genre scene over a male portrait. Evidence for the fact that the window-framing device was a later addition comes from two painted copies and an engraving (fig 2) that show the painting in its original, smaller format. The engraving, by the little-known engraver Cornelis van Meurs (active before ca. 1720?), gives a date for Van Mieris’s panel of 1676, which is entirely appropriate for Van Mieris’s development.

The window-framing motif appears to have been added by the artist’s son Willem van Mieris, who made a copy of the painting in 1687. He was probably also responsible for producing a “pendant” to this picture, A Man Drinking and a Woman Offering Him a Fish, which in the past was attributed to his father (fig 3). Willem van Mieris followed his father in choice of subject matter and technique, but his paintings are rather slick in execution. In A Man Drinking and a Woman Offering Him a Fish, the reflected light is a little hard and the figures are stereotypes. Between 1733 and 1764, both paintings are documented together in sales catalogues. The enlargement of the present picture must have been done before 1733, as the catalogue of the sale of the collection of Adriaan Bout gives the present dimensions, with the additions.

The provenance of Woman Reading and a Man Seated at a Table previously contained major lacunae. It can now be established, however, that the painting, which was described in the sales catalogues of the collections of Adriaan Bout and Benjamin da Costa, was later owned by the famous Leipzig banker Gottfried Winckler (1731–95). In the entry on the painting in the 1768 catalogue of Winckler’s collection, reference is made to Van Mieris as the artist; the catalogue describes the painting as ‘a picture of two figures seated at a table, a woman reading and a man drinking, contemporary and done in oil on panel.’
made to the Da Costa collection.[17] With this information, the vague reference to a subsequent owner, a “Mr Duval” from Geneva, can now be completely understood: he is the court jeweler Jean-François-André (François) Duval (1776–1854) from Saint Petersburg, who bought a major portion of Winckler’s paintings collection.[18] Duval’s collector’s mark, “FD,” was also found on the back of this panel.[19] In 1845 Duval sold his collection to Napoleon III’s half-brother, Charles-August-Louis-Joseph (1811–65), Duc de Morny, who lived in Paris but dispersed many of the newly acquired paintings in London a year later.[20] The painting would stay in England for more than 150 years, until it was acquired by the Leiden Collection in 2008 from the heirs of the Marquis of Lansdowne.

-Quentin Buvelot

**Endnotes**

1. The folds of the paper make clear that this is a letter; in older literature, however, it has often been described as a newspaper (see, for example, Jean-Baptiste Descamps, *La vie des peintres flamands, allemands et hollandois, avec des portraits gravées en taille-douce, une indication de leurs principaux ouvrages, & des réflexions sur leurs difféeréntes manières*, 4 vols. [Paris, 1753–64], 3:21).


4. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1:126 n. 205, was more hesitant in describing the figures in the present painting as the artist and his wife.


6. For more on this subject, see FM-108.

7. Van Mieris’s painting initially measured about 24 x 19 cm. Van Mieris is known to have enlarged some of his panels; see Quentin Buvelot and Otto Naumann, “Format Changes by


9. Otto Naumann thinks it might be a portrait of Charles I wearing armor and a goatee (e-mail to the author, 9 June 2011).


12. Willem van Mieris may have added the window frame as early as 1687, the date of his copy of the original composition (Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. [Doornspijk, 1981], 2:104, no. 92b). If this is indeed the case, Van Meurs did not reproduce the additions in his reproductive engraving.

13. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2:104, no. 93. Interestingly, this painting by Willem van Mieris was also enlarged: starting out as a panel of 25 x 19 cm, it was enlarged to 34 x 29 cm. The painting recently appeared at a sale at Christie’s, New York, 31 January 2013, lot 258, where it was bought in.

This was not the first time that a “pendant” was created for a painting by Frans van Mieris the Elder, or that a copy was made after his work. See Otto Naumann and Quentin Buvelot in Quentin Buvelot, ed., *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (New Haven, 2005), 233, no. 44 and fig. 22c. Importantly, Cornelia Moiso-Diekamp, *Das Pendant in der holländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt am Main, 1987), 378–79, did not accept the two paintings as


17. *Historische Erklärungen der Gemälde, welche Herr Gottfried Winckler in Leipzig gesammtet* (Leipzig, 1768), 173–74, no. 431: “Dieses Gemälde . . . war den Kennern sonst im Cabinette des Herrn d’Acosta im Haag besonders schätzbar.” Winckler had one other autograph Van Mieris: number 432 describes *Tronie of a Man in Oriental Dress* (Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. [Doornspijk, 1981], 2:84, no. 70); the whereabouts of this painting were unknown for a long time, but it appeared at auction at Sotheby’s, London, 5 December 2012, lot 6, repr., where it was bought by Johnny van Haeften, London, after which it was shown by him at the TEFAF, Maastricht, 2013. A painting of a woman holding a dog, described in the Winckler catalogue under number 433, may have been painted by the grandson of Van Mieris, Frans the Younger; see Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2:134–35, no. B 20 and fig. CB 20.


19. This seal was mentioned, but not identified, in *Catalogue of the Collection of Pictures Belonging to The Marquess of Lansdowne, K. G. at Lansdowne House, London and Bowood Wilts* (London, 1897), 62, in no. 160.

Provenance

- Adriaan Bout, The Hague (his sale, The Hague, 11 August 1733, no. 53 [505 guilders to Benjamin da Costa]).
- Benjamin da Costa, The Hague, 1733–64, and his widow (his sale, The Hague, 13 August 1764, no. 37 [615 guilders to Odor or Audon]).
- Jean-François-André (François) Duval, Saint Petersburg (until 1816) and Ghent (1816–45), who sold his entire collection to De Morny in 1845.
- Probably acquired by Henry Charles, 4th Marquess of Lansdowne (1816–66), Bowood House, Calne (Wiltshire).
- Henry Charles Keith, 5th Marquess of Lansdowne (1845–1927), Bowood House, Calne (Wiltshire).
- By descent to Henry William Edmund, 6th Marquess of Lansdowne (1872–1936), and George John Charles, 8th Marquis of Lansdowne (1912–99), and his heirs, Bowood House, Calne (Wiltshire), until 2008.
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

Exhibition History

- London, Royal Academy, 1884, no. 63 [lent by Marquis of Lansdowne].
- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, January 2011–January 2015 [lent by the present owner].

References


- Van Hall, H. *Portretten van Nederlandse beeldende Kunstenaars*. Amsterdam, 1963, 213, no. 34.


Versions

Engraved

1. C. H. van Meurs after Frans van Mieris, engraving, 292 x 271 mm, Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam, RP-P-1903-A-23289, showing the original format of the painting.


Versions and Copies


2. Willem van Mieris, oil on panel, 45.5 x 36 cm, signed and dated 1687, collection Hollandt, Braunschweig, cat. 1843, no. 212; Otto Naumann, Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2:104, no. 92b.

Technical Summary

The support, a rectangular-shaped composite panel comprising five vertically grained oak planks, has been marouflaged to a single plank of oak. A central rectangular plank has four narrow planks added to the edges. The composite panel has been thinned and marouflaged to a rectangular-shaped, vertically grained plank of oak, which has no bevels or machine toolmarks. Three red wax collection seals, a handwritten black inscription, and remnants of two layers of paper tape are located along the outer edges of the panel reverse, but there are no paper labels, import stamps or panel maker’s marks.

The X-radiograph reveals an earlier composition on the central rectangular plank depicting a half-length male figure wearing armor on his proper right arm and holding a stick or baton, and a
highly radio-opaque layer along the four narrow outer planks. The final painted composition of
the woman and man shows virtually no radio-opaque imagery aside from the female figure’s
flesh tones, highlights along her garments, and the letter she reads.

A ground layer, which appears to be dark, has been thinly and evenly applied followed by
relatively opaque paint with no obvious brushwork or impasto along the lighter areas and with
thinly applied transparent glazes along the richly colored sections, such as the red clothing,
green furniture and red wine.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 720 nanometers. The
images reveal the female figure’s drapery was painted before the backrest of the chair.

The painting is unsigned and undated. An inscription has been written in capital letters in dark
paint along the upper edge of the map hanging by a nail along the background wall.

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition and remains in a
good state of preservation.[2]

- Annette Rupprecht