



Hermit Praying in the Wilderness

Willem van Mieris
(Leiden 1662 – 1747 Leiden)

1707

oil on panel

21 x 17.4 cm

signed and indistinctly dated in dark paint, upper
right corner: "W. Van. Mieris, Fe Ano 1707"

WM-100

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An old hermit, tucked away in a rocky cave opening to a mountainous landscape, clasps his hands in prayer as he bends over a stone table, upon which rest two books, a skull and a crucifix. He gazes downward upon the open pages of one of the books, his eyes almost closed as he concentrates inwardly on the meaning of the text. Light falling from the upper left separates the bearded hermit from the darkness of the grotto, and creates tiny, shimmering highlights on the sculpted figure of Christ on the wooden crucifix.

The religious character of the image might lead to the assumption that the painting was destined for a Catholic patron, but the subject of a religious recluse was not uncommon in the Protestant culture of the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.^[1] One hermit that appears in a number of Dutch paintings is Saint Jerome, the leading translator of the Bible.^[2] Although Willem van Mieris did not include Saint Jerome's attributes of a lion and a pen, he may well have had this hermit in mind when conceiving this work. A sales catalogue from 1747—the earliest known record of this picture—identifies the painting as "St. Jerome in a cell." This catalogue also notes that the painting had a pendant, Mary Magdalene, by the same master, a painting that can be identified as *The Repentant Mary Magdalene* of 1709 (fig 1).^[3] In this painting, Mary Magdalene sits with her attributes in a similarly craggy landscape. She also turns her head and upper body to look at a crucifix on her right in such a manner that visually connects her to the hermit in the present picture.^[4]

As one of the most esteemed successors to the seventeenth-century painter Gerrit Dou (1613–75), Van Mieris often adapted subjects and motifs from Dou's pictures. The present painting is no exception.^[5] At least eleven pictures by Dou feature

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Willem van Mieris, *Repentant Mary Magdalene*, 1709, oil on panel, 20.3 x 15.7 cm, present location unknown



hermits. *The Hermit* of 1670 (National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.), for instance, depicts the same type of old man before a Bible, a crucifix, a skull, a basket, and an hourglass on a stone table.^[6] In his picture, Van Mieris clearly carried on Dou's pictorial tradition. He also strove to emulate Dou's refined painterly technique of differentiating surfaces in his figures and still-life objects. The delicately executed and minute details of the still life on the rock and the old man's head and hands—especially the wrinkled forehead with the bulging veins, the long gray beard, and the rugged hands with black fingernails—demonstrate Van Mieris's utmost effort to display his virtuosity as a “fine painter.”

The great reputation of Dou's hermit paintings among early eighteenth-century collectors must have been one of the factors that determined Van Mieris's choice of the subject.^[7] For instance, the artist's chief patron in Leiden, the illustrious collector Pieter de la Court van der Voort, bought one of Dou's hermits from another elite Leiden collector for the enormous amount of 3,000 guilders in 1710.^[8] It thus comes as no surprise that Van Mieris chose this subject to parade his virtuosic technique as he sought to appeal to the art lovers of his day.

- Junko Aono, 2017

Endnotes

1. For the religious affiliation of owners of hermits by Gerrit Dou or other Leiden painters, see Eric Jan Sluijter, Marlies Enklaar, and Paul Nieuwenhuizen, *Leidse fijnschilders: van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge, 1630–1760* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 1988), 111–13, no. 15 (cf. 85–87, no. 3); Ronni Baer, “The Paintings of Gerrit Dou (1613–1675)” (PhD diss. New York University, 1990), 55 n. 143; Annegret Laabs and Christoph Schölzel, *De Leidse Fijnschilders uit Dresden* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal; Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen) (Zwolle, 2000), 35–37.
2. Hermit iconography also stemmed from Saint Francis; see, for instance, Eric Jan Sluijter, Marlies Enklaar, and Paul Nieuwenhuizen, *Leidse fijnschilders: van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge, 1630–1760* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 1988), 86. The image of a humble anchorite, withdrawn from society and contemplating God in a wasteland, was probably viewed as a personification of piety and devotion, virtues that serve as a foil to the materialistic, active life on earth. For an interpretation of the hermit as a symbol of contemplative life, in contrast to active life, see Ronni Baer, “The Paintings of Gerrit Dou (1613–1675)” (PhD diss. New York University, 1990), 55–56; Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *The Collection of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogues: Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century* (Washington, D.C., 1995), 57–60; Ronni Baer, *Gerrit Dou, 1613–1675: Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; London, Dulwich Picture Gallery; The Hague, Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, 2000–1) (Zwolle, 2000), 132–33, no. 34; Annegret Laabs, ed., *De Leidse Fijnschilders uit Dresden* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 2000), 35.
3. Jacques de Roore, his sale, The Hague, 4 September 1747, no. 104 (£153, together with no. 105 as a pendant, sold to Van Spangen). *The Repentant Mary Magdalene* was with Sphinx Fine Art in London in 1997.
4. As this painting was executed two years later than the one of the hermit, it remains uncertain whether Van Mieris intended from the start to make a pair of these two paintings. Their union, however, gives us a glimpse into the early context of display, in which the hermit was viewed and appreciated in an eighteenth-century collector’s cabinet.
5. For Willem van Mieris’s borrowing of motifs and subjects from Dou’s paintings, see Junko Aono, “Looking Back to the Dutch Golden Age: Early Eighteenth-Century Genre Painting by Willem van Mieris,” in *Holland nach Rembrandt: Zur niederländischen Kunst zwischen 1670 und 1750*, ed. Ekkehard Mai (Cologne, 2006), 225–46; and Junko Aono, *Confronting the Golden Age: Imitation and Innovation in Dutch Genre Painting 1680–1750* (Amsterdam, 2015), 84–94. Another picture by Dou, *Hermit Praying* (Minneapolis Institute of Arts), displays meticulous detail, including the clasped rugged hands with dirty fingernails, which are also found in the current painting by Van Mieris.
6. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 1995), 57–60; Ronni Baer,

Gerrit Dou, 1613–1675: Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; London, Dulwich Picture Gallery; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (Zwolle, 2000), 132–33, no. 34.

7. The subject of the hermit was in high favor with Leiden painters, such as Quirijn van Brekelenkam and Dou's followers who worked in his manner. See Eric Jan Sluiter, Marlies Enklaar, and Paul Nieuwenhuizen, *Leidse fijnschilders: van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge, 1630–1760* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 1988), 85–87, 113; Ronni Baer, "The Paintings of Gerrit Dou (1613–1675)" (PhD diss. New York University, 1990), 53 n. 137.
8. De la Court bought this picture from Witterd van der Aa with the agency of the painter Carel de Moor. Regionaal Archief Leiden, family archive of De la Court, nr. 117a: the self-written inventory of Allard de la Court of 1749: "the large room at the side of Rapenburg [*grootte kaamer aan 't Raapenburg*] . . . Class A [*'t soort A*]," no. 5. Theodoor Hermann Lunsingh Scheurleer, Cornelia Willemijn Fock, and A.J. Van Dissel *Het Rapenburg: Geschiedenis van een Leidse gracht*, 6 vols. (Leiden, 1986–92), 2: 442. According to the eighteenth-century artist-biographer Jacob Campo Weyerman, who saw the picture at Pieter de la Court's house, the painting was "painted gloriously, miraculously, and in such indescribable detail that greater artistry was inconceivable": Jacob Campo Weyerman, *De levens-beschryvingen der Nederlandsche konst-schilders en konst-schilderessen*, 4 vols. (The Hague, 1729–69), 2: 117–18. Two years earlier, August II, Elector of Saxony, had purchased another hermit by Dou from an Antwerp dealer for approximately 1,000 guilders: Ronni Baer, "The Paintings of Gerrit Dou (1613–1675)" (PhD diss. New York University, 1990), no. 28; 52 n. 134.

Provenance

- Jacques de Roore (his sale, The Hague, 4 September 1747, no. 104 [£153, together with no. 105, Mary Magdalene, as its pendant, to Van Spangen]).
- John van Spangen (his sale, London, 12 February 1748, no. 73 [for £43.1]).
- Philippus van der Land (his sale, Amsterdam, 22 May 1776, no. 55 [for 180 florins, together with no. 54, Mary Magdalene, as its pendant]).
- Charles Alexander de Calonne (his sale, Skinner and Dyke, London, 23 March 1795, no. 37 [for £48.6]).
- Edward Atkinson, Fowey (his sale, London, 9 March 1912, no. 163).
- Possibly Major Forbes Fraser (his sale, London, 21 November 1924, no. 120).
- (Possibly sale, Christie's, London, 14 July 1961, no. 60).
- Private collection, South America [Otto Naumann, Ltd., New York, 1992; to Bert van Deun, 1993].
- Bert van Deun, Belgium, 1993 [Otto Naumann, Ltd., New York, 2004].

- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2004.

Exhibition History

- Williamstown, The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, “An Inner World: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting,” 5 March–17 September 2017 [lent by the present owner].
- Philadelphia, Arthur Ross Gallery, University of Pennsylvania, “An Inner World: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting,” 17 April–25 July 2021, no. 6 [lent by the present owner].

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- Hofstede de Groot, Cornelis. *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith*. Edited and translated by Edward G. Hawke, 10: 116, no. 41. 8 vols. London, 1907–28. Originally published as *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*. 10 vols. Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28.
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Versions

Versions and Copies

1. *Repentant Mary Magdalene*, signed and dated, upper right: W. VAN MIERIS 1709, oil on panel, 20.3 x

15.7 cm, present location unknown.

Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular oak, has bevels on all four sides.^[1] The unthinned and uncradled panel has wide, shallow, horizontal handtool marks and three deep horizontal gouges but no machine tool marks. There is a stencil and remnants of four paper labels but no wax seals, import stamps or panel maker's marks along the reverse.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied, followed by paint applied smoothly in successive thin layers of transparent glazing with slightly raised low brushmarking along the shadows of the hermit's blue robe, the edges of the book pages, and the dark foliage along the upper left quadrant.

No underdrawing or compositional changes are readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers.

The painting is signed and indistinctly dated in dark paint along the upper right corner.

The painting underwent minor conservation treatment in 2004 and 2012 and remains in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on visual examination of the X-radiograph and panel reverse images by Ian Tyers. According to Tyers, the panel does not have great potential for dendrochronology. The shims would need to be removed from the upper and lower edges to give access to both endgrains, as the panel is short of rings.