



Diana, Goddess of the Hunt

Willem van Mieris
(Leiden 1662 – 1747 Leiden)

1686

oil on panel

18 x 14.4 cm

signed and dated in dark paint, lower right
corner: "W. V. Mieris. Fet. 1686"

WM-101

Currently on view at: The National Museum of
China, Beijing



How To Cite

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Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635–81) trained his sons Jan (1660–90) and Willem in the *fijnschilder* tradition. Unfortunately, Jan died at a young age in Rome before he produced many works, but Willem continued to paint well into the eighteenth century. His works, which are rather slick in execution, were in great demand and fetched high prices. He painted many of the same subjects as his father, but he also produced many history pieces and, after 1700, kitchen and shop scenes. These pieces, with their Gerrit Dou–like stone window framing devices (**fig 1**), were fairly old-fashioned by this time, though they were still popular with collectors.^[1]

Willem van Mieris painted this work in 1686 when he was about 24 years old. Here, a woman dressed *à l'antique* in a gold-colored robe with a red sash stands before an idealized hilly, wooded landscape opening up to ruins and a distant mountain. Van Mieris effectively used the muted tonalities of this evocative Arcadian landscape to set off the woman's light-filled and sensual form. The delicacy of the artist's painterly touch, so reminiscent of that of his father (see FM-103), is particularly evident in the shimmering blue of her scarf (**fig 2**) and in the individual brushstrokes that model the blue and white ostrich feathers in her hair.

The woman is without doubt meant to represent Diana, the goddess of the hunt, who is also known by her Greek name Artemis. Although the painter omitted the crescent moon, Diana's primary attribute, she is depicted holding an arrow taken from the quiver lying on the rocky ledge before her. In Van Mieris's day, Diana was associated with elegance and purity. The latter association may be somewhat surprising, as the woman's plunging décolleté reveals a nipple that gives the painting an erotic charge.^[2] It is not known whether this painting had a pendant, but the gaze of the goddess would seem to suggest that there was one, probably Diana's twin brother, Apollo, the patron god of music and poetry.^[3]

At first glance, this scene with Diana appears to be a *portrait historié*, a painting in which a real person is depicted as a historical, biblical, or mythological figure, but this is far from certain.^[4] The painting was described as a *portrait historié* as early as 1842, when the English dealer John Smith published it as "A Young Lady, in the character of Diana." Smith's description was paraphrased in a Paris sales catalogue only two years later,^[5] and the notion that the painting is a *portrait historié* has appeared frequently in the literature.^[6] Diana's face, however, lacks the

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Attributed to Willem van Mieris, *A Man Drinking and a Woman Offering Him a Fish*, undated, oil on panel, 34 x 29 cm, private collection

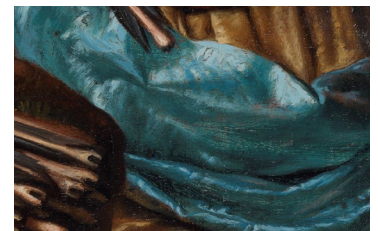


Fig 2. Detail of scarf from WM-101



Fig 3. Willem van Mieris, *The Repentant Mary Magdalene*, 1709, oil on panel, 20.3 x 15.7 cm, present location unknown



kind of individualized features seen in Van Mieris's female portraits.^[7] Her doll-like face with its double chin and thick neck resembles that of other stereotypical female figures in Van Mieris's history paintings, as in his painting *The Repentant Mary Magdalene*, 1701 (**fig 3**). As Junko Aono has noted, Van Mieris's paintings are populated by highly idealized women with "marble-like smooth skin, graceful poses and gestures and an almost sculpted classical profile."^[8] Van Mieris used panels of almost the same size to paint other scenes of women from history, including a painting of Mary Magdalene dated 1709, in which the saint, like Diana here, is portrayed looking to the left in front of an idealized landscape.^[9]

Portrait historié or not, this small jewel-like panel painting, which measures only 18 by 14.4 centimeters, is an exquisite example of Willem van Mieris's skillful handling of paint at the beginning of his career. The smooth, blended brushstrokes he used to model the ivory-colored flesh tones and bolder touches he applied to accent the woman's elegant wardrobe are techniques that helped establish his reputation as one of the finest painters of his day.

-Quentin Buvelot

Endnotes

1. A monograph on the artist is still a desideratum. For literature on Van Mieris, see the references listed in Junko Aono, "Imitation and Innovation: Dutch Genre Painting 1680–1750 and Its Reception of the Golden Age" (Ph.D. diss., University of Amsterdam, 2011), 174.
2. This pictorial motif had been introduced earlier in Dutch seventeenth-century painting; see Marlies Enklaar in Peter Schoon and Sander Paarlberg, eds., *Greek Gods and Heroes in the Age of Rubens and Rembrandt* (Exh. cat. Athens, National Gallery/Alexandros Soutzos Museum; Athens, Netherlands Institute; Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum) (Athens, 2000), 368 n. 1.
3. See Marlies Enklaar in Peter Schoon and Sander Paarlberg, eds., *Greek Gods and Heroes in the Age of Rubens and Rembrandt* (Exh. cat. Athens, National Gallery/Alexandros Soutzos Museum; Athens, Netherlands Institute; Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum) (Athens, 2000), 256.
4. See Rose Wishnevsky, "Studien zum 'portrait historié' in den Niederlanden" (Ph.D. diss., Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, 1967); E. de Jongh, *Portretten van echt en trouw: Huwelijk en gezin in de Nederlandse kunst van de zeventiende eeuw* (Exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum) (Haarlem, 1986), 319–31.
5. John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters*. 9 vols. (London, 1829–42, suppl., 1842), 9:63, no. 34. The catalogue of the sale in Paris, 23 March 1844, no. 10, describes the scene as "Une Dame en costume de chasserresse." It is known that Van Mieris made *portraits historiés*; a drawing of a woman portrayed as Diana was sold in Amsterdam, 9 March 1767, lot 1050 (index cards of Hofstede de Groot, Netherlands Institute for Art History, The Hague: "Het Pourtret van een Dame verbeeldende Diana, met zwart kryd getekend als de voorgaande, door denzelven [W. Mieres]").
6. Eric Jan Sluijter, in Peter Schoon and Sander Paarlberg, eds., *Greek Gods and Heroes in the Age of Rubens and Rembrandt* (Exh. cat. Athens, National Gallery/Alexandros Soutzos Museum and Netherlands Institute; Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum) (Athens, 2000), 62; Dominique Surh, "Portrait of a Woman as Artemis," in *Salomon Lilian Old Masters* (sales cat., Amsterdam, Salomon Lilian B. V.) (Zwolle, 2004), 54–55, no. 17.
7. As was convincingly pointed out by Marlies Enklaar in Peter Schoon and Sander Paarlberg, eds., *Greek Gods and Heroes in the Age of Rubens and Rembrandt* (Exh. cat. Athens, National Gallery/Alexandros Soutzos Museum; Athens, Netherlands Institute; Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum) (Athens, 2000), 256. Compare, for example, the face of Diana with the oval pendant portrait of an unknown woman from 1706 (copper, 14.3 x 12.5 cm, whereabouts unknown; bought in at sale, Christie's, Amsterdam, 8 May 2012, lot 50, repr.,

together with a pendant portrait of the husband; see Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten Höländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 10 vols. (Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28), 10:209, 213, nos. 398 and 418). For an overview of Van Mieris's portraiture, see the photographs kept at the RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History).

8. Junko Aono, "Imitation and Innovation: Dutch Genre Painting 1680–1750 and Its Reception of the Golden Age," (Ph.D. diss., University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam 2011), 173.
9. Panel, 20.3 x 16.2 cm, signed and dated 1709 (formerly read as "1701"), whereabouts unknown; formerly in the H. Blank collection, Newark, N.J., appeared at sale, Christie's, London, 3 December 2008, lot 139, repr.; see Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten Höländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 10 vols. (Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28), 10: no. 37.

Provenance

- Private dealer, Paris, 1837.
- M. Martini Collection, Paris, by 1837 (his sale, Bonnefons, Paris, 23 March 1844, no. 10 [for 1140 francs]).
- Private collection, Paris.
- (Probably sale, Piasa & E. Madec, Paris, July 1997).
- [Haboldt & Co., Paris].
- [Artemis Fine Arts S. A., London, 2000–1; Salomon Lilian B. V., Amsterdam, 2004].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2004.

Exhibition History

- Athens, National Gallery/Alexandros Soutzos Museum and Netherlands Institute, "Greek Gods and Heroes in the Age of Rubens and Rembrandt," 28 September 2000–8 January 2001, no. 50; Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum, 3 February–8 May 2001, no. 50 [lent by London, Artemis Fine Arts S. A.].
- Raleigh, North Carolina Museum of Art, "Small Treasures: Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, and Their Contemporaries," 12 October 2014–4 January 2015; Birmingham, Birmingham Museum of Art, 1 February–26 April 2015, no. 26 [lent by the present owner].

- Beijing, National Museum of China, “Rembrandt and His Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 17 June–3 September 2017 [lent by the present owner].

References

- Smith, John. *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters*. 9 vols. London, 1829–42, suppl., 1842, 9:63, no. 34.
- Hofstede de Groot, Cornelis. *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*. 10 vols. Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28, 10:212, no. 412.
- Sluijter, Eric Jan. In *Greek Gods and Heroes in the Age of Rubens and Rembrandt*. Edited by Peter Schoon and Sander Paarlberg. Exh. cat. Athens, National Gallery/Alexandros Soutzos Museum and Netherlands Institute; Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum. Athens, 2000.
- Enklaar, Marlies. In *Greek Gods and Heroes in the Age of Rubens and Rembrandt*. Edited by Peter Schoon and Sander Paarlberg, 256–57, no. 50. Exh. cat. Athens, National Gallery/Alexandros Soutzos Museum and Netherlands Institute; Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum. Athens, 2000.
- Surh, Dominique. “Portrait of a Woman as Artemis.” In *Salomon Lilian Old Masters*. Sales cat. Amsterdam, Salomon Lilian B. V. Zwolle, 2004, 54–55, no. 17.
- Weller, Dennis P. “Portrait of a Woman as Artemis.” In *Small Treasures: Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, and Their Contemporaries*. Exh. cat. Raleigh, North Carolina Museum of Art; Birmingham, Birmingham Museum of Art. Raleigh, 2014, 146–49, no. 26.

Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular oak with bevels on all four sides, is unthinned and uncradled.^[1] All four outer edges of the panel reverse have been routed 1 cm in width and 0.5 cm into the panel’s thickness. Adhesive residue and wood remnants along the routed surfaces suggest wood additions have been removed. The panel reverse has a few small remnants of paper tape or paper labels but no wax seals, import stamps or panel maker’s mark.

Gero Seelig, from the Staatliches Museum Schwerin, Germany, held a symposium at the 2011 CODART meeting regarding the unusual construction of three-panel paintings from that collection, one by Willem van Mieris. According to Seelig: “In all three, a smaller panel is inlaid into a larger one so that only the front surface of the smaller one—surrounded by the surface of the larger panel—shows. The actual painting extends over both surfaces. Art historians have

automatically assumed that this construction is a later alteration of the original panel. However, conservators can demonstrate that this is not the case. Nevertheless, in the past the supposed 'enlargement' was removed."^[2] Further investigation is required to determine what modification this panel may have undergone.

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 tree foliage, blue plumes and drapery folds, as well as along the quivers and the blue outline and details of the quiver case.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. The images reveal a compositional change along the blue sash above the figure's proper left hand, which was shifted higher during the paint stage.

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

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition 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 has good potential for dendrochronology.
2. From CODART's website.