



**Michiel van Musscher**

(Rotterdam 1645 – 1705 Amsterdam)

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Michiel van Musscher was born in Rotterdam on 27 January 1645. His parents were the Mennonite Jan Jacobsz van Musscher (d. 1670) and Catalijne Michiels Comans (d. 1649). Michiel's father took a second wife in 1656, Catalijntje Martens, who was also a Mennonite. Although most documents refer to Jan Jacobs as a "cruydenier," or grocer, his burial certificate states that "in his life he [had been] a painter."<sup>[1]</sup> Michiel, therefore, came from an artistic family. His grandfather, Jacob van Musscher (d. 1623), who died in Delft in 1623, also painted,<sup>[2]</sup> as did his maternal grandfather the cabinetmaker Michiel Comans I (1587–ca. 1664) and his uncle Michiel Comans II (1621–87), a dyer and schoolmaster. The latter was immortalized by Van Musscher posing at his easel in 1669 in one of the artist's most appealing early portraits.<sup>[3]</sup> Marten van Musscher (1645–1705), Michiel's half-brother, was also a painter, although he appears primarily to have decorated houses.<sup>[4]</sup>

Van Musscher, who had already begun "at the age of five ... to draw figures and animals on paper,"<sup>[5]</sup> was—according to a note by Van Musscher himself—sent by his father and stepmother at the age of fifteen to be trained in Amsterdam. He initially spent a few months with Martinus Saeghmolen (ca. 1620–69), "to learn the fundamentals of drawing."<sup>[6]</sup> The following year he was apprenticed to Abraham van den Tempel (1622/23–72), a fellow Mennonite, "to learn to mix paints and handle the brush." In 1665 he took "seven art lessons from Gabriel Metsu" and then completed his training in Haarlem in 1667 with a three-month stay with Adriaen van Ostade (1610–85).<sup>[7]</sup> During his time in Amsterdam, Van Musscher initially boarded with his uncle Michiel Comans II, though he was soon reunited with his parents, who moved from Rotterdam to Amsterdam in 1662. Like so many Mennonites, they settled along the Haarlemmerdijk, living in a house between the Eenhoornsluis and the Haarlemmerplein. Both locations are depicted in genre scenes that Van Musscher painted while at his parents' home in 1668 and 1669.<sup>[8]</sup>

Genre painting, though, did not become Van Musscher's specialty. He soon developed into a very popular portraitist, attracting patrons from two social spheres. Many came from his own Mennonite community; besides the likeness of his uncle mentioned above, he painted prominent Mennonite elders such as Tobias van de Wijngaert and Galenus Abrahams. That the Mennonite mercantile elite also found their way to his studio is evident from portrait commissions for the De Neufville and Rooleeuw families. His clientele also included regent-patrician families. Van Musscher profited greatly from the gap in the Amsterdam portrait market that opened up around 1670 when Ferdinand Bol (1616–80) stopped painting and Bartholomeus van der Helst (1613–70) died. His main competitor, Nicolaes Maes (1634–93), returned to Amsterdam from Dordrecht in 1673. Various members of influential Amsterdam families such as the Bickers, the Valckeniers (see *Pair of Portraits: Pieter Ranst Valckenier and Eva Suzanna Pellicorne*, 1687), and the Van Loons had their likenesses painted by Van Musscher. His most significant patron in the higher echelons of society was possibly "the art-loving Mr. Jonas Witsen." The portrait Van Musscher painted of Jonas Witsen (1647–75) was described by Houbraken as "outstanding in the art of painting," surpassing all others.<sup>[9]</sup> In executing it, Van Musscher had "spared neither time nor diligence ... and there was a reason for this; considering that this gentleman was his greatest Saint Christopher, who held [Van Musscher] high upon his shoulders so that Envy would not scratch him."<sup>[10]</sup> The impact of Van Musscher's portraits was so strong that he even attracted princely patrons, including the Frisian stadholder Hendrik Casimir II (165–96) and his wife, and Johan Maurits of Nassau-Siegen (1604–79). Among his most prestigious commissions were portraits of the Russian czar Peter the Great (1672–1725) and members of his entourage during their visit to the Dutch Republic in 1697.

Van Musscher was already in great demand as a portrait painter when he married Eva Visscher (1661–84) in 1678. The



marriage took place in the Dutch Reformed Church, even though Van Musscher was still a Mennonite. His wife, however, was not, although she did come from a Mennonite family.<sup>[11]</sup> Van Musscher did not remain faithful to his religion, converting in 1684 to the Remonstrant faith. This move does not seem to have alienated him from his circle, though, because in 1693 he married Elsje Klandes (1658–99), once again a woman with a Mennonite background. Van Musscher died in 1705. As had been done upon the death of Elsje Klandes in 1699, an inventory was drawn up of all his possessions. Many canvases remained unfinished, evidence that he remained a popular portraitist right up to his death. On 21 April 1706, the *Haarlemsche Courant* announced that the contents of his studio were to be auctioned, including works by a number of other famous painters, as well paintings by Musscher's own hand.<sup>[12]</sup>

- Piet Bakker, 2017

## Endnotes

1. “In syn leven een schilder.” Ruud Lambour, “Het doopsgezinde milieu van Michiel Musscher (1645–1705) en van andere schilders in zeventiende-eeuws Amsterdam: een revisie en ontdekking,” *Oud Holland* 125 (2012): 194.
2. The family ties with the landscape painter “I. van Moscher,” who was active in Haarlem and perhaps Delft between 1635 and 1655, although frequently presumed, have yet to be proven. Robert E. Gerhardt, “The Van Musscher Family of Artists,” *Oud Holland* 120, nos. 1–2 (2007): 111.
3. *Portrait of Michiel Comans (1614–1687), Calligrapher, Etcher, Painter, and Schoolmaster, with his Third Wife Elisabeth van der Mersche*, signed and dated 1669 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).
4. Bredius mentions Marten van Musscher in the section on Michiel van Musscher. Abraham Bredius, *Künstler-Inventare: Urkunden zur Geschichte der holländischen Kunst des XVIten, XVIIten und XVIIIten Jahrhunderts* (The Hague, 1917), 3: 998–99, but was unable to confirm any familial connection. That Marten van Musscher was Michiel’s half-brother has, however, been established recently. See Ruud Lambour, “Het doopsgezinde milieu van Michiel Musscher (1645–1705) en van andere schilders in zeventiende-eeuws Amsterdam: een revisie en ontdekking,” *Oud Holland* 125 (2012): 196.
5. “Zyn vyfde jaar begon ... mannetjes en beesjes te teekenen op papier.” Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 3: 210.
6. Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 3: 211. Martinus Saeghmolen worked for a time in the 1640s in Leiden where a ceiling painted by him has survived. From 1654 he lived in Amsterdam, where, in addition to Van Musscher, he taught Jan Luyken (1649–1712), the famous printmaker. According to Houbraken, Saeghmolen was a history painter. See Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 3: 63. Only one work by him is known: *Apollo Skinning Marsyas* (present whereabouts unknown); see N. De Roever, “Iets over Martinus Saeghmolen,” *Oud Holland* 6 (1888): 123–28.
7. “De vermenging der verwen en behandelinge van het penceel te leeren;” “zeven konstlessen van Gabriel Metzu.” Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 3: 210.
8. *Slaughtered Pig with a View of the Haarlemmerpoort*, signed and dated 1668 (Amsterdam Museum); *A Maid and a Female Merchant at the Eenhoornsluis in Amsterdam*, signed and dated 1669 (previous sale, Sotheby’s, New York, 24 January 2008, lot 18).
9. “Den konstminnenden Heer Jonas Witzen ... in Konst van schilderen uitsteekt.” Arnold

Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 3: 211. This portrait cannot be found. It may be among the ones of unidentified sitters. Houbraken provides no information about Jonas Witsen other than that he was “konstminnend,” art-loving. The most likely candidate is the lawyer Jonas Witsen who, according to a note written by his brother, burgomaster Nicolaes Witsen (1641–1717), was “eervaren in alle konsten en wetenschappen” (experienced in all arts and sciences). Jonas Witsen also “schilderde heerlijk, speelde op allerleyen instrumenten [en] songh [en] danste sonder weeregade” (painted wonderfully, played all kinds of instruments [and] sang [and] danced without equal). Nicolaes Witsen, handwritten note, “Geslacht Registers van N. Witsen, Anno 1683,” quoted in John E. Elias, *De Vroedschap van Amsterdam 1598–1795*, (Haarlem, 1903–5; reprint, Amsterdam, 1963), 1: 39. However, Houbraken says later, in his biography of Van Musscher, that in 1705 the “meer gemelde Heer Witsen” (previously mentioned Mr. Witsen) purchased from the painter’s estate “het zoo genaamde *Familiestuk*, waar in hy [Van Musscher] zig zelf, zyn vrouw en kind verbeeld heeft” (the so-called *Family Portrait*, in which he [Van Musscher] portrayed himself, his wife, and child [*sic*, children]) (currently in the Royal Museum for Fine Arts, Antwerp). Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 3: 212. If Houbraken is correct, Van Musscher’s patron cannot have been Witsen, the lawyer, who had died by then, but rather his son, Jonas Jonasz Witsen (1676–1715), who was city secretary of Amsterdam between 1693 and 1715 and appointed an alderman in the year of his death. See John E. Elias, *De Vroedschap van Amsterdam 1598–1795*, (Haarlem, 1903–5; reprint, Amsterdam, 1963), 1: 439.

10. “geen tyd, of yver gespaart ...: en ‘t heeft zyn rede gehad; aangezien gemelde Heer wel zyne grootste *Kristoffel* geweest is, die hem om hoog op zyn schouders beurde, op dat de nyt hem niet zou krabben” Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 3: 211.
11. His wife did not have herself baptized as a Mennonite, or as a member of any other faith.
12. Abraham Bredius, *Künstler-Inventare: Urkunden zur Geschichte der holländischen Kunst des XVIten, XVIIten und XVIIIten Jahrhunderts* (The Hague, 1921), 7: 166. For the auction, see Gerard Hoet and Pieter Terwesten, *Catalogus of naamlyst van schilderyen, met derzelver pryzen, zedert een langen reeks van jaaren zoo* (The Hague, 1752), 1: 89–90.

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