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Nicolaes Maes

(Dordrecht 1634 – 1693 Amsterdam)

How to cite

Bakker, Piet. “Nicolaes Maes” (2017). In *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, 4th ed. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Elizabeth Nogrady with Caroline Van Cauwenberge. New York, 2023–. https://theleidencollection.com/artists/nicolas-maes/ (accessed November 11, 2026).

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Nicolaes Maes is an example of a Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69) pupil who became disaffected with his master's style relatively soon after completing his apprenticeship. Rembrandt's style resonates in Maes's history paintings, in which he specialized until about 1654, and in the warm tones of the genre pieces he painted until 1658. Thereafter Rembrandt's influence faded, particularly, according to Arnold Houbraken, "more so when he began to concentrate on portraits and saw that young women in particular took more pleasure in white than in brown."[1]

Nicolaes Maes was born in Dordrecht in 1634, the second son of Gerrit Maes (d. 1684) of Ravestein and Ida Herman Claesdr (d. 1681). When Gerrit married, he moved into a house in the Voorstraat, Dordrecht, where he earned a living, and a certain degree of prosperity, as a cloth merchant. However, when he died in 1648, he was also described as a soap boiler, which was the profession of his eldest son, Abraham. Since Gerrit died in Abraham's house, father and son seem to have been business partners.[2]

According to Houbraken, Maes "had learned the art of drawing from a master in his youth [and] the art of painting from Rembrandt."[3] It has been suggested that his first master was Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627–78), a former pupil of Rembrandt who lived in Dordrecht between 1648 and 1651.[4] However, since Van Hoogstraten also taught Houbraken, it is difficult to imagine that Houbraken would not have mentioned this fact in his book had it been so.[5] When exactly Maes studied under Rembrandt is hard to say, but it was probably between 1649 and 1653.[6] In any case, Maes had moved back to Dordrecht by 28 December 1653, for on that day he posted the bans of his marriage with Adriana Brouwers (1624–90), widow of the preacher Arnoldus de Gelder (1604–52).

In 1658 Maes bought a house on the Steegoversloot in Dordrecht—probably the same house he moved into shortly after his wedding. The previous owner, Captain Job Jansse Cuijter, requested as partial payment a painting "portraying the seller and his family together in a single piece," for which Cuyter would "pay for the canvas or panel together with the frame."[7] Maes did not fare badly in Dordrecht, certainly taking into account that conditions for a painter from the 1660s on were not particularly favorable. In 1667 and 1672 he had to pay municipal taxes on capital of 3,000 and 4,000 guilders, respectively. His privileged position in society is evident from his membership in the local civic guard, in which he reached the rank of lieutenant. Maes was in the same company as Jacobus Leveck (1634–75), his neighbor and fellow pupil of Rembrandt, who was an ensign during the same period.

On 14 December 1673, a document was signed in Dordrecht stating that Maes and his family had departed for Amsterdam. His decision was likely prompted by the crisis gripping the art market at the time. As in so many cities of the Dutch Republic, market constraints had become increasingly palpable from the 1650s on, reaching an absolute low in the Disaster Year of 1672. With his fashionable painting style, Maes must have hoped to find favor among Amsterdam's relatively large population of wealthy elite. However, he held on to his house in the Steegoversloot, suggesting he was not entirely convinced of lasting success.

Maes, as it turns out, had no need to worry about his reception in Amsterdam. He "received so much work that it was deemed a favor if one person was granted the opportunity to sit for his portrait before another, and so it remained for the rest of his life and is the reason why a large number of portraits remained unfinished."[8] The several hundred portraits that have survived evidence the fact that affluent Amsterdam burghers easily found their way to Maes's studio in the Barndestreef.[9] After a busy period of work he would occasionally indulge in some rest and relaxation. For instance, he travelled to Antwerp to study the work of Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1650) and Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641). During

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his stay he visited the studio of Jacob Jordaens (1593–1678), with whom he conversed at length about painting.[10]

Although Maes lived in Amsterdam from 1673, he never became a citizen. Only in 1688, when the municipality demanded a list of members from the Guild of Saint Luke, did Maes register, though not as a “burgher” but as a resident. This status brought fewer privileges, but it was available at a lower price.[11] According to Houbraken, in the last years of his life Maes was “deerlyk met de Jicht geplaagt” (plagued by gout) and almost never appeared in public. He had “an exceptional aversion to taverns and all those who wasted themselves there.”[12] This somber period may have been prompted by the death of his wife, Adriana Brouwers, who was buried in the Oude Kerk on 14 March 1690.[13] Maes died shortly thereafter and, on Christmas Eve 1693, his body was laid to rest alongside that of his wife.

Despite the innumerable portrait commissions, Maes’s years in Amsterdam did not bring him great wealth. Nevertheless, compared to his Dordrecht years, his financial position improved considerably. On his death he left more than 11,000 guilders, not counting three houses in Amsterdam and two in Dordrecht. He had taught a number of pupils in Dordrecht, including the amateur painter and collector Jacob Moelaert (1649–ca. 1727), who was a good friend of Arent de Gelder (1645–1727).[14] Other Dordrecht painters influenced by his genre pieces include Abraham van Dyck (1635/36–80), in particular, to whom he was related.

- Piet Bakker, 2017

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Endnotes

1. “Te meer toen hy zig to het schilderen van pourtretten begaf, en wel zag dat inzonderheid de jonge Juffrouwen meer behagen namen in het wit dan in het bruin.” Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 2: 274.
2. On Gerrit Maes’s profession, see Nada Ghandour, “Recherches sur la biographie de Nicolaes Maes,” *Oud Holland* 113 (1999): 219.
3. “De teekenkonst in zyn jeugt bij een gemeen Meester [en] de Schilderkonst van Rembrant geleerd.” Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 2: 273–74.
4. Michiel Roscam Abbing, *De schilder & schrijver Samuel van Hoogstraten 1627–1678. Eigentijdse bronnen & oeuvre van gesigneerde schilderijen* (Leiden, 1993), 40–41.
5. Roscam Abbing believes that the word “gemeen” in this context is not meant in the usual sense of “ordinary,” but should be understood as “joint.” This meaning, however, is not supported anywhere in Houbraken’s biography of Maes.
6. Walter Liedtke, “Rembrandt’s ‘Workshop’ Revisited,” *Oud Holland* 117 nos. 1–2 (2004): 68.
7. “Alsamen curieuselyken te conterfeyten in één stuck”; “becostigen den doek ofte paneel metsgaders de leyst.” Abraham Bredius, “Bijdragen tot een Biografie van Nicolaes Maes,” *Oud Holland* 41 (1923/24): 208. *Captain Job Jansz Cuyter and His Family*, signed and dated 1659 (North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh); Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*. Vol. 3, *B. Keil J. Ovens* (Landau, 1983), 2036, no. 1440. For the identity of the family in the portrait, see Adolph Staring, “Vier familiegroepen van Nicolaes Maes,” *Oud Holland* 80 (1965): 171–72.
8. “Kreeg de handen zoo vol werk dat het voor een gunst gerekent wierd, als den eenen voor den anderen, gelegentheid wierd ingeschikt van te konnen voor hun pourtret zitten, en dit bleef zoo duuren tot het einde van zyn leven, waarom er ook een groot getal pourtretten onafgedaan zyn na gebleven.” Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 2: 275.
9. Leon Krempel, *Studien zu den Datierten Gemälden des Nicolaes Maes (1634–1693)* (Petersberg, 2000).
10. Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 2: 275–76.
11. Nada Ghandour, “Recherches sur la biographie de Nicolaes Maes,” *Oud Holland* 113 (1999): 217–18.
12. “En had een zonderlingen afkeer van de kroegen en zulken die zig daar aan verslingeren.” Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1976), 2: 275.

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13. Nada Ghandour, “Recherches sur la biographie de Nicolaes Maes,” *Oud Holland* 113 (1999): 219.
14. See the biography of Arent de Gelder in this catalogue.

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