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Willem van Mieris

(Leiden 1662 – 1747 Leiden)

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Willem van Mieris was born in Leiden on 3 June 1662. He was the second son of the painter Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635–81) and Cunera van der Cock (1629/30–1700). Like his older brother, Jan van Mieris (1660–90), Willem too became a painter. Naturally, both sons were instructed by their father, and according to Jacob Campo Weyerman (1677–1747), who knew Willem personally, the latter was so advanced that after his father's sudden death in 1681, he was able to "to stand on his own two artistic feet."[1] It is highly likely that Frans was the only teacher of Willem and Jan, and the two brothers presumably took over their father's workshop upon his untimely death. If this was indeed the case, Willem was probably in charge, given that he was the first of the two to join the Guild of Saint Luke in Leiden, on 21 June 1683; Jan followed suit three years later. The brothers seem to have had a good relationship, as Jan witnessed the banns of his brother's marriage to Agneta Chapman (1663–1744), the daughter of a surgeon, on 21 April 1684.[2]

By all accounts, Willem van Mieris's career was remarkably successful. His standing was such that he sat on board of the Guild of Saint Luke a number of times.[3] Moreover, together with Jacob Toorenvliet (1640–1719) and Carel de Moor (1655–1738), he founded the Leiden *Tekenacademie* (Drawing Academy)—no later than 1694 but probably already in the 1680s—which he led with De Moor until 1736.[4] Although his enrollment at the Leiden University on 22 December 1695 was not related to an academic course of study (he was then thirty-three years old), Van Mieris was, in fact, learned.[5] Nothing is known about the books he owned, but it is plausible that a significant share of the library that was auctioned after the death of his son Frans in 1764 had previously belonged to him. He also seems to have dabbled in the theoretical side of his craft, though his writings on painting likely were intended solely for his own use, for there is no indication that they were ever published.[6]

Willem's social position mirrored his success as a painter. His work was highly sought after, and he generally charged steep prices for it.[7] In 1705, he could even afford to buy a house on the elegant Breestraat, where he would live for the remainder of his life. He also never had a shortage of important patrons, "the most notable among whom are Madam Oortmans and the Honorable Mister Pieter de la Court van der Voort."[8] "Madam Oortmans" was Petronella de la Court (1624–1707), a first cousin of the father of Pieter de la Court van der Voort (1664–1739) and a great art lover.[9] She was the first leading buyer of Van Mieris's work, especially in the early years of his career. At her death in 1707, she owned six works by him.[10] Moreover, he painted three miniature pictures for her famous dollhouse. By far his most important benefactor, however, was the wealthy Leiden cloth manufacturer Pieter de la Court van der Voort, who engaged Van Mieris for numerous commissions, chiefly after 1700. De la Court owned fifteen of the artist's works, which fetched amounts ranging from 60 to 1,600 guilders.[11] He paid the latter sum in 1709 for Van Mieris's *Armida Binding the Sleeping Rinaldo,* to which Weyerman, who had seen the picture, gave the highest praise.[12]

De la Court also commissioned Van Mieris to copy pictures by Gerrit Dou (1613–75) and by his father, Frans van Mieris the Elder (whose original works were difficult to come by in these years), among others.[13] De la Court also had him finish, touch up, or add figures to paintings in his own collection, which ultimately numbered 215 works. The work Willem carried out for De la Court was not limited to painting alone. For example, he designed and modeled four handsome, monumental garden vases with bas-reliefs around 1703

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for his patron's house on the Rapenburg.[14]

De la Court's patronage ended abruptly in 1731: that year marked the beginning of a profound and protracted conflict between the De la Court and Backer families, which had become closely interwoven through marriage.[15] While Van Mieris regularly received commissions from the Backers, this was negligible in comparison to his work for De la Court.[16] It is therefore difficult to understand why Van Mieris sided with the Backer family. This choice, however, is illustrative of his social position and artistic success. Although De la Court was clearly his most important benefactor, Van Mieris was not dependent solely on his patronage; he worked for many other art lovers, some from the very highest circles.[17]

The most striking illustration of Van Mieris's wide recognition is his contact with several foreign princely art collectors. The Archbishop of Mainz and Elector of the Holy Roman Empire, Lothar Franz von Schönborn (1655–1729), for example, was a great lover and collector of Dutch painting. He ordered a few works from Van Mieris and kept up an extensive personal correspondence with the painter about the desired result.[18] Duke Anton Ulrich von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel (1633–1714) also collected Dutch masters and was one of Lothar Franz's fiercest competitors in acquiring the very best works. Just like his rival, Anton Ulrich highly valued Van Mieris and visited him in his workshop on one of his trips to the Dutch Republic.[19] Count Christoph August von Wackerbarth (1662–1734), a high-ranking German military man and confidant of the Polish king Friedrich August, courted the artist as well.[20] Weyerman gives an amusing account of Von Wackerbarth's unremitting attempts, after visiting the collection of Pieter de la Court in 1703, to buy an earlier version of the above-mentioned *Armida Binding the Sleeping Rinaldo* from the cloth manufacturer. He finally succeeded in doing so by paying an exceptionally high price. Van Mieris garnered great fame with his depiction of this subject based on an epic poem by Torquato Tasso (1544–95), four versions of which are known.[21] The most unusual one is the portrait of the German envoy Daniel Meinertzhagen (1675–1730) in the role of Rinaldo and his wife, Amelia van Stockum (1677–1743), as Armida. The satisfied customer paid Van Mieris a hefty "300 goude pistoolen" (300 gold pistoles) for this portrait historié.[22]

Van Mieris never lacked for orders, even when his sight diminished at the end of his life. He was certainly one of the most famous painters of his time, which explains why De la Court, rather than Van Mieris, bitterly lamented the rift between the former friends in 1732.[23] Fortunately, Van Mieris outlived De la Court; had he not, the news that the painter had died in the Backers' country house, of all places, would certainly have pained his former patron.[24] A fatal cold took Van Mieris's life at Backershagen in Wassenaar on 26 January 1747; he was eighty-four years old. The following day, his body was transferred to Leiden, where he was buried in a grave in the Pieterskerk that he had bought for himself in 1731.[25]

- Piet Bakker, 2017; revised in 2020

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Endnotes

1. “Op zijn eyge konstwieken kon flodderen.” Jacob Campo Weyerman, *De levensbeschryvingen der Nederlandsche konstschilders en konstschilderessen* (The Hague, 1729), 3: 388.
2. Agneta Chapman was the daughter of the surgeon Thomas Chapman (1637–before 1701) and Elisabeth Martens. Thomas Chapman’s parents came from England or Scotland and settled in Nijmegen in the 1630s. Thomas Chapman was born there, as was his daughter Agneta. Willem van Mieris was a witness when Chapman took a second wife, Elisabeth Clincq, in Leiden in 1690.
3. Eric Jan Sluijter, Marlies Enklaar, and Paul Nieuwenhuizen, eds., *Leidse Fijnschilders: Van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge, 1630–1760* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Museum De Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 1988), 152.
4. He was succeeded as director in 1736 by his son Frans van Mieris the Younger (1689–1763).
5. As documented in *Album studiosorum lugduno batavae 1575–1875* (The Hague, 1875), 739: “Wilhelmus van Mieris, delineandi artem docens.” This enrollment with no mention of a specific discipline, like so many others in the album, was probably motivated by the fiscal benefits it engendered.
6. From the will that Willem van Mieris had drawn up in 1715, it emerges that in addition to collecting an unknown number of books, he also seems to have written books. Frans van Mieris the Younger inherited both the entire workshop inventory and his father’s books, among which Willem counted his own writings on the art of painting: “He [Willem van Mieris] stated that he is giving a pre-legacy to his aforementioned son Frans van Mieris of all of his drawings, prints, painted models, medals, sculptures, clothes associated with the art of painting, and all other ornaments that he has gathered with respect to the art of painting, ditto all of the paints and tools for painting, as well as his books, all without exception, and moreover the painter’s own writings on the art of painting and other arts.” (Voorts verklaarde hij [Willem van Mieris] aan zijn voorn[oemde] zoon Frans van Mieris noch te prelegateren . . . alle zijn comp[aran]ts teykeningen, prenten, geschilderde modellen, medailies, beelden, klederen die tot de schilderkonst behoren, en alle verdere ornamenten die hij comp[aran]t tot de schilderkonst heeft vergadert, item alle verwen ende gereetschappen tot de schilderkonst behorende, alsmede alle zijn comp[aran]ts bouken, d geen uitgesondert, mitsg[ader]s zijne geschreven schriften van de schilder en andere konsten). Regionaal Archief Leiden, Notarial Archives, Notary Johan de Blauwer, inv. 1348, deed 84, 28 June 1715.
7. For example, in 1725, the Delft art collector Valerius Röver (1686–1739) paid him a total of 1,050 guilders for two pictures. Ernst Wilhelm Moes, “Het Kunstkabinet van Valerius Röver te

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Delft," *Oud Holland* 31 (1913): 8.

8. "Onder de welken uytstaaken Mejuffrouw Oortmans en den Heer en Meester Pieter de la Court van der Voort." Jacob Campo Weyerman, *De levensbeschryvingen der Nederlandsche konstschilders en konstschilderessen* (The Hague, 1729), 3: 388. See also Johan van Gool, *De nieuwe Schouburg der Nederlantsche Kunstschilders en Schilderessen: Waer in de Levens- en Kunstbedryven der tans levende en reets overleedene Schilders, die van Houbraken, noch eenig ander Schryver, zyn aengeteekend, verhaelt worden* (The Hague, 1750), 1: 192.
9. Petronella de la Court, now known primarily for her exquisite dollhouse, married Adam Oortmans (1622–84), a silk merchant at that time, in Leiden in 1649. The couple moved to Amsterdam, where they bought the beer brewery *De Zwaan* (The Swan) on the Singel in 1657. On Petronella, see I. H. van Eeghen, "Het poppenhuis van Petronella de la Court, huisvrouw van Adam Oortmans," *Maandblad Amstelodamum* 47 (1960): 159–67.
10. For her painting collection, see Stadsarchief Amsterdam, Inventory of Petronella de la Court, Notarial Archives, Notary G. Ypelaer, inv. 5338, fol. 553–642, 16 August 1707. Fewer paintings are mentioned in this inventory than in the catalogue of the auction of her collection in Amsterdam on 19 October of the same year. Conversely, a few paintings appear in the catalogue that are absent from her inventory. See Gerard Hoet and Pieter Terwesten, *Catalogus of naamlyst van schilderyen, met derzelverpryzen, zedert een langen reeks van jaaren zoo* (The Hague, 1752), 1: 104–9; Sale Petronella de la Court, 17 October 1707, Lugt 207. See also the biography of Jan van Mieris in this catalogue.
11. Eric Jan Sluijter, Marlies Enklaar, and Paul Niewenhuizen, eds., *Leidse fijnschilders: Van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge, 1630–1760* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Museum de Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 1988), 42.
12. *Armida Binding the Sleeping Rinaldo*, signed and dated 1709 (Mauritshuis, The Hague). See Jacob Campo Weyerman, *De levensbeschryvingen der Nederlandsche konstschilders en konstschilderessen* (The Hague, 1729), 3: 388–89.
13. For a survey of the copies Van Mieris painted for Pieter de la Court, see Junko Aono, "Imitation and Innovation: Dutch Genre Painting 1680–1750 and Its Reception of the Golden Age" (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2011), 142–43, list II-1.
14. Cornelia Willemijn Fock, "Willem van Mieris als ontwerper en boetseerder van tuinvazen," *Oud Holland* 87 (1973): 27–48.
15. Cornelia Willemijn Fock, "Willem van Mieris en zijn mecenas Pieter de la Court van der Voort," in *Leids Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* (1983), 277.
16. Cornelia Willemijn Fock, "Willem van Mieris en zijn mecenas Pieter de la Court van der Voort," in *Leids Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* (1983), 261–82. See also Jacob Campo Weyerman, *De levensbeschryvingen der Nederlandsche konstschilders en*

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konstschilderessen (The Hague, 1729), 3: 391; Johan van Gool, *De nieuwe Schouburg der Nederlantsche Kunstschilders en Schilderessen: Waer in de Levens- en Kunstbedryven der tans levende en reets overleedene Schilders, die van Houbraken, noch eenig ander Schryver, zyn aengeteekend, verhaelt worden* (The Hague, 1750), 1: 199.

17. Count Johan Hendrik van Wassenaer Obdam (1683–1745) was another important patron of Van Mieris. Between 1713 and 1721, the count bought six paintings for amounts ranging between 380 and 825 guilders directly from the artist. Van Wassenaer paid the latter amount for a *Grocer's Shop* of 1717 (Maurtishuis, The Hague), the highlight of his collection. Junko Aono, "Imitation and Innovation: Dutch Genre Painting 1680–1750 and Its Reception of the Golden Age" (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2011), 80–88. See also Jacob Campo Weyerman, *De levensbeschryvingen der Nederlandsche konstschilders en konstschilderessen* (The Hague, 1729), 3: 390–91; Johan van Gool, *De nieuwe Schouburg der Nederlantsche Kunstschilders en Schilderessen: Waer in de Levens- en Kunstbedryven der tans levende en reets overleedene Schilders, die van Houbraken, noch eenig ander Schryver, zyn aengeteekend, verhaelt worden* (The Hague, 1750), 1: 198–99.

18. K. Bott, "Zwei Zeichnungen des Willem van Mieris in den Kunstsammlungen Graf von Schönborn," *Oud Holland* 103 (1989): 243–48, passim; Koenraad Jonckheere, *The Auction of King William's Paintings (1713)* (Amsterdam, 2008), 161.

19. Koenraad Jonckheere, *The Auction of King William's Paintings (1713)* (Amsterdam, 2008), 194.

20. On Von Wackerbarth and his collection of Dutch masters, with its emphasis on Leiden *fijnschilders*, see Carl Niedner, "Der sächsische Kabinettsminister Graf August Christoph von Wackerbarth († 1734) und die Königliche Gemäldegalerie in Dresden," *Neues Archiv für Sächsische Geschichte und Altertumskunde* 31 (1910): 86–99.

21. The version of the picture that Van Mieris painted in 1706 for Lothar Franz von Schönborn, Elector of Mainz, is no longer identifiable. Ben Broos, "Weyerman en 'Wackerbaert,'" *Mededelingen van de Stichting Jacob Campo Weyerman* 24 (2001): 143–45.

22. *Armida Binding the Sleeping Rinaldo*, signed and dated 1715 (Stiftung Preussische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg, Jagdschloss Grunewald, Berlin). See Ben Broos, "Weyerman en 'Wackerbaert,'" *Mededelingen van de Stichting Jacob Campo Weyerman* 24 (2001): 145; Jacob Campo Weyerman, *De levensbeschryvingen der Nederlandsche konstschilders en konstschilderessen* (The Hague, 1729), 3: 391; Johan van Gool, *De nieuwe Schouburg der Nederlantsche Kunstschilders en Schilderessen: Waer in de Levens- en Kunstbedryven der tans levende en reets overleedene Schilders, die van Houbraken, noch eenig ander Schryver, zyn aengeteekend, verhaelt worden* (The Hague, 1750), 1: 199.

23. Cornelia Willemijn Fock, "Willem van Mieris en zijn mecenas Pieter de la Court van der Voort," in *Leids Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* (1983), 277.

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24. Cornelia Willemijn Fock, “Willem van Mieris en zijn mecenas Pieter de la Court van der Voort,” in *Leids Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* (1983), 277.
25. Eric Jan Sluijter, Marlies Enklaar, and Paul Niewenhuizen, eds., *Leidse fijnschilders: Van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge, 1630–1760* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Museum de Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 1988), 152.

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