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Woman Standing before a Mirror

Frans van Mieris the Elder (studio copy?)
(Leiden 1635 – 1681 Leiden)

17th century
Oil on panel
31.8 x 24.5 cm
faint illegible letters in light paint, upper right corner
FM-121

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A good gauge of the popularity of Frans van Mieris's painted oeuvre is the large number of copies, the oldest of which must have been made during his lifetime.[1] Nevertheless, little information exists about Van Mieris's workshop; it is not even known if the master made replicas of his own paintings. Copies and variants of Van Mieris's paintings, however, were certainly made after his death for Leiden collectors, a number of which came from the hand of his son, Willem (1662–1747). Some of Van Mieris's paintings were particularly popular and frequently copied; for example, around thirty copies are known of *The Oyster Meal* from 1661 (Mauritshuis, The Hague).[2] *A Woman before a Mirror*, now in Berlin **(fig 1)**, was also frequently copied, as was this Leiden Collection painting.[3] At least twenty other copies after the Berlin picture are recorded,[4] making it virtually impossible to establish their individual provenances. This copy is almost identical to the Berlin original, the most conspicuous difference being the blue ribbon on the red jacket draped over the chair.

It is difficult to determine whether the present picture was made in the studio of Frans van Mieris, although dendrochronological analysis indicates that the panel does date from the seventeenth century.[5] Not surprisingly, a number of later copies were made with fraudulent intent. The well-known collector and fabulously wealthy cloth merchant Pieter de la Court van der Voort (1664–1739), a great patron of Willem van Mieris, wrote to his wife on 8 August 1700 from Paris that on some of Willem's paintings, the first name had been replaced by "Frans" or simply overpainted to create the impression that the works were by his father.[6] Frans van Mieris the Elder had been dead for almost twenty years by then, but he was evidently still an international celebrity.

The theme of a young woman making her toilette appears relatively often in Frans van Mieris's paintings.[7] The concentration with which the young woman stands before a mirror while holding a piece of jewelry to her neck makes it clear that she is putting the last touches to her attire. Her dark-skinned maidservant, whose face Van Mieris prepared meticulously in a drawn study for the original painting,[8] holds up a jewelry box and waits curiously to see which piece her mistress will decide to wear. To the right, through a doorway, one sees a man reading at a table.

In the context of a woman making her toilette, a mirror can be associated with vanity or sensual pleasure.[9] That the woman uses the mirror here to adorn herself with jewelry seems to confirm this meaning. The opened letter on a corner of the table is without doubt a love letter—evidence of her interest in the sensual pleasures.[10] In contrast to the woman's concern with appearances, the man reading represents the opposite attitude: the life of the mind and a desire to acquire knowledge and wisdom.

Comparative Figures

Fig 1. Frans van Mieris the Elder, *A Woman before a Mirror*, ca. 1662, oil on panel, 30 x 23 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, 838

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- Quentin Buvelot, 2017

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Endnotes

1. For lists of copies, see Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), vol. 2; and 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, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 1988), 35–36.
2. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2:44–48, nos. 36a–cc.
3. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2:56–59, no. 46; see also Peter van der Ploeg in *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681*, ed. Quentin Buvelot (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), 157–59, no. 31, repr. Otto Naumann also thinks that the present painting is a copy (correspondence with the author, 10 August 2012).
4. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2: 56–59, nos. 46a–u.
5. On the basis of dendrochronological research executed by Peter Klein in 2012, the panel was dated after 1618 (letter of Peter Klein, dated 17 July 2012, kept in the Leiden Collection archives).
6. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1: 193, 207–10; T. H. Lunsingh Scheurleer, ed., *Het Rapenburg: Geschiedenis van een Leidse gracht,* 10 vols. (Leiden, 1986–92), 2: 388; 6a: 358–59, and figs. 55–56; Eric Jan Sluijter, "Een stuck waerin een jufr. voor de spiegel van Gerrit Douw," *Antiek* 23 (1988): 35–36.
7. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2: nos. 32, 51, 69, 76, 114.
8. Otto Naumann, "Frans van Mieris as a Draughtsman," *Master Drawings* 16, no. 1 (1978): 27, no. 11; Quentin Buvelot, Otto Naumann, and Eddy de Jongh, *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681*, ed. Quentin Buvelot (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), 157, fig. 31a.
9. For the symbolism of mirrors, see Eddy de Jongh, *Zinne- en minnebeelden in de schilderkunst van de zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1967), 76–78; Eddy de Jongh, *Tot lering en vermaak: betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstellingen uit de zeventiende eeuw* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Amsterdam, 1976), no. 47; Eric Jan Sluijter, "Een stuck waerin een jufr. voor de spiegel van Gerrit Douw," *Antiek* 23 (1988): 150–61.
10. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1: 69.

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Provenance

- Count Ferdinand von Plettenberg (1690–1737) (his sale, Amsterdam, 2 April 1738, no. 57 [for 800 florins]).
- Ewout van Dishoek (1678–1744), Lord of Domburgh (his sale, The Hague, 9 June 1745, no. 35 [to Wilhelm VIII, Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel for 1,300 florins]).
- Wilhelm VIII (1682–1760), Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel; possibly to Marc René, Marquis Voyer de Paulmy d'Argenson.
- Possibly Marc René, Marquis Voyer de Paulmy d'Argenson (1721–82), Paris; to Christophe-Nicolas de Montribloud.
- Possibly Christophe-Nicolas de Montribloud (d. 1784), Paris (his sale, Paillet, Julliot & Fils, Paris, 9 February 1784, no. 30 [to Paillet 2,501 francs]).
- Possibly Du Preuil (ca. 1767–1849), Dusseldorf (his sale, Lebrun, Paris, 25 November 1811, no. 113 [to Hesse for 250 francs]).
- (Possible sale, Lebrun, Paris, 2 February 1813, no. 239 [to Henri for 240 francs].)
- P.J.F. Vrancken, Lokeren (sale, Antwerp, 15 May 1838, no. 43 [to De Lelie, Amsterdam, for 630 florins]).
- Thadée Joseph Antoine Hyacinthe Van Saceghem (1767–1852), Ghent, 1842 (his sale, Brussels, 2 June 1851, no. 36 [to Tencé, Lille, for 27,200 francs]).
- Théodore Patureau, Antwerp (his sale, Paris, 20 April 1857, no. 14 [to Etienne le Roy for 19,700 francs]).
- H.J. Pfungst, London; to James John Van Alen.
- James John Van Alen (1846–1923), Rushton Hall, Kettering, Northamptonshire, 1904; by descent (sale, Christie's, London, 5 December 1969, no. 79).
- [Galleria Giorgio Caretto, Turin, by 1970.]
- Private collection, Turin, before 1976.
- (Sale, Finarte Casa D'aste, Rome, 14 November 2006, no. 27.)
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2006.

Exhibition History

- London, Whitechapel Art Gallery, "Dutch Exhibition," 30 March–10 May 1904, no. 273 [lent by James John Van Alen].
- Turin, Galleria Giorgio Caretto, "Mostra di scene di genere: Opere di maestri olandesi e fiamminghi del

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XVII secolo," 27 October–20 November 1970, no. 40.

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novembre 1970. Exh. cat. Turin, Galleria Giorgio Caretto. Turin, 1970, no. 40.

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Versions

1. Frans van Mieris, *A Woman Standing Before a Mirror*, oil on panel, 30 x 23 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, inv. no. 838.
2. After Frans van Mieris, *A Woman Standing Before a Mirror*, oil on panel, 31.5 x 24 cm, previous sale, Galerie Charpentier, Paris, 14 June 1960, no. 42.
3. After Frans van Mieris, *A Woman Standing Before a Mirror*, oil on panel, 32.5 x 24 cm, previous sale, American Art Galleries, New York, 5 April 1910, no. 95.
4. After Frans van Mieris, *A Woman Standing Before a Mirror*, oil on panel, 31.6 x 27.4 cm, National Gallery, Prague, inv. no. DO 4608.

Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular-shaped oak from the western Germany-Netherlands regions, is derived from a tree felled after 1608 and has a plausible creation date from 1618 onward.[1] The unthinned and uncradled panel has bevels on all four sides and two small rectangular wood inserts along the left vertical edge. A red wax collection seal with a partial impression and an old paper label remnant with an ink inscription from Dr. Bredius dated 1893 are located along the panel reverse, but there are no import stamps, panel maker's marks or machine tool marks.

A light-colored (possibly gray) ground has been thinly and evenly applied followed by paint applied in thin layers of smooth transparent glazing through the background and with areas of low brushmarking through the female figure's white blouse, vermilion cape and the chair over which the cape is draped.

There are remnants of letters in light paint along the upper right corner, but there is no discernible signature or date.

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

The painting, which was cleaned and restored in 2007 and revarnished in 2010, remains in a good state of preservation.

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Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on Peter Klein's (undated) dendrochronology report.

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