THE LEIDEN COLLECTION

A Young Woman Writing a Letter

Frans van Mieris
(Leiden 1635 – 1681 Leiden)

ca. 1670
oil on panel
18.5 x 14.7 cm
signed on the edge of the table, lower left corner: "Fvan Mieris"
FM-124

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In this intimate candlelit scene, a young woman, seated in the privacy of her bedchamber, leans over her writing desk to compose a letter. Wearing a white linen cap and a fur-trimmed velvet jacket over a tight-fitting bodice, she responds to the two-page missive that lies opened on the small, foreground table. With a brass inkwell near at hand, she carefully places the tip of her elegant quill pen at the top of a sheet of paper while steadying it with her other hand. The candlelight, domestic setting, and faint smile animating her face leave little doubt that this correspondence is amorous in nature.[1]

Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) painted this endearing scene around 1670, at a time, relatively late in his career, when he made a number of paintings of young women engaged in the letter-writing process.[2] Many of these epistolary scenes are illuminated by candlelight, a light source that suggests both privacy and intimacy—although, in one instance, the flame of the candle also serves to melt the end of a red wax stick that the woman will use to seal her letter.[3] *A Young Woman Writing a Letter* is the only painting among these works that explicitly depicts the receiving and subsequent writing of a letter, underscoring the sentiment of mutuality. In Van Mieris's other painted images, the letter to which the sitter responds is only implied or, if visible, not given this central role. Here, he emphasized the physical presence of the letter in the foreground through the striking patterns of light and shadow created by its complex network of creases. These diagonally interlocking folds, which the young woman's correspondent made to prevent others from reading its contents, signal the amorous nature of their exchange.[4] Adjacent to the letter is a wooden sealing wax stamp, which is ready for the young woman's use once she finishes her reply, a subtle reference to the continuing correspondence between her and her distant loved one.

The letter motif first appeared in Dutch painting in the 1630s, but it reached the height of its popularity around mid-century with the innovative thematic and stylistic contributions of Gerard Ter Borch (1617–81).[5] The Deventer artist's genre scenes of upper-class men and women reading, writing, and dispatching letters in elegant interiors reflected the taste for "modern" subject matter that was often associated with themes of love.[6] An important painting in this context is Ter Borch's depiction of his half-sister, Gesina, deeply absorbed in a letter on the table before her **(fig 1)**. With his careful attention to such details as the oriental carpet pushed aside to clear the writing surface, the open inkwell, and the graceful way in which she holds the quill pen, Ter Borch evoked a shared intimacy between subject and viewer in this tranquil scene.

Ter Borch's letter writers provided an important model for Van Mieris as well as for

Comparative Figures

Fig 1. Gerard ter Borch, *Woman Writing a Letter*, 1655, oil on panel, 38.3 x 27.9 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague, inv. no. 797.

Fig 2. Gabriel Metsu, *Elegant Lady Writing at Her Desk*, ca. 1662–64, oil on panel, 39.4 x 33.5 cm, The Leiden Collection, New York, inv. no. GM-110.

Fig 3. Frans van Mieris, *A Young Woman Writing a Letter*, ca. 1670, oil on panel, 18.5 x 14.5 cm, The Leiden Collection, New York, inv. no.

several of his contemporaries in the 1660s and 1670s, including Gabriel Metsu (1629–67), Caspar Netscher (ca. 1639–84), and Johannes Vermeer (1632–75), each of whom also explored a range of the psychological and emotional reactions that arise from the exchange of letters. In Gabriel Metsu's *Elegant Lady at Writing at Her Desk* in The Leiden Collection, for example, the sitter, who has been interrupted from writing, holds her quill pen above the inkwell and, with a bemused expression, gazes directly at the viewer **(fig 2)**.[7] By involving the beholder in this narrative moment, Metsu imbued his scene with a strikingly different—and more dramatic—character than the private inner worlds depicted by Ter Borch and Van Mieris.

The great interest in portraying letter themes reflected the increasing use of letters as a form of personal correspondence in the seventeenth century. While advances in the postal system made the sending of letters more reliable in the Dutch Republic, letter writing manuals, which first emerged in France, also helped to popularize epistolary exchange.[8] Like Jean Puget de la Serre's *Le Secrétaire à la mode*, one of the most widely read manuals in this period (published in French in 1630 and translated into Dutch in 1651), these books provided models for composing various types of correspondence, especially love letters. In his text, Puget de la Serre stressed the importance of responding point by point to the letter that one has received.[9] The thoughtful way that the woman in the Leiden Collection painting begins to compose her letter—keeping her lover's close by her side for reference—emphasizes the measured and delicate approach that was required for this private task.

The intimate character of *A Young Woman Writing a Letter* is closely related to its distinctive brushwork and muted palette of grays, browns, ochres, and purple.[10] Van Mieris executed this painting with mostly fluid, thin brushstrokes, in some areas in only one or two layers, and left the brown ground layer exposed in certain places to enhance the effect of shadow, as in the darker areas along the side of the woman's neck and beneath the folded corners of the letter in the foreground. This unusual technique has led Quentin Buvelot to raise the possibility that the painting was not finished, yet the careful and nuanced manner with which Van Mieris approached the composition—and the presence of the artist's signature—indicates otherwise.[11] In the flesh tones and sleeve of the woman's jacket, for example, he layered his brushwork densely and modeled the folds of her sleeve wet-in-wet with a deep shade of purple.[12] He executed the rest of composition more broadly and used the restrained palette to capture the warm tonalities of flickering candlelight in a darkened chamber. The intimacy of the scene would have also been enhanced by the panel's original arched shape **(fig 3)**, a format favored by the artist that helped to draw the subject closer to the beholder.[13]

A Young Woman Writing a Letter's muted colors and subtle lighting effects are

FM-124, with frame approximating original arched panel.

reminiscent of the technique of grisaille, a manner of painting that emphasizes the modeling of forms through light and shadow without the use of color.[14] Although Van Mieris's palette is more varied in this scene, he clearly intended the restrained colors to enhance the quiet, nocturnal setting and imbue the painting with a warm, seductive quality.[15] Interestingly, scholars have not addressed the work's near-monochromatic palette, despite the fact that the earliest known references to the painting in the eighteenth century characterize it as having been made "*in 't graauw*" ("in gray") or "*camayeuse*," terms that were used to describe paintings in monochrome.[16] As one of Van Mieris's only works rendered in this manner, *A Young Woman Writing a Letter* demonstrates his exceptional effort to seek new pictorial solutions for the depiction of the letter theme, creating a tender, meditative moment through the masterful effects of light and color.

That early collectors treasured this painting's pictorial qualities is evident in its remarkable provenance. After having been in the collection of the notable Dutch collector Gerard Bicker van Zwieten II (1687–1753) in The Hague in the first part of the eighteenth century, *A Young Woman Writing a Letter* was acquired by aristocratic Swiss collector and banker François Tronchin (1704–98).[17] Tronchin, who mingled with elite intellectual and cultural circles in Geneva and Paris, had purchased the painting by at least 1761, the year in which he compiled a handwritten inventory of his collection.[18] In 1770, he sold the painting, together with ninety-four other works from his collection, to Empress Catherine the Great of Russia (1729–96).[19] Van Mieris's painting remained in the imperial palace in St. Petersburg until the Russian Revolution in 1917, at which point it was transferred to the State Hermitage Museum until its eventual sale in 1929.[20] Van Mieris's small masterpiece subsequently passed through multiple private hands before being was acquired by The Leiden Collection in 2021.[21]

- Lara Yeager-Crasselt, 2022

Endnotes

1. Faintly visible in the background is a bed with its drapery pulled aside. As with most painted letters, the tiny script depicted by Frans van Mieris on this letter is illegible. For the practices of letter writing and depictions of the exchange of love letters in this period, see Peter C. Sutton, "Love Letters: Dutch Genre Paintings in the Age of Vermeer," and Ann Jensen Adams, "Disciplining the Hand, Disciplining the Heart: Letter Writing Paintings and Practices in Seventeenth-Century Holland," both in *Love Letters: Dutch Genre Painting in the Age of Vermeer*, ed. Peter C. Sutton, Lisa Vergara, and Ann Jensen Adams (Exh. cat. Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum of Arts and Sciences; Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland) (New Haven, 2003), 14–49 and 63–76; and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Pen to Paper," in *Vermeer and the Masters of Dutch Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry*, ed. Adriaan E. Waiboer, Blaise Ducos, and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Paris, Louvre Museum; Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland; Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art) (New Haven, 2017), 122–27. For a similar interpretation of the letter theme as amorous exchange or temptation, see Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635–1681)* (Doornspijk, 1981), 1: 111–13.
2. Van Mieris treated the letter theme in six paintings and one drawing beginning in the early 1660s until about 1680. For the dating of the Leiden Collection work, as well as his other letter scenes, see Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635–1681)* (Doornspijk, 1981), 1: 78–79, 111, 2: 96, nos. 82, 83, 92, 118. Quentin Buvelot has suggested a date between ca. 1670 and 1680 for the Leiden Collection painting; Quentin Buvelot et al., *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), 189–94, esp. 192. Several of Van Mieris's paintings likely treat the letter theme as a historical subject, as does *Woman with a Lapdog, Accompanied by a Maidservant (Probably Bathsheba with King David's Letter)*, 1680, The Leiden Collection. For the drawing, *Woman, Reading by Candlelight*, ca. 1660–62, black chalk on vellum, 205 x 170 mm, private collection, United States, see Quentin Buvelot et al., *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), 194, fig. 42c.
3. Frans van Mieris, *A Woman Sealing a Letter by Candlelight*, 1667, oil on panel (arched top), 27 x 20 cm, private collection. See http://rkd.nl/explore/images/252211.
4. Envelopes were used rarely in the seventeenth century, making the folding of a letter to maintain one's privacy of paramount importance.
5. Amsterdam and Haarlem artists in the early to mid-1630s, including Dirck Hals (1591–1656), Pieter Codde (1599–1678), and Willem Duyster (1599–1635), portrayed women in domestic interiors reading or holding letters, sometimes by candlelight. For the more widespread depiction of the letter motif, including in portraits and history scenes, see Sabine Schulze, ed., *Leselust: Niederländische Malerei von Rembrandt bis Vermeer* (Exh. cat. Frankfurt, Schirn Kunsthalle) (Frankfurt, 1993).
6. See Peter C. Sutton, "Love Letters: Dutch Genre Paintings in the Age of Vermeer," in *Love Letters: Dutch Genre Painting in the Age of Vermeer*, ed. Peter C. Sutton, Lisa Vergara, and Ann Jensen Adams

(Exh. cat. Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum of Arts and Sciences; Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland) (New Haven, 2003), 17–21; Adriaan E. Waiboer, "Corresponding Love," and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Pen to Paper," both in *Vermeer and the Masters of Dutch Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry*, ed. Adriaan E. Waiboer, Blaise Ducos, and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Paris, Louvre Museum; Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland; Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art) (New Haven, 2017), 114–21 and 122–27; and Alison McNeil Kettering, "Gerard ter Borch and the Modern Manner," in *Gerard ter Borch*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art; Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts) (New Haven, 2004), 20–29.

7. See the entry by Adriaan Waiboer on *Elegant Lady at Her Writing Desk* in this catalogue; and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Pen to Paper," in Adriaan E. Waiboer, Blaise Ducos, and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. eds., *Vermeer and the Masters of Dutch Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry* (Exh. cat. Paris, Louvre Museum; Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland; Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art) (New Haven, 2017), 123–24. Both authors have argued that this work is a portrait and not just a genre scene.

8. The writing of personal correspondence developed in France among the upper classes as "a sign of civility and sociability." Letter-writing practices gradually became codified, and letter-writing manuals emerged as a way of providing standard form and guidance to writers. The letter also became a prominent theme in contemporary emblem books, including those by Otto Vaenius, Roemer Visscher, Jacob Cats, and Jan Harmensz. Krul. See Peter C. Sutton, "Love Letters: Dutch Genre Paintings in the Age of Vermeer;" in *Love Letters: Dutch Genre Painting in the Age of Vermeer*, ed. Peter C. Sutton, Lisa Vergara, and Ann Jensen Adams (Exh. cat. Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum of Arts and Sciences; Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland) (New Haven, 2003), 26–43; Marcel Bax, "Epistolary Presentation Rituals, Face-Work, Politeness and Ritual Display in Early Modern Dutch Letter-Writing," in *Historical (Im)politeness*, ed. Jonathan Culpeper and Dániel Kádár (Bern, 2011), 37–87.

9. Jean Puget de la Serre's *Le Secrétaire à la mode* was reprinted in at least thirty editions between 1643 and 1664; it was translated into Dutch as *Fatsoenlicke zend-brief-schryver* in 1651. Peter C. Sutton, "Love Letters: Dutch Genre Paintings in the Age of Vermeer," in *Love Letters: Dutch Genre Painting in the Age of Vermeer*, ed. Peter C. Sutton, Lisa Vergara, and Ann Jensen Adams (Exh. cat. Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum of Arts and Sciences; Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland) (New Haven, 2003), 32–33.

10. Van Mieris's palette likely included brown earth pigments such as burnt umber, light ochre, warm red sienna, carbon black, and lead white, as well as the possible use of red lake in the woman's clothing. His broader, fluid handling is a departure from the "slick and hard qualities" and "porcelain-like smoothness" that Otto Naumann ascribes to Van Mieris's works from the 1670s and 1680s. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635–1681)* (Doornspijk, 1981), 1: 110–11. These visual observations have been supported by technical examination, including x-radiography and infrared imaging, performed by Simon Howell and Nancy Wade from Shepherd Conservation in 2021. See the technical examination report, November 2021, The Leiden Collection archives.

11. Quentin Buvelot made this suggestion in light of the painting's broad handling and "little elaborated

detail." See Quentin Buvelot et al., *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), 192. Other technical observations support the conclusion that Van Mieris considered the painting finished. Infrared imaging, for example, shows that he defined certain contours of the woman's facial features with fine lines using a brush with dark pigment, namely along the bridge of her nose and line of her lips. Infrared imaging also revealed a shape in the area behind the candle, which may indicate that Van Mieris originally depicted the woman reaching toward the candle, possibly to put out the flame or melt the sealing wax, and later changed his mind. See the technical examination report, November 2021, The Leiden Collection archives.

12. The flesh tones appear to have been more fully resolved and show a greater degree of modeling. See the technical examination report, November 2021, The Leiden Collection archives.

13. The panel's current rectangular shape is the result of two small triangular oak fillets that were later added to the upper corners. X-ray images show the original shape of the panel edges as curved, a format that is consistent with a number of paintings in Van Mieris's oeuvre. He seems to have favored an arched format for this subject matter in particular, as he executed each of his other paintings of letter writers on arched panels, with the exception being the *Letter Writer*, 1680 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). The Leiden Collection painting has been newly framed to reflect and preserve its original format (see fig 3).

    Although Van Mieris often made format changes to his paintings (see the entry by Quentin Buvelot on the *Death of Lucretia* in The Leiden Collection in this catalogue), the oak fillets in this instance are unlikely to have been added by the artist himself. Their addition does not revise or add to the composition as with other examples, but rather takes away from the focus on the letter writer and the intimacy of the candlelight scene. Nevertheless, the additions were likely made early in the painting's history, since all sides of the panel are beveled and the oak appears to be of a similar age. Dendrochronology was performed on the main panel, but the composition of the fillets was not suitable for further examination or analysis. I would like to express my thanks to Simon Howell and Ian Tyers for sharing their insights on the panel with me. See also Quentin Buvelot and Otto Naumann, "Format Changes by Frans van Mieris the Elder," *Burlington Magazine* 150 (February 2008): 102–4.

14. Painting in grisaille was also referred to as painting "in black and white," though artists could introduce other monochromatic color palettes to achieve different effects, such as painting in shades of brown, or brunaille. For the broader tradition of working in grisaille, see Lelia Packer and Jennifer Swilka, *Monochrome: Painting in Black and White* (Exh. cat. London, National Gallery; Düsseldorf, Museum Kunstpalast) (London, 2017).

15. Van Mieris pursued similar lighting effects in his drawings executed on vellum to achieve a richer and more evocative character for his night scenes. See, for example, *The Lovers*, ca. 1657–58, black chalk on vellum, 22 x 18.8 cm, Paris, Institute Néerlandais, Frits Lugt Collection; and *Woman, Reading by Candlelight*, as cited in note 2. I would like to thank Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. for bringing this point to my attention.

16. The term grisaille came into use in the seventeenth century, though contemporaries often used "*grau*" or

"*in 't graauw*" to describe paintings executed in a monochromatic manner. The earliest description of *A Young Woman Writing a Letter* as having been painted "*in 't graauw*" appears in the catalogue of the Bicker van Zwieten sale in 1741 (see Provenance). A handwritten notation in François Tronchin's *Catalogue des tableaux du cabinet de M. Tronchin, conseiller d'Etat à Genève* from 1765 mentions the painting (and its pendant, see note 17 below) as "*camayeuse*" (monochromatic). The painting is similarly described as "*en Camayeu*" in the early handwritten catalogue of paintings from the Hermitage: Ernst von Munich, *Catalogue des tableaux qui se trouve dans les Galeries et dans les Cabinets du Palais Imperial de St-Pétersbourg*, St. Petersburg, 1773–85, no. 720. Subsequent catalogues in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries describe the painting as "*grisaille d'un ton brunâtre*."

17. *A Young Woman Writing a Letter*'s provenance in the Bicker van Zwieten collection has been doubted in the past, but recent research into the painting's subsequent history in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries strongly suggests that this early provenance is correct. The painting was long associated with its so-called pendant, a grisaille version of Frans van Mieris's *Self-Portrait of the Artist, with a Cittern*, 1674, oil on canvas, 17.5 x 14 cm, National Gallery, London, executed by his son, Jan van Mieris (1660–90). Although the paintings were not likely to have ever been true pendants, they were sold together in the Bicker van Zwieten sale in 1741, and they appeared together again in François Tronchin's collection in 1765. They were acquired by Catherine the Great (1729–96) in 1770 and were only separated following their respective sales from the Hermitage in 1929. Jan van Mieris's painting is presently in a private collection. I would like to thank Otto Naumann for sharing his observations on the relationship between the two paintings. For the so-called pendant, see Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635–1681)* (Doornspijk, 1981), 2: no. D97; and Margreet van der Hut, *Jan van Mieris (1660–1690): His Life and Work* (Zaandijk, 2021), no. 21.

    For Tronchin, who likely started collecting in the 1740s, a period that coincided with his entrée into the Parisian cultural scene and following his travels in France, England, and Holland, see Renée Loche, "François Tronchin," in *L'Age d'or flamand et hollandaise: Collections de Catherine II Muséee de l'Ermitage, Saint-Pétersbourg* (Exh. cat. Dijon, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon) (Dijon, 1993), 43–48.

18. The handwritten inventory of Tronchin's collection, kept in the Archives de la maison ducale de Carlsruhe, was first published by Michel N. Bensovich, "Les collections de tableaux du conseiller François Tronchin et le Musée de l'Ermitage," *Genava: Revue d'histoire de l'art et l'archéologie* (January 1953): 25–51.

19. The sale was mediated by Denis Diderot (1713–84) and Prince Dmitry Golitsyn (1721–93). For Tronchin's sale of the collection to Catherine, see Renée Loche, "François Tronchin," in *L'Age d'or flamand et hollandaise: Collections de Catherine II Musée de l'Ermitage, Saint-Pétersbourg* (Exh. cat. Dijon, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon) (Dijon, 1993), 44–48. The painting is first recorded in the unpublished inventory of the collections of the imperial palace in 1773, compiled by Ernst von Munich.

20. I am grateful to Irina Sokolova, curator of Dutch and Flemish paintings at the Hermitage, for her kind assistance in helping me with the provenance of the painting in Russia. Correspondence dated 5 September 2021. See References for the documentation of the painting in the catalogues of the

Hermitage from 1773 through at least 1909. Attempts to trace the painting after its sale from the Hermitage in 1929 were unsuccessful. See Elena Solomakha, ed., *The State Hermitage Museum Sales 1929: Archival Documents*, St. Petersburg, 2014, 2: no. 14, 211.

21. See Provenance.

Provenance

- Gerard Bicker van Zwieten II (1687–1753), The Hague (his sale, The Hague, 12 April 1741, no. 65 [to Rottermond]).[1]
- François Tronchin (1704–98), Geneva, by 1761 (to Catherine the Great).
- Catherine the Great (1729–96), Empress of Russia, St. Petersburg, 1770; by descent to her son, Paul I (Pavel Petrovich) (1754–1801), Emperor of Russia; Imperial Gallery of the Hermitage Museum; State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, until being sold in 1929.[2]
- [D. Katz, Dieren, 1938.]
- Frans Joseph ten Bos (1878–1958), Almelo (his sale, Paul Brandt, Amsterdam, 24 June 1959, no. 14 [to Ortman for 6,000 guilders]).
- (Sale, Christie's, Amsterdam, 13 November 1995, no. 148 [for 80,500 guilders].)
- Rémy Knafou (b. 1948), Paris, by 2003.
- [Johnny Van Haeften, Ltd., London.]
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2021.

Provenance Notes

1. Frans van Mieris's *Death of Lucretia*, now in The Leiden Collection, was also formerly in the collection of Gerard Bicker van Zwieten II.
2. Gerrit Dou's *Herring Seller and Boy*, now in The Leiden Collection, was also formerly in the collection of Catherine the Great.

Exhibition History

- Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland, "Love Letters: Dutch Genre Painting in the Age of Vermeer," 1 October–31 December 2003; Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum of Arts and Sciences, 31 January–2 May 2004, no. 23 [lent by private collection, France].
- San Diego, Timken Museum of Art, "Exchanging Words: Women and Letters in Seventeenth-Century

Dutch Genre Painting," 21 September–31 December 2022 [lent by the present owner].

- Amsterdam, H'ART Museum, "From Rembrandt to Vermeer: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 9 April–24 August 2025 [lent by the present owner].
- West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art, "Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 25 October 2025–29 March 2026 [lent by the present owner].

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Technical Summary

The painting is on an oak-panel support, likely from the area of southern Germany and northeastern France.[1] Dendrochronology indicates the tree was felled sometime after about 1539, though as the panel is likely part of a larger board, it is not possible at this time to know a more precise date of manufacture. The panel, originally arch-topped, was cut down in the past along the top edge, and two small triangular additions were affixed in the top corners to convert the painting to its present rectangular format. The painting is currently framed to approximate the original format, though no modifications were made to the cut-down panel. The verso has original bevels on four sides to accommodate a frame.

The painting has an overall beige or warm light-brown ground. This ground layer likely contains lead white, as a radio-opaque material is seen within the grooves of the vertical wood grain. Parallel sweeps near the center of the composition visible in both the X-radiograph and infrared (IR) photograph may be evidence of a priming knife or other tool used to apply the ground. In the IR photo, lines visible on the figure's nose and mouth suggest the artist may have drawn in some important contours, and close examination suggests he may have used earth pigments to block in and begin to model the forms. The composition was carefully planned, and reserves are seen around the candle, ink well, the figure's hat, and the creased letter in the foreground. There is one possible change in the composition visible in the IR photo: a form extending from the figure's right shoulder to the candle's flame may indicate that the artist initially planned for her to reach out toward the flame, perhaps to snuff it. The final paint layers, which employ a relatively restricted palette, are thin and gestural, though certain areas, like the figure's flesh, are more densely worked up and refined.

The condition of the painting is very good. There are small, scattered paint losses around the painting's edges and in areas of the background, such as in the bedhanging on the right, and there are areas of abrasion along the bottom edge. These have all been retouched in the past. Increased transparency of the ground and paint layers, a natural sign of ageing, makes the grain of the wood panel visible as slightly darkened vertical striations. A varnish that covers the painting overall is slightly discolored, and it leaves the darker passages of paint slightly unsaturated.

– Gerrit Albertson, 2022

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. This technical summary was written from an examination report by Simon Howell and Nancy Wade of Shepherd Conservation in London, dated November 2, 2021. The report includes an x-radiograph, infrared photograph, and a dendrochronological report made by Ian Tyers. The painting was not examined by the author.