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Elderly Couple in an Interior

Frans van Mieris
(Leiden 1635 – 1681 Leiden)

ca. 1650–55
oil on panel
52 x 39.6 cm
FM-100

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Frans van Mieris the Elder's fame rests largely on elegant paintings depicting the daily affairs of wealthy citizens (see *Woman with a Lapdog, Accompanied by a Maidservant,* FM-105; *Woman Reading and a Man Seated at a Table,* FM-107; and *Young Woman Feeding a Parrot*, FM-112), but he he began his career by representing the lower classes. This early work, datable to 1650–55, shows an elderly couple in a simple interior, the man lighting his pipe with a burning coal, the woman plucking a duck. The subject of women cleaning and preparing food for the family was often featured by Dutch artists from this period, particularly those from Leiden, as, for example, in a comparable scene from the mid-1650s by Abraham de Pape (before 1621–66) **(fig 1)**.[1] In Van Mieris's painting, the man turns in his chair to look at the viewer, as though urging us to acknowledge the woman's domestic virtue. She concentrates entirely on her task, and although she has endeavored to save the bird's feathers in a wicker basket (the apparent cleanliness of the house is another example of her virtues as a housewife), some have fallen on the wooden floor in front of her.

Van Mieris depicted the elderly man lighting his pipe because this motif enhanced the realistic character of the scene: burning embers only glow in the bowl of the pipe when a smoker actually inhales. He adapted this motif from his teacher Gerrit Dou (1613–75), who included it at least twice in his paintings, once around 1635 when he depicted an elderly man lighting a pipe,[2] and a second time around 1645, when he made an illusionistic painting in which an artist leans out of a window niche holding a lit pipe in his hand.[3]

Although Van Mieris was greatly influenced by Dou's style and subject matter, he would quickly distinguish himself from his master. Even in his early paintings one can detect that Van Mieris, in the true spirit of *aemulatio*, strove to outdo his master in a number of ways. For example, around 1655 he began to paint with a luminosity unknown to his master, and he combined this heightened concern for the reflections of sunlight on objects with an increased precision in handling.[4] Here, he has illuminated the protagonists with sunlight falling into the room through a leaded-glass window. Van Mieris silhouetted the figures against a background shrouded in darkness, where one can barely make out the curtain of a bed and a bed pan. In the foreground he grouped together a number of domestic items—a broom, a bucket, and a shoe—to create a *repoussoir* that helps establish a sense of spatial recession.

Van Mieris's early works do not yet reveal the highly sophisticated palette of his later years, but they are not at all limited in color. In his early paintings he favored broad areas with strong local colors, among them vivid reds, blues and yellows. The rustic reds in one of Van Mieris's signed paintings, *A Peasant Meal*, and the relatively unblended blues and yellows in *Saying Grace* **(fig 2)** are cases in point.[5] The

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Abraham de Pape, *Old Woman Plucking a Rooster*, ca. 1650–55, oil on panel, 49 x 41 cm, The Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague, 138



Fig 2. Frans van Mieris the Elder, *Saying Grace*, ca. 1650–55, oil on panel, 34.3 x 40 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., Corcoran Collection (William A. Clark Collection), 2014.136.31

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existence of such strong reds in *Elderly Couple in an Interior* is one basis for attributing this unsigned work to the young Van Mieris. Moreover, a number of objects in this painting are found in Van Mieris's other early works, including a similarly designed birdcage placed before the window in *A Peasant Meal* and an identical chair in *Saying Grace*.[6] Finally, the shape of the curved wooden beams in room's interior are comparable to those in the latter work. It is striking that the iconography of these early works is uniformly positive.

When this painting was in the collection of the Barons Fisher, it was believed to be by the Leiden painter Abraham de Pape (before 1621–66).[7] Later, in 1991, at a public sale in London, the painting was attributed to another Leiden artist, Dominicus van Tol (ca. 1635–76).[8] The correct attribution to Van Mieris was made by Otto Naumann.[9]

- Quentin Buvelot, 2017

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Endnotes

1. Eric Jan Sluijter, Marlies Enklaar, and Paul Nieuwenhuizen, eds., et al., *Leidse fijnschilders: van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge, 1630–1760* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 1988), no. 62, ill.; Quentin Buvelot, *Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis: A Summary Catalogue*, (The Hague, 2004), 230–32, no. 130, ill.
2. Private collection; see *Gerrit Dou, 1613–1675: Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; London, Dulwich Picture Gallery; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (Zwolle., 2000), no. 5.
3. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. SK-A-86; see *Gerrit Dou, 1613–1675: Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; London, Dulwich Picture Gallery; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (Zwolle, 2000), no. 16.
4. Otto Naumann in Quentin Buvelot, ed., *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), 28.
5. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2:11, no. 6; and 2:7–8, no. 1; Quentin Buvelot, ed., *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), 76–78, no. 3, and 29, fig. 1.
6. In the present painting, a vertical shadow to the right of the window shows through the birdcage, indicating that the cage was added at a later stage by the artist, who apparently made a number of compositional changes during the paint stage, as was pointed out in a report by Annette Rupprecht, paintings conservator.
7. Castle Museum. *Dutch Paintings from East Anglia* (Exh. cat. Norwich, Castle Museum) (Norwich, 1966), 14, no. 32.
8. See Provenance.
9. Otto Naumann in *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681*, ed. Quentin Buvelot, (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), 28, 29, fig. 2, 216 n. 1, 238, no. 122.

Provenance

- Possibly Matheus van Noort (his sale, Voorschoten, 29 April 1845, no. 14)
- Possibly Cecil Vavasseur (1868–1955), 2nd Baron Fisher; by inheritance to John Vavasseur (1921–2012), 3rd Baron Fisher, Kilverston Hall, Thetford, Norfolk [as by Abraham de Pape].
- (Christie's, London, 13 December 1991, no. 152 [as "Attributed to Dominicus van Tol"]).

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- [Otto Naumann, Ltd., New York, 1991–92].
- Dr. Paul S. Barr, Suffern, New York, 1992.
- [Otto Naumann, Ltd., New York, 1992].
- Bert van Deun, Oberägeri, Switzerland, 1996 [Otto Naumann, Ltd., New York, 2004].
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

Exhibition History

- King's Lynn, Guildhall of Saint George, King's Lynn Festival, "Loan Exhibition of 17th-Century Dutch Oil Paintings," 19 July–2 August 1952, no. 20.
- Norwich, Castle Museum, "Dutch Paintings from East Anglia," 20 July–29 August 1966, 14, no. 32 [as by Abraham de Pape, lent by Lord Fisher].
- Leiden, Museum de Lakenhal, "Gerrit Dou: The Leiden Collection From New York," 9 March–31 August 2014 [lent by the present owner].
- Beijing, National Museum of China, "Rembrandt and His Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 17 June–3 September 2017 [lent by the present owner].
- Shanghai, Long Museum, West Bund, "Rembrandt, Vermeer and Hals in the Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 23 September 2017–25 February 2018 [lent by the present owner].
- Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, "The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection," 28 March 2018–22 July 2018 [lent by the present owner].
- St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, "The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection," 5 September 2018–13 January 2019 [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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- Guildhall of St. George. *Loan Exhibition of 17th Century Dutch Oil Paintings*. Exh. cat. King's Lynn, Guildhall of St. George. King's Lynn, 1952, no. 20.
- Castle Museum. *Dutch Paintings from East Anglia*. Exh. cat. Norwich, Castle Museum. Norwich, 1966,

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14, no. 32.

- Naumann, Otto. “Frans van Mieris’ Personal Style.” In *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681*. Edited by Quentin Buvelot, 28, 29, no. 2, 216 n. 1, 238, no. 122. Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art. Zwolle, 2005.
- Yeager-Crasselt, Lara. “Elderly Couple in an Interior.” In *Rembrandt and His Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection*. Edited by Lara Yeager-Crasselt, 92; 180, no. 36. Translated by Li Ying. Exh. cat. Beijing, National Museum of China. Beijing, 2017.
- Long Museum, West Bund. *Rembrandt, Vermeer and Hals in the Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection*. Exh. cat. Shanghai, Long Museum, West Bund. Shanghai, 2017, 158–59.
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- Van Elburg, Wouter. “The House in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam: A Sketch of a Multifaceted ‘Jewel’.” In *Art and Life in Rembrandt’s Time*. Edited by Elizabeth Nogrady et al., 45. Exh. cat. Amsterdam, H’ART Museum; West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art. Zwolle, 2025. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]
- De Baan, Els. “Fashion under the Cap.” In *Art and Life in Rembrandt’s Time*. Edited by Elizabeth Nogrady et al., 65. Exh. cat. Amsterdam, H’ART Museum; West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art. Zwolle, 2025. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]

Technical Summary

The support is a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular wedge-shaped oak with diagonally oriented rays.[1] The panel is unthinned and uncradled, has bevels along all but the thinner vertical edge, and has mechanical toolmarks along the nonbeveled panel interior. On the verso is a gold wax collection seal, three black stencils, and an illegible pen inscription on a paper tape remnant, but no paper labels, import stamps or panel maker’s mark.

A thinly and evenly applied white ground accentuates the wood grain and spills over onto the panel edges. The paint covers the ground completely and has been applied smoothly in thin layers with low brushmarking and transparent glazing light over dark. In raking light the vertical wood grain is pronounced, as are the outer contours and drapery folds of both figures’ clothes, the chairs they sit on, the wicker basket, and the wooden bucket.

The painting is unsigned and undated.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. Visible compositional changes include the male figure’s proper right hand and pipe lighter, which were shifted closer

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to his torso. The shape of his hat was also altered.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2004 and remains in an excellent state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on visual examination of the X-radiograph and panel reverse images by Ian Tyers. According to Tyers, the panel has good potential for dendrochronology.

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