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Man Tuning a Violin

Frans van Mieris
(Leiden 1635 – 1681 Leiden)

1680

oil on panel

19.3 x 15.2 cm

signed and dated in dark paint, upper right corner:

“Fvan. Mieris. fecit / 1680”

FM-111

How to cite

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Paintings of musicians, either playing or tuning an instrument, were extremely popular in the Dutch Republic, a testament to the appeal of music in that culture, particularly among the upper classes. Here, a young man dressed in a fancy black satin cloak listens intently to the sounds of the violin he is tuning, the half-smile on his face indicating that he is pleased with the results. He is seated in an elegant but dimly lit interior with monumental pilasters, one of which is just behind him. A large *roemer*, conspicuously filled with white wine, is on the table in front of him, as are two well-worn portfolios, probably containing sheet music, and a large red velvet cap with a green feather. Also on the table is a thick tome with finger indexing on the pages, indicating that the young man's dedication to music is only one aspect of his scholarly concerns. Paintings of musicians also evoked associations with harmony and love, ones frequently expressed in the poetry and emblem books of the period. For example, Jacob Cats (1577–1660), in his *Sinne- en Minnebeelden* of 1618, wrote a poem accompanying an illustration of a man tuning his lute (**fig 1**) that describes this activity as symbolic of two hearts “that vibrate to the same tune.”^[1]

Throughout his career, Frans van Mieris excelled in rendering different types of materials, including, as in this instance, glass, marble, and the fabric of the cloak and cap. This remarkable ability was one reason he achieved such inordinate fame during his lifetime. He often utilized this skill to emulate reality, sometimes also creating *trompe l'oeil* images that deceive the eye into believing that a painted image is reality itself.^[2] During the latter part of his career, however, at the time he painted this work, Van Mieris's art had become slicker and harder. He no longer sought to create the semblance of reality, but used his touch to create engaging but artificial images. Rhythmic accents that play across his fabrics bring energy and color to his paintings, but do not deceive the viewer into thinking them real. He also began to exaggerate expressions, as in the upward glance and half smile enlivening this young man's face.

The exaggerated bend of the man's left arm, which neatly echoes one of the highlighted folds of the man's shimmering cloak, may have been a deliberate attempt to convey elegance and refinement, as he uses this sweeping gesture in some of his other late paintings.^[3] This attitude may have its roots in the manuals of civility that were published in the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth century.^[4] These codes of manners were called *welstand*, a word that refers to proper manners in the French tradition. One of the most popular French etiquette guides, Antoine de Courtin's *Suite*

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. “Quid non sentit amor,” engraving from Jacob Cats, *Proteus, ofte, Minne-beelden verandert in sinne-beelden* (Rotterdam, 1627)



Fig 2. X-radiograph of *Man Tuning a Violin*, FM-111 (image turned upside down)



Fig 3. Frans van Mieris the Elder, *A Woman Tuning a Theorbo*, with

de la civilité française of 1671, was translated into Dutch the following year.^[5]

The large *roemer* filled with wine brings to mind Van Mieris's documented alcohol abuse, which seems to have caused his affairs to unravel rapidly in the last years of his life. In a letter dated 1675, one of Van Mieris's patrons wrote that Cunera van der Cock, the artist's wife, requested that some of the fee Van Mieris was owed for a painting be paid directly to her, without her husband's knowledge, because the money would otherwise disappear "like acid on an etching plate."^[6] It is not impossible that the artist, who is known to have had a great sense of humor, even alluded to his drinking problems in this work by including the large *roemer*.

Technical research has determined that Van Mieris reused an existing panel in painting this work (**fig 2**). When turned upside down, an X-radiograph of the painting shows a knee-length portrait of a lady, just as in *Woman with a Lapdog, Accompanied by a Maidservant*, also from 1680 (see FM-105). Less pronounced, but clearly visible on the X-radiograph, is a rectangular shape in the same position as the letter in *Woman with a Lapdog*.^[7] Probably Van Mieris started another version of that painting, but changed his mind and reused the panel for the present work.^[8] The subject of a figure tuning a string instrument had already been introduced by the artist as early as 1665 in the Rijksmuseum's *A Woman Tuning a Theorbo, with a Company in the Background* (**fig 3**). This painting, which is almost the same size as *Man Tuning a Violin*, was once thought to have also been executed in 1680.^[9]

a Company in the Background,
1665, oil on panel, 22 x 17.5 cm,
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-
A-262

- Quentin Buvelot, 2017

Endnotes

1. "Twee herten op eenen toon." Jacob Cats, *Proteus, ofte, Minne-beelden verandert in sinne-beelden* (Rotterdam, 1627), 86. See Eddy de Jongh, *Tot lering en vermaak: Betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstellingen uit de zeventiende eeuw* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Amsterdam, 1976), 106 and fig. 21b; see also Magda Kyrova, "Music in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting," in *The Hoogsteder Exhibition of Music and Painting in the Golden Age*, ed. Edwin Buijsen and Louis Peter Grijp (Exh. cat. The Hague, Hoogsteder & Hoogsteder; Antwerp, Hessenhuis Museum) (Zwolle, 1994), 31–62, esp. 41 and fig. 8.
2. See, for example, 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), 117–19, no. 16.
3. 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), 37.
4. 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), 38.
5. *Nieuwe verhandeling van de welgemanierheidt, welke in Vrankryk onder fraaye lieden gebruikelijk is* (New Treatise on Good Manners, Customary in France among Fine People); 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), 38.
6. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1: 31, 183–84.
7. This was pointed out in a report of August 2011 by Annette Rupprecht, paintings conservator.
8. The versions described by Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2: 125, nos. 120 a–c, are almost certainly identical to the present painting; as such, the provenances of these three previously called "versions" are actually the provenance of the painting discussed here, of which no copies are known.
9. The signature and date of the Amsterdam painting were discovered during the restoration of the panel in 2006 by the Rijksmuseum, where it was seen by the present author. The painting has since been published in Lieneke Nijkamp and Zeph Benders, "Nieuw licht op een nachtstuk van Frans van Mieris," *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 55 (2007): 208–17 and figs. 1–3. Otto Naumann had originally dated the painting to about 1680; see Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2: 124, no. 119 and caption to fig. 119.

Provenance

- Gerard Bicker van Swieten, The Hague (sale, The Hague, 12 April 1741, no. 58 [250 guilders to De Waart but still in Bicker van Swieten's possession in 1752]; sale, The Hague, 4 April 1755, no. 23 [161 guilders]).
- (De Montriblond Sale, Paris, 9 February 1784, no. 31).
- Phillipe Panne, London (sale, Christie's, London, 26 March 1819, no. 103 [9 guineas to Ward]).
- Ludovic de Spiridon, Rome, 1922–28 (his sale, Muller, Amsterdam, 19 June 1928, no. 60, as signed and dated 1650).
- Private collection, Germany (sale, Flechtheim, Helbing, Paffrath, Berlin, 11 March 1933, no. 60).
- [Galerie Voltaire, Paris, 1975].
- Private collection, Finland, by 1981.
- (Sale, Christie's, London, 10 July 1998, no. 33; sale, Christie's, New York, 15 October 1998, no. 64).
- [Johnny van Haeften Ltd., London, 2002].
- David Blank, Greenwich, CT, until 2005 [Salomon Lilian B. V., Amsterdam].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2005.

Exhibition History

- Raleigh, North Carolina Museum of Art, "Small Treasures: Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, and Their Contemporaries," 12 October 2014–4 January 2015, no. 25 [lent by the present owner].
- Dallas Museum of Art, "Vermeer Suite: Music in 17th-Century Dutch Painting," 17 January 2016–21 August 2016 [lent by the present owner].

References

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- Hofstede de Groot, Cornelis. *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch*

Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith. Edited and translated by Edward G. Hawke, 10: 48, no. 184. 8 vols. London, 1907–28. Originally published as *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*. 10 vols. Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28.

- Naumann, Otto. *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*. 2 vols. Doornspijk, 1981, 1:78–80, 2:124–25, no. 120.
- Buvelot, Quentin, Otto Naumann, and Eddy de Jongh. *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681*. Edited by Quentin Buvelot, 238, no. 120. Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington, National Gallery of Art. Zwolle, 2005.
- Weller, Dennis P. *Small Treasures: Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, and Their Contemporaries*. Exh. cat. Raleigh, North Carolina Museum of Art; Birmingham, Birmingham Museum of Art. Raleigh, 2014, 143–145, no. 25.

Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular-shaped oak, has bevels on all four sides.^[1] The unthinned and uncradled panel has machine tool marks along the lower left, a red wax collection seal with an oval-shaped impression, and small paper label remnants but no complete paper labels, import stamps, stencils or panel maker's marks along the panel reverse.

A light-colored ground has been evenly applied followed by paint applied smoothly in successive thin layers with low brushmarking and transparent glazing, light over dark. In raking light, the individual barbs of the green plume, the bright folds of the figure's red velvet hat, and the white pages of the book cantilevered over the table edge are slightly raised, as are the folds of the figure's satin drapery and the edges of the cover of the book located behind the hat.

The X-radiograph reveals an earlier composition: a three-quarter-length female figure, oriented upside down with respect to the visible composition. This figure is strikingly similar to the woman depicted in FM-105, a panel painting of nearly identical size, and a white, radio-opaque, parallelogram-shaped object located to the left of this female figure is similar in size and placement to the letter with wax seal lying on the table in FM-105.^[2] Fine aperture drying cracks have formed through the brown background, and areas of white paint along the left edge relate to the earlier composition, perhaps the putto on a dolphin in FM-105, as the earlier portrait is oriented upside down.

The painting is signed and dated in dark paint along the upper right corner.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images at 780–1000 nanometers. Further investigation at wavelengths that penetrate further into the infrared region may provide additional information.



The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition and remains in a good 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.

2. FM-105 has an inlaid panel construction:

Inset panel dimensions: 19.3 cm H x 15.5 cm W

Outer panel dimensions: 20.5 cm H x 16.5 cm W