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Portrait of a Fifty-Two Year Old Man

Frans van Mieris
(Leiden 1635 – 1681 Leiden)

1665
oil on panel
19.2 x 15 cm
signed and dated, upper left corner, over sculptural niche: “AET. 52. (AE in ligature) / F. van Mieris / 1665.”
FM-104

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The refined paintings that Frans van Mieris produced with saintly patience made him renowned during his lifetime both in his own country and abroad. Like Gerrit Dou (1613–75), he was among the best-paid painters of the Golden Age. From the voluminous book of inventories of the estates of people living on Rapenburg in Leiden, it can be inferred that Van Mieris's paintings were always more highly valued than those by his contemporaries.[1] These inventories also provide a unique picture of the varied social status, financial position and religious background of some of his buyers, as well as the composition and size of their collections. Van Mieris built a devoted clientele in Leiden that included Franciscus de le Boë Sylvius (1614–72), an internationally famous professor of chemistry and medicine whom Houbraken described as Van Mieris's patron.[2] The 1673 inventory of Sylvius's estate—his house at Rapenburg 31 still stands today—indicates that he possessed seven works by Van Mieris and an astonishing eleven by Dou.[3] Houbraken states explicitly that Sylvius gave Van Mieris regular commissions and had the first right of purchase of his works for a fixed fee.[4]

Among the works by Van Mieris described in the inventory of Sylvius's estate was a painting of "the deceased with his second wife by Van Mieris."[5] Without doubt, the overly labored double portrait of a couple of 1672 in Dresden is the painting described in the inventory, which was drawn up only a year after the completion of the painting **(fig 1)**.[6] This hypothesis was first proposed by Otto Naumann, who noticed that the face of the man, with his wide, flat and square chin, is identical to that in the engraving of Sylvius that Cornelis van Dalen (1638–64) made in 1659 **(fig 2)**.[7] The convincing likeness is confirmed by a description of the painting in the 1678 inventory of Sylvius's nephew Jean Rouyer: "The portrait of Professor Sylvius and his wife playing the lute."[8] The genre-like portrait is in effect an "in memoriam" painting for Sylvius's second wife, Margareta Lucretia Schlezer, who died before it was finished. The lute is a well-known reference to the harmony of love.[9] The professor is known to have owned at least six portraits of himself, painted, drawn, and engraved, including the 1659 print.[10]

Naumann has tentatively proposed that the present painting, fully signed and dated 1665, also represents Sylvius; however, this identification cannot be supported.[11] The inscription in the upper left corner of the present painting, "Aetatis 52," which is repeated on the back of the panel, clearly gives the age of the sitter as fifty-two, but Sylvius would not reach that age until 15

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Frans van Mieris the Elder, *Double Portrait of Franciscus de le Boë Sylvius and His Wife, known as "The Music Lesson,"* 1672, panel with arched top, 41 x 31 cm, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden, 1743



Fig 2. Cornelis van Dalen, *Portrait of Franciscus de le Boë Sylvius*, 1659, engraving (fourth state), 306 x 238 mm, British Museum, London, 1864,0714.17, © Trustees of the British Museum

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March 1666.[12] Moreover, the sitter does not resemble the man portrayed in Van Dalen's 1659 engraving.[13] Although the moustache and goatee are comparable, his face is narrower and his hair is less curly. Finally, the inventory of Sylvius's estate lists all the paintings in his collection, including the family portraits, but this work is not among them.[14]

The sitter's rich black cloak, which typifies the man as a well-to-do burgher from Leiden, is brilliantly rendered, much to the liking of contemporary viewers (for more on this subject, see FM-110.a and FM-110.b). In its depiction of such vestments, the portrait is akin to *Portrait of a Man* of 1663 (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) and *Portrait of Florentius Schuyl* of 1666 (Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague).[15] The simplicity and balance of the present painting is striking, as Van Mieris's portraits of male sitters are usually somewhat labored. The backdrop of architecture with a classical ambience and a cloudy sky that Van Mieris introduced in this work adds to the sitter's grandeur. In a similar manner, Van Mieris modeled the man's elegant gesture on the portrait idiom of the Flemish painter Anthony van Dyck (1559–1641), whose famous series of portraits, the *Iconographie*, had been engraved in 1645.[16]

- Quentin Buvelot, 2017

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Endnotes

1. See Cornelia Willemijn Fock, in *Het Rapenburg: Geschiedenis van een Leidse gracht*, ed. Theodoor Hermann Lunsingh Scheurleer, Cornelia Willemijn Fock, and A.J. van Dissel, 6 vols. (Leiden, 1986–92), 5a:17.
2. Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam, 1718–21; revised edition published in The Hague, 1753; reprinted in Amsterdam, 1980), 3: 3; For Sylvius's life, see the references in Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1: 25 n. 23, 137 n. 247.
3. For the inventory, see Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1: 175; Theodoor Hermann Lunsingh Scheurleer, Cornelia Willemijn Fock, and A.J. van Dissel, eds., *Het Rapenburg: Geschiedenis van een Leidse gracht*, 6 vols. (Leiden, 1986–92), 1: 31–32, 3a: 278–95, 335–42, 5a: 10, 25. For a detailed discussion of the collection, see Eric Jan Sluijter, "'All striving to adorne their houses with costly peeces': Two Case Studies of Paintings in Wealthy Interiors," in *Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Mariët Westermann (Exh. cat. Newark Museum; Denver, Denver Art Museum) (Zwolle, 2001), 105–16; cf. also Pamela H. Smith, "Science and Taste: Painting, Passions, and the New Philosophy in Seventeenth-Century Leiden," *Isis* 90 (1999): 421–61.
4. See also Theodoor Hermann Lunsingh Scheurleer, Cornelia Willemijn Fock, and A.J. van Dissel, eds., *Het Rapenburg: Geschiedenis van een Leidse gracht*, 6 vols. (Leiden, 1986–92), 5a: 10; Eric Jan Sluijter, "'All striving to adorne their houses with costly peeces': Two Case Studies of Paintings in Wealthy Interiors," in *Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Mariët Westermann (Exh. cat. Newark Museum; Denver, Denver Art Museum) (Zwolle, 2001), 110, 229 n. 34.
5. "Den overleden[en] met sijn laetste huysvr[ouw] van Mi[e]ris." Quoted from Theodoor Hermann Lunsingh Scheurleer, Cornelia Willemijn Fock, and A.J. van Dissel, eds., *Het Rapenburg: Geschiedenis van een Leidse gracht*, 6 vols. (Leiden, 1986–92), 3a:337. See Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2:101; Eirc Jan Sluijter, "'All striving to adorne their houses with costly peeces': Two Case Studies of Paintings in Wealthy Interiors," in *Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Mariët Westermann (Exh. cat. Newark Museum; Denver, Denver Art Museum) (Zwolle, 2001), 107, 110, 113 (and fig. 141), 228 n. 27.
6. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1:80, 83 (and n. 23), 138, 140, 2:101, no. 89; Theodoor Hermann Lunsingh Scheurleer, Cornelia Willemijn Fock, and A.J. van Dissel, eds., *Het Rapenburg: Geschiedenis van een Leidse gracht*, 6 vols. and index (Leiden, 1986–92), 3a: 290, 291, 292 (fig. 5); Rudi Ekkart, "Leidse

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Burgers in Beeld: Portrettisten in Leiden van de late zestiende tot de vroege achttiende eeuw," in ibid., 6a: 24, 38 n. 109; Eric Jan Sluijter "All striving to adorne their houses with costly peeces': Two Case Studies of Paintings in Wealthy Interiors," in *Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Mariët Westermann (Exh. cat. Newark Museum; Denver, Denver Art Museum) (Zwolle, 2001), 107, 110, 113 and fig. 141, 196, no. 85, 228 n. 27; Quentin Buvelot, ed., *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (New Haven, 2005), 18, fig. 7, 236, no. 89.

7. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1: 138 and fig. 10.
8. Eric Jan Sluijter, "'All striving to adorne their houses with costly peeces': Two Case Studies of Paintings in Wealthy Interiors," in *Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Mariët Westermann (Exh. cat. Newark Museum; Denver Art Museum) (Zwolle, 2001), 228 n. 27.
9. Eddy de Jongh, *Portretten van echt en trouw: Huwelijk en gezin in de nederlandse kunst van de zeventiende eeuw* (Exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum) (Zwolle 1986), 40–45.
10. Eric Jan Sluijter, "'All striving to adorne their houses with costly peeces': Two Case Studies of Paintings in Wealthy Interiors," in *Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Mariët Westermann (Exh. cat. Newark Museum; Denver Art Museum) (Zwolle, 2001), 113.
11. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1:70, 138, 2:78–79, no. 62.
12. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1:138, mistakenly writes that in 1665 Sylvius "would have passed from fifty-two to fifty-three years of age."
13. Eric Jan Sluijter, "'All striving to adorne their houses with costly peeces': Two Case Studies of Paintings in Wealthy Interiors," in *Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Mariët Westermann (Exh. cat. Newark Museum; Denver, Denver Art Museum) (Zwolle, 2001), 228 n. 27, even writes: "In my opinion, the other portrait that Naumann thinks might be Sylvius definitely represents a different face."
14. As already pointed out by Rudi Ekkart, "Leidse Burgers in Beeld: Portrettisten in Leiden van de late zestiende tot de vroege achttiende eeuw," in *Het Rapenburg: Geschiedenis van een Leidse gracht*, ed. Theodoor Hermann Lunsingh Scheurleer, Cornelia Willemijn Fock, and A.J. van Dissel, 6 vols. (Leiden, 1986–92), 6a: 25. The inventory is fully listed in Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1:175. A portrait of Sylvius by Van Mieris listed by Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith*, ed. and trans. Edward G. Hawke, 8 vols. (London, 1907–28); originally published as *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten*

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höllandischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts, 10 vols. (Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28), 10: 70-71, no. 261, was larger and only bore the monogram of the artist (see Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. [Doornspijk, 1981], 2:79; Theodoor Hermann Lunsingh Scheurleer, Cornelia Willemijn Fock, and A.J. van Dissel, eds., *Het Rapenburg: Geschiedenis van een Leidse gracht*, 6 vols. [Leiden, 1986–92], 3a: 291, 353 n. 102).

15. For the painting in Florence, see Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2: no. 57; Quentin Buvelot, ed., *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (New Haven, 2005), 235, no. 57; for the painting in The Hague, see Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2: no. 63; Quentin Buvelot, ed., *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (New Haven, 2005), no. 37. Schuyl was a Leiden professor who commissioned only one work from Van Mieris, after having obtained his doctorate two years earlier under the supervision of Sylvius, who probably introduced the two men.
16. Marie Mauquoy-Hendrickx, *L'iconographie d'Antoine van Dyck*, 2 vols. (Brussels, 1991); Ger Luijten in Carl Depauw, Ger Luijten, et al., *Antoon van Dyck en de prentkunst* (Exh. cat. Antwerp, Museum Plantin-Moretus; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Antwerp, 1999), 73–91.

Provenance

- Probably Adam Gottlob, Count Moltke, Copenhagen; by inheritance to Frederik Christian Moltke van Bregentved, Copenhagen, until 1931 (Moltke sale, V. Winkel & Magnussen, Copenhagen, 1 June 1931, no. 85).
- (Sale, Stockholm, Bukowski, 27 April 1955, no. 177).
- (Sale, Paris, Drouot, Rieunier & Bailly-Pommery, 24 March 1999, no. 19, not sold; Paris, Drouot, Rieunier & Associés, 2 December 2002, no. 58 [Otto Naumann Ltd., New York, 2003].
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

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Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular-shaped oak, has bevels and wood shims adhered with brads along all four sides.[1] The unthinned and uncradled panel has machine tool marks along the left side of the reverse but no wax collection seals, import stamps, labels or panel maker's marks.

A light-colored ground is followed by a dark underlayer. The image was constructed with thin layers of transparent glazing through the background and somewhat thicker paint along the figure's black cape, white collar, cuff, and proper right hand.

The painting is signed and dated in dark paint over the arched niche in the upper left corner. The upper edge of the *AE* written in ligature is cropped, which suggests the upper panel edge has been trimmed slightly.

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

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2003 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 but would require removal of either the upper or the lower shim.

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