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Portrait of a Lady

Frans van Mieris
(Leiden 1635 – 1681 Leiden)

1673
oil on panel with arched top
23 x 17 cm
signed and dated in dark paint on lowest stair riser, lower left corner: “F van Mieris. 1673”
FM-109

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The trend toward stylization of Frans van Mieris's later genre paintings is also apparent in his late portraits, among them this colorful *Portrait of a Lady.* In this well-preserved panel from 1673, a lady stands in an interior and gazes out at the viewer as she gracefully rests her right hand on her left wrist. She wears large, decorative silver earrings and a ring on the little finger of her left hand. The woman is dressed in the latest fashion, with the gold-thread braiding of her fine satin dress also incorporated into her hair. Her dark velvet shawl helps set off the smooth skin of her pale arms and hands.

The décor of the room is sparse but elegant. Hanging above a chair at the right is a mirror, which appears to show the reflection of a curtain hanging over a window. The simple black frame of the mirror is decorated at the top by a flourish of blue and pink ribbons, and at the bottom we see a small white object. Behind the woman is a small flight of steps, where Van Mieris inscribed his signature and the date of the painting.[1] An arched doorway at the top of the landing leads to a room furnished with a table covered by an expensive Persian rug. On the wall of this back room, partly obscured by the doorframe, is a small ornamental rack with twisted upright supports topped by decorative knobs. Two large silver vessels are displayed on its bottom shelf.[2]

Van Mieris painted this stunning portrait as a pendant to one depicting the woman's husband.[3] The signature on this pendant is incorporated in a rather conspicuous manner, as Van Mieris added the monogram "FvM" to the piece of paper in the man's hands but left out the date altogether **(fig 1)**. A wooden sphere on the handrail on which the man's elbow rests probably denotes the virtuousness of the sitter, who is shown in a fairly relaxed pose as he gazes toward his wife.[4] His jacket with the large red obi is a so-called *Japonsche rock*, which was worn only inside the house. Like his fancy collar, it was the height of contemporary fashion and very expensive, demonstrating both his wealth and cultured demeanor.

In many seventeenth-century portraits of couples, the man is depicted on the left side of the painting and the woman on the right, in accordance with heraldic tradition,[5] but Van Mieris did not follow this custom with these pendants. As in his pendant portraits from 1669 (FM-110.a and 110.b), Van Mieris linked the two works together through the man's gaze, which is directed at his wife.[6] He also mirrored compositional elements within the arch-shaped panels, including a staircase into a back room and a large black frame hanging near the sitter.

Although the identity of this couple is now unknown, we can glean some information about the sitters from the paintings. The woman's clothing and precious earrings, which Van Mieris has rendered with such meticulous care, reflect the couple's

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Frans van Mieris the Elder, *Portrait of a Man*, ca. 1637, panel with arched top, 23.5 x 17 cm, Buchkinghamshire Ascott House, ©National Trust

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prosperity. The black frame in the husband's portrait contains a map of a fortified city with the inscription "Smyrne," suggesting that he had trading relations with Smyrna (now called Izmir), the ancient port city of present-day Turkey.[7] Unfortunately, provenance information fails to shed any light on the couple's identity, as by the time these paintings first appeared in the art market the names of the sitters had been lost. In fact, at some point the two paintings actually ended up in different collections. The Amsterdam collector Nicolaas Nieuhoff (1733–76) is the earliest known owner of the woman's portrait.[8] It says a great deal about Van Mieris's reputation in the eighteenth century that his portrait of a woman fetched 700 guilders at the sale of the Nieuhoff Collection, whereas Vermeer's now much-loved *Woman Holding a Balance* (National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.) was sold for the considerably lesser sum of 235 guilders.[9]

- Quentin Buvelot, 2017

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Endnotes

1. Van Mieris had already used this type of composition in another genre scene: *The Doctor's Visit* from 1657 in Vienna, which is the artist's earliest dated painting (Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. [Doornspijk, 1981], 2:22–23, no. 20; 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) (New Haven, 2005), no. 13).
2. A pentimento is discernible around this rack: Van Mieris had initially painted it somewhat more to the left on the wall.
3. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2:105–6, no. 95; 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) (New Haven, 2005), 197, 199, fig. 44a.
4. See Eddy De Jongh, *Questions of meaning: theme and motif in Dutch seventeenth-century painting*, trans. and ed. Michael Hoyle (Leiden, 1995), 222–30.
5. See 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) (Haarlem, 1986), 36–40; Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "[Review of B. Broos, A. van Suchtelen, with contributions by Q. Buvelot et al., *Portraits in the Mauritshuis, 1430–1790* (The Hague and Zwolle, 2004)]," *Burlington Magazine* 148 (2006): 124.
6. He did not follow this same approach, however, in the pendant portraits of himself and his wife; see Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1:139.
7. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1:140; 2:105 (with more details of the inscription on the map).
8. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., ed., *Johannes Vermeer* (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (New Haven, 1995), 144, 145 n. 24. It is curious that the portrait of the husband was not part of the Nieuhoff sale in 1777, yet the two paintings were sold together only four years later, as part of the sale of the Tak Collection (see Provenance). Lot 9, the male portrait, went to a certain "Van der Vinne," and the portrait discussed here to "Nijman," i. e., Jan Danser Nijman, a famous Amsterdam collector who owned several paintings by Vermeer (see ibid., 198).
9. See Provenance; for the Vermeer, see Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *The Collection of the National Gallery of Art Systemaitc Catalogues: Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century* (Washington D.C., 1995), 371–77, no. 1942.9.97; Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., ed., *Johannes Vermeer* (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (New Haven, 1995), no. 10.

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Provenance

- Nicolaas Nieuhoff, Amsterdam, before 1776 (his sale, Amsterdam, 14–17 April 1777, no. 121 [Yver for *f* 700]).
- [Pieter Yver, Amsterdam].
- Jan Tak, Leiden (his sale, Zoeterwoude, 5 September 1781, no. 10 [Nijman for *f* 475]).
- Jan Danser Nijman, Amsterdam [not in his sale, Amsterdam, 16 August 1797].
- Chevalier François Xavier de Burtin, before 1818 (his sale, Brussels, 21 July 1819, no. 103 [*f* 3,000]).
- Baron Anthony Nathan Rothschild, London, by 1842–76; by descent to his daughter, Annie Yorke, born Rothschild, London, 1876–1926 (her sale, Christie's, London, 6 May 1927, no. 34).
- [Edouard Jonas, Paris, 1929 (to Mrs. Joseph Heine)].
- Mrs. Joseph Heine, formerly Mrs. I. D. Levy, New York (her sale, Parke-Bernet Galleries, New York, 24–25 November 1944, no. 242).
- Private collection, California (sale, Christie's, New York, 31 May 1990, no. 148).
- [Galerie Sankt Lucas, Vienna, 1990–91; Johnny van Haeften, London, 1992; Otto Naumann Ltd., 1993].
- Dr. Hinrich Bischoff, Berlin.
- [Johnny van Haeften Ltd., London, 2004].
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

Exhibition History

- London, Johnny van Haeften Ltd., "Dutch and Flemish Old Master Paintings," 1992, no. 20.
- The Hague, Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, "Frans van Mieris 1635–1681: Painted Perfection," 1 October 2005–22 January 2006, no. 44 [lent by the present owner].
- Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art, "Amorous Intrigues and Painterly Refinement: The Art of Frans van Mieris," 26 February–21 May 2006, no. 44 [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].

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- 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].
- Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi, “Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age. Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre,” 14 February–18 May 2019 [lent by the present owner].

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Daria Kuzina. Exh. cat. Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts; St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum. Moscow, 2018.

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- Ducos, Blaise, and Lara Yeager-Crasselt, eds. *Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age. Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre*. Exh. cat. Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi. London, 2019, 145, no. 67. [Exhibition catalogue also published in French and Arabic.]

Technical Summary

The support is a single plank of horizontally grained but vertically oriented rectangular-shaped oak with an arched upper edge.[1] The unthinned and uncradled panel has bevels around all four edges. The panel reverse has one red wax collection seal, a stencil, and four old paper labels but no import stamps, panel maker’s marks or machine tool marks.

A light brown ground has been thinly and evenly applied followed by a light gray underlayer. The paint has been applied in successive thin layers with low brushmarking and transparent glazing, and the contours of the forms are slightly raised. The black and gold ribbon and the lace along the edge of the figure’s proper right sleeve are extremely finely rendered, and the white apron is sheer enough so that the underlying mauve jacket and blue skirt show through.

The painting is signed and dated in dark paint on the lowest stair riser along the lower left corner.

No underdrawing or compositional changes are readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. The X-radiograph suggests a slight change in position of the thumb of the figure’s proper left hand, and a diagonal line visible in raking light above the figure’s head may relate to an earlier form.

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition and remains in an excellent state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

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

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