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Portrait of a Man

Peeter Leermans
(1635 – 1706)

1684
oil on copper
35.5 x 30 cm
extremely faintly signed and dated in dark paint, lower right corner: “Peeter Je An 1684”
Ple-100

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This small work portrays a young man with blue eyes and long, wavy, black hair sitting at dusk on a hillock before an imaginary wooded landscape. His costly silk Japanese dressing gown is lined with dark red satin, the same fabric as the cravat, which is tied around the sitter's neck with a lace cloth. Beneath the quilted dressing gown he wears a gold-colored waistcoat over a white linen shirt featuring cuffs richly trimmed with lace. Numerous beautifully executed animals surround the man, who plays with a small dog of a breed often seen in the works of Jan Steen (1625/26–79) and Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635–81): a kooikerhondje, which resembles a spaniel. In the branches above its head we see a goshawk, several finches, and a hoopoe (*Upupa epops*), a bird no longer found in the Netherlands, while on the ground, a salamander and a toad climb the sandy mound. A distant view of a castle in the midst of high mountains is depicted at the right.

This small copper painting was first documented at a sale in Brussels in 1769 (see Provenance), when it was in the company of its pendant, which portrays a woman playing the guitar in the company of two other figures. The people depicted in the pendant are undoubtedly this young man's wife and two of their children or other members of their family. It was not until the 1821 sale that the companion pieces were separated; the painting of the woman has not been seen since.

In 1946 the RKD (Netherlands Institute for Art History) in The Hague acquired a black-and-white photograph of *Portrait of a Man*, then in England in the possession of Edmund Treherne (1896–1958). A note accompanying the photograph says that the work is signed and dated "Peeter L… / 1684." This appears to be the only time the artist signed with his full given name, and though he has been referred to as Pieter Leermans, this would indicate that *Peeter* is the appropriate spelling. Over time, the signature gradually faded and now has disappeared altogether. At the 1983 auction the work was still "signed and indistinctly dated," whereas at the 1992 sale it was no longer described as signed (see Provenance). The date of 1684 is perfectly suited, in terms of style, to *Portrait of a Man*, in light of a number of closely related portraits by Leermans that are known to be from the period 1681–84 and which leave no doubt as to the dating of the present painting.[1]

Nothing is known about the life of Peeter Leermans, apart from the fact that he acquired a certain reputation early on, for his name appears in a select list—compiled by the Parisian connoisseur Dezallier d'Argenville (1680–1765)—of Dutch artists who were well known in France and whose work was paid for in gold.[2] Despite being listed in the company of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), Philips Wouwerman (1619–68), Gerrit Dou (1613–75), Godefridus Schalcken (1643–1706), Jan van Huysum (1682–1749), and other painters who still enjoy international reputations,

Comparative Figures

Fig 1. Peeter Leermans, *Hermit*, ca. 1670–75, oil on panel, 41.6 x 32.8 cm, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden, Gal.Nr. 1779

Fig 2. Peeter Leermans, *The Trumpeter and the Maidservant*, 1677, oil on copper, 30 x 25 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rennes, inv. 109, Photo © MBA, Rennes, Dist RMN-

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Leermans is practically unknown today. Even so, he was already recorded during his lifetime by André Félibien (1619–95) who, remarkably enough, mentions him in 1688 in the second volume of his *Entretiens* among the followers of Dou: “Skalque, Nesker, Lermans & Moër” (Schalcken, Netscher, Leermans, and De Moor).[3] Shortly after this, Leermans again had the honor of being mentioned in writing by the Paris art expert and publisher Florent le Comte (died 1712), who in 1700 described Leermans and Schalcken as fellow pupils in Dou’s studio.[4] There is no subsequent record of Leermans, a fact remarked upon in a Paris sale catalogue of 1814.[5] Not one document or archival record has ever surfaced that sheds any light on this painter’s life,[6] so it is a mystery how 1655 and 1706 crept into the art historical literature as the years of his birth and death.[7]

We can, nonetheless, draw some conclusions about the artist from his paintings, as he left a fairly consistent oeuvre of some thirty works, many of which are dated. Around ten paintings on panel and copper bear dates that range from 1670 to 1685. The period of his earliest artistic activity therefore indicates that Leermans was not born in 1655 but some time in the period 1640–45, which would in fact make him, as Le Comte suggested, a contemporary of Schalcken. Leermans’s earliest known work, dated 1670, is a genre piece depicting a girl cleaning fish, a composition that is closely related to those produced in the same years by Dou’s many pupils and followers.[8] Among the undated works are several scenes with a praying hermit **(fig 1**) or a penitent Mary Magdalene which, given the obvious influence of Dou, may also be dated to that period, namely the early 1670s.[9] It is possible, but by no means certain, that Leermans was active in Leiden at that time.

In 1677 he painted, in a manner that is also characteristic of his later work, one of his best genre pieces: an interior with a trumpeter making advances on a maidservant who is scouring a kettle, all of which is observed by a laughing old woman in the background **(fig 2)**. The two young and beautiful protagonists are painted in the supple, elegant style of Frans van Mieris the Elder in his best years, with a *beau fini* that is considerably less sharp and finished than what is seen in the previously mentioned scenes inspired by Dou. The palette, too, is more harmonious and less harshly colorful than in his earlier work.[10] Over the course of his career, Leermans’s genre scenes become more rare, and he returned progressively to portraits. *Musical Party on a Terrace* **(fig 3)** is one of his best genre pieces, and it is no coincidence that it bears the falsified signature of Frans van Mieris, which was not yet present when Gustav Waagen described the painting in 1854.[11]

It may well prove possible to identify the members of the musical party on the basis of the family arms that decorate the garden vase. In all likelihood it will then become clear that the sitters were not natives of Leiden (or any other city in Holland) but of

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Fig 3. Peeter Leermans, *Musical Party on a Terrace*, ca. 1680, oil on copper, 32 x 37 cm, Private Collection, London

Fig 4. Peeter Leermans, *Portrait of Eugène Alexander von Thurn und Taxis (1652–1714)*, 1682, oil on copper, 29 x 22 cm, National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, #NMW A37

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the Southern Netherlands, as it is assumed that Leermans moved to Brussels around 1680.[12] It was there, in 1682, that he painted the portraits of Eugène Alexander von Thurn und Taxis (1652–1714) and, presumably, his mother, Anne Françoise van Horne (ca. 1630–93) **(fig 4)**.[13] This prominent descendant of the imperial postmaster's family lived in a splendid mansion in Brussels with beautiful gardens overlooking the Zavelkerk, in which the family had two ornate funeral chapels built on either side of the choir in the second half of the seventeenth century. Only after the death in Brussels of his wife, Anna Adelheid zu Fürstenberg (1659–1701), did Eugène Alexander, the first prince in his family, transfer the headquarters of his business to Frankfurt am Main, where a new Thurn und Taxis mansion was built.

Several more arguments support the theory that Leermans immigrated around 1680 to the Southern Netherlands, probably to Brussels. Not a single painting by his hand was sold at public auction in Holland before 1800,[14] whereas in this same period his work appeared in the Southern Netherlands at no fewer than fourteen sales, in addition to seven auctions in London and five in Paris.[15] The first documented painting by Leermans was offered at a sale in Brussels in 1739, and shortly afterward another of his works appeared at a 1741 auction in Antwerp.[16] A similar situation is suggested by the works on offer in the period 1800–50, when Leermans's paintings appeared more frequently at public auctions taking place in the Southern Netherlands. It is also telling that the *Hermit* (see **(fig 1)**) in Dresden, which was acquired by Augustus the Strong (1670–1733), Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, was offered to him in 1708, along with two other works by Leermans, by the Antwerp art dealer François Lemmers.[17]

The iconography and execution of some of Leermans's paintings also argue for his move to the Southern Netherlands. The Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België (Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium) in Brussels have a large *Christ on the Cross* painted on copper.[18] Hofstede de Groot already expressed his surprise at the style of this fully signed work, which in his opinion bore no resemblance whatsoever to the Dou-like works in Dresden and Rennes (see **(fig 1)** and **(fig 2)**). He even went so far as to call it a copy after Rubens.[19] When the same art historian saw *Saint Joseph and the Christ Child* in Budapest, he noted: "Completely Catholic in conception and Flemish in its palette."[20] It may be expected of someone who immigrated to Brussels around 1680 that he would conform, as regards style and iconography, to the prevailing tastes of the Southern Netherlands and make paintings in a Rubensian palette of subjects suited to the Counter Reformation.

In light of the above, we can finally hazard a guess as to the identity of the young sitter in *Portrait of a Man*; in all likelihood he is from the Southern Netherlands, possibly from a Brussels family. The earliest known provenance of this work is

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another clue, for the painting was first documented, together with its pendant, at a sale held in that city in 1769. Thus it is to be hoped that further archival research in Brussels will eventually yield some biographical information on Peeter Leermans. His oeuvre, too, certainly deserves closer investigation.[21]

- Guido Jansen, 2017

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Endnotes

1. See Bernhard Schnackenburg, *Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister Kassel: Gesamtkatalog* (Mainz, 1996), 169, inv. GK 309, *Portrait of a Huntsman*, dated 1682, oil on canvas, 55.5 x 46.5 cm. Also *Portrait of a Gentleman, Aged 33*, dated 1683, which was auctioned at Christie's in London, 20 July 1990, lot 172, together with *Portrait of a Cleric*, dated 1682, both oil on copper, 33.5 x 26 cm; illustrations in color. It should be noted, however, that the master painted his last known portrait a year later, in 1685. This was *Portrait of a Lady and Child* sold at Christie's in London on 31 May 1946 as lot 92 (support not recorded, 12½ x 9¼ inches); see RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History) Databases, Excerpts, HdG-fiche 1276289. Moreover, *Portrait of an Officer, in Armor*, which was sold in London in 1908, is said to have been dated 1692. This is probably an incorrect reading of "1682"; see RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History) Databases, Excerpts, HdG-fiche 1276312.
2. Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville, *Abrégé de la vie des plus fameux peintres,* 3 vols. (Paris, 1745–52), 3: IV–V.
3. André Félibien, *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages des plus excellents peintres anciens et modernes,* 5 vols. (Paris, 1666–88), 2: 245.
4. Florent le Comte, *Cabinet des singularitez d'architecture, peinture, sculpture, et graveure: Ou introduction à la connaissance des plus beaux arts, figurés sous les tableaux, les statues et les estampes*, 3 vols. (Brussels, 1702), 275: "Il laissa des Eléves qui suivirent sa manière; entr'autres Scalque & Lermans" (He left behind pupils who pursued his manner: Schalcken and Leermans, among others).
5. A signed portrait of a man dated 1684, which was sold at an auction held in Paris on 28–30 March 1814, is described in the catalogue as follows: "Un seul écrivain parle de P. Léermans, et le met au-dessus des Peintres du même genre: cependant, comme ses ouvrages, très-rares, sont peu connus" (The one author who mentions P. Leermans ranks him above other painters of the same genre, even though his very rare works are little known). RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History) Databases, Excerpts, HdG-fiche 1276296.
6. For the purpose of this project, Piet Bakker combed the Leiden archives; he, too, was unable to find a single document concerning Leermans.
7. These dates first appeared in the aforementioned Paris sale catalogue of March 1814, which provides no justification or references to any sources. The sale catalogue (see note 5) gives: "Leermans (P.) Ecole hollandaise. Né en 1655, mort en 1706" (Leermans [P.] Dutch school. Born in 1655, died in 1706). In 1803 De Burtin still thought that the painter was Flemish: "Leeremans, Flamand"; François Xavier de Burtin, *Catalogue de tableaux, vendus à Bruxelles, depuis l'année 1773; avec les noms de maitres mis en ordre alphabetique, et la désignation du sujet, de la grandeur et du prix de chaque piéce en argent de change, avec l'extrait de la vie de chaque peintre* (Brussels, 1803), 155. The source used by the Paris

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auction house has not yet been found.

8. The painting last surfaced in an auction at Sotheby's in London, 12 December 1990, lot 177 (oil on panel, 37 x 29.5 cm). It also had a false "N. MAES 1657" signature and date. Around 1850 Gerrit Gruijter (1806–after 1880) copied the painting (as a work by Maes) in watercolor; this sheet is preserved as part of the Fodor collection in the Amsterdams Historisch Museum, inv. no. 403. Photographs of both works can be found at the RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History), group 562, Leermans box. An image of the watercolor can be found on RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History) Databases, Images, Kunstwerknummer 25431.

9. See, for example, the *Praying Monk* at a sale at Sotheby's in London, 7 March 1979, lot 100 (oil on panel, 24 x 18.5 cm), and the portrayals of *Mary Magdalene* that were sold at Bukowski's in Stockholm on 22 October 1952, lot 143 (oil on panel, 42 x 32.5 cm) and Christie's in London on 28 April 2010, lot 108 as by Dou (oil on panel, 36.8 x 28 cm). The RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History) has photographs of all the works mentioned.

10. Commenting on the *Allegory of Avarice (The Miserly Woman)* in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, Hofstede de Groot noted: "Pijnlijk van uitvoering en hard en bont van kleur als een Naiveu" (Painful in execution and as jarringly colorful as a Naiveu), referring to Matthis Naiveu (1647–1721); RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History) Databases, Excerpts, HdG-fiche 1276301.

11. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Christopher Brown, *The Golden Age of Dutch and Flemish Painting: The Edward and Sally Speelman Collection* (Exh. cat. Houston, Museum of Fine Arts; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (Houston, 2000), no. 11; Gustav F. Waagen, *Treasures of Art in Great Britain: Being an Account of the Chief Collections of Paintings, Drawings, Sculptures, Illuminated Mss., &c &c*, trans. Elizabeth Eastlake, 3 vols. (London, 1854), 2:253. He saw the painting in the collection of Frederick Heusch (1809–70) in London.

12. In 1992 Rudi Ekkart confirmed the lack of any documents in which Leermans occurs (see also note 6). He rightly doubted the attribution to Leermans of the *Regents of the St. Elizabeth Hospital*, dated 1667, in Leiden's Lakenhal (inv. no. 270), calling it "hypothetisch en moeilijk te staven" (hypothetical and difficult to substantiate). He came to the conclusion that, in view of some of the sitters, it was "niet onwaarschijnlijk dat ook deze kunstenaar zijn geluk in Duitsland heeft gezocht" (not unlikely that this artist, too, sought his fortune in Germany). The "German" sitters lived in Brussels, however; see Rudolf E. O. Ekkart, "Leidse burgers in beeld," in Theodoor Herman Lunsingh Scheurleer, Cornelia Willemijn Fock, and A. J. van Dissel, *Het Rapenburg: Geschiedenis van een Leidse gracht*, 6 vols. (Leiden, 1986–92), 6: 3–39, esp. 29 and 38 n. 132. We know, at any rate, two identical versions of a *Portrait of the Great Elector, Friedrich Wilhelm I of Brandenburg (1620–1688), as a Knight of the Golden Fleece*, both of which are signed and dated 1681 by Leermans. Given the rather puffed-up appearance of the elector's face, Leermans must have worked from an engraving, probably a mezzotint. One version (oil on copper, 35 x 28.7 cm) is reproduced in Walther Bernt, *Die Niederländischen Maler des*

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17. Jahrhunderts, 5 vols. (Munich, 1948–62), 4:166, and is to be found in the Jakob Briner Foundation, Museum Briner und Kern, Winterthur, Switzerland (inv. 58); the other specimen was to be found in 1963 in the collection of Count Thierry de Limburg Stirum, Huldenberg, Belgium (photo RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History)). The RKD's website (Databases, Images, Kunstwerknummer 131004) reproduces the painting in Switzerland, but the identification and whereabouts it gives are incorrect.

13. David Dilwyn John, *National Museum of Wales: Catalogue of Oil-Paintings* (Cardiff, 1955), 148, nos. 715 and 716. Unfortunately, both paintings are in a poor state of preservation. The pendant of the woman (oil on panel, 29 x 23 cm, inv. no. A38) has been identified, on the basis of a later inscription, as the mother of Eugène Alexander, Anne Françoise van Horne (ca. 1630–93). It is possible, however, that it portrays his wife, who was also named Anna.

14. With one exception, albeit a painting that was wrongly sold as a work by "P. Leermans" with the collection of J. Danser Nyman on 16 August 1798 in Amsterdam (lot 158); RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History) Databases, Excerpts, HdG-fiche 1276300. The work has been identified as Nicolaes Maes's *Hurdy-Gurdy Player*, now in Dordrecht, inv. no. DM/948/119 (on loan from the Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed [Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands], inv. no. NK 2445).

15. This sum is a combination of the auction excerpts present at the RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History), the so-called Hofstede de Groot index cards, and what the Getty Provenance Index gives for Leermans. Since December 2011 the cards can also be consulted online via RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History) Databases, Excerpts.

16. RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History) Databases, HdG-fiche 1276285 for the sale in Brussels on 20 July 1739 and card 1276282 for a work from the collection of Jacomo de Wit, which was offered at a sale on 15 May 1741 in Antwerp as the following: "Eenen Hermeyt met veel bywerck door Leirmans, in de goestinge van G. Dauw, seer delicaat" (A hermit with many accessories by Leermans, in the manner of G. Dou, very delicate).

17. The other two pieces were sold before 1722; Annegret Laabs, "'Une fille et un Cupido von Rembrandt': Die Gemäldeankäufe Augusts des Starken in Antwerpen 1708 und 1709," *Dresdener Kunstblätter* 45 (2001): 19.

18. Henri Pauwels et al., *Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België, Departement Oude Kunst, inventariscatalogus van de oude schilderkunst* (Brussels, 1984), 172, inv. 604 with illustration (signed, oil on copper, 64.5 x 39.5 cm).

19. RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History) Databases, Excerpts, HdG-fiche 1276274.

20. "Geheel en al katholiek van opvatting en navolging der Vlamen in het coloriet." RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History) Databases, Excerpts, HdG-fiche

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1276275; for the painting, see Ildikó Ember and Zsuzsa Urbach, *Museum of Fine Arts Budapest: Old Master's Gallery; Summary Catalogue*, vol. 2, *Early Netherlandish, Dutch and Flemish Painting* (Budapest, 2000), 94, inv. no. 343 (oil on copper, 91.5 x 69 cm).

21. For instance, Leermans is still completely unknown as a painter of portrait miniatures. In my opinion, *Portrait of a Lady* in the Städel Museum in Frankfurt (inv. no. 458), which Mirjam Neumeister has attributed to Arie de Vois, is by the hand of Leermans; Mirjam Neumeister, *Holländische Gemälde im Städel Museum 1550–1800* (Petersberg, 2010), 515–20. *Portrait of a Young Lady in a Blue Dress*, likewise reproduced in that volume, should also be ascribed to Leermans; Mirjam Neumeister, *Holländische Gemälde im Städel Museum 1550–1800* (Petersberg, 2010), 518 (fig. 573). For quite some time this exquisite portrait has been with the Paris art dealer Claude Vittet who, in 2012, offered it on his website as a work by Constantijn Netscher.

Provenance

- (Sale, Krafft, Brussels, 26 June 1769, no. 11, the same lot includes its pendant) [72 francs].
- J. B. van den Branden (his sale, Collaer, Brussels, 13 April 1801, no. 7, the same lot includes its pendant) [82 francs to Marnef].
- De Marneffe (his sale, Brussels, 16 May 1809, no. 111) [86 francs to Renders].
- Cornellis Louis Reijnders (his sale, Nieuwenhuys and De Man, Brussels, 6 August 1821, no. 58) [26 francs to Coor].
- E. A. Treherne, Hollow Hill, Ditchingham, Suffolk, England, 1945–47.
- (Sale, Bonhams, London, 21 April 1983, no. 35; sale, Kunsthaus Lempertz, Cologne, 21 May 1992, no. 83, not sold; sale, Auktionhaus Kaupp, Sulzburg, 25 September 2004, no. 2215, not sold [Johnny van Haeften Ltd, London, 2004]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2004.

Technical Summary

The support, a rectangular copper sheet, has substantial weight and does not flex when handled. The panel's thickness tapers slightly, and there are no hammer marks, which suggests the panel has been rolled. A burr along the reverse of the left edge and incisions along the front surface of the upper and left edges suggest the support was trimmed before the painting was executed. Fine hand-drawn black lines applied over brown and black oxidation layers form a rectangular border along the outer edges of the panel reverse. A numerical inscription, white chalk, and indications of the previous location of four labels are located along the panel

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reverse, but there are no wax seals, stencils, or maker's marks.

Fine scratches give tooth to the front surface of the support. No ground is readily visible. The paint has been smoothly applied with extremely fine modeling through the figure's flesh tones, hair, and brown background, and with delicate dabs of raised impasto through the foliage and brocade.

The painting is extremely faintly signed and dated in dark paint along the lower right corner.

No underdrawing or compositonal changes are readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2005 and remains in a good state of preservation.

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