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Portrait of Samuel van Acker

Willem van Mieris
(Leiden 1662 – 1747 Leiden)

1683
oil on panel
39.4 x 30.8 cm
signed and dated in light paint, upper left corner: “W. V(??). Mieris. (?)68(?).”
WM-106.a

How to cite

Aono, Junko. “Pendant Portraits of Samuel van Acker and His Wife (?), 1683” (2017). In *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, 4th ed. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Elizabeth Nogrady with Caroline Van Cauwenberge. New York, 2023–. https://theleidencollection.com/artwork/portrait-of-samuel-van-acker/ (accessed November 20, 2026).

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These two paintings, dated 1683, are outstanding examples of the early work of the promising young artist Willem van Mieris, who painted these portraits in the very year he joined the Leiden Guild of Saint Luke.[1] These portraits must have been one of the earliest commissions that he received as an independent painter. He painted another pair of portraits one year later that show a comparable approach, not only in the strong chiaroscuro effects and brownish tonalities, but also in the sitters' fashionable appearance (**(fig 1)** and **(fig 2)**).[2]

The male sitter, Samuel van Acker, wears a luminous brown Japanese gown and stands in an interior with a pedimented door in the background. Through the door can be seen a garden with a statue of cupid. Holding a letter in his left hand, he rests his right hand on three bolts of fabric lying on the wooden table. His female counterpart also poses in an interior with a table and an open doorway, partially obscured by a curtain, in the background. Handsomely attired in a decorative black lace cap and a brown satin dress, she holds a rose in one hand and with the other feeds a small white dog standing on a chair beside her. On the table behind her is additional canine sustenance, together with a vase of flowers. In both paintings, bright light falling from the upper left illuminates the sitters and casts a deep shadow on the right side of their faces. The artist's virtuosity in minutely rendering different kinds of materials and textures is evident in the shimmering highlights on the sitters' clothing, as well as in the specular reflections glancing off the silver writing set beside Samuel van Acker.

The identification of the male is known from the letter he holds, which is addressed to: "Monsr Samuel van Acker" **(fig 3)**. Van Acker was born in Leiden in 1658 as the eighth child of carpenter Jan van Acker and Adriaentje Samuels de Haen.[3] In 1679 he married Maria le Maistre, daughter of *greinwercker* Pieter le Maistre and Maria Catoir. Samuel was at that time also a *greinwercker*, which means that he was manufacturing *grein*, a very delicate fabric, partly silk, used for ribbons and stockings.[4] His profession is clearly indicated by the textile bolts on the table. Maria le Maistre died after giving birth to ten children, whereupon Samuel married Johanna de Hoest in 1697.

Considering that the two portraits were already described as pendants in several records in the nineteenth century, the female portrait probably depicts Maria le Maistre. In those days a young, wealthy couple would often commission an artist to paint their likeness to celebrate their marriage, and

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Willem van Mieris, *Portrait of Gualtherus Kolff*, 1684, oil on panel, 18.5 x 14.5 cm, private collection



Fig 2. Willem van Mieris, *Portrait of Petronella van Duyren*, 1684, oil on panel, 18 x 14.5 cm, private collection



Fig 3. Detail of the letter in Samuel van Acker's hand, WM-106.a

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such *huwelijksportretten* (“marriage portraits”) were considered status symbols.[5] Although the portraits are dated 1683, four years after the couple’s wedding, their marriage could have been the reason for the commission. The rose that the woman holds traditionally alluded to love, and might correspond to the garden statue of cupid in Samuel’s portrait.

The character of the woman’s pose, however, leaves some question as to her identity. In contrast to traditional companion pieces, in which couples face each other, the woman in this pendant pair does not turn toward her companion.[6] The hanging curtain at the left further isolates her from him. Although it is rather difficult to imagine a young couple commissioning Van Mieris to portray them in such an unconventional way, the paintings’ identical dimensions, the matching scale of the sitters, the harmonious color scheme, and the complementary chiaroscuro effects relate the two pictures to each other extremely well. If the sitter is Maria, then there must have been a specific reason that Van Mieris depicted her in this unusual manner.

An alternative explanation is that the female sitter was another, perhaps unmarried, member of the Van Acker family. It could be that these two works originally belonged to a larger suite of family portraits and that they came to be joined as pendants only through the accident of history.[7] In fact, it is likely that Van Mieris also made portraits of other members of the Van Acker family. According to his probate inventory, Samuel’s son owned a pair of portraits that Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635–81) had painted of his grandparents, Jan van Acker and Adriaentje Samuels de Haen. This pendant pair was appraised at the enormous amount of 500 guilders.[8] The personal connection that Jan van Acker had with Frans van Mieris the Elder probably induced his son, Samuel, to turn to the fledgling artist Willem van Mieris to paint his portrait and other members of his family. Whatever the identity of the female sitter, these splendid portraits bear witness to the younger Van Mieris’s artistic talent and social connections, both of which he would develop further throughout the course of his career.

- Junko Aono, 2017

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Endnotes

1. For biographic information on Willem van Mieris, see Piet Bakker's biography in the current catalogue, and see also Eric Jan Sluijter, Marlies Enklaar, and Paul Niewenhuizen, *Leidse fijnschilders: van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge, 1630–1760* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 1988), 152.
2. Private collection. Ref., RKD, artwork nos. 125566, 128832.
3. Genealogical information on Samuel van Acker and his family is based on Piet Bakker's unpublished research into the baptism, marriage, and burial registers and the Notarial Archive (NA) in the Regionaal Archief Leiden (RAL).
4. Samuel may have met Maria in her father's workshop, where Samuel could have received his training.
5. For this type of portrait, 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) (Zwolle, 1986).
6. The possibility that the woman's portrait was intended to hang on the left side should not be eliminated. In fact, the sales catalogue from 8 July 1981 (Sotheby's, London) illustrates this pair with Van Acker on the right and the woman on the left. This arrangement, however, is odd in that the woman turns toward her companion but he does not acknowledge her. A female portrait could be hung on the left when the pendants depict two sisters, as seen in Willem van Mieris's pendant portraits dated 1688 (RKD artwork nos. 167533, 167538).
7. A woman, either a widow or unmarried, could be portrayed in this way. Portraits of unmarried women were not typically designed to accommodate a companion painting hung on its left side. For examples of such portraits, 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) (Zwolle, 1986), 73–75, 79–80, 83–86, 93–95, nos. 4, 6, 8, 10. Through the process of inheritance, some family portraits may have stayed together while others could have been dispersed or combined with unrelated pictures. Furthermore, pendant pictures did not always depict married couples. In the 1749 probate inventory of Samuel's son, for example, two portraits were mentioned in one lot. These were portraits of Samuel van Acker and his daughter Susan, who remained unmarried throughout her life. It is possible that Samuel's son inherited this pendant pair from his sister Susan, who died in 1747. Samuel had two older and two younger sisters, but we lack information about their marriage statuses. One of them could be a candidate for the female sitter in this pair of portraits.
8. Regionaal Archief Leiden, NA notary G. Camper de Jonge, inv. 2164, documents 72 and 73; 16 August 1749. The inventory mentions only "Van Mieris" as the painter of the portraits.

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Considering that Jan van Acker died around 1680, this attribution must refer to Frans the Elder, as Willem was too young to have executed these pictures.

Provenance

- Anthony Oberman (1781–1845) (his sale, Amsterdam, 31 March 1846, no. 54 [500 florins to Roos], as by Frans van Mieris).
- (Sale, Amsterdam, 17 March 1857, no. 78).
- (Sale, Sotheby's, London, 8 July 1981, no. 211).
- Private collection, Amsterdam [Salomon Lilian B. V., Amsterdam, 2002; to Noortman Master Paintings, Maastricht, 2004].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2004.

References

- 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: 207, no. 394; 212, no. 413. 8 vols. London, 1907–28. Originally published as *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten höllandischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*. 10 vols. Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28.
- Burgemeister, Wendela and Dominique Surh. "A Pair of Portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel van Acker." In *Salomon Lilian: Old Masters 2002*. Sales cat. Amsterdam, Salomon Lilian B.V. Amsterdam, 2002, 48–49, no. 19.
- Schavemaker, Eddy. "A Pair of Portraits of Mr and Mrs Samuel van Acker." In *Noortman: One Hundred Master Paintings*. Sales cat. Noortman Master Paintings, Maastricht and London. Zwolle, 2003, 77, no. 25.

Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular wedge-shaped, non-Baltic oak, has bevels on all four sides.[1] The unthinned and uncradled panel has three numerical inscriptions and machine tool marks but no wax seals, import stamps, labels or panel maker's mark.

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A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied followed by a warm brown underlayer, which is also present in the pendant portrait WM-106.b. The paint has been smoothly applied wet-into-wet along the background and with slightly raised contours along the figure's garments.

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

The painting is signed and dated in light paint along the upper left corner.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2001 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.

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