



THE LEIDEN
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Child's Lesson (Hannah Entrusting Her Son Samuel into the Care of the High Priest Eli?)

Frans van Mieris
(Leiden 1635 – 1681 Leiden)

ca. 1656–57

oil on panel with arched top

29.2 x 21.7 cm

signed in light-colored paint, lower left corner: "F. van Mieris" ("F" slightly cropped)

FM-102

How to cite

Buvelot, Quentin. "Child's Lesson (Hannah Entrusting Her Son Samuel into the Care of the High Priest Eli?)" (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/the-childs-lesson/> (accessed January 24, 2026).

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Child's Lesson is one of Frans van Mieris's early works, probably painted around 1657.^[1] In this evocative painting, a young mother tenderly holding her son's hand looks up at a kindly old man holding a book close to his side. Van Mieris situated the three figures in a darkened interior before a brick arch. The dim light passing through the leaded-glass windows in a back room reveals a wooden flight of steps winding to the left, but all of the visual attention rests on the three figures. The attractive woman, who wears a black headscarf, is dressed fashionably in a bluish-purple skirt and a gold-colored upper garment with décolletage.^[2] Her blond son, dressed in a buttoned jerkin, has laid the book he is reading on his mother's lap beside his plumed cap. The refined rendering of these garments and feathers displays the Leiden artist's great virtuosity even at this early period of his career.^[3]

Depictions of women and children in domestic interiors are frequently found in Dutch art.^[4] The most direct prototype for *Child's Lesson* is an engaging painting by Gerard ter Borch (1617–81), *The Reading Lesson*, ca. 1652 (fig 1), which is one of a number of Ter Borch's paintings that inspired Van Mieris at various stages of his career.^[5] In both paintings the mother is seen in profile while her son, with long flowing locks, reads from a book in her lap. As in this instance, Ter Borch seems to have helped Van Mieris develop his narrative style to convey a sense of emotional intimacy between figures, which would become a hallmark of his mature style.

The motif of a mother teaching her children is rooted in allegorical images of Grammar, one of the seven liberal arts.^[6] Sixteenth-century prints, such as those made by Cornelis Drebbel after Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1617) (fig 2), helped spread this motif to Dutch painters, who translated it into a more contemporary context.^[8] As in Drebbel's print after Goltzius, a man is present in Van Mieris's *Child's Lesson*. With his advanced years, beard, brown coat and book, he exhibits all the characteristics of a scholar. Perhaps he is a teacher who has come to give the boy extra instruction and is smiling approvingly because he has found the mother giving her son reading lessons. The elderly man also serves a visual counterpoint to the elegant mother, with her smooth skin, and her young son, providing the artist the opportunity to contrast the differing ages of the three figures.

Van Mieris's painting has, with good reason, been linked to the Old Testament story of Hannah (I Samuel 1:24–28). Hannah was not able to conceive a child until she had prayed for a son and promised to relinquish him to the priesthood. It has been argued that Van Mieris depicted the moment at which Hannah entrusted her son Samuel into the care of the high priest Eli.^[9] This interpretation would certainly explain the meaningful gaze exchanged between the woman and the old man, as well as his attire, which seems to be rather old-fashioned.

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Gerard ter Borch, *The Reading Lesson*, ca. 1652, oil on panel, 27 x 25 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Département des Peintures, Bequest of Louis La Caze, 1869, MI 1006, Photo: Gérard Blot, © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY



Fig 2. Cornelis Drebbel, after Hendrick Goltzius, *Grammar*, engraving, 164 x 128 mm, Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam, RP-P-BI-7173





Van Mieris did occasionally paint history scenes in his later years, such as *Death of Lucretia* from 1679 (see FM-103). Much like his friend Jan Steen (1625/26–79), he often situated these scenes in seventeenth-century domestic settings, as in his *Jeroboam's Wife with the Prophet Ahijah*, 1671, a scene from the Old Testament (fig 3).^[10] Even though Van Mieris did not situate the figures in a temple, as did other painters from the Dutch Golden Age who portrayed Hannah entrusting her son Samuel to Eli, it is likely that the Leiden master was inspired by this biblical story in rendering this intimate scene.^[11]

Fig 3. Frans van Mieris the Elder, *Jeroboam's Wife with the Prophet Ahijah*, 1671, oil on panel, 24 x 20 cm, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille, 293, Photo: Quecq d'Henripret, © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

- Quentin Buvelot, 2017



Endnotes

1. This dating was proposed verbally in 2005 to the author by Naumann, who had previously dated it to circa 1662–63 (Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. [Doornspijk, 1981], 1: 66, 2: 61). Plietzsch had already proposed an earlier dating (Eduard Plietzsch, *Holländische und flämische Maler des 17. Jahrhunderts* [Leipzig, 1960], 53).
2. The dress is comparable to that worn by the sitter of *A Woman Holding a Black Feather (Portrait of Cunera van der Cock)*, datable to 1658–60, in Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Kunstmuseum, Basel (Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. [Doornspijk, 1981], 2:59–60, no. 48; Paul H. Boerlin, *Im Lichte Hollands: Holländ. Malerei d. 17. Jh. aus d. Sammlungen d. Fürsten von Liechtenstein u. aus Schweizer Besit* [Exh. cat. Basel, Kunstmuseum] [Zurich, 1987], 164–65, no. 56), as already pointed out by Naumann, 2: 60, and Meredith Hale in *Dutch and Flemish Old Master Paintings* (Sales cat. Johnny van Haeften, Ltd.) (London, 2002), in no. 18, note 1.
3. The author has benefited greatly from Bieke van der Mark's entry in Quentin Buvelot, ed., *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), no. 12.
4. See, for example, Mary Frances Durantini, *The Child in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Ann Arbor, 1983).
5. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Katalog der Gemälde Gerard ter Borchs sowie biographisches Material*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:108; Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1: 66; Marjorie E. Wieseman in Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., ed., *Gerard ter Borch* (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Detroit, The Detroit Institute of Arts; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Zwolle, 2004), 88.
6. Mary Frances Durantini, *The Child in Seventeenth Century Dutch Painting* (Ann Arbor, 1983), 94.
7. For the print, part of a series of seven, see Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1:66 and fig. 81.
8. Bettina Werche, "Frans van Mieris D. Ä.," in *Leselust: Niederländische Malerei von Rembrandt bis Vermeer*, ed. Sabine Schulze (Exh. cat. Frankfurt, Schirn Kunsthalle) (Frankfurt, 1993), 252; Marjorie E. Wieseman in Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., ed., *Gerard ter Borch* (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Zwolle, 2004), 88. See also Mary Frances Durantini, *The Child in Seventeenth Century Dutch Painting* (Ann Arbor, 1983), fig. 47.
9. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1:66 n. 11, 2:61.
10. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2: no. 85; Peter van der Ploeg in Quentin Buvelot, ed., *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), no. 43.



11. See the list in Andor Pigler, *Barockthemen: Eine Auswahl von Verzeichnissen zur Ikonographie des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, 2 vols. (Budapest, 1974), 1:134–35; see also Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2: 61.

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. 86).^[1]
- [Frank T. Sabin, London, 1934].
- Abraham Bronkhorst (1886–1944), The Hague, 1935.
- [D. Katz, Dieren and Nijmegen, 1935–36].
- [S. Nijstad, The Hague].
- Mr. & Mrs. Lloyd H. Smith, 1969–2000 (their sale, Sotheby's, New York, 25 May 2000, no. 47 [Johnny van Haeften Ltd., London, 2002–4]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2004.

Provenance Notes

1. A seal on the back of the panel still attests to this prestigious provenance. For the Moltke Collection, see Ben Broos, *Intimacies and Intrigues: History Paintings in the Mauritshuis*, The Hague, 1993, 98–99, with numerous references. The number “86” on the back of the panel refers to the 1931 sale of the Moltke Collection in Copenhagen, see Provenance. *Portrait of a Fifty-Two-Year Old Man* (FM-104) also comes from the Moltke Collection.

Exhibition History

- London, Frank T. Sabin, “Autumn Exhibition: Dutch and Flemish 17th-Century Paintings,” October 1934, no. 8.
- Rotterdam, Rotterdamse Kunstkring, “Tentoonstelling van schilderijen door Oud-Hollandsche en Vlaamsche meesters waaronder beroemde meesterwerken als Rembrandt, Frans Hals, Jan Steen enz. enz. uit de collectie der Fa. D. Katz te Dieren,” 16 November–15 December 1935, no. 41 [lent by Abraham Bronkhorst].



- The Hague, Gemeentemuseum, “Oude Kunst uit Haagsche Bezit,” 12 December 1936–31 January 1937, no. 123.
- Almelo, De Waag, “Oude Kunst uit Twents Particulier Bezit,” 31 October–30 November 1953, no. 27.
- Frankfurt, Schirn Kunsthalle, “Leselust: Niederländische Malerei von Rembrandt bis Vermeer,” 24 September 1993–2 January 1994, no. 58.
- London, Johnny van Haeften Ltd., “Dutch and Flemish Old Master Paintings,” 2002, no. 18.
- The Hague, 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].
- Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, on loan with the permanent collection, January 2010–February 2012; February 2014–February 2016 [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].
- 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].
- Amsterdam, H'ART Museum, “From Rembrandt to Vermeer: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 9 April–24 August 2025 [lent by the present owner].
- West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art, “Art and Life in Rembrandt’s Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 25 October 2025–29 March 2026 [lent by the present owner].

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- Yeager-Crasselt, Lara. “Child’s Lesson.” In *Rembrandt and His Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection*. Edited by Lara Yeager-Crasselt, 94; 181, no. 37. Translated by Li Ying. Exh. cat. Beijing, National Museum of China. Beijing, 2017.
- Long Museum, West Bund. *Rembrandt, Vermeer and Hals in the Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection*. Exh. cat. Shanghai, Long Museum, West Bund. Shanghai, 2017, 110–11.
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Versions

Versions and Copies

- Formerly Emile Wolf, New York, oil on panel, 27 x 22.2 cm; Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2:61, no. 50a.



Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular wedge-shaped oak with an arched upper edge, has bevels along all four sides and a shim glued to the lower edge.^[1] The panel is unthinned and uncradled and appears to have been trimmed slightly along the left vertical edge. Along the panel reverse there is one red wax collection seal, two old paper labels, and a numerical inscription but no import stamps, panel maker's mark or machine tool marks.

A white-colored ground was applied followed by a brown transparent underlayer used as a mid-tone, particularly through the man's and boy's faces, jackets, and hair and shadows of the woman's blue skirt. Infrared images captured at 1700 nanometers reveal a loose and fluid sketch roughly outlining forms and defining silhouettes, and along the female figure's proper left hand. The image was constructed in paint applied in thin layers of opaque underpaint along the blue skirt and final thin transparent glazing, depending on the intended effect. There appear to be artist's fingerprints along the man's beard and boy's hair.

The painting is signed in light-colored paint along the lower left corner but is undated. The "F" appears slightly cropped, suggesting the left panel edge was trimmed slightly.

No compositional changes are evident in the infrared images or X-radiograph.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2009 and remains in a good state of preservation despite areas of thinness through the man's and boy's jackets.^[2]

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. The upper arched edge could be examined, but it would be preferable if the lower shim could be removed.
2. Entry based on 2011 examination report by Kate Smith, paintings conservator, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.