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Woman with a Lapdog, Accompanied by a Maidservant (probably Bathsheba with King David's Letter)

Frans van Mieris
(Leiden 1635 – 1681 Leiden)

1680
oil on panel
19.3 x 15.5 cm
signed and dated in dark paint, upper left corner of smaller inlaid panel: "Fvan Mieris_1680"
FM-105

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Frans van Mieris painted this work in 1680, shortly before his death in March 1681. The painting exhibits all the features of Van Mieris's late style, including the warm hues of its color scheme of browns and reds, the porcelain-like finish, and the shimmering highlights created with extremely fine yet fluid brushstrokes (see also FM-110). These effects allowed Van Mieris to unite his composition and impart grace and sophistication to his figures.[1] The central focus is a young woman with a plunging décolletage who sits with a small spaniel on the lap of her shiny satin dress. Her white face contrasts with the dark and wrinkled visage of an old maidservant, who smilingly whispers in her ear.[2] As the young woman listens, she gazes to the side with a slight smile and absentmindedly combs her long hair.[3] The scene seems to be set after nightfall, making this one of Van Mieris's few night scenes.[4] That love is in the air can be deduced from the statue of a frolicking putto in the dimly lit background.[5] On the table is an opened letter with a red seal, probably a love letter, an orange, and a glass bottle.

Van Mieris depicted many facets of the letter-writing and letter-receiving culture throughout the course of his career, including another painting from 1680, which shows a woman writing a letter while a boy waits for her to finish **(fig 1)**.[6] The genre character of that scene poses a striking contrast with the present painting, which belongs to a group of paintings in which letters feature in a more narrative context, such as *The Matchmaker*, 1671, in Dresden **(fig 2)**.[7] In *The Matchmaker* the word "AMOR" appears on a piece of furniture behind the woman. Dressed in contemporary attire, she holds a letter in her hand while sitting languidly, her left breast exposed. It is probable that she is Bathsheba, and the gesticulating old woman opposite her is the procuress or messenger sent by King David, whose wife Bathsheba would become.[8] The Dresden painting was long considered to be a simple genre scene involving a love letter, and a similar misunderstanding also occurred with a painting of *Bathsheba with King David's Letter*, ca. 1659–60, by Van Mieris's good friend Jan Steen (1626–79).[9]

The present work also probably depicts the story of Bathsheba, given that Van Mieris typically located his biblical scenes in domestic settings (see FM-102). In this manner he was able to suggest the relevance of the biblical story to contemporary life. This approach also allowed him to shift the narrative emphasis from Bathsheba as the object of David's sexual attraction to the moral dilemma Bathsheba faced as a married woman. Nevertheless, in this instance, her evocative gaze clearly foretells the path she will choose.

The Bible does not mention David writing to Bathsheba, but letters had become central to depictions of Bathsheba by the time Van Mieris painted this work,

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Frans van Mieris the Elder, *The Letter Writer*, 1680, oil on panel, 25 x 19.5 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-261



Fig 2. Frans van Mieris the Elder, *The Matchmaker (Bathsheba?)*, 1671, oil on panel 29.5 x 24 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, 1742

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particularly among Leiden artists. The tradition may stem from a work by Jan Lievens (1607–74), which was extensively praised by Philips Angel (ca. 1618–45, or after), a Leiden painter, etcher and art theorist whose work Van Mieris surely knew. In his 1642 treatise, *Lof der Schilder Konst*, Angel wrote about the importance of the letter to this biblical story:

> Without doubt such a messenger was an old woman well-versed in the art of love, or a procuress, so one calls her, who brought the message, not simply with her mouth alone, but undoubtedly through a letter (as evidence of a greater authority), which she handed to Bathsheba, wherin he [David] have [her] to undrstand his sweet consideration, which he had over [her] . . . thereby igniting a sweet blush of modest shame in her person, through the reading of the letter . . . such a hot fire of lust must have been in Bathsheba, whenever the king sought her.[10]

Not only does the old woman in Van Mieris's painting descend directly from the procuress Philips Angel describes, but so does "the sweet blush of modest shame" on the face of the young woman who, imparting the significance of this most suggestive moment, gazes evocatively to the side, listening carefully to the words being whispered in her ear as the opened letter rests by her elbow.

- Quentin Buvelot, 2017

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Endnotes

1. Otto Naumann in *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681*, ed. Quentin Buvelot (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (New Haven, 2005), 38.
2. The old woman appears in other paintings by the artist; see Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2: nos. 87, 116; see also FM-103. The same applies to the dog.
3. This is the main motif of a painting by Van Mieris dated 1678, Musée du Louvre, Paris; Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2: no. 114.
4. See 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), 38–41.
5. Peter C. Sutton, Lisa Vergara, and Ann Jensen Adams, *Love Letters: Dutch Genre Painting in the Age of Vermeer* (Exh. cat. Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland; Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum of Arts and Sciences) (New Haven, 2003), 148.
6. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2: no. 118; Peter C. Sutton, Lisa Vergara, and Ann Jensen Adams, *Love Letters: Dutch Genre Painting in the Age of Vermeer* (Exh. cat. Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland; Greenwich, CT, Bruce Museum of Arts and Sciences) (New Haven, 2003), no. 24; 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. 48.
7. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 2: no. 87; Peter Sutton, Lisa Vergara, and Anne Jensen Adams, *Love Letters: Dutch Genre Painting in the Age of Vermeer* (Exh. cat. Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland; Greenwich, CT, Bruce Museum of Arts and Sciences) (New Haven, 2003), no. 25; Quentin Buvelot, ed., *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (New Haven, 2005), 55, fig. 12.
8. For depictions of Bathsheba, see Elisabeth Kunoth-Leifels, *Über die Darstellungen der "Bathseba im Bade"* (Essen, 1962).
9. Private collection; see Peter Sutton, Lisa Vergara, and Anne Jensen Adams, *Love Letters: Dutch Genre Painting in the Age of Vermeer* (Exh. cat. Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland; Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum of Arts and Sciences) (New Haven, 2003), no. 25. Steen's panel clearly depicts the Old Testament scene of Bathsheba, as her name is inscribed on the letter held by the young woman in his painting.
10. See Philips Angel, *Lof der schilderkonst* (Leiden, 1642), 50. The English translation is taken from Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder*, 2 vols. (Doornspijk, 1981), 1: 114.

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Provenance

- Adriaan Bout, The Hague (his sale, The Hague, 11 August 1733, no. 54 [van Zwieten for 260 f.].
- Gerard Bicker, Lord of Swieten, The Hague, 1733–38 (his sale, The Hague, 12 April 1741, no. 57).
- Bicker van Zwieten Collection, Amsterdam (his sale, The Hague, 4 April 1755, no. 24 [202 f.]).
- Private collection, Amsterdam (sale, Amsterdam, 2 August 1830, no. 52 [Manvis for 25 f.]).
- James Walker; by inheritance to Mrs. Alexander Boyle (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 25 June 1898, no. 68 [S. J. Smith]).[1]
- Monsieur et Madame B., Paris (their sale, Paris, Drouot, 13 June 1997, no. 48).
- [Piet de Boer, Amsterdam, 1997–98]
- [Salomon Lilian, Amsterdam, New York, 2003–4].
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

Provenance Notes

1. The whereabouts of the painting between 1898 and 1997 remains largely unknown. When the painting appeared at the public sale in Paris in 1997, coming from an unknown private collection in Paris, the panel had been laid into a much larger panel measuring 27 x 20.5 cm. The expanded portions have since been removed (see Otto Naumann in his letter to Salomon Lilian, the then owner of the painting, dated 30 September 2002, a copy of which is kept in the painting's files at the Leiden Collection).

Exhibition History

- Greenwich, CT, Bruce Museum of Arts and Sciences, "Love Letters: Dutch Genre Paintings in the Age of Vermeer," 31 January–2 May 2004, no. 26 [lent by Salomon Lilian, B. V., Amsterdam].
- San Diego, Timken Museum of Art, "Exchanging Words: Women and Letters in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting," 21 September–31 December 2022 [lent by the present owner].

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- Hofstede de Groot, Cornelis. *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of theSeventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith*. Edited and translated by Edward G. Hawke,

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10: 59–60, no. 227. 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.

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- Buvelot, Quentin, Otto Naumann, and Eddy de Jongh. *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681*. Edited by Quentin Buvelot, 40, fig. 21, 41, 239, no. 133. Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington, National Gallery of Art. Zwolle, 2005.
- Van der Hut, Margreet. *Jan van Mieris (1660-1690): His Life and Work*. Zaandijk, 2021, 16, 63, fig. 7.
- Yeager-Crasselt, Lara. *Exchanging Words: Women and Letters in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting*. Exh. brochure. San Diego, Timken Museum of Art. San Diego, 2022, n.p., ill.

Technical Summary

The support is a composite panel comprising two slightly differently sized, vertically grained, rectangular-shaped oak planks set inside one another.[1] This type of inlaid panel construction is found mostly, but not exclusively, in paintings from the Leiden School.[2]

The larger outer plank is unthinned and uncradled, and has bevels along all four edges; there is one red wax collection seal but no paper labels, import stamps or panel maker's mark. The smaller plank has been set into the larger plank, and a 0.5-cm border of the front surface of the larger plank surrounds the smaller plank along all four sides.

The original paint and light-colored ground end at the edges of the smaller panel. An additional light-colored ground has been applied to the four narrow borders of the larger plank, and the composition has been extended onto all but the lower border.[3]

A fine linear crack in the paint surface around the perimeter of the inset plank delineates the original painted composition. An extremely fine horizontal craquelure pattern has formed over the entire original composition, and a more widely spaced horizontal craquelure pattern has formed through the paint along the left and right borders.

The paint has been applied over a smooth, light-colored ground in successive thin layers with low brushmarking and transparent glazing, light over dark. The contours and folds of the red table cloth and the

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figure's green velvet cloak and gold skirt are slightly raised. The most pronounced contour is that of the red fabric along the corner of the table, beneath the figure's proper right arm.

The painting is signed and dated in dark paint along the upper left corner of the smaller inset panel.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. A dark pentimento along the figure's proper right thigh suggests that the table corner may have originally extended slightly closer to the dog, and that the red tablecloth may have covered more of the figure's thigh. In the X-radiograph, it appears that the base and stem of a wine glass had previously been set on the table in front of the carafe where the letter is now placed. A large radio-opaque shape along the upper right quadrant of the image does not relate to the current composition or to anything on the panel reverse.

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition 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 smaller panel has good potential for dendrochronology but would require access along the obscured endgrain.
2. According to Geero Seelig's online description of his 2012 CODART Market of Ideas Session, "at least three panel paintings in Schwerin are constructed in an extraordinary fashion, including one by Willem van Mieris dated 1698."
3. The composition probably previously extended onto the lower border and was removed during a past restoration.

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