NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Michiel van Miereveld
Dutch, 1567 - 1641

Portrait of a Lady with a Ruff

1638

oil on panel
overall: 70.5 × 57.9 cm (27 3/4 × 22 13/16 in.)
framed: 97.8 x 83.8 x 12.7 cm (38 1/2 x 33 x 5 in.)
Inscription: center right: AEtatis, 26 / Ao 1638 / M. Miereveldt
Gift of the Coe Foundation 1961.5.4

ENTRY

In contemporary considerations of Dutch seventeenth-century portrait traditions, Michiel van Miereveld has the unfortunate distinction of being the foil against which are placed the stylistic innovations of Frans Hals (Dutch, c. 1582/1583 - 1666) and Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606 - 1669). Whereas Hals and Rembrandt introduced a sense of movement and psychological penetration into their portraits, Van Miereveld maintained a preference for formal and formulaic images throughout his long artistic career. In his portraits, whether full length or half length, he excelled in careful descriptions of external features and costume details but, the criticism goes, he provided little feeling for life.

Although *Portrait of a Lady with a Ruff* will do little to dispel the general assessment of Van Miereveld's work, it nevertheless has a quiet charm, evident especially in the understated warmth of the woman's gaze. Van Miereveld painted the portrait in 1638, at the twilight of his career, and was by this time too set in his ways to break free entirely of the formulas that had earned him accolades for more than four decades. The strength of the traditions he followed and the subtle efforts he made to modify them can be seen in a comparable portrait of a younger woman painted some fourteen years earlier [fig. 1], in which the costume and the pose are virtually identical to those in *Portrait of a Lady with a Ruff*. In the later work, Van Miereveld created a more three-dimensional image through the perspective of the collar and stronger modeling of light and dark.

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Although minor changes in Van Miereveld's style can be detected, it is still quite astonishing that he continued to work in this manner through the 1630s, during a period when so much more lively and penetrating images were being created by his younger colleagues in Haarlem and Amsterdam. He must have continued in this vein in large part because there was a market for such images—clearly a conservative market that still abided by the idea that portraits should describe a sitter's features but not expose much psychological character through gesture or expression. Van Miereveld's manner of portraiture may also have retained its hold on a Dutch clientele because it reinforced Neo-Stoicism, a philosophical ideal that was current in the Netherlands.[1] One of the guiding principles of the Neo-Stoic ideal, *tranquillitas*, was achieved by controlling one's inner emotions. Thus, a calm outward demeanor would suggest the sitter's tranquil inner state, attained through rational thought and self-knowledge.

Aristocratic circles in Delft and The Hague, where Van Miereveld worked throughout his long career, remained conservative long after more dynamic attitudes had affected the upper social strata of Amsterdam and Haarlem. The character of the first two cities during the 1620s and early 1630s was determined largely by the presence of the princely House of Orange, whose patriarch, Willem "the Silent" of Orange (1530–1584), had taken as his motto the Neo-Stoic sentiment *saevis tranqvillvs in vindis* (calm in the midst of raging seas).[2] Van Miereveld, who worked extensively for the courts of three consecutive Stadholders—Willem the Silent and his two sons, Prince Maurits (1567–1625) and Prince Frederik Hendrik (l584–1647)—was clearly rewarded for the visual continuity he provided, a continuity that accorded well with the House of Orange's philosophy of hereditary princely rule.[3]

The aristocratic sitters who also patronized Van Miereveld, most of whom were from Delft and The Hague, clearly took their lead from the court and eagerly embraced the portrait style it preferred. Although the identity of this particular sitter is not known, one may judge on the basis of her elaborate costume that she was part of the social elite. Her wide lace-edged ruff, finely fluted lace-edged cuff, and embroidered black garment are remarkable for their craftsmanship and refinement. The elegant embroidery on her stomacher, with its intricate pattern of flowers and birds, may have had some personal significance to the sitter, but the meaning, if it existed, is now lost.[4] Whether or not this portrait of a woman ever had a male pendant is not known.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Michiel van Miereveld, *Portrait of a Young Woman*, 162(4?), oil on panel, Trustees of the Wallace Collection, London

NOTES

[1] The concept of Neo-Stoicism has been related to portraiture of this type, although not specifically to Van Miereveld, by Ann Jensen Adams in a lecture presented at the Rembrandt symposium in Amsterdam in 1992, "The Two Faces of Self-Knowledge in Rembrandt's Portraits: Neo-Stoic Tranquillitas and Calvinist Worldly Activity," and in her book, *Public Faces and Private Identities in Seventeenth-Century Holland: Portraiture and the Production of Community* (New York, 2009), 78–105.

[2] This motto appears on the verso of a medal struck in his honor in 1568. Ann Jensen Adams, *Public Faces and Private Identities in Seventeenth-Century Holland: Portraiture and the Production of Community* (New York, 2009), 89.

[3] No better example of Van Miereveld's importance as the creator of the

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image of Frederik Hendrik can be cited than the commission the prince gave to Sir Anthony van Dyck (Flemish, 1599 - 1641) when this great Flemish painter came to The Hague in the winter of 1631–1632 to paint his portrait. Instead of being allowed to come up with his own invention, Van Dyck was instructed to follow the model of a painting executed around 1610 by Van Miereveld (Stadhuis, Delft). See Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. et al., *Anthony van Dyck* (Washington, DC, 1990), 238 n. 7.

[4] For an excellent discussion of period costume, see Bianca M. du Mortier, “Costume in Frans Hals,” in Seymour Slive et al., *Frans Hals* (London, 1989), 45–60.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The cradled support is a single, vertically grained board with beveled edges on the reverse. Small checks along the right side follow the grain, and a longer check runs vertically from the bottom edge, right of center. A thin, pale warm brown ground layer was applied, followed by a gray imprimatura under the flesh and ruff. Paint is applied thinly and smoothly with slightly impasted highlights. In a letter dated May 12, 1942, William Robinson Coe writes, "Incidentally, when I purchased the portrait the face was that of a young woman."[1] Indeed, the 1914 auction catalogue for the Griscom collection shows a sitter with a very different face.

The background is extensively abraded, particularly at the right. Inpainting covers scattered small losses and abraded areas of the drapery, flesh, and hair. The thick discolored varnish layer is cloudy and matte in patches. The painting has not been treated since its acquisition.

[1] Mr. Coe goes on to say, "The expert I use confirmed my opinion that the face had been painted over and I authorized him to work on it. Some time later he asked me to come to his studio and he showed me the face underneath and insisted that there was still another one, and finally he got down to the original face and also discovered Mierevelt’s signature." Letter to David Finley dated May 12, 1942 (see copy in NGA curatorial files).

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PROVENANCE

Possibly Van der Bogaerde collection, 's-Hertogenbosch.[1] possibly L. Baron, Paris; possibly (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 23 November 1901, no. 142); Pollard.[2] Mr. J.C. Bennett; (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 20 December 1902, no. 80); (P. & D. Colnaghi & Co., Ltd.).[3] (Eugene Fischof, Paris); purchased 1903 by Clement Acton Griscom [1841-1912], Philadelphia;[4] (his sale, Plaza Art Galleries, New York, 26-27 February 1914, no. 11);[5] William Robertson Coe [1869-1955], Oyster Bay, Long Island, New York; Coe Foundation, New York; gift 1961 to NGA.

[1] This early provenance information was cited in the 1914 auction catalogue for the Griscom Collection.

[2] Lynda McLeod, Librarian, Christie's Archives, London, kindly provided the names of the consignor and buyer at the 1901 sale; see her e-mail of 1 August 2012, in NGA curatorial files. There is no size information in the sale catalogue, and the description is very brief, so it is not certain this is the same painting.

[3] A note in NGA curatorial files indicates that Colnaghi purchased the painting that was no. 80 in the 1902 sale. This was kindly confirmed by Lynda McLeod, Librarian, Christie's Archives, London, who also provided the name of the consignor; see her e-mail of 28 March 2013, in NGA curatorial files.

[4] The 1903 purchase date is in the 1914 sale catalogue.

[5] An annotated copy of the sale catalogue in the NGA library records the buyer as an anonymous bidder. W.R. Coe’s letter of 12 May 1942 to David Finley (copy in NGA curatorial files) confirms Coe’s purchase at the 1914 sale.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

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1961 Extended loan for use by Ambassador David K.E. Bruce, U.S. Embassy residence, London, England, 1961-1969.

1978 Extended loan for use by the Ambassador, U.S. Embassy residence, London, England, 1978-2011.

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1995 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*. The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue. Washington, 1995: 169-170, repro. 171.

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