



Jan Miense Molenaer
Dutch, c. 1610 - 1668

Self-Portrait as a Lute Player

c. 1637/1638

oil on panel

overall: 38.7 x 32.4 cm (15 1/4 x 12 3/4 in.)

The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund 2015.20.1

ENTRY

In this finely wrought self-portrait, Jan Miense Molenaer sits with a lute balanced high on his left thigh, adjusting a tuning peg with one hand and thumbing a string with the other. His furrowed brow and fixed gaze convey the level of concentration needed to coax just the right note from the instrument. A still-life ensemble of food, instruments, and smoking paraphernalia lies beside him: walnuts cracked on a plate, a small violin known as a pochette resting atop a recorder, and coals in a brazier burning low. Together with the soft lighting, the scene exudes a sense of calm and quiet.

Much of the painting's charm comes from the extraordinary naturalism that Molenaer conveyed through his exquisite attention to detail and deftly handled brush. He modelled his fabrics and metals with carefully blended colors, applying quick highlights at curves and contours to give his materials form and substance, as is evident in his creamy gray ensemble with a broad white collar. Molenaer may have even used the blunt end of his brush to scrape away paint to indicate the individual curls of his moustache and leonine mane.

Molenaer's identity as the sitter is confirmed by comparisons with other known self-portraits. One sees the same curly hair, broadly set eyes, bulbous nose, and cleft

chin in *The Duet*, the double-portrait he painted of himself and his wife, the artist Judith Leyster (Dutch, 1609 - 1660), around 1635–1636 [fig. 1], and in his *Self-Portrait with Family Members* of c. 1636 [fig. 2]. [1] *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player* has traditionally been dated slightly earlier than these works. [2] However, Molenaer appears to be slightly older in the Gallery's painting, and the somewhat loose brushwork, particularly in the handling of the face and drapery, is consistent with the evolution of his style around 1637, when he moved to Amsterdam. [3] Pentimenti visible both to the naked eye and through infrared reflectography reinforce this slightly later dating, as they show that Molenaer originally based the position of his right hand on the self-portrait in *The Duet*. As in that work, he initially pictured himself strumming the lute, but later revised the gesture to show himself tuning its strings instead [fig. 3]. Infrared reflectography also shows that Molenaer signed the work "J M_LE_R" to the left of the lute, a signature configuration that is consistent with his work of the mid- to late 1630s [fig. 4]. [4] Unfortunately, little of this signature is visible to the naked eye because he scratched into the paint layer to reveal the ground beneath, and that scratching has since been filled in with a darker material that could be paint or old discolored varnish residue. [5]

The sensitivity with which Molenaer treated the details of playing versus tuning the lute make it likely that the instrument was a real part of his life. Lutes were an integral component of musical culture in seventeenth-century Dutch society, and the inventory of the artist's possessions made after his death lists a number of instruments, including a violin, two transverse flutes, and three "cyters," which may refer either to cithers or lutes. [6] Additionally, in his musical scenes Molenaer has demonstrated his knowledge of the proper postures and fingering for the lute as prescribed in contemporary instruction. [7] For example, Nicolaes Vallet's *Secretrum musarum* (Amsterdam, 1615), a lute manual with sheet music published not in the scholarly Latin, but rather in the French and Dutch vernacular, describes how musicians ought to extend the pinky finger to support the hand, thereby allowing the middle fingers to easily manipulate the strings. [8] As discussed above, in *The Duet* Molenaer has positioned himself playing the instrument with his left hand on the fret board and his middle fingers curled in the act of plucking, his pinky finger extended for support—just as Vallet recommended. In the Gallery's painting, Molenaer originally followed the same convention, but then altered the composition to demonstrate how one ought to tune the instrument by twisting a tuning peg with the left hand while drawing in the pinky of the right hand and extending the middle fingers, also per contemporary manuals.

Apart from demonstrating his familiarity and facility with the instrument, Molenaer may also have chosen to portray himself as a lute player because of music's many symbolic associations, among which was intellectual activity. As one of the liberal arts, music was highly regarded as an art form in the early modern period and considered an essential component of high education. For painters keen to exalt their craft, music and musical instruments became an important touchstone for comparison between the two art forms. [9] Particularly in self-portraiture, painters commonly pictured themselves with or among instruments as well as other emblems of learning—books, globes, plaster casts, *naturalia*—both reflecting the universality of their knowledge and calling attention to the parallels between their professions, such as their shared need to integrate theory and practice in the act of creation. [10]

Along with intelligence, inspiration, and imagination, music, and particularly the lute, was naturally also associated with harmony. The Haarlem printmaker Gillis van Breen (c. 1560–after 1602) articulated the harmonious relationship between men and women through lute imagery in an engraving made circa 1600 after Cornelis Ysbrantsz Cussens's *Allegory of Marriage* (Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) that shows a man playing a lute beside a woman playing a violin. Van Breen added an inscription to the image that likens a strong marital relationship to a successful musical duet: "Just as the slenderest string reverberates around the male string, and the melodious strings of the heavy-voice lyre follow, so you, harmonious strings, must accord to the tone of marriage, in which as the consort accepts the commands of her lord." [11] Even more closely related to Molenaer's scene is Jacob Cats's popular emblem "Quid non sentit amore" (Who does not feel love) that shows how the tuning of one lute causes the strings of a partner lute to vibrate in unison just as two lovers' hearts beat as one [fig. 5].

Shortly before Molenaer painted *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player* he had become a member of the Haarlem painter's guild and had also married Judith Leyster. [12] These developments in his personal life may help explain the focus on the theme of harmony and love in the painting. [13] Not only does the pochette resting on top of the table beside Molenaer relate to the partner instruments described by Cussens and Cats, but Molenaer's fixed gaze and calm demeanor also underscore the notions of love and fidelity symbolically linked to the lute. Significantly, Molenaer pays no attention to the array of sumptuous foods, drinking vessels, and smoking implements on the table beside him—items commonly associated with the temptation of sensual pleasures. Instead, he is focused entirely on the task at hand,

assuring the viewer of his unwavering dedication to his professional and personal life.

Alexandra Libby

May 7, 2019

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

NOTES

- [1] According to Dennis P. Weller in personal communication with the author, Sept. 16, 2015, other self-portraits may possibly appear in *Artist in His Studio with an Old Woman*, c. 1632–1633, oil on panel, Private Collection; *Man with a Pipe*, c. 1632–1634, oil on panel, Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main, inv. no. 221; and in the background of *Woman Playing a Virginal*, c. 1635, oil on panel, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, on loan from the City of Amsterdam, inv. no. SK-C-140.
- [2] The painting has previously been dated to 1635 in *Gemalde Alter Meister*, auction catalog, Galerie Sanct Lucas, Vienna, Autumn 1996, no. 32; and Dennis P. Weller, “Self-Portrait as a Lute Player” in *Jan Miense Molenaer: Painter of the Dutch Golden Age*, ed. Dennis P. Weller (Raleigh, 2002), 130–132.
- [3] Dennis P. Weller, “Jan Miense Molenaer: Painter of the Dutch Golden Age” in *Jan Miense Molenaer: Painter of the Dutch Golden Age*, ed. Dennis P. Weller (Raleigh, 2002), 17–24.
- [4] Dennis P. Weller, personal communication with the author, May 14, 2016.
- [5] See Technical Summary.
- [6] For the complete inventory of Molenaer’s possessions recorded on Oct. 10, 1668, see Frima Fox Hofrichter, *Judith Leyster: A Woman Painter in Holland’s Golden Age* (Doornspijk, 1989), 85–103.
- [7] For a discussion of lute music and manuals, see especially Jan W. J. Burgers, *The Lute in the Dutch Golden Age: Musical Culture in the Netherlands 1580–1670* (Amsterdam, 2013), 89–140; Burgers also discusses the celebrity of lutenists in *The Lute in the Dutch Golden Age: Musical Culture in the Netherlands 1580–1670* (Amsterdam, 2013), 51–64.
- [8] Vallet’s music and playing instructions are discussed in Louis Peter Grijp, “The Ensemble Music of Nicolaes Vallet,” in *Proceedings of the*

International Lute Symposium Utrecht 1986, ed. Louis Peter Grijp and Willem Mook (Utrecht, 1988), 64–85; Louis Peter Grijp, ed., *The Complete Works of Nicolaes Vallet*, vol. 3, *Secretum Musarum I* (Amsterdam, 1615; repr., Utrecht, 1992), xxx; and Jan W. J. Burgers, *The Lute in the Dutch Golden Age: Musical Culture in the Netherlands 1580–1670* (Amsterdam, 2013), 140–144.

- [9] See Ivan Gaskell, “Gerrit Dou, His Patrons, and the Art of Painting,” *The Oxford Journal* 3 (1980): 15–23; Ignacio Lamarque Moreno, “Music and Its Symbolism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 1990), 53–54.
- [10] Notable self-portraits that follow such a model include Gerrit Dou, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1665, Private Collection, Boston; Jan Steen, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1663–1665, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid; and Frans van Mieris, *Self-Portrait of the Artist Holding a Small Painting*, c. 1677, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. For the Dou self-portrait, see Ronni Baer, “Self-Portrait,” in *Gerrit Dou, 1613–1675*, ed. Ronni Baer (New Haven, 2000), 122, no. 29. Musical instruments are also a staple of images of artist studios. See, for example, Jan Miense Molenaer, *The Artist’s Studio*, 1631, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; Quiringh van Brekelenkam, *The Artist in His Studio*, c. 1659, State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg; Frans van Mieris, *A Connoisseur in the Artist’s Studio*, c. 1655–1657, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden; Gabriel Metsu, *Artist Painting a Woman Playing a Cello*, whereabouts unknown; Jan Steen, *The Drawing Lesson*, c. 1665, Getty Museum, Los Angeles; and Johannes Vermeer, *The Art of Painting*, c. 1666, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. For the Metsu self-portrait, see Franklin W. Robinson, *Gabriel Mestu (1629–1667)* (New York, 1974), fig. 42.
- [11] Quoted in Dennis P. Weller, “The Duet,” in *Jan Miense Molenaer: Painter of the Dutch Golden Age*, ed. Dennis P. Weller (Raleigh, 2002), 137.
- [12] Molenaer became a member of the Guild of St. Luke in 1634, though he had been signing and dating works since 1629. He and Leyster posted their wedding bans in Haarlem on May 11, 1636, and were married three weeks later on June 1. For Molenaer’s biography, see Dennis P. Weller, “Jan Miense Molenaer: Painter of the Dutch Golden Age,” in *Jan Miense Molenaer: Painter of the Dutch Golden Age*, ed. Dennis P. Weller (Raleigh, 2002), 9–25.
- [13] Molenaer had also used the musical motif to suggest a concordant and balanced existence before. In *The Duet* Molenaer pictures himself and Judith Leyster seated together in a well-appointed interior playing string instruments—he a lute and she a cittern (fig. 1). Dressed in their finest attire with a lap dog curled up at their feet, they gaze out at the viewer as they strum their instruments in unison. In *Self-Portrait with Family Members*, his

brothers and sisters engage in a musical performance that includes voice, cittern, lute, violin, and cello. The group performs in the shadow of two large portraits hanging on the back wall that depict the deceased patriarch and matriarch of the family, Molenaer's parents, Jan Mientzen and Grietgen Adriaens (fig. 2). The message in both paintings is clear: music expresses the harmonious bond that unites family.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a single oak (estimated) panel with vertical grain. The right side is more tangential than the left, but the panel remains quite flat. [1] All four edges of the panel are beveled on the reverse. The center of the panel is approximately 1 cm thick, and the beveled edges decrease to 0.3–0.5 cm thick. The top bevel has been adjusted, and the appearance of the top edge suggests that it could have been reduced, but any alteration was minor.

The ground layer is off-white, and under magnification, blue shard-like pigments can be seen scattered throughout the layer. An underdrawing is not visible with infrared reflectography (IRR). However, when painting the background, the artist appears to have left parts of the central compositional elements in reserve, including the sitter's face and hat, and the central part of the lute. [2] The paint medium is estimated to be oil. The paints were applied thinly, so that the texture of the panel is easily visible, and predominantly wet into wet. Some objects within the composition, as well as highlights, appear to have been applied over drier paint. Overall, the paint stratigraphy is complicated, but examination under magnification and with IRR indicates that objects on the table as well as parts of the figure and chair were applied over the background.

The artist depicted some details by scratching through upper paint layers with a thin tool, which in most instances reveals the ground layer. These elements include the sitter's hair and moustache, a lute-string loop, the lute tuning pegs, a line on the red plate at the left of the table, and the signature. A few letters of the signature are visible under normal light, including the "J" and "R" but there are small islands of a darker nonoriginal material, possibly overpaint or old discolored varnish residue, within the lines of the characters. This embedded material is more transparent than the surrounding paint, but also appears to be composed of fine particles, making the signature difficult to distinguish. With IRR, the complete signature is visible.

Some pentimenti are just visible under normal light. The most noticeable is that of the proper right hand, where the artist changed the positioning of the sitter's fingers. Examination with IRR reveals that the hand was first painted much like the lute player's hand in Molenaer's *The Duet* (Private Collection), with the little finger extended and the other fingers more curved. [3]

The panel and paint layers are in good condition. There are minor indentations in the wood and there is a crack at the upper left that has been retouched. There is also scattered retouching, particularly within the background and tablecloth. The natural resin (estimated) varnish saturates the paints and is fairly even.

Dina Anchin

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TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] Restoration materials cover much of the panel edges. However, most of the growth rings appear to be oriented approximately 45 degrees to the panel surface, except near the right edge where the board becomes more tangential. This shift on the right can be seen in the x-radiograph of the painting.
- [2] Infrared reflectography images were captured using the following: a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera with J filter (1.1–1.4 microns), a Si CCD with 55 mm Nikon macro lens and a spectral band of .85–1.0 microns, and a Xenics 640 × 512 InGaAs camera with 55 mm Nikon macro lens and J filter (1.1–1.4 microns).
- [3] See Entry, fig. 1.
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PROVENANCE

Private collection; (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 11 July 1980, no. 112); exported to Switzerland; (Galerie Sanct Lucas, Vienna), by 1981; private collection; (Galerie Sanct Lucas, Vienna); purchased 1996 by Philip and Lizanne Cunningham, Alexandria, Virginia; (Christie's, New York); purchased 2015 by NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1996 Gemälde Alter Meister, Galerie Sanct Lucas, Vienna, 1996, no. 13, repro.

2001 Loan to display with permanent collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2001-2015.

2002 Jan Miense Molenaer: Painter of the Dutch Golden Age, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh; Indianapolis Museum of Art; Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire, 2002-2003, no. 22, repro.

2009 Judith Leyster 1609-1660, National Gallery of Art, Washington; Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem, 2009-2010, unnumbered NGA brochure, fig. 12 (shown only in Washington).

2021

Clouds, Ice, and Bounty: The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund Collection of Seventeenth-Century Dutch and Flemish Paintings, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2021, no. 15, repro.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1993 Welu, James A., and Pieter Biesboer. *Judith Leyster: A Dutch Master and Her World*. Exh. cat. Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem; Worcester Art Museum. Haarlem, 1993: 306-307, fig. 33e.
- 2013 Burgers, Jan W.J. *The Lute in the Dutch Golden Age: Musical Culture in the Netherlands 1580-1670*. Amsterdam, 2013: 12, pl. 5.
- 2015 Libby, Alexandra. "Jan Miense Molenaer, *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player*." *National Gallery of Art Bulletin*, no. 53 (Fall 2015): 38, repro.

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