

AMOROUS INTRIGUES AND PAINTERLY REFINEMENT

The Art of Frans van Mieris

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Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635–1681) is one of the most celebrated Dutch *fijnschilders*—“fine painters” whose elegant works of art are distinguished by meticulous brushwork, particularly in the rendering of materials. Described by his teacher Gerrit Dou as “the prince of all my pupils,” Van Mieris achieved considerable fame in his lifetime for his masterful technique. Seventeenth-century collectors of his intimate genre scenes, portraits, and allegorical works prized above all the heightened illusionism that makes these small paintings so captivating. Yet Van Mieris achieved more in his paintings than just the imitation of nature: he was especially concerned with human emotion and the way figures interact with one another. Many of his liveliest works are filled with erotic tensions and ambiguous narratives, depicting—often in a humorous way—social exchanges that reflected contemporary ideas about the rituals of love, courtship, and seduction.

THE ARTIST'S LIFE AND CAREER

Frans van Mieris was born into a family of goldsmiths in Leiden on April 16, 1635. In the early 1650s, he trained with Gerrit Dou, the most famous painter in Leiden, before studying with Abraham van den Tempel, a history and portrait painter who taught him how to render the sheen of woven fabrics. Van Mieris returned to Dou's studio shortly before 1655 and stayed there until joining the Leiden painters' Guild of Saint Luke in May 1658. He would later serve as the guild's dean. His marriage to Cunera van der Cock in the spring of 1657 produced four children, of whom the two sons Jan and Willem became painters; his grandson, Frans van Mieris the Younger, also earned his living as an artist.

One of the largest and most important Dutch cities, Leiden owed its wealth to the manufacturing of *laken*, a fine cloth made from wool. In addition, its distinguished university, the oldest center of learning in the Dutch Republic, made Leiden a major center of culture and scholarship. Artistic life flourished with the presence of such painters as Rembrandt van Rijn (who lived in the city until 1631), the group of *fijnschilders* centered around Rembrandt's student Dou, and Jan Steen, with whom Van Mieris was close friends. Aside from their shared interest in painting humorous genre scenes, the two friends were reputed to have spent much time drinking together in local taverns.

From the beginning of his career, Van Mieris found a ready market among Leiden's affluent citizens. His remarkable skill in painting fabric was perhaps all the more appreciated in a city of textile manufacturers. Yet Van Mieris' reputation quickly extended far beyond the city's borders. Among the artist's patrons were foreign rulers, such as Grand Duke Cosimo de Medici III of Florence, who visited Van Mieris on a trip to the Netherlands in 1669, and Archduke Leopold Wilhelm, who tried to persuade the artist to become his court painter in Vienna. Van Mieris' business thrived in Leiden, however, and he chose to remain in the city his entire life. When he died there in 1681, he was buried in the Church of Saint Peter alongside the city's elite.

One of the best examples of the artist's ability to capture the tangible presence of materials is the blue silk curtain in *A Trompe l'Oeil with a Garland of Flowers and a Curtain*, 1658 (FIG. 2), which Van Mieris executed with the flower specialist Adriaen van der Spelt. (*Trompe l'oeil* is a French term that means "fool the eye.") The curtain, with its sheen, folds, wrinkles, and gold-embroidered edge, is so real in appearance that one could imagine pulling it back to reveal the flowers behind it. Van Mieris completed the illusion with the carefully rendered curtain rod and black frame. At the time, curtains were commonly hung in front of paintings to protect them from dust and soot. Van Mieris, like other artists who employed this pictorial trick, therefore was playing on viewers' expectations of seeing an actual curtain suspended from a rod attached to the frame.

A Trompe l'Oeil with a Garland of Flowers and a Curtain also recalls the famous story of the artistic competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasios, two painters from classical antiquity. Zeuxis had depicted grapes so realistically that birds tried to eat them, but Parrhasios painted a curtain that Zeuxis tried to pull aside. Zeuxis thus declared Parrhasios the winner, for the curtain had fooled him—a human being, and moreover an artist—while Zeuxis' grapes had fooled only birds. Quite appropriately, even during his lifetime, Van Mieris was compared to both Zeuxis and Parrhasios.



FIG. 2 Frans van Mieris and Adriaen van der Spelt, *A Trompe l'Oeil with a Garland of Flowers and a Curtain*, 1658, oil on panel, The Art Institute of Chicago, Wirt D. Walker Fund



FIG. 3 *Sending the Boy for Beer*, c. 1655–1657, oil on panel, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

VAN MIERIS AS STORYTELLER

Like his teacher Dou, Van Mieris specialized in genre painting; most of his works are narrative scenes drawn from everyday life. They depict a wide range of Dutch society, from quacks and peasants to fashionable young ladies and soldiers. Van Mieris emulated his famous teacher's attention to detail and favored similar subject matter, but he placed a greater emphasis on telling stories and on the way figures relate to one other. In *Sending the Boy for Beer*, c. 1655–1657 (FIG. 3), an elderly woman has paused from scraping carrots to hand a coin to a boy to get some beer, while the man next to her laughingly reaches into his vest, perhaps to pull out money for his own share. Van Mieris meticulously depicted the architectural features and furnishings of a peasant interior; the grouping of carrots and kitchenware in the lower right corner is an especially lovely passage. Warm light entering the room through the windows, however, draws attention primarily to the three figures. The artist affectionately focuses on the easy interactions of these ordinary people, lending the painting an intimate and slightly humorous character.

Amorous pursuits were among the most popular genre subjects of the seventeenth century. *Brothel Scene*, c. 1658–1659 (FIG. 4), is one of Van Mieris' liveliest compositions, rich with erotic implications. What appears at first to be a charming scene of flirtation between a buxom maid

and her jolly suitor at an inn is in fact a depiction of a soldier propositioning a prostitute in a brothel, a seeming illustration of the seventeenth-century Dutch saying “Inn in front, brothel behind.” The painting offers many visual clues to interpret the nature of their relationship, such as the woman’s loosened bodice, a second couple seen beyond the doorway, linens hanging over a bed above, and, most conspicuous of all, a pair of copulating dogs to the right of the officer.

By the end of the 1650s, Van Mieris began specializing in representations of the upper classes. Flaunting his unparalleled ability to paint fabrics, he increasingly clothed his figures in colorful, expensive silks, satins, and velvets. In “*The Duet*,” 1658 (FIG. 5), a young woman in a lavish orange-red dress plays the harpsichord while accompanied by a man playing the lute. The interior is quite sumptuous, with a large landscape painting hanging on the wall, ornate architectural details on a monumental doorway, a chandelier visible in the next room, a parrot (at the time an exotic, precious bird), and the splendidly decorated harpsichord, whose maker’s name is announced in large lettering above the keyboard.

The two musicians are so absorbed in their playing that they are unaware of an approaching servant. Here music acts as a metaphor for the harmony of two people in love, a theme accentuated by the graceful and complementary poses of the two figures. Van Mieris framed them with



FIG. 4 *Brothel Scene*, c. 1658–1659, oil on panel, Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague



FIG. 5 "The Duet," 1658, oil on panel,
Staatliches Museum, Schwerin

a bright blue chair in the right foreground and a dark curtain in the upper left, creating an intimate space for their private recital. Typical of Van Mieris, the illumination adds to the refinement of this scene: for instance, the light reflecting off the woman's satin dress and the curled sheets of music.

Van Mieris' sophisticated understanding of color, light, and composition is particularly evident in a masterpiece commonly known as *The Little Dog* (COVER). The painting's subject is the playful relationship between an elegant young woman, who has just finished her morning toilet, and her pet spaniel. Much to the young woman's delight, the little dog responds to her gesture and stands on its hind legs, begging for a reward. However innocent the scene may look, amorous connotations are subtly present. Through similar themes described in emblem books (popular publications in which moralizing texts are accompanied by explanatory images), viewers of the time would have understood that the playful game between the lady and spaniel parallels the game of love, whereby a mistress teases her admirer by commanding him to do her will. Other elements in the painting would have been equally suggestive to seventeenth-century viewers, such as the maidservant straightening the bed linens.



FIG. 1 *An Old Soldier with a Pipe*, c. 1655–1657, oil on panel, Allentown Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Eugene L. Garbaty

VAN MIERIS' PAINTING TECHNIQUE

Collectors often paid dazzling prices for Van Mieris' paintings, which, though small in scale, often took hundreds of hours to finish. To create the enamel-like effect of his highly detailed pictures, Van Mieris painstakingly used tiny brushes to apply and modulate thin layers of paint so that the brushstrokes became nearly invisible. His works were made to be viewed up close where one could marvel at the perfection of his technique. Van Mieris occasionally worked on copper rather than wood—his usual support—to enhance the smoothness of his paintings' surface.

With his meticulous technique, Van Mieris was able to paint materials in an astonishingly realistic manner, a skill so highly regarded by the Dutch that they had a word for it: *stofuitdrukking* ("the rendering of textures"). In *An Old Soldier with a Pipe*, c. 1655–1657 (FIG. 1), for instance, he convincingly distinguishes among an array of materials, from the hard, light-reflecting metal breast plate to the soft fur and feather hat covering the soldier's wavy hair. Although the painting is tiny (not quite eight inches high), Van Mieris has managed nonetheless to render the veins in the soldier's hands, the grain of the wooden table and tankard, and the metal buckle clasping the man's leather belt.



FIG. 6 *Cunera van der Cock, the Artist's Wife*, c. 1657–1658, oil on vellum (?) on panel, The National Gallery, London



FIG. 7 *Agatha Paets*, 1665, oil on panel, Private collection, United States

PORTRAITURE

Although known primarily for his genre scenes, Van Mieris was also a remarkable portrait painter, executing over forty small-scale portraits throughout his career. He completed several of his wife, including the tender *Cunera van der Cock, the Artist's Wife* (FIG. 6), c. 1657–1658. Van Mieris has captured her delicate features—the thin straight nose, rosebud lips, small chin, and pale skin—in an intimate work that was painted, probably around the time of the couple's marriage, as a companion piece to a self-portrait of the artist. Originally oval in shape, the painting was later expanded to its present format, with another artist completing the added areas.

In contrast to the personal portrayal of his wife, whose distinctive features make her a recognizable individual, Van Mieris painted a number of idealized portraits of the wealthy citizens of Leiden. His polished style, so suited to the upper classes, became even more refined in the 1660s with the arrival of a midcentury vogue for timeless ideals of perfection and beauty that ultimately derived from classical antiquity. For example, Van Mieris occasionally used classically inspired settings to reflect the high status of his sitters, such as the monumental architecture and marble sculptures in the background of *Agatha Paets*, dated 1665 (FIG. 7). One of the artist's finest and most ambitious portraits, it portrays the wife of Leiden's mayor dressed fashionably in a silk gown with ornate sleeves. The smooth perfection of her creamy skin, the pleasing proportions of her features, and the elegance of her formal pose suggest that Van Mieris depicted her to conform to contemporary standards of beauty. In her right hand she holds a peach. In Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1644), an influential handbook in which abstract ideas are personified by allegorical figures, the peach refers to the heart and the peach's leaf to

the human tongue. Thus, in order to speak the truth, one's heart must be attached to the tongue in the same way that a peach is attached to the leaf.

Van Mieris was second only to Rembrandt in the number of self-portraits he executed, and one of his finest is the splendid 1667 *Self-Portrait* (FIG. 8). Here Van Mieris portrays himself as a distinguished gentleman at the peak of his success. Proud of his profession, the artist is shown with the tools of his trade: palette, brushes, and easel. Van Mieris leans on a balustrade in a pose similar to that found in several self-portraits by artists such as Titian, Dürer, and Rembrandt, and the comparison to this illustrious group was surely intended. The pose also allowed Van Mieris to advertise his exquisite rendering of fabrics, for the superbly painted satin of his sleeve catches the eye of the viewer even more than the artist's face.

ALLEGORIES AND HISTORY PAINTING

Van Mieris used his wife many times as a model in his genre scenes. She also served as the model for his allegorical *Pictura*—the personification of the art of painting—a work from 1661 (FIG. 9). Although slightly idealized, Cunera's characteristic features are recognizable. As *Pictura* she is identified by a number of attributes: a palette, brushes, and a golden chain with a mask, for masks, like paintings, imitate appearances in the natural world. The plaster cast of an antique sculpture in her arms is an explicit reference to an ancient debate over which of the arts—painting or sculpture—was better able to re-create reality. That painting could represent a sculpture convincingly was an assertion of its superiority, for sculpture could not do the reverse.



FIG. 8 *Self-Portrait*, 1667, oil on panel,
The National Trust, Polesden Lacey



FIG. 9 *The Art of Painting (Pictura)*, 1661,
oil on copper, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



FIG. 10 *A Boy Blowing Bubbles*, 1663, oil on panel,
Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague

Van Mieris paid great attention to the figure's lustrous satin garment, its surface seemingly shimmering in the light. He applied vibrant hues of blue and pink to capture its ever-changing appearance. The exceptional richness of the glossy garment stems from the copper support and from a thin layer of gold leaf applied under the paint. Van Mieris apparently used gold leaf in this way in a number of paintings; it was an unusual technique (though one used at times by Rembrandt) and indicative of his initial training as a goldsmith.

Although *Pictura* is a rare example of allegorical painting for Van Mieris, some of his genre scenes likewise contain deeper meanings. The delightful painting *A Boy Blowing Bubbles*, 1663 (FIG. 10), for instance, refers to more than just a joyful pastime of childhood. Bubbles were associated with the transience of earthly life, a meaning captured by the Latin expression "Homo bulla" ("man is a bubble"), that the Dutch philosopher Erasmus reintroduced in the sixteenth century. Like *Pictura*, *A Boy Blowing Bubbles* also may have been a visual argument that painting could imitate reality better than sculpture could. Only a virtuoso painter could create the highly illusionistic space of the window frame and render such difficult material as soap bubbles. Perhaps the most deceptive element is the snail that seems to crawl below the window over the date of the painting. The curious coloring of the flower and vine leaves is due to aging: over time the yellow pigment has broken down, leaving only the blue that had been mixed with the yellow to make the original green.

In the last decade of his career, Van Mieris executed a number of history pieces, the term used to describe scenes drawn from the Bible or mythology. One of them, *Jeroboam's Wife with the Prophet Ahijah* (FIG. 11), depicts a biblical episode from the life of Israel's first king, Jeroboam. Van Mieris chose to portray the moment when the blind prophet Ahijah tells the king's wife that her son would die and the court would be destroyed because of the king's practice of idolatry. Upon hearing the prophecy, she clutches at her heart. Van Mieris' narrative style became quite theatrical at the end of his career, as seen here in the exaggerated gestures and expressions he used to convey the wife's reaction to the horror of the prophecy.

VAN MIERIS' INFLUENCE

By the end of his short life, Van Mieris was admired as much for his refined technique as for his carefully constructed narratives. Many artists responded to his work, among them Jan Steen, Johannes Vermeer, and Gotfried Schalcken (see gallery 13a), all of whom similarly painted sumptuously dressed figures in elegant interiors. Van Mieris' impact on Dutch artistic traditions extended well into the early eighteenth century through the paintings made by his sons and grandson. While his art fell largely out of favor at the end of the nineteenth century, appreciation for it has recently risen again, helping to reestablish Van Mieris as one of the eminent artists of his time.



FIG. 11 *Jeroboam's Wife with the Prophet Ahijah*, 1671, oil on panel, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille

PROGRAMS

Concerts

Sunday, March 19, 6:30 p.m. in the West Garden Court

The Egidius Kwartet, a vocal ensemble from the Netherlands, performs the music of Tielman Susato and other seventeenth-century Dutch composers.

Concerts at the National Gallery of Art are free and open to the public. Admittance to the West Garden Court is on a first-come, first-seated basis, beginning at 6:00 p.m.

Lecture Programs

February 26, 2:00 p.m., East Building Auditorium

Frans van Mieris: The Artist and His Reputation
Frederik J. Duparc, director, Royal Picture Gallery
Mauritshuis

Courtship and Seduction in the Art of Frans van Mieris
Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., curator of northern baroque
paintings, National Gallery of Art

Exhibition Tours

March 2, 3, 4, 7, and 9 at noon, West Building

Amorous Intrigues and Painterly Refinement: The Art of Frans van Mieris (50 minutes) led by Philip Leonard

Free one-hour tours for groups of twenty or more adults may be booked three weeks in advance. Call (202) 842-6247.

Film on Van Mieris

A twelve-minute introductory film about Van Mieris' art is shown in the Micro Gallery in the West Building. It is produced by Bobcat TV for the Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis and made possible by Mr. and Mrs. Thomas S. Kaplan. *In Dutch with English subtitles.*

COVER: *The Little Dog* (detail), c. 1660, oil on panel, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated, 256-page catalogue, *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681*, published by Waanders Publishers. Hardcover \$50.

On the Web

A list of links to related resources and activities is available at www.nga.gov/exhibitions/vanmierisinfo.htm.

General Information

Hours: Monday–Saturday, 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Sunday 11:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m.

Gallery Web site: www.nga.gov

For information about accessibility to galleries and public areas, assistive listening devices, sign-language interpretation, and other services and programs, inquire at an Art Information Desk, consult the Web site, or call (202) 842-6690 / TDD line (202) 842-6176.

Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all of its programs is free of charge, except as noted.

Brochure written by Margaret Doyle, department of exhibition programs, and Jephtha Dullaart, department of northern baroque paintings, and produced by the department of exhibition programs and the publishing office. Copyright © 2006 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington

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