



Frans van Mieris

(Leiden 1635 – 1681 Leiden)

How to cite

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Frans van Mieris was born in Leiden on 16 April 1635 to the Remonstrant goldsmith and diamond cutter Jan Bastiaensz van Mieris (1586–1650) and his second wife, Christina van Garbartijn.^[1] Van Mieris came from a family of gold- and silversmiths; two uncles practiced this craft, as did his older cousin Willem Fransz van Mieris (ca. 1600–56). In 1645 Jan apprenticed his son to this cousin for six years, presumably intending him to continue the family tradition.^[2]

It soon became apparent, however, that Van Mieris's talents lay elsewhere. He turned out to be a gifted draftsman, and upon the insistence of the cloth merchant and, later, poet and calligraphic glass engraver Willem van Heemskerck (1613–92), Van Mieris's father sent him to study with the drawing master and glass engraver Abraham Toorenvliet (d. 1656), father of the painter Jacob Toorenvliet (1640–1719).^[3] Van Mieris's command of drawing developed so well under Toorenvliet that according to Arnold Houbraken, "his father decided to surrender him entirely to art, to which end he delivered him to the renowned Gerrit Dou."^[4] Dou quickly dubbed Van Mieris "the prince among his pupils, and said that he carried off the crown from them all."^[5] Once Van Mieris had mastered the art of drawing, his father apprenticed him to Abraham van den Tempel (1622/23–72) to "familiarize him with a broad handling of the brush."^[6] Nevertheless, given that Van Mieris was "more inclined to painting in a small format and in fine detail, he returned to Gerrit Dou for instruction."^[7]

We do not know when Van Mieris completed his training, but he was probably still quite young. In any case, it was the sixteen-year-old "Frans" who presented the members of the gold- and silversmiths' guild a painting of Eloy, their patron saint.^[8] His earliest dated work, the famous *Doctor's Visit*, originated in 1657 and was preceded by at least fifteen pictures.^[9] Most of them diligently emulate his teacher Dou. Yet he soon abandoned the excessive detailing and countless accessories so typical of Dou to focus increasingly on the interaction among the figures, thereby conveying a liveliness generally absent in Dou's work.^[10] Van Mieris rapidly developed an entirely personal style, which first manifested itself fully in the aforementioned *Doctor's Visit*.

Despite all these signs of early independence, Van Mieris did not join the Guild of Saint Luke until 14 May 1658.^[11] He had married Cunera van der Cock (1629/30–1700) one year earlier, on 15 March 1657, six days after the birth of their first daughter, Christina (1657–85). The couple would have four more children, including Jan (1660–90) and Willem (1662–1747), who followed in their father's footsteps.^[12]

The many extant paintings from the early 1650s confirm Houbraken's comment "that [Van Mieris] found admirers and patrons from the very beginning."^[13] Among these affluent Leiden citizens was the town councilor Cornelis Paets (1636–94), who had assembled a splendid collection of paintings and was an amateur painter who had learned "the art of drawing and painting in his youth" from Van Mieris.^[14] Paets commissioned Van Mieris to portray his wife, Agatha, and the painting was "esteemed by all art lovers as one of his consummate works of art."^[15] Paets also owned "a young lady swooning, as well as a doctor and an old woman weeping."^[16] Quite exceptionally, for the commission of his wife's portrait, Paets paid Van Mieris by the hour, an arrangement that ultimately cost him 1,500 guilders. This may have been the painting that French envoy Balthasar de Monconys (1611–65) saw Van Mieris working on in 1663, noting in his diary that he could hardly believe the high price the patron was willing to pay for it.^[17] Cosimo III de' Medici (1642–1723), Grand Duke of Tuscany, offered Paets more than 3,000 guilders for this work on several occasions, but according to Weyerman, this was "fortunately in vain," for "this would have been a great loss for the city of Leiden, as that magnificent work of art is deemed an inimitable wonder by all connoisseurs."^[18] The fabulously wealthy merchant and regent Isaac

Gerard (1616–94) was also a great aficionado of Van Mieris. He owned four expensive pictures, possibly including *Man Offering Oysters to a Young Woman* and *The Sleeping Officer*, both now considered outstanding works.^[19]

His most important patron, however, was Franciscus de le Boë Sylvius (1614–72). In 1658 this former “huisarts” (physician) was appointed a professor of chemistry and medicine at the Leiden Academy, and soon made a name for himself far beyond the country’s borders.^[20] Sylvius was the proud owner of a collection that ultimately counted 185 paintings. Among them were ten, or possibly eleven, pictures by Dou, and seven by Van Mieris, including a double portrait of Sylvius and his wife, Margareta Lucretia Schlezer (d. 1669).^[21] Sylvius held Van Mieris in such high esteem that according to Houbraken he regularly requested “that any work that he [Van Mieris] created would be for him, or that he might be granted the privilege of offering a price commensurate with what someone else wanted to give.”^[22]

Sylvius also acted as an agent for Van Mieris. For instance, in 1660 Van Mieris painted the celebrated *Cloth Shop* “through the grace of the gentleman mentioned, his patron” for the art gallery of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm (1614–62) in Vienna, “which so delighted the Archduke that he paid him 1,000 guilders for it.”^[23] Leopold, moreover, tried to persuade the artist to work at the court in Vienna for an astonishingly lucrative remuneration—an offer Van Mieris nevertheless declined. Furthermore, Sylvius brought Van Mieris into contact with Cosimo III when he visited Leiden in 1667 and 1669. The Grand Duke, too, was so impressed by Van Mieris’s work that he engaged the artist to paint five pictures, including a self-portrait, for his famous portrait gallery of celebrities.^[24]

Despite the fact that notable collectors and princely patrons were prepared to pay dazzling prices for his work, Van Mieris repeatedly faced financial difficulties. In 1666 he even had to pledge part of his property as security to defray a substantial debt.^[25] These predicaments were sometimes related to arrears in rent (Van Mieris never bought a house), which is surprising given that the amounts were generally but a fraction of what he must have earned from painting on an annual basis.^[26] That he regularly had money problems also emerges from his active correspondence with Giovacchino Guasconi (1636–99), the envoy of Cosimo III, in which Van Mieris frequently requested advances even though he never delivered the commissioned works on time.

His financial difficulties were also partly related to excessive drinking; at least this is suggested by a debt he owed an innkeeper in 1674.^[27] Van Mieris regularly imbibed too freely. In a letter in 1675 Guasconi wrote that Van Mieris turned up for an appointment blind drunk and had left behind at a tavern the painting he was supposed to bring to the envoy.^[28] When it came to payment for this painting, Van Mieris’s wife, Cunera, insisted that the money be given to her because she feared that otherwise it would evaporate “like acid on an etching plate.”^[29] Houbraken suggests that Van Mieris regularly sought the company of his good friend Jan Steen (1625/26–79) who “fell deeper and deeper into drinking,” whereby “it also sometimes transpired that our Mieris tended to have one too many.”^[30] One cannot escape the impression that Van Mieris had a drinking problem, also because the quality of his paintings seems to have diminished somewhat toward the end of his life. This, however, in no way affected the great demand for his work, which remained constant. Frans van Mieris died on 12 March 1681, and was buried in the Pieterskerk a few days later.

Endnotes

1. The date of birth is mentioned by Houbraken, who was informed by the artist's son Willem van Mieris.
2. For the estate inventory of Willem Frasz van Mieris and his wife, Beatrix van Meerdenburch, see Regionaal Archief Leiden, Notarial Archives, Notary N. Paedts, inv. 676, deed 33, 13 February 1665.
3. Willem Jacobs van Heemskerck was a cloth merchant by trade, but is now known primarily for his diamond-point calligraphic engraving on glass vessels. That the Van Heemskerck and Van Mieris families were closely acquainted is evidenced by the commissions extended by members of the Van Heemskerck family to all four Van Mierises. Willem Jacobs van Heemskerck engaged Frans van Mieris the Elder in 1663 to paint the portrait of his son Jacob. See Rudolf E.O. Ekkart, "Het portret van Jacob van Heemskerck," *Leids Jaarboekje* 77 (1985): 47–51. Subsequently, in 1687 Jan van Mieris was engaged to portray Willem Jacobs himself (Museum de Lakenhal, Leiden) and his twin daughters, Maria and Bartha (art dealer Johnny van Haften, London, catalogue 1997, no. 24). Grandson Leonard van Heemskerck, finally, owned two paintings by Willem van Mieris, including "Een Vrouwe Pourtraitje, in't haar gekapt, met een wit satijne Jakje aan" (A portrait of a woman, wearing a cap and a white satin jacket). See Theodoor Hermann Lunsingh Scheurleer, Cornelia Willemijn Fock, A.J. van Dissel, eds., *Het Rapenburg: Geschiedenis van een Leidse gracht* (Leiden, 1992), 6: 135, no. 7. He also had his portrait painted by Frans van Mieris the Younger, which after his death was meant to be given "aan de Regenten van het Pesthuys met versoeck het selve een plaats te vergunnen in de Regentenkamer" (to the regents of the Leper Home with the request that it be granted a place in the Regent Chamber). Regionaal Archief Leiden, Notarial Archives, Notary J. van Stipriaan, inv. 2286, deed 20, 5 March 1772.
4. "Zyn Vader besloot hem geheel de Konst op te offeren, tot welken einde hy hem bestelde by den berugten Gerard Dou." Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, 1980), 3: 2.
5. "Den Prins van zyne Leerlingen, en zeide: dat hy de kroon van hun allen weg droeg." Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, 1980), 3: 2.
6. "Aan een kloeke penceelbehandeling te [laten] gewennen." Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, 1980), 3: 2.
7. "Meer toe het kleen en uitvoerig schilderen geneigt [was], keerde hy weder tot het onderwys van Gerard Dou." Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, 1980), 3: 2–3.
8. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder* (Doornspijk, 1981), 1: 162.
9. *The Doctor's Visit*, signed and dated 1657 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna); Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder* (Doornspijk, 1981), 1: no. 20 I.

10. Peter Hecht, ed. *De Hollandse fijnschilders: Van Gerard Dou tot Adriaen van der Werff* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Amsterdam, 1989), 15.
11. He may have been a member earlier. The administration of the Guild of Saint Luke was kept only barely, if at all, in 1656 and 1657. The guild contribution in these years was not collected, and no new members were registered. On the quality of the guild's administration, see Piet Bakker, "Crisis? Welke crisis? Enkele kanttekeningen bij de economische neergang van de schilderkunst in Leiden na 1660," *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 27 (2011): 232–70.
12. See the biographies of the painters Jan van Mieris and Willem van Mieris in this catalogue.
13. "Dat hy van den beginne af aan beminnaars en begunstigers vont." Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, 1980), 3: 2.
14. "In zyne jeugt de konst van Teekenen, en Schilderen." Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, 1980), 3: 4.
15. "By alle Konstkenners voor een van zyne uytmundendste Konststukjes geschat." Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, 1980), 3: 4. *Portrait of Agatha Paets*, signed and dated 1665 (Private Collection); Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder* (Doornspijk, 1981), 2: no. 60. Also preserved are two drawings of her son Willem Paets (1665–1740) as a child, who later held the office of burgomaster several times, as his father had done. *Willem Paets in a Cradle*, 1665, black chalk (Fondation Custodia – Collection Frits Lugt, Paris), and *Portrait of Willem Paets as a Child*, 1665, black chalk (British Museum, London); Quentin Buvelot, Otto Naumann, and Eddy de Jongh, *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), 169–75, nos. 35–36.
16. "Een jong Juffertje dat in een flaaute leit, nevens een Medecynmeester en een schreiende oude Vrouw." This description is most likely of *The Doctor's Visit*, signed and dated 1667 (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles); Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder* (Doornspijk, 1981), 2: no. 71 I.
17. Quentin Buvelot, Otto Naumann, and Eddy de Jongh, *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), 19.
18. "Gelukkig vergeefs ... die vervoering [zou] een groot verlies zyn geweest voor de Stad Leyden, dewyl dat heerlyk Konststukje als een onnavolglyk wonder wort geschat by alle konstkenners." Jacob Campo Weyerman, *De levensbeschryvingen der Nederlandsche konstschilders en konstschilderessen* (The Hague, 1729), 3: 344.
19. Quentin Buvelot, Otto Naumann, and Eddy de Jongh, *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), 18. This is *Man Offering Oysters to a Young Girl*, signed and dated 1659 (State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg); Otto

Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder* (Doornspijk, 1981), 2: no. 27, and *The Sleeping Officer, ca. 1666* (Alte Pinakothek, Munich); Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder* (Doornspijk, 1981), 2: no. 65. From 1672 on, Isaac Gerard sat on the Leiden town council. He lived on the Rapenburg and owned several country estates. When an inventory of his possessions was drawn up in 1697, he was worth more than 450,000 guilders. See Stadsarchief Amsterdam, Notarial Archives, Notary D. van der Groe, inv. 4264, fol. 1-52v, 27 August 1697. The inventory is transcribed in Theodoor Hermann Lunsingh Scheurleer, Cornelia Willemijn Fock, and A.J. van Dissel, eds., *Het Rapenburg: Geschiedenis van een Leidse gracht* (Leiden, 1989), 4: 494–503 (Appendix II). The painters Jacob Toorenvliet and Cornelis Berckhey valued the approximately 200 paintings at more than 6,000 guilders. Gerard owned four pictures by Frans van Mieris with an estimated value, respectively, of 80 guilders (“een conterfeitsel” [a portrait]), 500 guilders (“een stuckje met drie figurtjes” [a picture with three little figures]), 660 guilders (“een slapent mannetje” [a man sleeping]; possibly *The Sleeping Officer*), and 750 guilders (“een stuckje daer oesters gegeten worden” [a picture of oysters being eaten]; possibly *Man Offering Oysters to a Young Girl*). The latter three pictures were by far the most expensive pieces in Gerard’s collection, with fourth place going to a “naghtstuckje” (nocturnal scene) assessed at 300 guilders. In addition, two *tronies* by Dou were valued together at 60 guilders.

20. Until his appointment in 1658, Sylvius lived in Amsterdam, the last year as widowed from his first wife, Anna de Ligne (1627–57). In 1667 he took a second wife, in Leiden, Magdalena Schlezer (d. 1669), who was born in Kleve but resided in Utrecht. The couple soon took possession of a house on the Rapenburg (no. 31) that was built for Sylvius; in 1673, a year after his death, it was worth 11,000 guilders. Sylvius had earlier lived in a rented house on the Rapenburg (no. 43) for 800 guilders per year. Theodoor Hermann Lunsingh Scheurleer, Cornelia Willemijn Fock, and A.J. van Dissel, eds. *Het Rapenburg: Geschiedenis van een Leidse gracht* (Leiden, 1988), 3: 270.
21. Not mentioned is the *Portrait of a 52-Year-Old Man*, signed and dated 1665 (The Leiden Collection, New York), which according to Naumann could be the likeness of Sylvius. See the entry in this catalogue. For the estate inventory, see Regionaal Archief Leiden, Notarial Archives, Notary A. den Oosterlingh, inv. 1073a, deed 66, 6 September 1673. This inventory is transcribed in Theodoor Hermann Lunsingh Scheurleer, Cornelia Willemijn Fock, and A.J. van Dissel, eds. *Het Rapenburg: Geschiedenis van een Leidse gracht* (Leiden, 1988), 3: 270. Commentary on the collection and hanging of the pictures in the various rooms is provided in Theodoor Hermann Lunsingh Scheurleer, Cornelia Willemijn Fock, and A.J. van Dissel, eds. *Het Rapenburg: Geschiedenis van een Leidse gracht* (Leiden, 1988), 3: 284–95, and Eric Jan Sluijter, “‘All Striving to Adorne Their Houses with Costly Pieces.’ Two Case Studies of Paintings in Wealthy Interiors,” in *Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Mariët Westermann (Exh cat. Denver, Denver Art Museum; Newark, Newark Museum) (Zwolle, 2002), 105–16. Sylvius’s picture collection was divided in 1676; half went to his brother, the merchant Jacob de le Boë, living in Hamburg, and the other half to the children of his sister Rachel Rouyer. The Hamburg works were seen by the painter Godfrey Kneller who, prior to his departure for England, spent some time in Hamburg, where he painted the portraits of Sylvius’s brother Jacob and his family, among others. See the biography of Godfrey Kneller in this catalogue. Joachim

von Sandrart, *Joachim von Sandrarts Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste von 1675: Leben der berühmten Maler, Bildhauer und Baumeister*, ed. Arthur R. Peltzer, 350–51 (Nuremburg. 1675–79; reprint, Munich, 1925), 350–51.

22. “Dat al wat hy maakte voor hem mogt wezen, of hy keur hebben om het zelve te naasten tot zoodanig een prys als ymant anders daar voor wilde geven.” Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, 1980), 3: 3. Buvelot’s explanation of this quote is that Sylvius paid Van Mieris a fixed fee for the right of first refusal, as we know was the case of the Swedish diplomat Pieter Spiering with respect to Gerrit Dou. See the biography of Gerrit Dou in this catalogue; Quentin Buvelot, Otto Naumann, and Eddy de Jongh, *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), 16–17. Houbraken, however, speaks of “versocht,” or request, and his words are difficult to interpret as anything other than that Van Mieris was entirely at liberty to accept or reject such a request.
23. “Door de gunst van gemelden Heer zynen Mecenas ... het welk den Aarthertog zoo wel beviel dat hy hem daar voor dede betalen duizent gulden.” Quentin Buvelot, Otto Naumann, and Eddy de Jongh, *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), *The Cloth Shop*, signed and dated 1660 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna); Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder* (Doornspijk, 1981), 2: no. 31.
24. *The Old Lover*, ca. 1669? (Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder* [Doornspijk, 1981], 2: no. 98); *The Family Concert*, signed and dated 1675 (ibid., no. 102); *A Man Playing the Theorbo (Self-Portrait?)*, signed and dated 1676 (ibid., no. 107); *Self-Portrait as a Painter*, 1676 (ibid., no. 110); *Self-Portrait of the Artist Holding a Small Painting*, ca. 1676 (ibid., no. 111). At present, all five paintings are in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. See Quentin Buvelot, Otto Naumann, and Eddy de Jongh., *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), 215n60.
25. Regionaal Archief Leiden, Notarial Archives, Notary P. van Scharpenbrant, inv. 1099, deed 40, 7 September 1666.
26. For example, in 1659 he rented a house on the Korte Oude Vest “omtrent de brouwerij van den Hamer” (in the neighborhood of the Hamer brewery)—directly across from the workshop of his former teacher Dou—for one year for 220 guilders. In 1672, he had a debt of 530 guilders because he was two years in arrears for the rent of a house on the Houtmarkt. In 1678 he again rented a house on the Houtmarkt, this time for 138 guilders per year. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder* (Doornspijk, 1981), 1: 166, 175, 187.
27. Eric Jan Sluijter, Marlies Enklaar, and Paul Nieuwenhuizen, eds., *Leidse fijnschilders: Van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge, 1630–1760* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Museum de Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 1988), 127, refers to Regionaal Archief Leiden, Notarial Archives, Notary P.G. van Tielt, inv. 914, deed 124, p. 18.
28. Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder* (Doornspijk, 1981), 1: 178; Quentin Buvelot, Otto Naumann, and Eddy de Jongh, *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis;

Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), 23.

29. “Zoals zuur op een etsplaat.” Quentin Buvelot, Otto Naumann, and Eddy de Jongh., *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), 23.
30. “Meer en meer tot den drank verviel ... ’t ook somtyds wel eens [gebeurde], dat onze Mieris zig in de maat van drinken vergiste.” Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 3: 7.

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