

cat. no. 6

Frans van Mieris the Elder
1635 – Leiden – 1681

A Candlelit Interior with a Woman Searching her Garment for Fleas

Oil on panel
27 x 20 cm.

Provenance:
France, private collection

Frans van Mieris the Elder, already internationally renowned in his own time, was the son of the Leiden goldsmith Jan van Mieris (1585/86-1650).¹ Destined to follow in his father's trade, Jan apprenticed his son to his relative, the goldsmith Willem van Mieris, at the age of 10. However, the boy's abilities clearly lay elsewhere, and soon he was taking drawing lessons from the glass painter and draughtsman Abraham Toorenvliet (c. 1620-1692). Van Mieris then moved to the studio of Gerard Dou (1613-1675), the founder of the school of Leiden *fijnschilders*, and subsequently studied with Abraham van den Tempel (1622/23-1672). Before 1655 he was back with Dou who, recognising Van Mieris' exceptional talent,

called him 'the prince among my pupils'. In around 1656, Van Mieris met Cunera van der Cock, whom he married after their daughter Christina was born, in the spring of 1657. The couple had two more daughters and two sons, Willem and Jan, who would become successful painters themselves. On 14 May 1658 Van Mieris joined the Leiden Guild of St Luke, of which he would later become Dean. Although the earliest signed work known today is dated 1657, several works can be dated even earlier on stylistic grounds. During the next twelve years Van Mieris produced a steady flow of masterpieces, mostly genre works, but also portraits and a handful of history pieces. While initially leaning heavily on Dou's



subject matter and style, Van Mieris quickly developed his own artistic language. While maintaining – and even surpassing Dou's meticulous achievements – he expanded his colour palette and the possibilities of light effects, emphasising human interaction and sometimes adding a frivolous touch, all betraying his intimate knowledge of the work of colleagues (and competitors) such as Gabriel Metsu (1629-1667) and Gerard ter Borch (1617-1681).² Not surprisingly, Van Mieris found a wealthy clientele among the Leiden elite, who were willing to pay large sums for his work. Internationally, too, his work was in great demand. Most significant is the interest of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo III de' Medici, who visited Van Mieris (whom he lists alongside Rembrandt (1606-1669) and Dou as famous painters) during his tour through the Republic, commissioning various works from him over the years. Archduke Leopold Wilhelm of Austria was so pleased with Van Mieris' work that he invited him to become his court painter, an offer Van Mieris refused. In spite of this, Van Mieris had money problems throughout his career, not least because of excessive alcohol consumption. The quality of Van Mieris' work of the 1670s is less consistent than his previous efforts. His treatment seems harder, and one discerns an inclination towards a more polished elegance. After Van Mieris' untimely death at age 45, his two sons continued in their father's footsteps.

The discovery of a new Frans van Mieris is a rather exceptional affair.³ The present work, which recently surfaced in France and has never been published before, thus adds significantly to Van Mieris' oeuvre, specifically to a qualified group of candlelight scenes by his hand into which the present work fits neatly, as will be demonstrated. In the foreground of a dark interior, a young woman rests her right elbow on a tabletop. The light of a candle in a candle holder, standing on the same tabletop, illuminates her. While a delicate still life is formed behind the candle of a glass vase with a piece of cloth stuffed in its neck, and what seems to be the handle and part of the body of a tin tankard, a leather canteen hanging above the table is lit by the flame below. Once accustomed to the dim light, the outlines of the interior space become apparent. To the right of a central bed a passage with an arched roof leads to a doorway and an adjacent room, dimly lit by another candle, which faintly illuminates a bundle of onions and a painting on the right wall. Underneath this painting, in front of the passage, a man seated on a chair has dozed off. The woman, whose red and brown striped dress is warmly lit by the light of the candle, has pulled down her *décolletage* a little, enough to expose her right nipple, just above the edge of her inner garment. For all this candid intimacy, the young girl pays no

attention to us beholders. Instead, she seems fully concentrated with her own *décolletage*, more precisely with searching herself for fleas. Her gaze directed downwards (not un-reminiscent of Vermeer's *Milkmaid*), she pulls away her garment from her bosom with her right hand and thumb, while touching her breast with her left hand, her little finger graciously pointing outwards. The stilled atmosphere, the delicate hand eye coordination and the somewhat risqué subject matter muster a tranquil, voyeuristic admiration in the spectator, as much towards the girl as towards Van Mieris' superb skills.

The subject of a male or female searching him or herself for fleas had been popular with Netherlandish artists for a long time – in the works of, for example, Cornelis Saftleven (1607-1681), Harmen Hals (1611-1669) and Adriaen van Oostade (1610-1685) – and could thus boast a rich pictorial tradition containing a variety of meanings, ranging between solicitous mothers de-fleeing children, grubby peasants checking their garments, and allegorical works depicting the sense of Touch.⁴ However, the flea had another, more specific connotation. Already in antiquity the bug was associated with eroticism. Following the *Eligia de Pulice*, the 'Elegy about the Flea' by the pseudo Ovid, a whole genre of 'flea-poetry' flourished, which glorified the flea's habitat in between the sheets, its accessibility to the female body's intimate parts, and its ability to sting, as a metaphor for intercourse. In some cases poets even declared their desire to be a flea. Sixteenth and seventeenth century flea poetry continued the concept, most famously in John Donne's



Fig. 1 Gerard van Honthorst, *The Flea Hunt*, c. 1622, oil on canvas, 131 x 195.5 cm., Dayton, The Dayton Art Institute

The Flea, published in around 1610.⁵ In the visual arts, the addition of candlelight to the flea theme would prove a fertile niche, since it enhanced associations with the night, intimacy, and ultimately with nightly visitors and sex. Already in the 1620s, Gerard van Honthorst (1592-1656) had tried his hand on the subject, depicting a procuress assisting a half-naked courtesan while two men covertly watch the scene (fig. 1). Others followed in his wake.⁶ From this perspective Van Mieris' work – although distinctly different from Honthorst's painting – gains new meaning. While Van Mieris deliberately refrains from giving all too obvious hints, we realise we are not merely witnessing an innocent young woman, but rather we are spying upon a loose woman,



Fig. 2 Frans van Mieris, *A Boy Smoking*, black chalk on parchment, 20.5 x 16.2 cm., Paris, Fondation Custodia

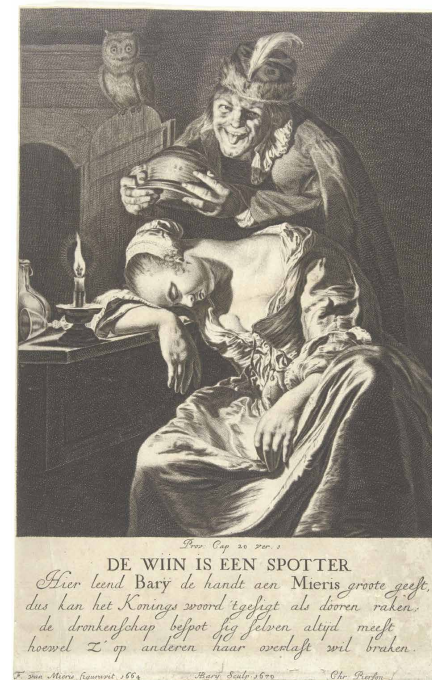


Fig. 3 Hendrick Bary after Frans van Mieris, *Wine is a Mocker*, 1670, engraving, 29 x 19.3 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

a prostitute in a brothel after hours. Tellingly, the contemporary poem *Curse against the Fleas* by Jacob Westerbaen, published in 1672, deals with similar content, being written from the viewpoint of a man in a brothel. As the weather does not allow for him to continue on his way, one of the 'damsel-creatures' leads him to her bed. But as he lays down



Fig. 4 Frans van Mieris, *Woman Playing a Lute*, 1665, oil on panel, 22 x 17.5 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

a flea bites him, and he cries that the bug has got the wrong person: 'It's not to the damsel / That you offer your point [...] Since your teeth are clamping me / You don't find damsel breasts.'⁷

One can imagine how keenly interested Van Mieris must have been in the then still marginal subtheme, especially given his predilection for the candlelit scene and the artistic and narrative opportunities which it offered. Van Mieris, no doubt inspired by the recent exertions by Dou in that field, had embraced the candlelit scene early on, when he



Fig. 5 Frans van Mieris, *Lady Sealing a Letter*, 1667, oil on panel, 27 x 20 cm., United States, private collection

was still under his master's tutelage. Two drawings, *A Boy Examining Coins by the Light of a Lantern* and *A Boy Smoking* (fig. 2), both executed in around 1655, show the young artist's interest in observing the chiaroscuro effects of artificial light.⁸ During the 1660s, the decade generally regarded as Van Mieris' most successful period, the number of candle light scenes increased. The drawing *Woman Reading by Candle Light*⁹ dates from around 1662, while in 1664 Van Mieris produced a now lost drawing, engraved under the title *De Wiin is een spotter* ('Wine is a Mocker') by the printmaker Hendrick Bary (1640-1707) in



Fig. 6 Frans van Mieris, *Lady Writing a Letter by Candle Light*, 1670, oil on panel, 16 x 12 cm., private collection

1670 (fig. 3).¹⁰ With *Woman Holding a Lute* of 1665 in the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum (fig. 4),¹¹ the *Lady Sealing a Letter* of 1667 (fig. 5)¹² and the *Lady Writing a Letter by Candle Light* dated 1670 (fig. 6), Van Mieris ventured into painted candle light scenes as well.

Although Van Mieris returned to candle light scenes on a few occasions during the last decade of his career, the cluster described here provides the correct context for the Lilian work. Above all, these works – especially the paintings – share the same sophisticated rendering of light and

shadow effects, and a similar treatment of the different fabrics of the protagonist's clothes. While thematically all different to a certain extent, the works in general all share the same pictorial characteristics: a seated male or female leaning on a table, engaging in one or another form of (in)activity, illuminated by a candle standing on the table, or – in one case – an oil lamp. Yet on a more specific level, too, these works show a conspicuous feature in common. Three of the works – *A Boy Smoking*, *Wine is a Mocker* and *Lady Sealing a Letter* – share a foreground scheme wholly comparable with that of the present work: a table on the left, on which there stands a candle stick with a candle accompanied by a small still life, as the protagonist leans his or her right elbow upon the tabletop.¹³ In two of these works – *A Boy Smoking* and *Wine is a Mocker* – we even see the same candle stick found in the present work (fig. 7a-c). Another, seemingly peculiar element in the Lilian work, a thin black vertical *repoussoir* edge on the far left side of the panel, is found likewise in *A Boy Smoking*. The Lilian work further shares with *Lady Sealing a Letter* exactly the same outline and execution of the background: a huge, sketchily rendered dark four poster bed, and to the right an arched passage leading to another room, enlivened by an indistinct figure (the sleeping man in the Lilian work, a female servant in the *Lady Sealing a Letter*), while a second candle provides a minimal light.¹⁴ What is more, the two panels are equally rounded at the top and both measure 20 x 27 cm. While in his paintings Van Mieris chose orange and red clothing for all four ladies, thus cleverly maximising the beautiful warm tonality to be expected of the candlelight, it is the clothing in the *Wine is a Mocker* print that corresponds most closely with that in the present work. The shape and simplicity of the girl's dress, its long, diagonal, sweeping fold, the result of one knee being lifted up; and the low neckline with the pushed up bosom all feel akin to those seen in the Lilian work.¹⁵

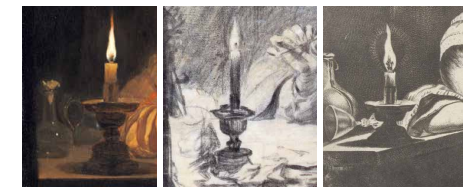


Fig. 7a-c Cat. no. 6, figs. 2, 3, details



Fig. 8 Gerard Valck after Michiel van Musscher, *Girl Searching her Clothes for Fleas by Candle Light*, mezzotint, 34.5 x 25 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



Fig. 9 Cornelis Dusart, *Girl Searching her Clothes for Fleas by Candle Light*, mezzotint, 19 x 13.9 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

Never repetitive, Van Mieris continuously sought for thematic variation and pictorial modulation, ever avoiding the cliché, emulating both other artists and himself, every time with astonishing, original results. Given the multiple interrelations within Van Mieris' oeuvre, he likely executed the present work in around 1665-1667. While Van Mieris was the first *finjschilder* to treat the theme, others followed. Candlelight specialist *pur sang* Godfried Schalcken (1643-1706) must have been aware of the present work as a Paris sale description of 1907 mentions a remarkably similar panel by his hand.¹⁶ A mezzotint by Gerard Valck (1651/52-1726) after a now lost painting by Michiel van Musscher (1645-1705), shows that the latter also treated the subject in a similar fashion (fig. 8). They were in turn succeeded by younger artists such as Arnold Boonen (1669-1727)¹⁷ and Cornelis Dusart (1660-1704), who appropriated the theme for one of his own mezzotints (fig. 9). While none of these efforts are without merit, they all remain tributary to Van Mieris' earlier, freshly surfaced achievement.

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Notes

- 1 Biography based on: Q. Buvelot 'De reputatie van Frans van Mieris' and O. Naumann, 'De stilistische ontwikkeling in het werk van Frans van Mieris', in: Q. Buvelot, *Frans van Mieris 1635-1681*, exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis, Washington, National Gallery of Art 2005-2006, pp. 12-27.
- 2 O. Naumann, in: *The Hague/Washington 2005-2006*, p. 32, where the author discusses emulation in relation to Van Mieris.
- 3 I thank Otto Naumann for endorsing the attribution to Frans van Mieris the Elder of the present *Candlelit Interior with a Woman Searching her Garment for Fleas*, after first hand inspection, September 2015. Expertise on request.
- 4 See for instance: E. de Jongh, G. Luijten, *Mirror of everyday life: genre prints in the Netherlands 1550-1700*, exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum 1997, cat. no. 79.
- 5 See: J.F. Moffitt, 'La Femme à la puce: the textual background of seventeenth-century painted 'leas-hunts'', in: *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 110 (1987), pp. 99-103.
- 6 See for Honthorst's takes on the subject: R. Judson, R.E.O. Ekkart, *Gerrit van Honthorst 1592-1652*, Doornspijk 1999, pp. 198-200, cat. nos. 257, 258, with reference to the subject's erotic connotations. Another early example is by Pieter Codde, *Woman Catching Fleas by Candle Light*, oil on panel, 27 x 24 cm., Bad Bentheim, private collection. In France, the theme is picked up on by Georges de la Tour, *La Femme à la puce*, c. 1638, oil on canvas, 123.3 x 89 cm., Nancy, Musée Lorrain.
- 7 J. Westerbaen, *Alle de Gedichten van Jacob Westerbaen, ridder, heer van Brandwijk en Cybland 46*, The Hague 1672, pp. 44-446: 'Het is de loffer niet Die ghy uw punten biedt [...] Daer my uw tanden klemmen Vint ghy geen loffe-memmer'.
- 8 See: O. Naumann, 'Frans van Mieris as a Draughtsman', in: *Master Drawings* 16/1 (1978), pp. 3-34, cat. nos 5, 15.
- 9 See: *The Hague/Washington 2005-2006*, p. 194, fig. 42c, p. 241, no. 34.
- 10 The caption underneath the print reads 'Van Mieris figuravit 1664 / H Barij sculp. 1670'. The term 'figuravit' clearly indicates that the print was made after a drawing, as opposed to the term 'pinxit', painted, which is found on many other prints by Bary after the paintings of other painters. See: Naumann 1978, cat. no. 24 for a drawing copied after the lost original.
- 11 See for this work and its restoration: L. Nijkamp, Z. Benders, 'Nieuw licht op een nachtstuk van Frans van Mieris', in: *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 55 (2007), pp. 208-217.
- 12 *The Hague/Washington 2005-2006*, cat. no. 41.
- 13 Naumann 1978, cat. no. 24, considers the drawn copy of *Wine is a Mocker* faithful to the original. Since that drawing is not mirror-imaged to the print by Bary, one can assume that neither was the lost original.
- 14 Clearly the indistinct background scene with dim candlelight was part of Van Mieris' repertoire, for we come across it again in the Rijksmuseum's *Woman Holding a Lute*.
- 15 The diagonal drapery in the dress is found more often in Van Mieris' oeuvre. Especially similar, compositionally, is his *Woman Playing the Lute*, 1663, oil on panel, 22 x 17 cm., present whereabouts unknown. See: O. Naumann, *Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635-1681)*, 2 vols., Doornspijk 1981, 2, cat. no. 53.
- 16 Martin Rikoff sale, Paris, 4 December 1907, lot 18: 'La Chercheuse de puces. Une chandelle, brûlant dans un flambeau massif, vient éclairer le visage de la jeune femme. Celle-ci écarte de ses deux mains son corsage entr'ouvert sur la poitrine et scrute des yeux, avec une grande attention, les plis de l'étoffe. Signé à gauche sous le flambeau. Bois. Haut., 28 cent.; larg., 23 cent.' See also T. Beherman, *Godfried Schalcken*, Paris 1988, p. 399, cat. no. 198.
- 17 A 'femme occupée à chercher ses puces à la lueur d'une lampe' by Boonen was offered at a sale in Ghent, Fernand, 25 July 1801, lot 88, 10 x 8.5 in.

