

Willem van Mieris and His First Model: Agneta Chapman as the Morgan *Flora*

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Figure 1

WILLEM VAN
MIERIS

Agneta Chapman
(the Artist's Future
Wife) as Flora

New York, Morgan
Library & Museum



When the Dutch painter and draftsman Willem van Mieris (1662–1747) took over the family workshop after the sudden death of his father, Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635–1681), at the age of forty-five, he made a flying start to his long and very productive career as an independent artist. Only nineteen years old, he had barely finished his training within the family studio, and it was two more years before he entered the Leiden

painters' guild in 1683. Frans had spawned a worthy heir, not only to carry on the flourishing family business but also to uphold his fame as a Leiden *fijnschilder* or painter in the “fine manner,” a style of virtuoso rendering of details in mainly portraits and genre paintings introduced and made popular by his own master, Gerrit Dou (1613–1675).¹ Willem had fully assimilated his father's style and technique, produced highly accomplished paintings bearing the signature of the *pater familias*, and finished what was left incomplete on his father's demise.² Several paintings and drawings bear witness to Willem's early artistic maturity. In the years around 1680–87 he produced a small number of paintings and drawings of young women, mostly dressed as mythological figures, all of them dated and signed with his own name. Some of these women look alike and appear to be the same person, who seems to have served as a regular model to the artist in these early years.

One such example is a drawing in the Morgan Library & Museum, New York, representing *Flora* (Fig. 1),³ the ancient Roman goddess of flowers and the season of Spring. She has flowers in her hair and holds a peony—a symbol of feminine beauty—between the index finger and thumb of her left hand; a branch of a live peony plant is growing in the lower right corner of the sheet. With her right hand, the fingers delicately rendered as in most of Willem's paintings and drawings,⁴ Flora presses her garment to her torso,



Figure 2

WILLEM VAN
MIERIS

Agneta Chapman
(the Artist's Wife)

Berlin,
Kupferstichkabinett

Figure 3

WILLEM VAN
MIERIS

Self-portrait

Berlin,
Kupferstichkabinett

just below her breasts, one of which is bare. She looks straight at the beholder (though not with a seductive look or sensual smile), as if this were a portrait in disguise of an actual person. The face and body do not really match.

In her recent collection catalogue of the Dutch drawings at the Morgan Library, Jane Turner, elaborating on an older notion,⁵ convincingly argued that, in view of her individualized features, *Flora* is probably a female *portrait historié*, pointing to paintings by Rembrandt (1606–1669) of *Flora* in St. Petersburg and Dresden (painted respectively in 1634 and 1641), which are possibly disguised portraits of his first wife, Saskia.⁶ In view of the drawing's provenance from the collection of Pieter de la Court van der Voort (1664–1739), the artist's peer and principal local patron,⁷ Turner suggested that the woman represented was perhaps a member of the De la Court family. In my opinion, we should follow her initial reference to Rembrandt and Saskia more fully by looking for a woman closer to the artist himself.

In fact, the features of the Morgan *Flora* are very similar, although in reverse, to those of the

supposed portrait of Willem van Mieris's wife, Agneta Chapman (1663–1744),⁸ whom he depicted in an oval-shaped drawing in the Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin, which is preserved together with a pendant *Self-portrait* (Figs. 2–3).⁹ Signed and dated 1684, the pair of portraits was possibly made on the occasion of the couple's marriage on 24 April of that same year.

The Morgan *Flora* drawing is dated the previous year (1683), and the artist may have used his fiancée as a model for it.¹⁰ It is significant that since ancient times the goddess's festival, called *Floralia*, was held on 28–30 April. As a fertility goddess, this guise was also most appropriate for the wedding planned for the following spring. The resemblance between the two women is limited to their faces. In the portrait drawing in Berlin, Agneta's hair is neatly pulled back in a pearl-ornamented bun, with a v-shaped double parting and little ringlets around her forehead, whereas Willem's hair hangs in loose curls below a velvet hat with a feather. With her formal hairstyle, earrings, and the fancier clothes, Agneta looks somewhat older than twenty-one, perhaps



SILHOUETTE
ARCHED TOP

Figure 4

WILLEM VAN
MIERIS

Agneta Chapman
as Allegory of
Arrogance

Vienna,
Kunsthistorisches
Museum

even rather matronly, yet virtuous, as befitting a matrimonial portrait. Thus the resemblance may not be apparent at first. Flora, by contrast, is depicted as a young woman, gracious, if not voluptuous in her pose, presenting her bare breast—as a *pars pro toto*—to the beholder, in this case the painter himself. It is almost as if the artist and his model were exchanging intimate signs of love and affection, proposing to each other.

The same face, or at least a very similar one, appears in other paintings made in the first years

of their marriage. They are all on panel and of equally small dimensions. One of them, in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, shows a woman, described as a courtesan or *Allegory of Arrogance*, standing before a landscape (Fig. 4); it is a companion piece to one depicting an agitated man drawing his sword (an *Allegory of Fury*) in the same collection.¹¹ Painted in 1684 and 1683 respectively, the compositions have an arched top, similar to the *Flora* drawing.¹² Agneta Chapman may well have modeled for other paintings in these early years, including an *Old Man Seducing a Young Woman*, dated 1683 and now also in Vienna,¹³ an *Artemis Holding an Arrow*, dated 1686, formerly on the art market,¹⁴ and a *Woman with a Bird Cage (Lesbia)*, dated 1687, now in the Kunsthalle, Hamburg.¹⁵

Willem and Agneta lived happily together well into their eighties, although not without physical difficulties, for Willem gradually lost his sight. In 1734, they celebrated their golden wedding anniversary, a rarity in those days when average life expectancy was less than thirty-five years.¹⁶

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NOTES

1. Willem van Mieris's slightly older brother Jan van Mieris (1660–1690) was also educated in their father's workshop and, in addition, was apprenticed to the classicist painter Gerard de Lairesse (1640/41–1711). For some time they must have worked together. Jan, however, suffered from protracted poor health, entered the painters' guild three years after his younger brother, and died at the age of twenty-nine in Rome during a two-year trip to Italy. Over the course of the last thirty years, Jan's limited *oeuvre*, both paintings and drawings, has gradually begun to be assembled by several authors (most of it by a process of removal from Willem's *oeuvre*), starting with Otto Naumann's catalogue *Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635–1681)*, 2 vols., Doornspijk 1981, which is also a good source for archival material about the family; see also J. van Tatenhove and Robert-Jan te Rijdt, "Enkele tekeningen van Jan van Mieris," *Delineavit et Sculptis*, 31, 2007, pp. 43–55. The present author is working on a *catalogue raisonné* of the drawings and paintings of Willem van Mieris (to be published in due course).
2. See Peter Sutton, *Love letters: Dutch Genre Paintings in the Age of Vermeer*, exh. cat., Greenwich, Bruce Museum,

- and Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland, 2003, pp. 200–202, under no. 43. The contemporary source for this information is Willem van Mieris's fellow artist Jacob Campo Weyerman in his *De levens-beschryvingen der Nederlandsche konst-schilders en konst-schilderessen...*, 4 vols., The Hague, 1729–69, esp. vol. 3 (1729), pp. 387–92.
3. Inv. no. I, 162a. Point of the brush and black ink, with gray wash; 168 x 125 mm; see Jane Shoaf Turner, *Dutch Drawings in the Pierpont Morgan Library: Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries*, 2 vols., New York, 2006, no. 396, repr.
 4. Nine studies of hands in different poses, all in black chalk, heightened with white, on blue paper, dating from around 1685, have been preserved in the Lugt collection, Fondation Custodia, Paris (inv. nos. 1980-T.10 A–T.10 I); see Albert J. Elen, “‘Ongemeen uitvoerig op Perkament met sapverven behandeld’: De gekleurde tekeningen van Willem van Mieris uit de collectie Willem Witsen,” *Delineavit et Sculptit*, 15, 1995, pp. 1–24, esp. pp. 6 and 12, n. 27.
 5. See *ibid.*, p. 12, n. 31.
 6. St. Petersburg, Hermitage, inv. no. 732 (oil on canvas; 125 x 101 cm; see J. Bruyn *et al.*, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, The Hague and elsewhere, 1982–, vol. 2 [1986], no. A93, repr.), and Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, inv. no. 1562 (oil on panel; 98.5 x 82.5 cm; see *ibid.*, vol. 3 [1989], no. A142, repr.).
 7. Actually, Pieter de la Court took over as a patron of the artist from his aunt Petronella Oortmans–de la Court (1624–1707), a wealthy merchant's wife and art collector in Amsterdam, who, besides buying paintings by the young Willem van Mieris, seems to have introduced him to other rich merchants and aristocratic patrons in the city in the 1690s.
 8. Agneta (also called Angenita), the daughter of Thomas Chapman and Elisabeth Martens, was christened on 22 February 1663 in Nijmegen.
 9. Inv. nos. KdZ 4515 and KdZ 4514. Both point of the brush and gray ink and gray wash; 119 x 93 and 119 x 90 mm, respectively; see Eric J. Sluijter *et al.*, ed., *Leidse Fijnschilders: Van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge, 1630–1760*, exh. cat., Leiden, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal, 1988, p. 165; and Van Tatenhove and Te Rijdt 2007, pp. 45, fig. 4 (the self-portrait), and 54, n. 8. Willem followed the example of his father, Frans, who between 1657 and 1662 had portrayed himself and his wife, Cunera van der Cock (1629/30–1700), in similarly small, oval companion paintings; see Naumann 1981, vol. 2, nos. 29–30, 38–39 and 41–42, all repr.
 10. Likewise, Willem's mother appears to have modeled for several genre paintings by his father, Frans van Mieris, for example, the *Doctor's Visit*, painted in the year of their marriage, 1657 (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. no. 590-1657; see Naumann 1981, vol. 1, pp. 127–28, vol. 2, no. I 20, repr.). Willem's colleague Adriaen van der Werff (1659–1722) in Rotterdam also used his wife as a model for paintings, “like the great Rubens in his time,” according to his (personally approved) biography. For instance, his wife Margareta Rees (1669–1731) posed for the small panel painting of *Diana and Callisto* (1704; Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, inv. no. 2535; see Barbara Gaechtgens, *Adriaen van der Werff [1659–1722]*, Munich 1987, pp. 71, 159, 240–241, and 437–38); this, for obvious reasons—Diana and her female companions are nude—was a present for his wife and kept in the family (though not discreetly, as it was shown to visitors) until the couple succumbed to pressure from Adriaen's royal patron and benefactor, the Count Palatine in Düsseldorf, and sold it in 1712, for a huge sum and a silver beauty case for Margareta. Willem van Mieris did not depict Agneta in the nude, but possibly also kept the drawing himself for a personal keepsake for some time, eventually selling it to his patron De la Court.
 11. Inv. nos. 587-1684 and 585-1683 (both oil on panel; 21.2 x 16 cm each); see Peter Hecht, *De Hollandse fijnschilders: Van Gerard Dou tot Adriaen van der Werff*, exh. cat., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, 1989, nos. 19–20, both repr. (in color).
 12. Although the contorted expression of the swordsman makes a comparison with Willem's drawn portrait difficult, it is conceivable that the young artist depicted himself and his beloved around the time of their marriage.
 13. Inv. no. 591-1683 (oil on panel; 31.3 x 25.2 cm); see *Die Gemäldegalerie des Kunsthistorischen Museums in Wien: Verzeichnis der Gemälde*, Vienna, 1991, p. 84, pl. 548.
 14. Present whereabouts unknown (with Bob Haboltd, Paris and New York, 1998–99; oil on panel; 17.5 x 14.3 cm); see Sander Paarlberg and Liesbeth van Noortwijk, *Griekse goden en helden in de tijd van Rubens en Rembrandt*, exh. cat., Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum, 2000, no. 50, repr. (in color).
 15. Inv. no. 524 (oil on panel; 20.5 x 16.9 cm); see Naumann 1981, vol. 1, fig. 123.
 16. See Adrianus D. Schinkel, *Geschied- en letterkundige bijdragen*, The Hague, 1850, pp. 90–91, based on authentic documents from the Van Mieris family. Schinkel mentions their silver wedding anniversary celebrated at their estate, Bakkershagen, near Wassenaar, as well as the rare fortune to reach their golden wedding anniversary. The couple's only surviving child, Frans van Mieris the Younger (1689–1763)—their three daughters having each died in their first year—was a long-time partner in his father's workshop and continued his style and output, often with his signature, though on a lower artistic level. He remained unmarried, and the family tradition died out with him.