

Additions to Willem van Mieris' *Rape of Lucretia*: An Example of the Artist's Working Methods

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Willem van Mieris (1662–1747) is an artist whose working methods in the evolution of his painted and independent drawn compositions can be reconstructed in some detail, since over the course of his long career he created an exceptionally rich *oeuvre* in both media, much of which has come down to us. His drawings can be classified into three groups on the basis of their character and function: preliminary drawings (sketches and studies, mostly in black chalk, some on blue paper, ranging from details of individual figures to full compositions); finished drawings made for sale (generally executed with black chalk on parchment, or colored in gouache on paper); and documentary drawings (“rough sketches” of paintings he was still working on, executed on the reverse of some of his letters to prospective buyers to give them an impression).¹ The first two groups occasionally overlap, as, for instance, in his designs of bas-relief decorations for a set of four garden vases depicting the Four Seasons: the large preliminary drawings for these, all in black chalk on parchment, are at the same time finished works in their own right.²

In 1992 Ben Broos published an article on the functional relationship between Willem van Mieris's signed, but undated painting of *Tarquinius and Lucretia*, then on the art market (Fig. 2),³ and a previously unpublished drawing of the same subject by the artist in the Museu Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon (Fig. 3).⁴ This is not a love

story, as the title might imply, but a violent scene of rape. Broos, exploring the iconography and provenance of the painting, also mentioned Van Mieris's probable source, namely the print of the same subject, dated 1571, by Cornelis Cort (1533–before 1578) after Titian (c. 1488–1576).⁵ His discovery of this pair of related works—preliminary drawing and painting—joined the group of ten examples of pairs already known at that time.⁶ In each case, the drawing clearly preceded the painting instead of the other way around.

The purpose of this short note is to introduce two further drawings related to this composition, including an unpublished sheet for the whole in the Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam (Fig. 1),⁷ which is preliminary to both the Lisbon drawing and the finished painting (which are more or less identical, even in size). Van Mieris used the other new drawing, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Fig. 4),⁸ to work out a detail, namely the bas-relief in the background of the Lisbon drawing and the painting.

The first drawing in the creative line-up is the work now in Amsterdam. It is executed in black chalk and brush in gray ink, washed in various shades of gray, on paper of smaller dimensions than the parchment drawing in Lisbon. The composition of this preliminary drawing has on the whole been followed closely in the finished Lisbon drawing, as well as the painting: an interior with a bed and a wall parallel to the picture

Figure 1

WILLEM VAN
MIERIS

Rape of Lucretia

Amsterdam,
Rijksprentenkabinet



plane with an image, probably a bas-relief, between pilasters in the background. The composition has been slightly extended at the top in the parchment drawing and the painting, showing the Ionic capitals on the top of the pilasters. The left

side is closed off by part of a high, arched doorway, likewise in a classicizing style and also flanked by fluted pilasters, with a sculptural figure in the spandrel above. The porch offers a view into a brightly lit architectural hall beyond, with a

column supporting an architrave. At right a curtain hanging above the bed acts as a *repoussoir*. These are compositional elements that we find in other drawings and paintings by Van Mieris, produced during a period of more than two decades, from 1687 onward.⁹

Some of the roughly sketched details in the Amsterdam sheet, such as the indistinct figure in the spandrel, were more fully worked out by the time Van Mieris made both the finished Lisbon parchment and the painting (which are more or less identical, even in size). There are other noticeable differences between the two drawings. First of all, Van Mieris included a plinth in the lower left corner of the Amsterdam sheet, a *repoussoir* motif he often used, but one that he omitted in the two finished works. That the Rijksprentenkabinet sheet, though seemingly finished, was a working composition study is evident from pentiments around the plinth. Van Mieris apparently rejected the idea of the plinth, using black chalk to draw part of a stool over it, its leg featuring a carved putti's face and an animal paw, like the one on the corner of the bed.¹⁰ In the finished works, architectural details were completely removed from this corner, and instead the artist inserted a small, yapping dog, also a recurring motif in his *oeuvre*. He moreover altered the head of Tarquinius, omitting the helmet and adjusting the angle and expression on his face (which in the painting, to judge from an old photograph, seems to have been slightly changed in the area around the mouth). The most interesting difference though is the decoration in the wall panel in the background above the struggling couple, to which Lucretia inadvertently points with her upheld hand grasped by her assailant. In the preliminary drawing in Amsterdam, it is summarily sketched and its nature and subject are impossible to determine, although it may be expected to be appropriate to the main theme depicted here. In the Lisbon drawing, the representation, inscribed within an arched top, is different and the figures can be made out. When the painting was auctioned in Paris in 1812, it was minutely described in the sale catalogue and the background scene



Figure 2 (above)

WILLEM VAN
MIERIS

Rape of Lucretia

Lisbon, *Museu
Calouste Gulbenkian*



Figure 3 (left)

WILLEM VAN
MIERIS

Rape of Lucretia

Location Unknown



Figure 4

WILLEM VAN
MIERIS

Rape of the Sabine
Women

New York,
Metropolitan
Museum of Art

was identified as the *Rape of the Sabine Women*.¹¹

In 2007 two hitherto unknown drawings by Van Mieris appeared on the art market, both of which were acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. They are finished drawings, executed in black chalk on parchment, obviously a pair, the one that concerns us here representing the *Rape of the Sabine Women* (Fig. 4), the other the *Massacre of the Innocents*.¹² The first was already known from a drawn copy by Catharina Backer (1689–1766),¹³ wife of Van Mieris's Leiden patron Allard de la Court (1688–1755).¹⁴ The source of inspiration for the original drawing was also known before it resurfaced. Van Mieris based several of his finished drawings on ivory sculptures and bas-reliefs by the Flemish artist Francis van Bossuit (1635–1692), which he probably knew from the collection of his presumed early patron Petronella Oortmans-de la Court (1624–1707) in Amsterdam.¹⁵ Both New York drawings turn out to have been modelled on ivory bas-reliefs by Van Bossuit, which

we know from engravings by Matthijs Pool (1676–1740), published much later, in 1727.¹⁶ It was Van Mieris's own drawing of the *Rape of the Sabine Women* that he used for the background of the finished Lisbon drawing, as well as of the painting. The wide, horizontal composition of the New York drawing was compressed, and only the principal motifs can be made out: the group with the swooning woman and a naked child at her feet and the woman to her right, also lifted up by a Roman soldier. The rest of the scene is indistinct or left out. It was clearly not the artist's intention to depict this part of the composition in great detail, but merely to make it recognizable. He would not have wanted to distract the attention from the main theme—Tarquinius surprising the virtuous Lucretia in her bedroom and threatening her with his dagger to keep quiet (otherwise he would kill her and leave a naked servant's body next to hers in order to imply adultery).

The combination of subjects is perfect, as both depict legendary scenes from early Roman histo-

ry, both recounted by the Roman historian Livy (59 BC–AD 17) in his *Ab urbe condita*, the story of the Sabine women preceding that of Lucretia.¹⁷ The thematic connection between the two subjects—women attacked by rapists—is obvious, yet the dishonored Lucretia committed suicide, whereas the still unmarried young women of the Sabine people, abducted by young Romans in order to merge the two neighboring tribes, lived on, prevented war, and bore joint offspring. It seems that Van Mieris went through his extant stock of inventions, either kept in his workshop portfolio or in his memory, to find an appropriate scene that might fit this particular purpose.¹⁸

The main scene is commonly referred to as “Tarquinius and Lucretia,” which is not altogether appropriate. Lucretia was married to Lucius Tarquinius Collatinus (fl. sixth century BC), Roman governor of Collatia, a Sabine city northeast of Rome, which had been taken from the Sabines in 585 BC by his grandfather’s brother Lucius Tarquinius Priscus (reg. 616–579 BC), fifth king of Rome. Lucretia’s assailant was Sextus Tarquinius Superbus, son of her husband’s second cousin, the tyrant Lucius Tarquinius Superbus (reg. 535–496 BC), seventh and last king of Rome. So referring to the rapist by the family name alone would do no justice to Lucretia’s husband. After the rape and her suicide, Collatinus and a friend of his, Tarquinius Priscus’ grandson Lucius Iunius Brutus (reg. 509 BC), joined forces for revenge and freed Rome from the hated Tarquini rule. They are considered to be the founders of the Roman Republic and elected its first two consuls.¹⁹

Why Van Mieris chose this particular subject can only be guessed. Either it was deemed an acceptable vehicle for depicting a violent scene with a partly naked female figure in a bedroom interior—chastity/virtue/honor attacked by lust/evil—or he was commissioned by a client and asked to include a *portrait historié* to represent a contemporary villain, perhaps as a concealed political statement. As Broos rightly observed,²⁰ “who would have wanted to be cast as the rapist Sextus Tarquinius? Or could the individual have

been a notorious scoundrel who had no say in his own portrayal?” This would perhaps explain the awkward position of Tarquinius’ head and the apparent changes made to his face.

Van Mieris is also known to have depicted the *Rape of Lucretia* in a colored drawing on parchment that belongs to a series of twenty gouaches made for the Amsterdam collector Jonas Witsen (1676–1715) between 1691 and 1696.²¹ That drawing, whose current whereabouts are unknown, was referred to as “*een Tarquin by Lucretia*” in a sale catalogue in 1790.²² It is dated 1696 and may turn out to be a variant of the same composition. It seems safe to date the drawings and the painting of the *Rape of Lucretia* roughly between 1690 and 1710, but the use of the drawing of the *Rape of the Sabine Women*, which is stylistically close to both a drawing of the *Massacre of the Innocents*, dated 1696, in the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam,²³ and the abovementioned designs for garden vases (1702–4), narrows the period to the years between 1695 and 1705.²⁴

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NOTES

1. See this author’s previous article, “Brieven van de jonge Willem van Mieris met ‘ruwe schetsen’ van schilderijen,” in Charles Dumas, ed., *Liber amicorum Dorine van Sasse van Ysselt*, The Hague, 2012, pp. 133–44.
2. **WHERE ARE THESE FOUR DRAWINGS (LOC., INV. NOS., MEDIUM, DIMENSIONS)?** See idem, “De voortekeningen voor de vaasreliëfs van Willem van Mieris,” *Oud Holland*, 109, no. 4, 1995, pp. 201–16.
3. Present whereabouts unknown (oil on panel; 44.3 x 38.5 cm); sale, Amsterdam, Christie’s, 28 November 1989, lot 178, repr. (in color); see Ben Broos, “Willem van Mieris: *Tarquinius and Lucretia*, a Drawing and a Painting,” *The Hoogsteder Mercury*, 13/14, 1992, pp. 89–95, esp. fig. 00. At the time of Broos’s article, the painting was with art dealer Verner Amell Ltd., London. It was again auctioned at Christie’s, London, 7 July 2010, lot 121, repr. (in color), but remained unsold.
4. Inv. no. 518. Black chalk on parchment; 413 x 360 mm; see Broos 1992, fig. 00; see also the forthcoming collection catalogue by Manuela Fidalgo, *Drawings and Watercolors in the Calouste Gulbenkian Collection*, Lisbon, 2013.

5. Engraving; 376 x 270 mm; see Broos 1992, fig. 4; and Manfred Sellink, *The New Hollstein: Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings, and Woodcuts, 1450–1700: Cornelis Cort*, Amsterdam, 1993, no. 193, repr.
6. See Emke Elen-Clifford Kocq van Breugel, “Tekeningen van Willem van Mieris (1662–1747) in relatie tot zijn schilderijen,” *Leids Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, 4, 1985, pp. 147–64.
7. Inv. no. RP-T-1957-331. Black chalk, point of brush and gray ink, with gray wash; 229 x 184 mm; see www.rijksmuseum.nl/zoeken.
8. Inv. no. 2007.276.2. Black chalk on prepared parchment; 195 x 328 mm; sale, London, Sotheby’s Olympia, 26 April 2006, one of a pair in lot 235, [both repr.?]. See www.metmuseum.org/collections.
9. See, for instance: (1) the painting *Preciosa*, dated 1687, in the Galleria di Palazzo Bianco, Genoa (inv. no. 233); (2) the drawing of the *Suicide of Cleopatra*, dated 1699, the De Grez collection, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (inv. no. De Grez 2532; black chalk on parchment, 173 x 145 mm); (3) another painting of *Preciosa*, this one dated 1709, in the Gemäldegalerie, Dresden (inv. no. 1775; see Annegret Laabs, *De Leidse fijnschilders uit Dresden*, Zwolle and Leiden, 2001, pp. 86–87, repr.), for which there was a preliminary drawing on the art market in 1994 (with Christina van Marle, *Exhibition of Old Master Drawings*, Amsterdam, no. 14); and (4) the painting of the *Musician Refreshed*, dated 1711, in the Wallace Collection, London (inv. no. 155).
10. A stool like this must have been one of the studio props in Van Mieris’s workshop, as it is also represented in a drawing of the *Musician Refreshed* (present whereabouts unknown; black chalk, heightened with white, on blue paper; 345 x 285 mm), which is a preliminary study for the painting of the *Neglected Lute* of c. 1709 in the Royal Collection at Buckingham Palace, London (inv. no. RCIN 405543).
11. See Broos 1992, pp. 91 and 95, n. 8.
12. Inv. no. 2007.276.1. Black chalk on prepared parchment; 196 x 321 mm; see www.metmuseum.org/collections.
13. See Emke Elen-Clifford Kocq van Breugel, “Sculpturen van Francis van Bossuit getekend door Willem van Mieris,” *Delineavit et Sculpsit*, 8, 1992, pp. 12–24 (for the Backer copy, see esp. pp. 14, 16–17, and 22, n. 13).
14. It is likely that Allard de la Court owned the Amsterdam drawing of the *Rape of Lucretia* (Fig. 3), as might be deduced from his 1741 inventory, which mentions: “*Lucretia en Tarquinius door W:van Mieris op Papier gescheit[derd]*.” Around 1800, the sheet was in the collection of Jonkheer Johan Goll van Franckenstein the Younger (1756–1821), with his inscribed number 1832 on the verso, but it did not feature in the 1833 sale of his son Pieter Hendrik Goll van Franckenstein (1787–1832).
15. See Elen-Clifford Kocq van Breugel 1992, pp. 15–17. On the subject of sculptures by Van Bossuit in the collection of the De la Court family, see also Frits Scholten, “Een ijvoren Mars van Francis, de beeldsnijder Van Bossuit en de familie De la Court,” *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum*, 47, no. 1, 1999, pp. 26–43.
16. See François van Bossuit et al., *Beeld-snyders Kunst-kabinet, door den vermaarden Beeldsnyder Francis van Bossuit, in ivoor gesneden en geboetseert, in ’t koper gebracht naar de Teekeningen van Barent Graat door Mattys Pool*, Amsterdam, 1727, nos. XXIII and XXI.
17. See Livy I:9 (The Rape of the Sabine Women) and I:57–59 (The Rape of Lucretia).
18. Van Mieris also used the drawing of the *Rape of the Sabine Women* as a model for part of a similar bas-relief in a small panel painting *The Drinker*, dated 1706 (Leiden, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal, inv. no. 1202). The bas-relief is behind the table on the right, and only the left-most part of it is visible. Represented is a combination of two details in the New York drawing: the woman lifted up on the right and the head and front legs of the staggering horse. The possible connection between this lonely drinker, which is obviously a portrait of a wealthy person, and the subject of the bas-relief remains a mystery.
19. See Livy I:58.
20. See Broos 1992, pp. 91–92.
21. 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 Sculpsit*, 15, 1995, pp. 1–24 (esp. p. 19, no. 15).
22. Mentioned in the sale catalogue of the Witsen collection in Amsterdam, 16 August 1790, lot 12.
23. Inv. no. MB 2007/T 3. Black chalk on parchment; 187 x 276 mm; see [published ref.?].
24. Broos (1992, p. 94) suggested an approximate date between 1700 and 1710, citing for comparison the painting of *The Drinker*, dated 1706, in Leiden (see Note 18 above).