

PROPERTY FROM AN IMPORTANT BRITISH PRIVATE COLLECTION

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## FRANS VAN MIERIS, THE ELDER

(LEIDEN 1631-1685)

### *The Drummer Boy*

signed and dated 'F van Mieris / Ao 1670' (lower left)  
oil on copper  
6¾ x 5½ in. (17.1 x 14.3 cm.)

£800,000-1,200,000

US\$1,100,000-1,600,000

€900,000-1,300,000

#### PROVENANCE:

(Probably) bought by Elector Maximilian II Emanuel of Bavaria (1662-1726) at the beginning of the 18th century for his Gallery in Schloss Schleißheim. Elector Franz Stefan I of Bavaria (1708-1765), and by descent in the Bavarian Electoral and Royal Collection, and subsequently the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen until 1929, in the following locations: Picture Gallery of Schloss Schleißheim, mentioned in the inventories of 1748 (the earliest existing inventory, p. 4, *recto*), and moved by 1839 to, The Alte Pinakothek, Munich (inv. no. 547), by whom sold by ministerial decree in 1929 to the following, with D.A. Hoogendijk, Amsterdam.

Acquired shortly afterwards by Charles Peto Bennett (1856-1940) (m. Kristine Elisabeth 'Kiss' Gudde), and by descent to his son, Alfred Edwin Peto Bennett (1905-1996), and by descent to the present owners.

#### LITERATURE:

J. Smith, *A catalogue raisonné of the works of the most eminent Dutch, Flemish and French painters*, London, 1829, I, p. 83, no. 86, incorrectly listed as on panel, valued at 300 gns.

G. de Dillis, *Catalogue des tableaux de la Pinacothèque Royale à Munic*, Munich, 1839, p. 10, no. 80, as 'William van Mieris'.

*Verzeichniss der gemälde in der Königlichen Pinakothek*, Munich, 1853, p. 210, no. 275, as 'William van Mieris'.

*Verzeichniss der gemälde in der Königlichen Pinakothek*, Munich, 1865, p. 187, no. 275, as 'Frans van Mieris'.

C. Lemcke, 'Frans Van Mieris', *Kunst und Künstler Deutschlands und der Niederlande bis gegen die Mitte des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts*, Leipzig, 1878, II, p. 23.

Lord Gower, *The figure painters of Holland*, London, 1880, p. 113.

J.D. Champlin and C.C. Perkins, eds., *Cyclopedia of painters and paintings*, New York, 1887, III, p. 265.

J.A. Crowe, *Handbook of painting: The German, Flemish and Dutch schools, based on the handbook of Kugler*, London, 1889, p. 409.

G.C. Williamson, ed., *Bryan's Dictionary of Painters and Engravers*, London, 1904, III, p. 337.

A. von Wurzbach, *Niederländisches Künstlerlexikon*, Vienna, 1910, II, p. 165.

C. Hofstede de Groot, *A catalogue raisonné of the works of the most eminent Dutch painters of the seventeenth century*, Cambridge, 1927, no. 178.

L. Hourticq, *Histoire générale de l'art*, Paris, 1932, p. 307.

E. Bénézit, *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des peintres, sculpteurs etc.*, Paris, 1953, VI, p. 117.

I.F. Finlay 'Musical instruments in 17th century Dutch paintings', *The Galpin Society Journal*, VI, 1953, p. 68, no. 141.

O. Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635-1681) the Elder*, Doornspijk, 1981, II, p. 94-95, no. 81, illustrated.

B. Gaehtgens, *Adriaen van der Werff*, Munich, 1987, p. 203, under no. 7.

J. Ingamells, *The Wallace Collection, Catalogue of Pictures*, IV, *Dutch and Flemish*, London, 1992, p. 218, under no. P178.

E. Schavemaker, *Eglon van der Neer*, Doornspijk, 2010, p. 95, note 4.

Described as 'a picture of exquisite beauty' by the great nineteenth-century chronicler of Dutch paintings John Smith, Frans van Mieris's *Drummer Boy* is a work of striking originality that can be considered one of the most important child genre scenes painted in Holland during the second half of the seventeenth century. Untraced since its de-acquisition from the Alte Pinakothek Munich in 1929, and feared to be lost, the picture can now be properly re-instated into van Mieris's *oeuvre* and its qualities appreciated at large for the first time in almost a century.

Together with Gerrit Dou, Frans van Mieris was the founder and leading member of a group of Leiden painters known collectively as the *fijnschilders* on account of their exceptionally refined, jewel-like handling of paint. Precise craftsmanship was in van Mieris's blood. He was the son of a goldsmith, Jan van Mieris (1585/86-1650), and initially set out to follow the same vocation before turning his talent to painting. He trained in the studio of Dou and soon eclipsed his fellow pupils, as Arnold Houbraken noted in his life of van Mieris published in 1721 (vol. 3, p. 2). Later, in the eighteenth century, the French theorist Jean Baptiste Descamps claimed van Mieris also surpassed his master because 'he drew better and had more finesse; his touch is more spirited, his colours fresher and less tortured and his paintings more forceful' (*Vie des Peintres Flamands, Allemands et Hollandois...*, Paris, 1760, III, p. 19).



(actual size)



Schleißheim Palace, Oberschleißheim, Germany

It was for this finesse and his supreme ability to render light and texture in miniaturist detail that van Mieris was so admired: above all, for his spectacular rendering of different materials such as silk, satin and velvet. His *Drummer Boy* is dressed in a shimmering, pale yellow, silk shirt with slashed sleeves and a brilliantly observed blue and red ribboned hem. He wears a blue, folded sash across his chest and a red, velvet cap with a feather in its side. The light source is from the upper left, beautifully illuminating the boy and casting his shadow against the back wall and the shadow of his left hand against the drum, heightening the sense of his physical presence. The secondary figure of the young flute player remains out of the spotlight. In the same vein, van Mieris delights in the minute observation of different surface textures: the wooden body of the well-used drum and its taut skin tied with string; the stone ledge with various nicks and chips; and the vine leaves seen in various degrees of light.

As well as offering a vivid demonstration of his technical brio, van Mieris's cherubic *Drummer Boy* is rich in emblematic meaning. Painted in 1670 (the last digit of the date has been questioned in the past as a '6', but is clearly '0'), this is the only genre picture by van Mieris in which adults do not appear. Intended as a meditation on childhood, van Mieris celebrates the innocent state of youth, the two protagonists absorbed in their play with a seriousness displayed by adults in their seemingly more important pursuits. In Netherlandish art, the art of play had long been treated as an allegory of adult life, a notion going back to Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Children's Games* of 1560 (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum). At the same time the artist reminds us of the transience of youth and impending adulthood. The drummer boy looks wistfully into the distance as if musing on what lies ahead, the feather in his cap a familiar *vanitas* symbol as is the empty birdcage above his head.

While most children in seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting were treated as scamps, imitating the bad behaviour of adults, van Mieris treats the drummer boy heroically already displaying the attributes of virtuous citizenship. The notion of civic responsibility is clearly evoked by the drummer boy's guise. In this van Mieris was likely inspired by the writer Jacob Cats, who had included a poem in the forward of his *Houwelick* titled 'Kinderspel: ex nugis seria' (Child's Play: trifles beget seriousness), which he illustrated with a print by Experiens Sillemans after Adriaen van de Venne, showing boys and girls of different ages forming into a column of civic guards (fig. 1). Cats's saying 'Behold how people also reveal their true natures in childhood', which is also the subject of the print, seems to have been van Mieris's underlying message.

The *Drummer Boy* had an immediate impact on van Mieris's contemporaries. Eglon van der Neer repeated the theme with a picture of 1676 (private collection; see E. Schavemaker, *op. cit.*, p. 478, no. 66, illustrated), and Adriaen van der Werff adopted it in 1679 (Gaehgens, *op. cit.*, pp. 202-203, no. 7, illustrated). Willem van Mieris, Frans's son, revisited the subject in a picture of 1702 (London, Wallace Collection). The picture also inspired a number of copies. Naumann lists three on panel (*op. cit.*, nos. 81a, b and c), and a fourth was offered at Christie's, South Kensington, 2 December 2014, lot 775.

#### A Note on the Provenance:

This picture was probably acquired by the Bavarian Elector Maximilian II Emanuel (1662-1726) in the early eighteenth century for his palace at Schleißheim, a few miles north-west of Munich. It was certainly at Schleißheim by 1748, and remained in the possession of the Bavarian Electors and Princes, being transferred with the majority of the collection into the purpose-built Alte Pinakothek, where it is first recorded by 1839. After the toppling of the monarchy in Germany at the end of the First World War, the works passed into the hands of the state. The collection had a remarkable holding of works by Frans van Mieris. John Smith listed ten pictures in 1829 and by 1864 there were twelve. Perhaps on account of this embarrassment of riches, and perhaps also due to a lack of appreciation for *fijnschilder* paintings in the early twentieth century, there began a spate of major de-accessions: *Peasant Inn* went in 1928 (Leiden, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal); the present work and *Woman playing a Lute* (Edinburgh, National Galleries of Scotland) were both sold in 1929; *Oyster Meal* followed in 1931 (The Hague, Mauritshuis); and then, in the Nazi era, *Woman feeding a Parrot* was sold off in 1936 (private collection; formerly Sotheby's, London, 3 December 2008, lot 25); and *Old Soldier with a Pipe* (Pennsylvania, Allentown Museum of Art) went in 1937 - a decimation of the single greatest collection of paintings by Frans van Mieris ever formed.



Fig. 1 Experiens Sillemans, after Adriaen van de Venne, *Child's Play: trifles beget seriousness*, engraving

