PIETER VAN DER WERFF
(Kralingen-Ambach, near Rotterdam 1665 – 1722 Rotterdam)

A young Girl at a Window with Lovebirds

Oil on panel, 12 x 9 ins. (30.5 x 23 cm)

PROVENANCE
Sale, Amsterdam, 17 April 1783, lot. No. 158, where sold to Rijnberg (as Willem van Mieris)
Count Frederik Christian von Moltke, Copenhagen, inv. no. 109 (cat. 1885), 1885-1931 (as Willem van Mieris)
Sale, Winkel & Magnussen, Copenhagen, 6 January – 6 February 1931, lot. 143
Sale, Rasmussen, Copenhagen, 11-13 April, 1967, lot. 36 (as Willem van Mieris)
With Newhouse Galleries, New York (inv. no. 17883), 1967 (as Willem van Mieris)
Private collection, Texas (as Willem van Mieris)
Sale, Sotheby’s, New York, 1 June 1990, lot no. 110 (as Pieter van der Werff)
With Salomon Lilian Old Master Paintings, Amsterdam (cat. 1990, p. 26-27, with colour reproduction)
Daphne Alazraki Fine Art, New York, 2003-2004
Private collection, U.S.A., 2004-2018

EXHIBITED
Kansas City, William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art, Paintings of Dutch Seventeenth-century Interiors, 1967 (as Willem van Mieris)
TEFAF, Maastricht, 1991, with Salomon Lilian Old Master Paintings (colour reproduction in Handbook, p. 90)
TEFAF, Maastricht, 2003, with Daphne Alazraki Fine Art (colour reproduction in Handbook, p. 31)

LITERATURE
Few paintings by this underappreciated artist can match the charm of this intimate painting of a pretty, blond-haired girl standing in a window niche. She is dressed in an elegant yellow gown over a white chemise, with a softly frilled neckline. A blue silk shawl is draped over one shoulder. She has turned to look directly at the viewer, having clearly been interrupted whilst feeding morsels of bread to a pair of small parrots – a species commonly known as lovebirds. One of the brightly coloured birds is perched on her finger, while its mate sits nearby on the top of its cage. A Turkish carpet is draped over the window ledge.

Pieter van der Werff has long remained in the shadow of his older, more ambitious brother Adriaen van der Werff (1659-1722). Pieter was trained by his brother, who was six years his senior, and subsequently became his chief assistant and collaborator. But whereas Adriaen achieved international renown, becoming one of the most highly paid Dutch artists of his time, Pieter seems to have enjoyed mainly local patronage. And whilst Adriaen attracted the attention of princely collectors from across Europe – his chief patron being Johann Wilhelm, the Elector Palatine, whose court painter he became in 1696 – Pieter drew his clientele largely from the wealthy middle classes of Rotterdam. However, to characterise him merely as Adriaen’s assistant does not do him justice, for besides the work he carried out for his brother, which is carefully recorded in Adriaen’s notebooks, Pieter produced a small body of his own independent work. Also, as dean of the Rotterdam painters’ guild from 1703-16, he evidently commanded the respect of his fellow artists. Although less inventive than his older brother, Pieter nevertheless developed an equally polished style. Indeed, according to his eighteenth-century biographer Johan van Gool, he was so skilled at imitating his brother’s paintings that even connoisseurs were unable to “to distinguish with their eyes what was authentic or not”.

Following his appointment as court painter to Johann Wilhelm, Adriaen largely abandoned his earlier repertoire of genre scenes and portraits in order to concentrate on history subjects, thus leaving the way clear for his brother to make his mark in these genres. Pieter duly developed a busy portrait practice, providing likenesses of the wealthy citizens of Rotterdam. In 1696, he was awarded a prestigious commission to paint thirty oval portraits of the directors of the Rotterdam Chamber of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and their illustrious ancestors, a project that kept him occupied for many years. In addition, from the mid-1690s onwards, Pieter produced small, meticulously finished genre scenes in the tradition of the Leiden fijnschilders. It seems likely that the same clientele which commission portraits from Pieter also commissioned and bought his scenes of everyday life.

This well preserved panel exemplifies Pieter’s genre scenes and can be counted among his best works. The extremely refined manner of painting is characteristic of his style and was achieved using fine brushes and applying his paint in successive thin layers. Great care has been lavished on the masterful recreation of surface textures – the smooth stone, the polished sheen of the metal birdcage, the pile of the Turkey carpet, the shimmer of silk – and the subtle gradations of light and shade. Although not dated, it must originate from around the same time as the closely related painting of Two Girls with Flowers near a Statue of Cupid (Fig. 1), of 1713, in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. The composition, colour scheme, and lighting of the present work, as well as the figure type and costume of the girl, find parallels in the Amsterdam painting. Indeed, the blond-haired girl might even be modelled on the same child although it is more likely that she is an idealised type.
At the very beginning of his career, in the late 1670s and early 1680s, Adriaen van der Werff painted some scenes of children in a window niche whilst still under the influence of his master Eglon van der Neer (c. 1634-1703). However, it is hard to know whether these works could have provided the inspiration for Pieter as his approach to the subject was so entirely different. Whereas Adriaen’s youngsters are quirky in character, wear fanciful costumes, and grin and grimace as they play with their pets, Pieter’s are clad in pseudo-antique garb and display smooth regular features, sweet expressions and elegant hand gestures. Very likely Pieter sought to update a popular theme in keeping with the neo-classical ideals of the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries.

The motif of a young woman feeding a parrot became popular in Dutch genre painting from around 1660, and examples may be found in works by Frans van Mieris (1635-1681), Gabriel Metsu (1629-1667), Pieter van Slingelandt (1640-1691), Casper Netscher (1639-1684), Godried Schalcken (1643-1706), and others. Depending on the context, parrots could be interpreted in a variety of ways - both negative and positive - in seventeenth-century paintings. Birds in general carried erotic connotations – the verb vogelen (to catch or watch birds) was synonymous with fornication – and references to a bird that escapes its cage was traditionally associated with lost virtue. However, there is no indication that this was the intended meaning here, for although the girl’s feathered friends are pictured outside their cage, they show no inclination to fly away. Indeed, because parrots could easily be tamed and taught to “speak”, they could be understood as a symbol of eagerness to learn (leer-sucht)
and were therefore a perfect metaphor for the education of young people. Finally, as exotic pets kept by wealthy households, parrots carried associations of luxury.

The stone window-frame device was introduced into Dutch genre painting by Gerrit Dou (1613-1675) in the late 1640s, but the format remained popular well into the eighteenth century, especially with the pupils and followers of Dou. Van der Werff made full use of its potential to enhance the illusionistic qualities of the painting here and in a number of his other genre scenes. The form was also frequently employed by his Leiden contemporary Willem van Mieris (1662-1747) in his scenes of everyday life. Perhaps partly for this reason, the work of Pieter van der Werff has sometimes been confused with that of Willem van Mieris, as indeed is the case of the present painting which was long considered to be a work of the Leiden master until finally recognised as being by Pieter van der Werff in 1990.

**BIOGRAPHY**

The younger brother of the celebrated painter Adriaen van der Werff, Pieter van der Werff was baptised in Kralingen, near Rotterdam, on 1 May 1665. His parents, Aerijens Jansz., the owner of a corn mill on the Oudedijk in Kralingen, and Maertgen Adriaens, were well-to-do members of the local community. His father served several time as an alderman. Pieter received his training from his six-year-older brother Adriaen, and followed closely in his footsteps, sharing Adriaen’s studio and working with him as a collaborator and assistant. The business relationship of the two brothers is apparent from Adriaen’s notebooks in which he kept a detailed record of the amount of work each of them spent on a painting, from which he calculated precisely how much he owed his sibling. Besides collaborating with Adriaen and making copies of some of his works, Peter created his own independent compositions. Like Adriaen he painted portraits, genre scenes and history subjects.

In 1694, Pieter married Maria Bosman (1672-1700), the daughter of a Rotterdam brewer, who, according to Johan van Gool, had also been one of Adriaen’s pupils. However, she apparently did not pursue a career as an artist, but died prematurely in 1700, leaving a young daughter Elisabeth. Shortly after losing his wife Pieter and his daughter moved in with Adriaen on the Delftsevaart.

Pieter was evidently well respected by his colleagues as he served as dean of the Rotterdam Guild of St. Luke from 1703-1716. However, later in life he suffered from some kind of nervous disorder and became increasingly reclusive and neurotic, until he was eventually no longer able to work. He died in September 1722, and was laid to rest in the family grave in the Grote Kerk, followed only seven weeks later by his brother Adriaen.

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i A small species of parrot from the genus *Agapornis*, lovebirds mate for life and are famous for their affectionate behaviour.