The Van Musscher Family of Artists*

In the late seventeenth century, Michiel van Musscher was acknowledged as one of the most respected portraitists in Amsterdam. He was appointed by the city magistrates to be one of the two artists who oversaw the art academy in the Amsterdam Stadhuis (town hall), and his commissioned portraits included many of the prominent and prosperous citizens of Amsterdam, as well as Tsar Peter the Great, Admiral François Lefort and several other members of the Russian Great Embassy of 1697. Nevertheless, today he certainly is not as celebrated as many of the other artists of that era. While some reviews of his portraits have been published, little has been written concerning his family and personal life. Standard reference texts simply replicate the text of Houbraken's De Groote Schouburgh by reporting Van Musscher's sequential teachers (Martinus Saeghmolen, Abraham van den Tempel, Gabriel Metsu and Adriaen van Ostade), but there is no accompanying description of his genealogy. No mention is made of any possible hereditary artistic talent which might have provided a glimpse into the future of the young child who excelled in draughtsmanship and subsequently developed into a premier artist.

Researching the genealogy of Michiel van Musscher, I was able to obtain the names of a number of his relatives from the respective municipal archives pertaining to Amsterdam, Delft and Rotterdam, thus allowing construction of a genealogy. This new insight, expanded by information from other sources, permits a detailed examination of Van Musscher's extended family. By incorporating these familial relationships and their connection to some of Van Musscher's portraits, possibly coupled with the religious belief of his family and its resulting influence on his oeuvre, we may improve our understanding of his art.

Throughout my research of the documented genealogy, it was evident that seventeenth-century records contain frequent spelling variations. I have made note of some of the common deviations, but, in general, I have tried to standardize the spellings of the various family members to improve readability.

The pater familias is Jacob van Musscher (I) (?–1623) of Delft. It has been suggested that Jacob (I) arrived in Haarlem about 1590 then subsequently relocated to Delft. In 1603–1604 Karel van Mander, the Mennonite artist and writer, described Van Musscher (variously spelled as Jaques de Mosscher and Jaques de Moschero) as a former student and poet then living in Delft; praising him as 'accomplished and experienced in all aspects of art.' As Van Mander's pupil, Jacob (I) would have been his student in Haarlem and, in fact, a Jaques Muschaart was registered as a painter in the artists' Guild of St. Luke of Haarlem in 1593. The various spellings used by Van Mander for
the Musscher family name may suggest a stay in Italy, and Van Regteren Altena suggests the year 1600 for this sojourn.9

As noted, Van Mander places Jacob van Musscher (I) in Delft by 1603-1604.10 The earliest existing record of the artists' guild of St. Luke in Delft is the register of 01-01-1613, and Jacob is listed as a member.11 Since the names on that list are cited in order of admission to the guild, and Jacob Musscher is numerically the thirty-eighth of the forty oil painters recorded,12 he probably became a member in the 1612-1613 period. Montias, in his detailed examination of the Delft guild, reports that Jacob Fransz. Musscher was a history painter originally from Antwerp; this origin is 'inferred from a source but ...not known with any certainty.'13

In the Delft guild register, next to the name of Jacob Musscher, is the notation 'Jacob Fransz. Muskel has paid his death duty.' Montias reports that Jacob Francois Musscher was buried in Delft on 29-08-1623, believing him to be the same individual listed in the Delft burial register as 'Jacques Francois.' In reality, the entry for the burial that day in the Oude Kerk reads: 'Jacob Franss' (with the notation 'schilder' [painter]).14

Considering the possibility that on other occasions Jacob Fransz. Musscher may have used his abridged patronymic name 'Jacob Franss.' (or variations Franss., Franssz., Frans.), the author, employing the four name variations, searched the digital Delft marriage records and found the entry of Jacob Fransz. Review of the actual register found that 'Jacob Fransz., from Embden, painter, living at Haarlem, married Jannetgen Gerritsdr. in Delft on 11 January 1603' (fig. 1). This record corroborates the important fact that Jacob Fransz. had relocated from Haarlem to Delft; however, it also signifies that the birth city of the artist was not Antwerp but rather Embden (now Emden, a North Sea port of Lower Saxony in North-West Germany, approximately 100 miles northeast of Amsterdam). It has been reported that many Mennonites had immigrated to Emden to avoid religious persecution.15 Regrettably, multiple archival searches in both Antwerp and Embden for data regarding Jacob Fransz. van Musscher (and name variations) revealed no information concerning him.16

In Delft, on 02-12-1616, Jacob's wife, using the more familial form of her name Jannetgen Gerritsdr., possibly also is recorded as a witness at the Baptism of one Gerrit Gerritsz., son of Jan Gerritsz. and his wife Aeffge Pietersdr. While it might appear illogical that Jannetgen Gerritsdr., almost certainly a Mennonite (see below), would be a witness at a religiously sanctioned childhood baptism, she might have made an exception if Jan Gerritsz. were her brother. This familial relationship may be more plausible if it is recalled that the wife of Jan Gerrits was Aeffge Pietersdr., and, years later, one of the witnesses assisting Jannetgen after the death of her husband was one Abraham Pietersz. (possibly a brother of her sister-in-law). Since, the ancestors of Jannetgen Gerritsdr. are only subject to conjecture and cannot be documented adequately, I have started the genealogy of the Gerrits family with her.17

Therefore, the descendants of interest in the Musscher family derive from the married couple Jacob Fransz. Musscher and his wife Jannetgen Gerritsdr. (Genealogy 1).