Michiel van Musscher (Rotterdam 1645 - Amsterdam 1705) was a premier portraitist to the wealthy and powerful in Amsterdam in the last decades of the seventeenth century. Although many of his portraits are known in museums and private collections throughout the world, to date his most elusive individual portrait has been his 1688 likeness of Nicolaas Witsen (1641-1717). Witsen was a world traveler, author, collector, successful businessman, frequent burgomaster of Amsterdam, special delegate for England of the States General, director of the Dutch East India Company, and patron of Van Musscher.

Considering Witsen’s wealth and civic power, as well as Van Musscher’s oeuvre in oil portraiture, it should not be surprising that the artist created a comprehensive, formal oil portrait conveying his patron’s status in Amsterdam. Although reported in the 1700s, no images or recent records of this painting are known, which would be unusual for such a famous individual’s portrait. I believe that most art historians have considered the painting as lost, with the artist’s meticulous drawing of Nicolaas Witsen thought to be a faithful image of the 1688 portrait (fig. 1). Contemporary with the painting, simplified prints from either the drawing or the original portrait also were produced (fig. 2).

1 Michiel van Musscher Portrait of Nicolaas Witsen, c. 1688, drawing in black chalk with brushed in highlights in grey and brown, on paper, 462 x 335 mm. Amsterdam, Collection of the Royal Antiquarian Society (P-KOG-0000157-00). Photograph: Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, with permission of the Royal Antiquarian Society.

The portrait’s existence in the 1700s has been noted, but, since Witsen did not have any children that survived to adulthood, there was no direct descent by inheritance. This resulted in the portrait being owned by Witsen’s nephew and namesake, Nikolaas Lambertz Witsen (Nikolaas II, 1682-1746), and then passing by descent to Nikolaas’ son, Nicolaas Witsen the Younger (Nicolaas III, 1709-1780). Its location for the next one-hundred years is unknown; nonetheless, research now reveals that it did make a last public appearance, albeit a brief one, over 140 years ago as lot 165 at the Amsterdam estate auction of the collection of Sietze Johannes Roosdorp (1817-1872), on 4-5 February 1873. The succinct auction catalog entry provides the only known description of the portrait:

1 Michiel van Musscher, Portrait of Nicolaas Witsen (1641-1717), Mayor of Amsterdam, 1688, oil on canvas, 54.0 x 48.0 cm. Signed lower left on carpet guard border; dated 1688 lower middle on carpet guard border and dated on letter, middle left. Private collection. Photograph: Bert Muller, Woerden, for the author.