



Short notice

From *Young Woman with a Fan* to Isabella: A Rediscovered Identity

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In the painting *Young Woman with a Fan* by Simon Willem Maris (The Hague 1873-1935 Amsterdam) we see a girl sitting in an armchair (fig. 1). She is sumptuously dressed, holds a fan in her right hand and the golden tassel on its cord in her left. Who was this girl? What was her name?

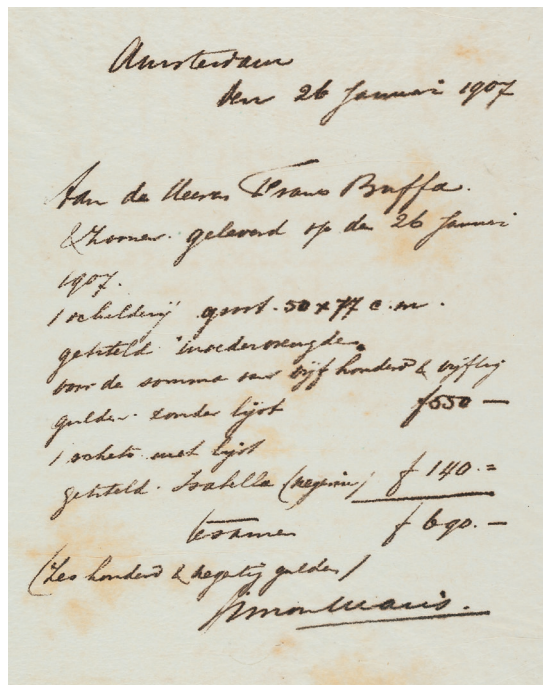
The artist's family archives held in the RKD (Netherlands Institute for Art History), provided important clues to her identity. Nine photographs and references to the name Isabella in Maris's personal documents bring the establishment of her identity a step closer. The photographs show a young girl of about twelve years old.¹ Around 1906 she posed for Maris in his studio at 498 Keizersgracht in Amsterdam, where he had been living since 1902.² It is certain that her first name was Isabella. In the family archives there are four documents that mention the name: in captions to two photographs of her in a photograph album, once in a separate note by Maris and lastly as the title for a sketch of the girl in a letter to an art dealer.³ The artist also used 'Isabella' as the title for a version of the portrait reproduced on a card owned by a private individual.

< Fig. 1
SIMON MARIS,
Isabella, c. 1906.
Oil on canvas,
41 x 29 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. SK-A-2931;
A. van Wezel Bequest,
Amsterdam.

A Painting with Many Titles

The need for further identification of the sitter arose in 2015 as part of the terminology project undertaken by the Rijksmuseum, in which the terminology and titles used in labels and wall texts were scrutinized in order to replace outdated, Eurocentric words and phrases that are now considered derogatory and offensive. The designation of Maris's painting as a 'little negress', the title it had been given in the 1976 collection catalogue, thus became the subject of discussion.⁴ This description of the painting had already been used by the art dealer Jan C. Schüller (1871-1915) in an exhibition in the Pulchri Studio in The Hague in 1908. In a newspaper article, the painting was described as follows: '... by his son SIMON MARIS a superbly painted "Little Negress" of very distinguished colouring and conception and with fine painting of the fabric of the clothes and of the fan.'⁵

Today, this century-old term is considered problematic because of its use in contexts of slavery and colonialism in order to stigmatize and suppress persons based on the colour of their skin. The use of this colonial term as the title of Maris's painting reproduced and legitimized a colonial hierarchy



that still has its effects to this day, and helped to perpetuate it. It reduced the girl in the portrait to a racial type and, as a result, deprived her of her individuality.

The first title by which Maris's painting was indexed in the museum also ignored the individuality and identity of the sitter. The 1922 annual report states that the painting of Isabella was included in the collection that year as part of the bequest made by Andries van Wezel.⁶ It was described as 'Indian type; Oriental girl sitting in an armchair'.⁷ In 1916, however, before the painting was bequeathed to the Rijksmuseum, it was exhibited in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam under the neutral title of 'portrait'.⁸ The various titles given to the painting illustrate their manufactured and relative character and justify an amendment that meets present-day standards and values. In 2015 this resulted in the neutral title of *Young Woman with a Fan*, while at the same time a search for the girl's identity was launched.⁹

Fig. 2

Carbon copy of the letter to the art dealers Frans Buffa & Zonen, 26 January 1907. The Hague, RKB, Simon Maris and Family Archives (NL-HAKD-0257), inv. no. 0257.63.

Fig. 3

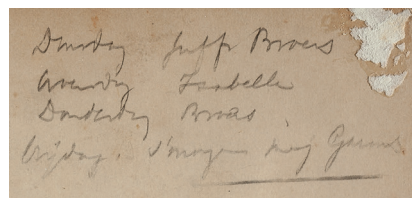
Reproduction of a version of the painting of Isabella with an inscription written by Maris. Sally Schuman private collection.

Fig. 4

Separate note in the scrapbook compiled by Simon Maris's son Thijs Maris, s.a. The Hague, RKB, Simon Maris and family archives (NL-HAKD-0257), inv. no. 0257.257.

A Rediscovered Name

The various titles given to the painting over the years suggested that Simon Maris himself had never given a title for the painting under discussion, but two documents provide evidence to the contrary. In one of the artist's copy books there is a surviving letter to the art dealers Frans Buffa & Zonen. On 26 January 1907 the artist wrote: 'i sketch with frame entitled *Isabella (negress)*' (fig. 2).¹⁰ He further wrote 'Isabella' on a card with a reproduction of a version of the painting, now in a private collection (fig. 3).¹¹ That these titles do indeed refer to the sitter is further supported by a separate note made by Maris, where he states that one of her sittings took place on a Wednesday: 'Woensdag Isabella' (fig. 4).



Finally, as we have already mentioned, in the family archives the name appears twice as captions below two photographs of her, which likewise indicate that her first name was important to the artist in relation to her portrait. Taken together, these documents justify the change in title from *Young Woman with a Fan* to *Isabella*.

Isabella Posing in the Studio

Various photographs found in Simon Maris's family archives give a face to the previously unknown sitter. In two of them, we see Isabella with a cup in her hands, sitting on a footstool in front of the armchair in which she would pose (figs. 5, 6). Maris probably took the photographs himself, possibly before he asked Isabella to wear the sumptuous dress and hat in which she was finally portrayed (figs. 7, 8, 9). The room in which Isabella modelled and



Fig. 5
SIMON MARIS (?),
Photograph of
Isabella in Simon
Maris's Studio,
c. 1906.
Negative,
124 x 100 mm.
The Hague, RKD,
Simon Maris and
Family Archives
(NL-HaRKD-0257),
inv. no. 0257.121.



Fig. 6
SIMON MARIS (?),
Photograph of
Isabella in Simon
Maris's Studio,
c. 1906.
Negative,
124 x 102 mm.
The Hague, RKD,
Simon Maris and
family archives
(NL-HaRKD-0257),
inv. no. 0257.122.



< Fig. 7
SIMON MARIS (?),
*Photograph of
Isabella in Simon
Maris's Studio,*
c. 1906.
Negative,
124 x 101 mm.
The Hague, RKD,
Simon Maris and
family archives
(NL-HAKD-0257),
inv. no. 0257.122.

> Fig. 9
SIMON MARIS (?),
*Photograph of
Isabella in Simon
Maris's Studio,*
c. 1906.
Negative,
123 x 102 mm.
The Hague, RKD,
Simon Maris and
Family Archives
(NL-HAKD-0257),
inv. no. 0257.122.



< Fig. 8
SIMON MARIS (?),
*Photograph of
Isabella in Simon
Maris's Studio,*
c. 1906.
Negative,
124 x 101 mm.
The Hague, RKD,
Simon Maris and
Family Archives
(NL-HAKD-0257),
inv. no. 0257.122.



was photographed can be identified with certainty as Simon Maris's studio from the distinctive features of the armchair, with two rams' heads on the arm rests and upholstery with rosettes as well as the rug on which she rests her feet. On various occasions Maris had his own photograph taken in his well-appointed studio.¹² In fig. 10 the artist himself is sitting in the same striking armchair and we recognize the mirror that shows the reflection of Isabella's back in the painting. The similarities to the photographs of Isabella confirm that this was the place where the photographs of her were taken and where she sat for the portrait.

Different Versions of 'Isabella'

Maris, who concentrated on portraiture and for the most part painted young

women, mothers with children and child portraits,¹³ made several studies of his subject, which means multiple versions of the same portrait exist.¹⁴ This is also true of the painting of Isabella.¹⁵ In the letter to Frans Buffa & Zonen, Maris mentions a sketch with the title *Isabella*. He may have been referring to the twice as large, sketchier version of the Rijksmuseum painting, which the De Visscher family of Zeist acquired in the nineteenth-twenties (fig. 11).¹⁶ According to family tradition, they bought it from the artist himself. The owners gave the painting the title *Mevr. Allwood* as well as *Mevr. Alting*.¹⁷ However a search for an Isabella Allwood or Alting in the Amsterdam City Archives database has so far yielded nothing.

Another version, whereabouts unknown, also shows Isabella and is closer to the Rijksmuseum's example in its refinement. Maris had this version reproduced many times for publication and for his own use.¹⁸ This painting is reproduced on the card on which he wrote the name Isabella as the title (fig. 3). He also wrote: 'For Miss Nancy Lagaay from Simon Maris.' This reproduction is in the private collection of Sally Schuman and it was her grandmother, Anna Maria Lagaay (1875-1967), who was the recipient of the card from Maris, together with a previously unknown painting of Isabella (fig. 12).¹⁹ In 1896 Lagaay was employed as a teacher of 'class four' at a public primary school in Amsterdam.²⁰ She probably took the painting with her to California after she married Carel Lodewijk Herman Vornholt in 1907 and the young couple decided to emigrate.²¹ Unlike the Rijksmuseum portrait, the painting, which is still owned by the family, shows Isabella in simple clothes, like those she is wearing in a number of photographs before she changed into the sumptuous dress. (figs. 5, 6). Isabella's portraits in costume were probably intended

Fig. 10
Simon Maris and
Nonnie Koch in
Simon Maris's
Studio, c. 1902-10.
Photograph,
120 x 89 mm.
The Hague, RKD,
Simon Maris and
Family Archives
(NL-HaRKD-0257),
inv. no. 0257.103.





Fig. 11

SIMON MARIS,
*Portrait of
Mrs Allwood with
a Fan*, c. 1906.
Oil on canvas,
86.5 x 57.5 cm.
Private collection.
Photograph:
AAG Auctioneers,
13 October 2008,
lot 72. Courtesy
AAG Auctioneers.



Fig. 12

SIMON MARIS,
Isabella, c. 1906.
Oil on canvas,
61 x 43.2 cm.
Sally Schuman
private collection.

exclusively for the art market. It is consequently noteworthy that Lagaay owned a version of *Isabella* in which she is plainly dressed. It may have been a preliminary study. This might explain why Maris readily parted with it, as it was not intended for the art market. Another possibility is that there was a link, as yet unknown, between Lagaay, Maris and *Isabella*.

However, we may justifiably conclude that the series of paintings of *Isabella*, combined with the different indications of her name, show that Maris made a carefully observed portrait of an individual, not a type.

Further Research

A vital missing puzzle piece in the search for *Isabella*'s identity is her surname. It is essential for a successful search in the Amsterdam City Archives population registers, which could provide information about her personal history, such as where she lived and her background. However, the omission of the surnames of black models by Western European artists was the rule rather than the

exception.²² Moreover, colonial terminology was preferred to the use of a forename and surname. This former perceived lack of any need to specify the individuality and identity of a portrayed person of colour hinders the establishment of a complete re-identification today. Although there are still many unanswered questions, the discoveries in the archives bring Isabella's identity a step closer and shed light on the human story contained in Maris's painting.

NOTES

- * The author would like to thank Jenny Reynaerts, Eveline Sint Nicolaas and Stephanie Archangel for their helpful advice and comments.
- 1 Rkd, Simon Maris and Family Archives NL-HaRkd-0257 (hereafter referred to as SM), inv. no. 0257.95; two photographs in 0257.104; two negatives in 0257.121; four negatives in 0257.122.
 - 2 On 23 January 1902 Simon Willem Maris and his future wife Cornelia Hendrika Maria Den Breejen moved into 498 Keizersgracht. They lived there until July 1928, when they moved to 6 Sarphatistraat; family registration card in the name of S.W. Marris [sic]; Amsterdam City Archives, Family Registration Cards Amsterdam 1893-1939, no. 5422, inv. no. 957.
 - 3 As a caption to two photographs in an album: Rkd, SM (note 1), inv. no. 0257.104.
 - 4 Pieter J.J. van Thiel et al., *All the Paintings of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam: A Completely Illustrated Catalogue*, cat. Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 1976, p. 367.
 - 5 '... van zijn zoon SIMON MARIS een superieur geschilderd "Negerinnetje" van zeer gedistingeerde kleur en opvatting en met mooie schildering van de stof der kleeding en van den waaier.' It is not certain that this citation refers to SK-A-2931, since there are different versions of the same painting. See further in the article; anonymous, 'Tentoonstelling-Schüller in Pulchri', *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 23 June 1908, p. 6.
 - 6 As stated on the label on the back of the painting, Van Wezel had purchased the painting from the art dealers Frans Buffa & Zonen: 'Kunsthändler François Buffa & Fils, Kalverstraat nr. 39, Amsterdam'. However, we do not know the precise year of acquisition. The painting appears on the final bequest list: 'Schilderijen en. Te bestemmen voor erven', drawn up by the museum on 9 February 1921; Rein van der Wiel, *Van Rapenburgerstraat naar Amerika: de levensstijd van diamantbewerker Andries van Wezel (1856-1921)*, Zwolle 2010, pp. 94, 264 and appendix 4.
 - 7 'Indisch type; Oostersch meisje zittend in een fauteuil', *Verslagen omtrent 's Rijks verzamelingen van Geschiedenis en Kunst* 1922, vol. 45, The Hague 1923, p. 13.
 - 8 *Tentoonstelling van de collectie A.S. Van Wezel. Juli-augustus 1916*, exh. cat. Amsterdam (Stedelijk Museum) 1916, p. 5, no. 40.
 - 9 Former label text: 'Simon Maris painted this woman on various occasions, holding a cigarette or a red fan. Perhaps she was a model, yet this painting could also be an actual portrait. For lack of information, in the past it was variously titled as *The Negress, Portrait of a Mulatto, East-Indian Type, The Little Negress*. These terms are now considered derogatory. Until her name is known, the painting will bear a neutral title.'
 - 10 Rkd, SM (note 1), Vb4 Copy books of sent letters, inv. no. 0257.63, 1906-1919, 1 vol., p. 38 verso.
 - 11 Correspondence with Sally Schuman, 4 August 2018, Documentation/object file Rijksmuseum SK-A-2931, no. T5-2M.
 - 12 H.J. Wolter (foreword), *Atelier Simon Maris veiling*, sale cat. Amsterdam (S.J. Mak van Waay), 16 April 1935.
 - 13 'Simon Maris Overleden', *De Kunst. Een Algemeen Geïllustreerd en Artistiek Weekblad* 27 (26 January 1935), no. 1359, pp. 11-12.

- 14 N.H. Wolf, 'De kunstschilder Simon Maris', *Op de Hoogte* 25 (September 1928), pp. 200-02.
- 15 Maris also portrayed another model in the same clothes and with the same attributes as Isabella. The portraits' titles were *Le Recital* and *Portrait of Seated Lady in Blue Dress*, 1907. See <https://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/simon-willem-maris-dutch-1873-1935-187-c-88f4376be6#> and <https://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/simon-willem-maris-dutch-1873-1935-portrait-of-62373-c-b3e4f298be>, both consulted on 8 January 2019.
- 16 In 1917 this painting was offered for sale at Kunstzalen Regnard & Co on 10 October 1917. It is reproduced as no. 83 in the sale catalogue under the title 'negerin', (Negress). The art galleries were active from 1914 to 1918, in 1917 at 792 Keizersgracht; RKD, Image documentation from the S. Maris archives: Nederland II Schilderkunst portret S. Maris.
- 17 Esther Schreuder, *Black is Beautiful: Rubens to Dumas*, exh. cat. Amsterdam (De Nieuwe Kerk) 2008, p. 294, no. 87; sale Amsterdam (AAG Auctioneers), 13 October 2008, no. 72; <https://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/simon-maris-den-haag-1873-amsterdam-1935-portre-72-c-pm931aond4>, consulted on 5 January 2020.
- 18 Reproduced in A.W. Wilten, 'Simon Maris', *Op de Hoogte* 16 (1919), p. 3; and in the *Rotterdamsche Dameskroniek*, 23 April 1921; seven reproductions held in the RKD, image documentation from the S. Maris archives: Nederland II Schilderkunst portret S. Maris.
- 19 Correspondence with Sally Schuman, 4 August 2018, Documentation/object file Rijksmuseum SK-A-2931, no. T5-2M.
- 20 'Onderwijzeres aan de openbare lagere school 4^{de} klasse'; 'Nr. 171. Extract uit de Notulen van de Gemeenteraad van Amsterdam'; private collection Sally Schuman.
- 21 Via Ancestry.com. Mrs Anna Maria Vornholt in the U.S. Passport Applications, 1795-1925: Washington D.C., National Archives and Record Administration (NARA), vol. 20: Special Series – San Francisco.
- 22 Another well-known example of this is the black woman pictured in Manet's *Olympia*, who is identified only by her forename: *Laure, très belle négresse* or simply *La négresse*; Denise Murrell, *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today*, New Haven 2018, pp. 7, 23.