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A VISUAL AND COMPARATIVE ATTRIBUTION STUDY: PORTRAIT OF AN UNIDENTIFIED 17TH-CENTURY FLEMISH SITTER

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(Revisiting Willem van Haecht and the Possible Identification of Jan van Montfort)

The introduction of any 'new' Old Master work into scholarly circulation is an event that can not only expand the catalogue of the artist's surviving oeuvre, but also refine our understanding of artistic and technical practice, patterns of patronage, and the visual preferences of an era. This seems to be precisely the case with the restoration and subsequent attribution of a small male portrait on panel (21 x 13 cm), which had remained for decades in a private collection without a secure attribution.

The physical condition of the work was poor: the thin red-oak panel had suffered a diagonal fracture; the ground layer was flaking in places, and the painted surface was obscured by soot, yellowed resin varnishes, and uneven later overpainting. The verso, it seems, had even been used by other artists as a palette: clots of dried paint were visible alongside a paper label and a hanging cord. This 'utilitarian biography of the object inevitably raised doubts about its artistic value (Figs 1-2).

Nevertheless, it was precisely the conservation treatment that revealed-beneath dense soot and multiple layers of later overpainting a painting of surprising subtlety and intimate elegance. After the support and ground had been consolidated, the later additions were removed in stages, including the use of a Pettenkofer box (a method that regenerates varnish films and softens later overpaint using solvent vapours). The original paint layer, as it were, 'came to life'. The sitter's face proved to be executed with extremely fine, feather-like strokes of lead white Owing to its dense, smooth, 'silken' body in impasto and its soft greyish tone in scumbled passages when modified in mixtures, lead white enabled particularly delicate modelling. The starched ruff collar, tightly encircling the neck (a characteristic element of upper and middle-class dress in 16th-and 17th-century Europe), is rendered with an almost enamel-like density of white handling, the satin sleeves of the doublet shimmer through the use of semi-transparent glazes.

UV examination confirmed the relative integrity of the original paint surface. In places, an even yellowish fluorescence was observed, indicating the presence of an aged varnish, in several areas, bluish fluorescence of the paint layer was noted where the varnish film had been lost due to later interventions. Warm, dark patches, by contrast, marked zones of later overpainting (Fig. 3)

Stylistically, the work appears to belong to 17th-century Flemish painting and may be associated with the Antwerp milieu, including the circle of Peter Paul Rubens. In the comparative analysis-considering handling, the rendering of materials, facial typology, and comparison with reference works -valuable consultative support was provided by Dr Nils Buttner, Professor at the

State Academy of Fine Arts in Stuttgart and a leading specialist on P. P Rubens, who took part in the attribution discussion.

Comparison with works securely attributed to Willem van Haecht-The Gallery of Cornelis van der Geest (1628), Alexander the Great Visiting the Studio of Apelles (1628-1637), Apelles Painting Campaspe (c. 1630), The Collection of Cornelis van der Geest with Paracelsus (16305), and interior of the Salon of the Archduchess Isabella (1621)-suggests affinities in palette, paint-layer construction, and certain technical procedures consistent with the master's practice (1). However, a definitive attribution of the portrait requires further research, including comprehensive technical and technological examination.


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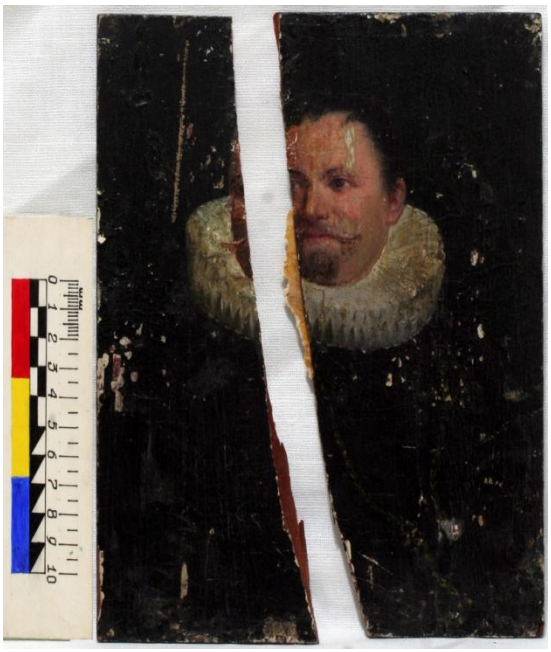

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Fig. 1-2. Front and reverse of the painting before restoration.



Fig. 3. A fragment of the painting under Ultraviolet light.

The removal of later overpainting revealed iconographic details that narrowed the circle of potential sitters: a long gold chain with a suspended key (an insignia associated with a treasurer at the court of Isabella Clara Eugenia), as well as specific features of court dress from the first quarter of the 17th century. Physiognomic comparison with known portraits (including examples linked to the traditions of Rubens and Van Dyck) likewise suggests significant correspondences that require further study (Figs 4-6).

Comparison of the available images of Jan van Montfort with the portrait under consideration reveals similarities extending to specific details-facial proportions, the set of the eyes, the line of the nose, and the character of the facial oval.

These hypotheses were further supported by Professor Nils Büttner in personal correspondence: ...this is a significantly reduced portrait of Jan van Montfort. The wooden panel... may serve as a crucial clue... This timber was utilised in Amsterdam during the 17th century, consequently, the painting could have been executed there."

Jan van Montfort (Jean de Monfort, 1567-1648)

was a Flemish sculptor and medallist active in the Habsburg Netherlands during the first half of the 17th century. In 1602, he served as an assayer at the Antwerp Mint; in 1613, he became a councillor and Mint Master at the court of Albert VII, Archduke of Austria, and Isabella Clara Eugenia, Infanta of Spain and Sovereign of the Netherlands. In this capacity, he held the title of majordomo to the Infanta and carried out political and diplomatic commissions; he also resided in France for a period (2, pp. 132-134)

If the proposed identification is accepted as a working hypothesis, the sitter may be compared with one of the figures in Willem van Haecht's composition The Gallery of Cornelis van der Geest: a person of similar physiognomic type, albeit at a more advanced age, appears in the lower-left corner of the painting.

In the detail (Fig. 7), one can distinguish, on the left, Isabella Clara Eugenia, Infanta of Spain and Sovereign of the Netherlands (No. 1), and her husband and co-sovereign Albert Vil (No. 2); nearby is Peter Paul Rubens (No. 3). Władysław IV Vasa (No. 4) is depicted in the centre, to his right stands Jan van Montfort, treasurer to the archducal couple (No. 5). Next follows Anthony van Dyck (No. 6), as well as the owner of the gallery-the prominent Flemish collector Cornelis van der Geest (No. 7) (see. Vlieghe, Hans Flemish Art and Architecture, 1585-1700. Yale University Press, 2004).



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Fig. 4. P. P. Rubens. Portrait of Jan van Montfort. Oil on canvas, 1636-1628. Courtauld Institute of Art, London.

Fig. 5. Anthony van Dyck. Portrait of Jan van Mentfort. Oil on canvas. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



Fig. 6. Presumed Portrait of Jan van Montfort attributed to Willem van Haecht.



Fig. 7. A detall of Willem wan Haecht's The 'The Gallery of Cemelis van der Geest. Oil on panel, 16ай.

This juxtaposition suggests that the portrait under consideration most likely predates The Gallery of Cornelis van der Geest (Fig. 8) and may have been executed between 1615-1620 a period when van Haecht was apparently assembling a 'figurative stock for his future multi-figure compositions.

The construction of the panel likewise points to an early stage the planed red-oak board, approximately 5 mm thick, has a thin peripheral bevel designed to reduce internal wood tension a technique often associated in specialist literature with the practice of miniaturists and masters of cabinet painting.

The conservation treatment, completed with the application of an ultra-thin dammar varnish containing 0.5% beeswax, restored the work's visual unity and made high-quality photography possible. This, in turn, revealed a faint silvery underdrawing another feature that may align the painting with van Haecht's techniques (pending verification through technical and chemical analysis).



Fig. 8. Willem van Haecht The Gallery of Comelis ven der Geest. Oil on panel, 1628.

Thus, the Portrait of a Man (presumably Jan van Montfort) may be regarded as a rare link between Willem van Haecht's intimate studies and his mature 'gallery' compositions. Even if the attribution and identification of the sitter are revised by future scholarship, the present finding already broadens our understanding of the artist's early portrait practice and prompts a re-examination of a substantial body of anonymous Northern European works from the first third of the 17th century. Together with the forthcoming detailed technical and chemical report, this publication is likely to deepen our understanding of artistic production in High Baroque Flanders, where a small panel can prove no less informative for workshop practice than a monumental altarpiece.



Fig. 9 (1). A detail of Willem van Haecht's The Gallery of Cornelis van der Geest. Oil on panel, 1628. (Detail corresponds to Fig. 7, no. 5.)

Fig. 10 (2). Presumed Portrait of Jan van Montfort, attributed to Willem van Haecht. Oil on panel, around 1615-1620 (?).



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Fig. 11. Painting after restoration.

References

1. Vlieghe, Hans. Flemish Art and Architecture, 1585-1700. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2004.
2. Forrer, L. Biographical Dictionary of Medallists. Vol. IV. London, 1909.