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Portrait of a Young Boy with a Hat

Michael Sweerts
(Brussels 1618 – 1664 Goa)

ca. 1655–56
oil on canvas
39 x 27 cm
MS-101

How to cite

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Rendered with red and brown earth tones and a light that catches his glistening blue eyes and parted lips, Michael Sweerts's *Portrait of a Young Boy with a Hat* evokes the tenderness of boyhood. The figure's averted gaze and slightly turned shoulders suggest his attention is directed elsewhere, but Sweerts depicted the details of his dress and features with such softness and tactility that he seems strikingly present before the viewer. He wears a slightly tattered, broad-brimmed hat pushed back on his head to expose waves of reddish brown hair accented by his ocher-red jacket. It, too, seems worn, as the light reveals small tears in the seams on his right shoulder. Sweerts manipulated the light to play across the boy's forehead, cheeks and nose, casting rich shadows along the left side of his face and jagged patterns descending along his arm and torso. Although he appears to be from a lower social class, Sweerts has rendered him with gentle grace.

The lifelike quality of this image suggests that it was done directly from life, or *naer het leven*, in the Netherlandish tradition of the *tronie*.[1] These head studies, which appear so exacting in their representation that they could be mistaken for formal portraits, were instead highly individualized depictions of anonymous figures. Removed from a specific time or place, *tronies* gave artists the opportunity to focus on the physical and psychological character of an individual.[2] *Tronies* of young men particularly interested Sweerts after he returned to Brussels in the early to mid-1650s, and *Portrait of a Young Boy with a Hat* is one of at least five similar images that he executed in that decade.[3] While Sweerts also depicted young and old women with a similar degree of sensitivity, his representation of young men was exceptional in the seventeenth century, both in number and discerning manner of execution.[4] These works, as evidenced in the Leiden Collection painting, demonstrated Sweerts's ability to create a pictorial experience both immediate and timeless.

This approach is similarly evident in Sweerts's *Boy with a Hat* in Hartford (**fig 1**).[5] The figure wears a similar broad-brimmed hat, though pushed farther down on his head, and a white collared shirt beneath a tattered jacket. As he gazes over his right shoulder, his body recedes sharply back into space. Sweerts repeated this compositional device—the turned head and angled shoulders—in his images of young men from the latter half of the 1650s, including *Portrait of a Youth* in San Francisco, from ca. 1659–61.[6] The somewhat awkward frontal emphasis and tightly cropped composition of the Leiden Collection painting distinguishes it from Sweerts's other male *tronies* and suggests that it may have been among the first of this series of *tronies* that he painted in the mid-1650s.

Sweerts's *tronies* may have had a didactic function. In Brussels, Sweerts established a drawing academy for young artists and tapestry designers to learn how to draw a

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Michael Sweerts, *Boy with a Hat*, ca. 1655–56, oil on canvas, 36.9 x 29.2 cm, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Conn., The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1940.198



Fig 2. *Youth with a Fur-Trimmed Cap*, 1656, etching, 9 x 8.2 cm, from the series Diversae facies in usum iuvenum et aliorum, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. RP-P-1888-A-13822



Fig 3. Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, ca. 1665–66, oil on

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model from life.[7] This academic exercise may have been complemented by Sweerts's own *Diversae facies*, a print series of various head studies that he published in 1656.[8] Following in the tradition of earlier seventeenth-century drawing books, these etchings represented a range of character types for students to copy as part of their training. One such etching from this series, *Youth with a Fur-Trimmed Cap* **(fig 2)**, shares a number of stylistic and compositional similarities with *Portrait of a Young Boy with a Hat*. The half-length figure is positioned against an empty background with his head and shoulders turned to the left. Sweerts rendered the figure with a similar use of chiaroscuro, even creating distinct patterns of shadows on his jacket. Although noticeably older than the boy in the Leiden Collection painting, this etching demonstrates how Sweerts was able to modify a range of character types in age, gender, and dress to suit his needs in print or paint. Much as with the etchings, *Portrait of a Young Boy with a Hat* could have served as a model for Sweerts's students in the academy.[9]

Sweerts's sensitive representation of an individual set against an undefined, dark background shares stylistic similarities with Johannes Vermeer's (1632–75) *Girl with a Pearl Earring* **(fig 3)**. The latter work, painted a decade after Sweerts's image, similarly conveys a timeless, classicizing beauty.[10] Although the two artists likely never met, the ability of Sweerts and Vermeer to evoke the spirit of an individual and render him or her, regardless of class, with an unusual sense of dignity reflects a shared artistic sensibility.

canvas, 46.5 x 40 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague, inv. 670

- Lara Yeager-Crasselt, 2017

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Endnotes

1. See Lyckle de Vries, “Tronies and Other Single Figured Netherlandish Paintings,” *Leids Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 8 (1989): 185–202; and most recently, Dagmar Hirschfelder, *Tronie und Porträt in der niederländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 2008); and Franziska Gottwald, *Das Tronie: Muster-Studie-Meisterwerk* (Berlin and Munich, 2011).
2. *Tronies* were deeply admired and collected by contemporaries throughout the Netherlands, and rendered by artists such as Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), Jan Lievens (1607–74), and Pieter de Grebber (ca. 1600–52/53). For the genesis of the *tronie* as a genre and its different manifestations in the Netherlands, see note 1 above.
3. See Rolf Kultzen, *Michael Sweerts: Brussels 1618–Goa 1664* (Doornspijk, 1996), 64–71, nos. 45, 94–96, 98; and Guido Jansen and Peter C. Sutton, eds., *Michael Sweerts (1618–1664)* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art) (Zwolle, 2001), nos. 24–25, 28. Sweerts’s *tronies* are not signed or dated. Kultzen dated these images to Sweerts’s brief Dutch period, under the belief that the artist had arrived in Amsterdam in the late 1650s. More recent documentation has informed us that Sweerts was in Brussels until 1659, and in all likelihood executed this series of *tronies* before he departed his native city. While the figures in these *tronies* typically wear peasant dress, Sweerts also depicted a young man in exotic costume, *Young Man with a Turban and Flowers*, ca. 1658–61, oil on canvas, 76.4 x 61.8 cm, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. See Jansen and Sutton, *Michael Sweerts*, no. 23. Dagmar Hirschfelder discusses Sweerts’s *tronies* in the context of her greater study as an exceptional case in the development of the Dutch *tronie*; see Dagmar Hirschfelder, *Tronie und Porträt in der niederländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 2008), 150–52, nos. 510–11, 514–15.
4. For Sweerts’s depictions of female figures, see, for example, *Head of an Old Woman*, ca. 1655–61, oil on panel, 49.2 x 38.1 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, and *A Young Maidservant*, ca. 1660, oil on canvas, 61 x 53.5 cm, Fondation Aetas Aurea, Vaduz, Liechtenstein. The work of the Bruges artist Jacob van Oost the Elder (1603–71) bears striking similarities to Sweerts’s handling of the figure and composition, and he, too, depicted a number of images of children. See, for example, *Young Woman*, ca. 1665, oil on canvas mounted on panel, 41.3 x 31.7 cm, private collection; Guido Jansen and Peter C. Sutton, eds., *Michael Sweerts (1618–1664)* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art) (Zwolle, 2001), 151, fig. XXV-2; and *Portrait of a Boy*, ca. 1650, oil on canvas, 80 x 63 cm, National Gallery, London.
5. See Rolf Kultzen, *Michael Sweerts: Brussels 1618–Goa 1664* (Doornspijk, 1996), no. 98; and Guido Jansen and Peter C. Sutton, eds., *Michael Sweerts (1618–1664)* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art) (Zwolle, 2001), no. 24.

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6. *Portrait of a Youth*, ca. 1659–61, oil on canvas, 39.4 x 34.8 cm, Fine Arts Museum San Francisco, Roscoe and Margaret Oakes Collection. This boy seems to come from a different social class. Here Sweerts has replaced the peasant costume with a more fashionable white, broad-collared shirt and finely buttoned jacket. See Rolf Kultzen, *Michael Sweerts: Brussels 1618–Goa 1664*, trans. Diane Webb (Doornspijk, 1996), no. 96; and Guido Jansen and Peter C. Sutton, eds., *Michael Sweerts (1618–1664)* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art) (Zwolle, 2001), no. 25.

7. See Jonathan Bikker, "Sweerts' Life and Career—A Documentary View," in *Michael Sweerts (1618–1664)*, ed. Guido Jansen and Peter C. Sutton (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art) (Zwolle, 2001), 25–36.

8. For these etchings, see Ger Luijten, "'For the Young and Others': The Prints of Michael Sweerts," in *Michael Sweerts (1618–1664)*, ed. Guido Jansen and Peter C. Sutton (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art) (Zwolle, 2001), 167–78, nos. P9–P21. For Dutch and Flemish drawing books, see Jaap Bolten, *Method and Practice: Dutch and Flemish Drawing Books, 1600–1750* (Landau, 1985). Such etchings may have also been intended as collector's items, as they were never bound into a book but remained as single sheets. For the tradition of this type of series, see, for instance, Jan Lievens's *Diverse Tronikens*, small etchings of various head studies, which were probably published while the artist was in Antwerp in 1635–44. See Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., ed., *Jan Lievens: A Dutch Master Rediscovered* (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Milwaukee, Milwaukee Art Museum; Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis) (New Haven, 2008), nos. 62–66. For the use of *tronies* as studies for emotion and character, see also Dagmar Hirschfelder, *Tronie und Porträt in der niederländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 2008), 328–34, for Sweerts, 332.

9. This point is also raised in Guido Jansen and Peter C. Sutton, eds., *Michael Sweerts (1618–1664)* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art) (Zwolle, 2001), 151. In her recent study of the genesis of the *tronie*, Franziska Gottwald traces its origins to the medieval workshop, examining its use as a type of model and ultimately its development into an autonomous genre in the seventeenth century. Sweerts, however, is not discussed in the context of Gottwald's study. See Franziska Gottwald, *Das Tronie: Muster-Studie-Meisterwerk* (Berlin, 2011).

10. For a discussion of the artistic relationship between Sweerts and Vermeer, see Rolf Kultzen, *Michael Sweerts: Brussels 1618–Goa 1664*, trans. Diane Webb (Doornspijk, 1996), 65–66; Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Johannes Vermeer* (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (New Haven, 1995), 168; Walter Liedtke, *A View of Delft: Vermeer and His Contemporaries* (Zwolle, 2001), 241–42; and Dagmar Hirschfelder, *Tronie und Porträt in der niederländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 2008), 198.

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Provenance

- Franz Theodor Bettendorf (1763–1809), Aachen and Brussels.
- Clemens B. Lagemann, Aachen, as by Pieter de Grebber.
- Private collection, Paderborn.
- Frau Anne Gold, Aachen.
- [Bob Haboldt, Paris, 1995].
- Private collection, France (private sale, Sotheby's, New York, 2009).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2009.

Exhibition History

- Rome, Scuderie del Quirinale, "Vermeer: Il secolo d'oro dell'arte olandese," 26 September 2012–20 January 2013, no. 43 [lent by the present owner].
- Amsterdam, H'ART Museum, "From Rembrandt to Vermeer: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 9 April–24 August 2025 [lent by the present owner].
- West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art, "Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 25 October 2025–29 March 2026 [lent by the present owner].

References

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- Kultzen, Rolf. *Michael Sweerts: Brussels 1618–Goa 1664*. Doornspijk, 1996, 66, 70, n. 64, 71, n. 67, 119–20, no. 100.
- Yeager-Crasselt, Lara. "Ritratto di fanciullo con cappello." In *Vermeer. Il secolo d'oro dell'arte olandese*. Edited by Walter Liedtke, Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., and Sandrina Bandera, 196–97, no. 43. Exh. cat. Rome, Scuderie Del Quirinale. Rome, 2012.
- Yeager-Crasselt, Lara. *Michael Sweerts (1618-1664): Shaping the Artist and the Academy in Rome and Brussels (Pictura Nova XXI)*. Turnhout, 2015, 41, 99, 102, 104; pl. 40.
- Nogrady, Elizabeth. "Michael Sweerts, *Young Boy with a Hat*." In *Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time*. Edited by Elizabeth Nogrady et al., 140, ill. Exh. cat. Amsterdam, H'ART Museum; West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art. Zwolle, 2025. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]

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Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of medium-weight, plain, closed-weave fabric with all four tacking margins removed, has been Beva-lined with a fine fabric interleaf. There is no obvious cusping, and paper tape extends onto the stretcher along the upper and lower edges only. Thin wood shims have been attached along the left and right edges with brads. There are two labels, but no wax seals, import stamps or stencils along the lining or stretcher.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied. The paint has been applied with loose fluid brushstrokes in thin, smooth, glazes with no use of impasto. Raised dabs of white highlights have been applied to the figure's pupils, lower eyelids, proper right eyebrow, side of nose, and jacket seam along the proper right shoulder.

No underdrawing or compositional changes are readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers or as pentimenti. There is no X-radiograph of the painting.

The painting is unsigned and undated.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 1994 and remains in a good state of preservation.

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