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Portrait of a Man (Possible Self-Portrait)

Attributed to Pieter Verelst
(Dordrecht 1616/18 – ca. 1678 Hulst?)

ca. 1645–50
oil on panel
37.3 x 31.8 cm
PV-100

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The earnest yet slightly bemused young man in this sympathetic portrait bust engages the viewer with a direct gaze. His smooth face and wispy moustache suggest that he is in his late twenties or early thirties, an age appropriate for the stylish notched black beret atop his brown curls. The light illuminating his face and the white, flat collar of his chemise enlivens the scene by accenting the gold or silver piping of his jacket. The base of a Corinthian column, visible at the right in the darkened background, is a pictorial element indicating that—despite his relative youth—he is a man of substance and gravitas.

Tree ring analysis of the panel reveals that the portrait was painted sometime after 1645, a date consistent with the style of the sitter's long, curly hair and the shirt's flat collar.[1] The manner in which the sitter gazes directly at the viewer suggests that the painting could be a self-portrait, perhaps patterned after one of Rembrandt's self-portraits of the late 1630s and early 1640s **(fig 1)**. Nevertheless, the smooth, refined brushwork is uncharacteristic of an artist trained in Rembrandt's workshop. This distinctive stylistic blend of smooth classicism and a Rembrandtesque pose is a fundamental reason for attributing this work to Pieter Verelst, who, in the late 1640s, would have been about 30 years old, the approximate age of the sitter.[2] The self-portrait hypothesis is strengthened by the existence of another bust-length portrait, also attributed to Verelst **(fig 2)**, in which the same young man similarly engages the viewer with bold self-confidence.[3]

Verelst began his artistic career in his native Dordrecht, probably in the mid-1630s. Although it is unclear from whom he learned his craft, given the many connections that existed between Dordrecht artists and Rembrandt's workshop during the 1630s and 1640s, it is probable that he was trained by an artist familiar with Rembrandt's stylistic innovations.[4] Verelst, who joined the Dordrecht painters' guild in 1638, was a versatile, even eclectic artist who painted a wide range of subjects in different styles, among them portraits, *tronies*, and low-life genre scenes. In 1643 Verelst moved to The Hague, where he joined the Guild of Saint Luke that very year. It is not known why he moved there, but it may have been because he believed he could find clients for portraits among those associated with the States General or the court of Stadholder Frederik Hendrik, the Prince of Orange. Indeed, the formal portraits that Verelst painted in The Hague attest to his considerable skill as an insightful portraitist, and his ability to adapt to the courtlier stylistic model of Adriaen Hanneman (ca. 1603/4–71).

After moving to The Hague, Verelst continued to paint images of scholars and hermits, as well as *tronies* of young boys or old, bearded men situated against a dark background in a Rembrandtesque manner. The portrait in the Leiden Collection fits

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait at Age 34*, 1640, oil on canvas, 102 x 80 cm, National Gallery, London, inv. no. NG672, © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY



Fig 2. Pieter Hermansz Verelst, *Portrait of a Young Man, Head and Shoulders, Wearing a Hat with a Red Feather*, ca. 1645, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 53 cm, Sotheby's, London, 5 April 1995, lot 192

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entirely within that tradition. Although the face is smoothly modeled and the sitter has a dignified and elegant presence, as is appropriate for Verelst's portrait style in The Hague, the manner in which light falls on his face and the way the beret shades his forehead and eyes fully reflects Rembrandt's manner. If indeed this is a self-portrait, Verelst's proud bearing provides a glimpse into the artist's solid sense of self, one that undoubtedly reflects the optimism he felt in his new artistic circumstances.

In 1656, Verelst's self-assurance allowed him to join Hanneman and 46 other artists in breaking away from the Guild of Saint Luke to establish the Confrerie Pictura, a new professional organization. While Hanneman served as the Confrerie's first deacon, the membership regarded Verelst with sufficient respect to have him follow in Hanneman's footsteps and elect him deacon in 1659–60. Unfortunately, Verelst's career did not end on a positive note. In November 1668 debts and bankruptcy precipitated Verelst's sudden departure from The Hague, leaving his creditors a mere 410 guilders worth of possessions.[5] Despite the economic decline at the end of his career, this striking portrait is a testament to his artistic skills.

- Henriette Rahusen, 2017

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Endnotes

1. See, for example, Frans Hals, *René Descartes*, ca. 1649, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, on permanent loan from the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek (NCG inv. 998).
2. The painting was attributed to Verelst when it was sold by Sotheby's, New York, 27 January 2007, lot 555.
3. The second portrait, sold at Sotheby's, New York, in 1995, was attributed to Verelst by Werner Sumowski. See Sotheby's, London, *Old Master Paintings*, sale 5201, 5 April 1995, lot 192. Catalogue notes indicate that *Portrait of a Young Man, Head and Shoulders, Wearing a Hat with a Red Feather* was formerly attributed to Govaert Flinck (1615–60). In 1983, Sumowski reattributed it to Verelst, dating the portrait to the period when Verelst's work revealed the strong influence of Rembrandt's work of the 1630s. See Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 1: 83, 97 color repro.
4. The influence of Rembrandt is evident in the work of a number of artists in Dordrecht in the 1630s and 1640s, including those who are not documented as the master's students. Two artists from Dordrecht who did study with Rembrandt are Ferdinand Bol (1616–80) and Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627–78). The impact of Rembrandt's style, however, is also evident in the paintings of Paulus Lesire (1612–54/56) and Benjamin Gerrits Cuyp (1612–52).
5. G. H. Veth, "Aanteekeningen Omtrent Eenige Dordrechtsche Schilders, XXXIX Pieter Hermansz. Verelst en zijne zonen," *Oud Holland* 14, no. 2 (1896): 99–112.

Provenance

- (Sale, Sotheby's, New York, 27 January 2007, no 555, as attributed to Pieter Verelst [Salomon Lilian B. V., Amsterdam]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2007.

Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular eastern Baltic oak, is derived from a tree felled after 1645, and has a conjectural usage date of 1645–77. The wedge-shaped plank is slightly wider than typical eastern Baltic boards and has bevels on all four sides, a steep narrow one along the left edge.[1] The

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unthinned and uncradled panel has machine tool marks. A milky wax coating has been applied to the panel reverse and extends onto the panel edges. A paper label remnant has been applied over the wax but there are no wax seals, import stamps, stencils, inscriptions or panel maker's marks.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied followed by paint built up in successive thin layers through the background and figure's hair and hat, with thin paste consistency through the figure's face, and with low impasto highlights along the edge of the figure's garment. Drying cracks have formed through all but the more opaquely applied flesh tones, but are most pronounced in a vertical band along the left third of the composition.

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

The painting is unsigned and undated.

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition and remains in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. As viewed from the reverse. The characterization of the wood is based on Ian Tyers's November 2010 dendrochronology report.

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