

## Artwork of the Month November 2020

### Unknown Netherlandish Artist, *Portrait of a Man Aged 27* (1556)

*Jeanne Nuechterlein, Reader in History of Art at the University of York, co-curator of 'Making a Masterpiece: Bouts and Beyond, 1450-2020', and a member of FYAG Committee, reflects on the appeal of a small sixteenth-century portrait, about which little is known.*



Unknown Netherlandish artist, *Portrait of a Man Aged 27*, 1556. Oil on wood, diameter 19.3 cm. York Art Gallery. Photo: Jeanne Nuechterlein (with permission from York Museums Trust).

This small roundel portrait normally hangs in York Art Gallery's storeroom, but Beatrice Bertram and I were pleased to be able to bring it out this past year for 'Making a Masterpiece: Bouts and Beyond, 1450-2020', where it unexpectedly became one of my personal favourites in the exhibition, despite its small size and the mystery of its artist and subject.

This painting exemplifies the great expansion in portraiture across northern Europe in the sixteenth century. The unknown artist was clearly very skilled at turning a face into a satisfying pictorial composition. The few simplified elements of clothing enhance, through contrast, the man's lively facial features and especially lively facial hair. There is nothing to suggest that this was a wealthy or important individual – no fur, no jewellery, no insignia. Indeed, much of the interest of Renaissance portraiture lies in its extension to people from varying social classes, who, like people today, wanted to make a lasting visual record of their existence.

As far as I know, this portrait has not often been shown since its acquisition in 1955 with the rest of the F. D. Lycett Green collection, perhaps due to its imperfect condition: a scratch runs diagonally across the man's forehead, and a deeper crack runs from the right edge through the moulded circular frame. For our exhibition, which examined the materials used in making art, the crack was actually a benefit, since we used it to highlight the fact that the circular panel and its frame are carved from the same piece of wood, rather than the frame being a separate attachment. An integral frame is only possible if the work is small enough to be constructed from a single wood plank. This construction appears in several other small painted panels from the Netherlands and Germany in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, including a few roundel portraits by Hans Holbein the Younger and Cornelis Ketel (both of whom spent part of their careers in England), although these two artists are too early and too late respectively to have made this painting.

In its first known modern sale in 1929, the portrait was attributed to the Bruges painter Pieter Pourbus, but, although the style is certainly very similar, Pourbus was later not thought to be quite right. Letters in York Art Gallery's archive reveal that Gallery staff contacted a few experts in 1958 to see if anyone could come up with a better attribution, but no one could put their finger on it. The firmest response (from conservators in Brussels and Paris) was only that it certainly wasn't by Corneille de Lyon or any other French artist. In 1992, York Art Gallery's then Art Assistant,

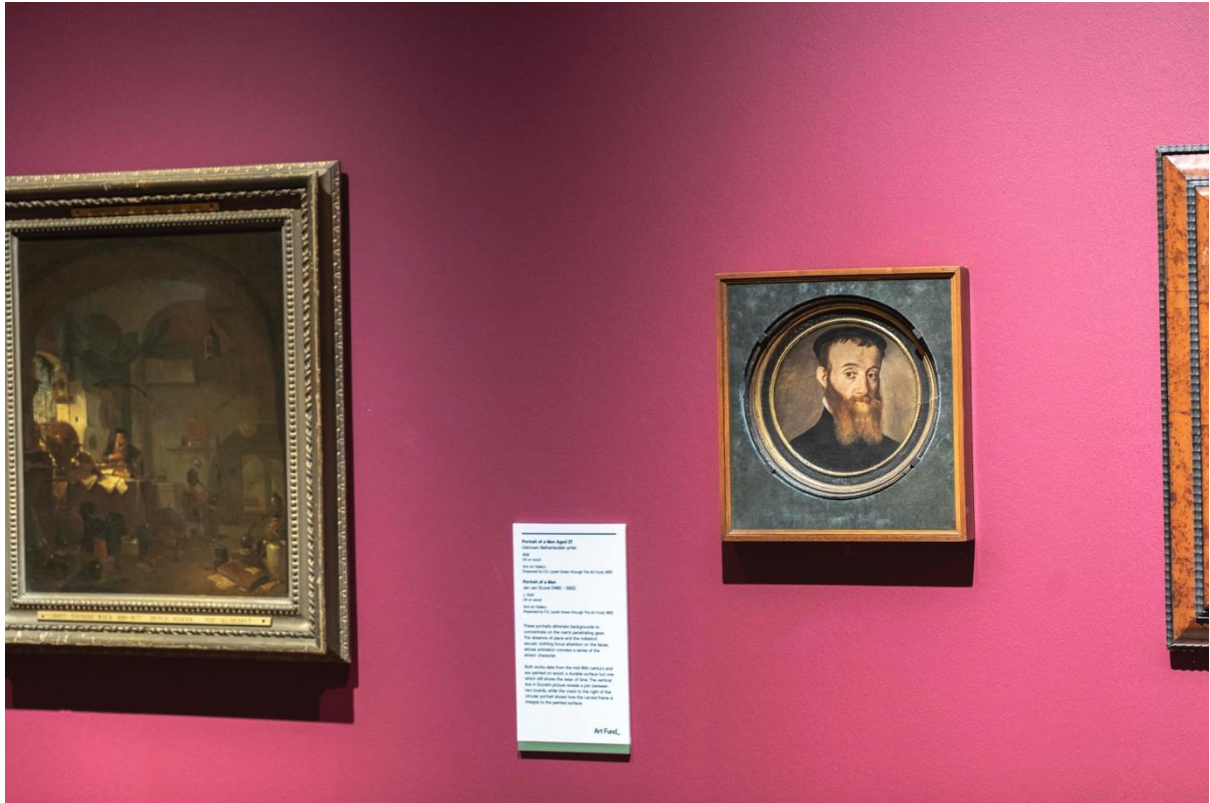
Catharine MacLeod – now Senior Curator at the National Portrait Gallery – wrote to ask the opinion of Lorne Campbell, the prominent art historian, who has written the Netherlandish art catalogues for the National Gallery, London. He noted a similarity in format to works by Cornelis Ketel, although he admitted that ‘The style of yours seems quite distinctive, but I can’t at the moment make any associations.’ MacLeod wrote back, ‘I must say I find it reassuring that you also could not make any stylistic associations, as that is the painting I felt I really ought to know about!’

In the face of such uncertainty from other experts with more highly trained connoisseurial eyes, I did not venture an attribution for our exhibition, leaving it at ‘Unknown Netherlandish artist’. I spent a lot of time looking through comparative images, but I found that I too could not pin the artist down.

Neither do we have any idea of the depicted man’s identity. The inscription running along the top of the carved frame is somewhat abraded (and partly shadowed in the photograph above), but it gives a fairly minimal set of information in a very standard Latin format: ‘ANNO.1556 AETATIS.27’ – in other words the man was aged 27 when the portrait was painted in 1556. (The second digit of his age at first looks like a 5 rather than 7, but that’s due to a scratch in the paint surface.) The clothing he wears is also very commonplace, a black cap and black jacket made of some undecipherable type of fabric, and a hint of a white lace collar appearing at the neckline: conservative mid-sixteenth century clothing.

Why, then, is this my Artwork of the Month? In the ‘Making a Masterpiece exhibition’, we were able to put on display many strong pieces from York’s collection, including several that were wonderfully improved through a generous conservation grant from the Friends, for which we were enormously grateful. Among them, I could cite several others that really delighted me, including Jan van Goyen’s stunning landscapes [\*River Scene\*](#) and [\*Peasants and Horsemen at an Inn\*](#), and a number of striking prints that had never before been displayed.





*Portrait of a Man Aged 27* on display in 'Making a Masterpiece: Bouts and Beyond, 1450-2020'. Photo: Chris Streek, York Museums Trust.

And yet, I developed a particular soft spot for this portrait, due to its vivid sense of personality. I find the man's raised eyebrows and friendly smile immensely endearing, and, whenever Beatrice and I walked past the portrait, we imagined him saying a cheery 'Hello!' from the wall. He appears completely unpretentious, with his uncontrolled locks of hair peeping out along his already-receding hairline, and his red beard looking simultaneously well-groomed and slightly out of control. These individualized elements are satisfyingly balanced against the very flat black of his clothing and the surprising variation in the paint strokes of the indistinct background. The vibrant colour contrasts, especially the highlights in the beard standing out against the black, nicely complement the conversational effect of his facial expression.

Altogether, this painting exemplifies for me the appeal of portraits from the past: they can give us the feeling that we somehow interact with an individual who lived several centuries ago, even if we have no idea who he was. I almost like the painting more because we can't put any names to it. It leaves us free to read whatever we like into the man's persona, as constructed by the artist. I admit that is perhaps not the most professional art-historical way to think about a painting – but, after all,

such lively reactions are exactly why I decided to become an art historian.

**Jeanne Nuechterlein**

November 2020



Unknown Netherlandish artist, *Portrait of a Man Aged 27*, detail. Photo: Chris Streek, York Museums Trust.