

JEAN GOSSART
*AN ELDERLY
COUPLE*

LORNE
CAMPBELL

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with French Paintings before 1600*

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PROVENANCE

Jan Gossaert (Jean Gossart)

NG1689

An Elderly Couple

Oil on parchment, laid down on canvas, 48.1 x 69.2 cm, parchment 47.1 x 67.8 cm, painted surface approximately 46.0 x 66.9 cm

NG1689 was possibly the ‘Two Portraits in one Picture – *very animated and elaborately finished* which, attributed to Quinten Massys, was sold at Christie’s on 21 May 1808 (120) by ‘Burrell’: Sir Charles Merrik Burrell (1774–1862), MP.¹ It was bought, for the very high price of £215 5s., by Hill – the dealer Philip Hill (c.1766–1836) of Greek Street, Soho. It reappeared as no. 17, ‘Massys, The Portrait of Foger (and his Wife,) ...’, in Hill’s exhibition of ‘capital Pictures for Sale by Private Contract’ which began on 16 April 1810 at the Old Academy Room, 118 Pall Mall. It was once again sold at a very high price, 300 guineas.² NG1689 was certainly by 1824 in the collection of Landseer’s friend and patron William Wells (1760–1847) of Redleaf in Kent where it was attributed to Massys. It was sold with the rest of Wells’s pictures at Christie’s on 13 May 1847 (76) and was bought by Seguier for Mrs Whyte. She was Maria Louisa Simpson (1773–1855), widow of the lawyer Mark Anthony Whyte (died 1838), and lived at Barrow Hill near Rocester in Staffordshire. By her will of 12 January 1855 she bequeathed Barrow Hill and the pictures there to her niece, Louisa Jane Finch Simpson, widow of Henry Dawson (died 1849).³ Mrs Dawson died in 1865; her son, Captain Arthur Finch Dawson (1836–1928), inherited the house and the pictures. NG1689 was purchased in 1900 through the restorer and dealer Ayerst Hooker Buttery (1868–1929), London.

1. Fredericksen et al. 1990, I, p. 577. In the copy of the sale catalogue at the Courtauld Institute is the annotation ‘2 ¼ 2 fine’ which, in the code used by this annotator (who gives very approximate measurements and seems to include frames), means 2¼ feet high by 2 feet wide, or 61 x 68.5 cm. Burton Fredericksen, in a letter of 9 January 1990, kindly drew attention to this and other facts relating to the sale catalogues of 1808 and 1810.

2. Fredericksen et al. 1990, I, p. 577. Note in the copy of the sale catalogue at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (information kindly given by Burton Fredericksen). The sale was advertised in the *Times* of 16 April 1810, p. 1: admission cost 1s., as did the catalogue.

3. Will proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, 16 January 1856: NA, PROB 11/2226, sig. 74.

EXHIBITIONS AND VERSION

Exhibitions

London BI 1824 (28); London BI 1837(5); London BI 1839 (22); London BI 1848 (88);
Derby 1870 (184); London RA 1879 (219); NG 1939 (no catalogue); NG 1947 (33);
Rotterdam-Bruges 1965 (28); NG 1975 (16); NG 1977–8 (not numbered); NG 2008–9 (50);
New York 2010–11 (53); NG 2011 (53)

Version

A version of poor quality and uncertain date, measuring 9 x 14 in., 23 x 35.5 cm, was sold at Dowell's in Edinburgh on 28 April 1917 (111), as 'Flemish School'. Above the sitters are the inscriptions: 'RICHARD FFERRIS MD/ CATHERINE FFERRIS/ 1559'.⁴

TECHNICAL NOTES

NG1689 was cleaned in 1942, when the backing canvas was partially strip-lined. The painting is in very good condition, though the man's black doublet is a little worn and there is a small damage in the lower-right section of the woman's veil. The yellow pins in her veil have been touched out by a restorer, for unexplained reasons. Some of the red lakes, for example in the shadows on the woman's veil, may have faded slightly.

The support is one piece of parchment which has been laid down on a single piece of fine canvas (14 warp and weft threads per centimetre). The softwood stretcher does not bear any visible maker's mark. The parchment may have wrinkled when it was laid down: the damage in the lower-right corner could have occurred when a wrinkle was smoothed away. The parchment may originally have been laid down on a panel: holes in the edge of the parchment were possibly made when it was tacked or laced to a panel.

The parchment is covered in a thin priming layer of lead white. Infrared reflectography

4. See the sale catalogue; the inscriptions are not completely legible in the accompanying reproduction.

reveals underdrawing in a liquid medium, apparently applied with a brush. The drawing consists of outlines and some hatching in the shadows of the man's draperies. There are many small changes. In the underdrawing, the man's hat is larger and the hanging ribbons are further from his face on both sides of his head. The contour of his face is drawn to our left of the painted contour; his neck, on our left, and the point of his nose are narrower in the drawing. His shoulders seem to have been drawn lower and the contour of his left upper-arm is drawn to our left of the painted contour. Fewer changes are visible in the woman, apart from slight alterations in some of the folds of her veil. As the black area of her dress is not penetrated by infrared radiation, it is impossible to tell whether there may be further changes there. Lines have been ruled to mark the limits of the composition at the top and bottom and on the left but not on the right. At the top and bottom, these lines are just inside the painted surface; on the left, the line is about one cm inside the painted surface and goes through the man's sleeve.

The green background is underpainted in azurite mixed with lead-tin yellow and some lead white; the translucent glaze is verdigris, partially dissolved in a medium of linseed oil, which contains some pine-resin. The medium of the woman's veil is walnut oil.⁵

The paint has been applied with great skill and, in some areas, for example the man's shirt, at considerable speed. Some of the hairs of the eyebrows are rendered in *sgraffito*; in many places the paint is worked wet-in-wet; in the fur it is feathered and in places the paint has been made to bead; in the man's fingernails it is dragged. The glaze on the man's purple sleeves has been blotted with a cloth: red fibres embedded in the glaze are probably from the woollen textiles from which the dyestuff in the red lake pigment was extracted. The green glaze has also been blotted.

The man's hat was painted after the green background. Because its reserve is smaller than the underdrawn hat, Gossart must have changed his mind about its shape before he laid in the background. The background glaze, however, was applied after the woman's veil was painted. The ribbons hanging from the man's hat were painted after his red collar; his face

5. These observations are based on examination of paint samples from the green background. The binding medium was analysed by GC-MS and FTIR microscopy. See reports in the NG Scientific Department files by M. Spring (July 1994) and R. White and J. Pile (January 1995).

was painted after the background but his hair was painted on top of his face and the ribbons. The stray white hairs caught among the ribbons were of course painted after the ribbons and the fur but some of the detailing of the fur was painted after the stray hairs.

DESCRIPTION

The man, who has grey hair and brown eyes and who is rather inefficiently shaved, wears a black cap with lappets that have been turned up and buttoned to the crown of the cap. The hat-badge is a cameo, framed in gold and showing a young man and a young woman, both nude. Standing in front of a tree, they are embracing. The youth may be wearing a wreath and holds a staff in his right hand; the young woman holds a cornucopia in her left hand. They could be Mercury and Fortuna (or Tyche), whose emblem was a cornucopia: they are the gods of trade and prosperity.⁶ Alternatively, they could be Mars and Venus. Her billowing veil is reminiscent of the headdress of Gossart's *Venus* (Brussels);⁷ and in a painting of *Mars, Venus and Cupid*, by a follower of Gossart, Mars holds a cornucopia.⁸ From the man's hat hang two dark grey or black ribbons. Over a white shirt he wears a black garment tied at the neck with an elaborate lace. Over that is a grey or black doublet, complicated in its structure and lined in red. His gown, lined and trimmed with brown fur, is purple; and he holds a brown, presumably wooden, staff, its head encased in silver engraved with patterns in the grotesque style. The woman, whose eyes are grey and who has brownish hair on her upper lip, wears a white veil held in place with two golden pins (touched out by a restorer) and a black dress lined with brownish fur.

6. Hackenbroch 1996, pp. 260–1.

7. Friedländer, vol. VIII, no. 44.

8. Wetzlar sale, Sotheby Mak Van Waay, Amsterdam, 9 June 1977, lot 121; Friedländer, vol. VIII, no. 46.

THE IDENTITIES OF THE SITTERS

If NG1689 is indeed the portrait offered for sale in 1810 (see Provenance), the sitters were then identified as 'Foger and his wife', members of the Fugger family, wealthy bankers of Augsburg. The inscriptions on the version sold in Edinburgh in 1917 and apparently dated 1559 identify the sitters as Catherine Ferris and Richard Ferris, MD, presumably the man of that name who by 1522 was a member of the Barbers' Company of London, who served Henry VIII and Elizabeth I and who died in 1566.⁹ Holbein included his portrait in his *Henry VIII and the Barber-Surgeons* (now with The Worshipful Company of Barbers, London), painted shortly before Holbein's death in 1543: Ferris is the man on the extreme right in the front row; he was added at a late stage in the evolution of the composition and bears no resemblance to Gossart's old man.¹⁰ As Gossart's portrait may be dated to the 1510s, the old man must have been born in about 1445, decades before Ferris. Ferris's wife was not Catherine but Emma Wisdom, whom he married in 1542 and who survived him.¹¹ The inscriptions on the Edinburgh version can be dismissed as baseless invention.

The only indications of the sitters' identities are provided by their clothes. The man's hat-badge, which may never have existed in reality and was probably created by Gossart, may nonetheless suggest that he took an interest in classical antiquity. His silver-topped staff and his fur-lined purple gown show that he is prosperous. The cap, with its two trailing ribbons, is of a type found fairly frequently in North Netherlandish portraits;¹² it was perhaps a North Netherlandish fashion to wear such hats, which might conceivably have come to denote a certain status. The woman's veil and dress are very similar to those worn by Maria van Snellenberg in a double portrait of her and her husband Dirck Borre van Amerongen

9. Young 1890, p. 524.

10. Strong 1963, p. 8.

11. Guildhall Library, London, MS 4448, register of St Stephen Coleman Street, 6 July 1542 (Emma's father was a painter, John Wisdom); will of Richard Ferris, proved 22 April 1566, NA, PROB 11/48, 9 Crymes.

12. Compare the portrait of Jan I, Count of Egmond, who died in 1516, attributed to the Master of Alkmaar (New York); Pieter Jan Foppesz. in Heemskerck's group portrait of him and his family, painted in c.1530 (Kassel); the portrait of Aert van der Goes, Advocate of Holland, dated 1541, in the style of Heemskerck (van der Goes collection, Wassenaar); the portrait of Cornelis Aertsz. van der Dussen, attributed to Scorel (Berlin); or the portrait of Jan Diert attributed to Heemskerck (Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht). A possible instance of a South Netherlander wearing such a hat is found in Joos van Cleve's portrait of an unidentified man, dated 1526 (Kassel). For reproductions, see Friedländer, vol. X, no. 59; vol. XII, no. 383; Fölting 1973, p. 315; Friedländer, vol. XII, nos 351, 353; vol. IX, no. 119.

(Rotterdam). It is attributed to the Master of the Amsterdam Death of the Virgin and was probably painted in Utrecht in about 1515.¹³ Such evidence may suggest that NG1689 was painted in the northern provinces of the Low Countries, which, given the established facts of Gossart's biography, is in any case probable.

ATTRIBUTION AND DATE

Attribution

The double portrait sold in 1808 and 1810 was attributed to Quinten Massys. Between 1824 and 1900, NG1689 was invariably attributed to Massys. In 1901 it was catalogued as by Gossart;¹⁴ in the 1913 catalogue the idea was put forward that it might be by two different hands, one German and one Netherlandish.¹⁵ Though this theory was dropped after 1921, the portrait remained 'ascribed' to Gossart until 1945, when it was once more catalogued as by Gossart. The attribution has been accepted by Friedländer, who considered it 'in many respects his masterpiece',¹⁶ by Davies and by most other art historians.

Date

Weisz dated the portrait in the 1500s, von der Osten towards 1513; Pauwels, Hoetink and Herzog placed it in the 1520s; Ainsworth between c.1515 and 1530.¹⁷ The dress of the couple may indicate that it was painted in the 1510s¹⁸ but, because they were old, they may not have kept up assiduously with current fashions. The style is close to that of the signed diptych of Jean Carondelet, dated 1517 (Louvre),¹⁹ and the Brussels donor portraits of about 1520; the attention to detail is less startling in the later portraits. The nudes in the man's hat-badge,

13. Friedländer, vol. X, no. 153; J. Giltaij in exh. cat. Rotterdam 1994, pp. 274–7.

14. NG 1901 catalogue, p. 250.

15. NG 1913 catalogue, p. 414.

16. Friedländer, vol. VIII, p. 39 and no. 80

17. Weisz 1913, pp. 78–9; von der Osten 1961, pp. 459–60; Pauwels, Hoetink and Herzog in the exh. cat. Rotterdam-Bruges 1965, p. 176; Ainsworth in Ainsworth et al. 2010, pp. 276–8.

18. See above.

19. Ibid., no. 4.

whose poses derive from engravings by Dürer, are reminiscent of Gossart's *Neptune and Amphitrite* (Berlin), dated 1516.²⁰

Such half-length double portraits were known in the Low Countries in the fifteenth century and appear to have been relatively common in Germany.²¹ Two portraits by Quinten Massys, which may be cut from one double portrait, were painted at about the same time as NG1689 and show sitters who are similarly failing to communicate with each other.²² According to Smith, Gossart has brought the couple 'the more together to show them the more apart. Eyes averted, ignoring each other, they choose not to communicate. Thickly clothed as if to defend their bodies one from the other, they make a pitiful contrast to the young lovers in the cameo on the man's hat. They, like an emblem of honest communication, "eye-beams twisted", stare into each other's eyes, baring their souls as they have bared their bodies. Held by the girl, a horn of plenty promises unashamedly physical joys. The elderly couple, haggard and sour, seem, through their incompatibility, never to have experienced such happiness ...'²³

Although the woman is behind the man and although, in reality, her head was probably smaller than his, in the portrait her face is only very slightly smaller. Because it is more strongly lit, because it is surrounded by a large area of white veiling and because it is more centrally placed on the horizontal axis of the composition (whereas the man's head is just contained within the top half), she occupies the dominating position. She appears to be the younger and stronger of the two. She has retained most of her teeth, whereas he has lost his; the whites of her eyes are greyish but his are pink; she is tidily dressed but he is casting white hairs onto his collar. Her hands are concealed but his are clenched, perhaps rather desperately, around his fur collar and his staff – contrasted with the staff casually held by the young god in the hat-badge. She makes a bolder pattern of simple shapes, while his contours, as well as his body, are crumpled. He is shrinking – literally, for his body is much too small in proportion to his head. Though the two may not be communicating, she appears to buttress his decaying and shrivelled form.

20. Ibid., no. 47. The poses derive from Dürer's *Temptation of the Idler* (B.76) and his *Adam and Eve* of 1504 (B.1).

21. Campbell 1990, p. 54 and references.

22. Private collection, Belgium, and Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: *ibid.*, pp. 34–7.

23. Smith 1973, p. 32.

The parchment support is unusual and may suggest that the portrait was meant to be easily transported.²⁴ That could imply that it was painted not for the sitters themselves but rather for some distant friend or descendant. The two heads are rather differently treated. The woman's is carefully outlined in the underdrawing and there are very few alterations, though the detail, for example in the hairs on her upper lip, is equally exacting; whereas the man's head is more sketchily underdrawn and there are many more changes. He may have been painted after the woman. They may never have seen the finished painting, may never have been aware of Gossart's merciless observation of their physical decrepitude or the pitiful contrast between the young gods on the hat-badge and the collapsing flesh of their own bodies. The white hairs which have fallen from the man's head and which curl over his collar are not just triumphs of illusionistic virtuosity but a dreadful commentary on mortality.

24. Gossart's *Deësis* (Prado), sometimes said to be on parchment, is in fact on paper, this time laid down on panel (Friedländer, vol. VIII, no. 19; exh. cat. Madrid 2006, pp. 102–13).