



Michel Sittow,
*Portrait of Diego
de Guevara (?)*
c. 1515/1518,
oil on panel

Michel Sittow, a northern painter who was born in Estonia on the Baltic Sea but apprenticed in Bruges, was an acclaimed portraitist at the Spanish court. After Queen Isabella's death in 1504, his peripatetic career took him to several northern European centers, including Burgundy, where he probably painted this portrait. The sitter gazes with serious mien, not at the viewer, but at an unseen point beyond the picture's frame. The ornate carpet covering the stone parapet on which his hand rests provided scholars with an important clue that led to the discovery of the object of his concentration—a painting of the Madonna and Child, of similar dimensions, in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin. In that panel a larger portion of the parapet, covered by the same carpet, appears as a support for the Christ Child. It seems certain that the Berlin and Washington panels were originally hinged together to form a devotional diptych. Circumstantial evidence suggests that the National Gallery's portrait represents Diego de Guevara, a nobleman whose family came from Santander in northern Spain. For forty years Don Diego was a valued member of the Habsburg court in Burgundy. Supporting this identity is the embroidered cross of the Spanish Order of Calatrava on his golden doublet; after serving in numerous positions of trust in the households of Philip the Fair and Charles V, Don Diego was appointed to the wardenship of that order.

Visual evidence + historical documentation + technical data = art historical analysis

Visual evidence suggests that Sittow's male figure was not a separate portrait but rather a painting on panel hinged together with the image below of the Madonna and Child. Such two-part devotional paintings, or diptychs, were popular in the Netherlands. They typically featured a donor portrait on the right side and the religious figure on the left. Although nothing remains of the original frames, these panels relate to one another in terms of size, scale, and artistic handling of materials. Their design—with the rug-covered parapet in the foreground—also unifies these images.



Two period property inventories (1548 and 1554) provide circumstantial evidence to support the identification of the male as Guevara. They describe paired paintings that most likely refer to the objects above.



The appearance of the Calatrava Cross (above), visible in the patterned garment just above the man's right hand, also suggests that the portrait could depict Guevara while making a case for an approximate date for the painting. In 1517 Guevara was appointed to a position of importance within the order of Knights of Calatrava (founded in the 12th century in present day Spain). Technical examination of the painting indicates that the Calatrava Cross was an addition to the portrait but nevertheless made at the time the portrait was being painted.