



Attributed to Jan de Bray

Jan de Bray

Dutch, c. 1627 - 1688

Head of a Young Boy

c. 1650

oil on copper

overall (oval): 7.5 x 5.9 cm (2 15/16 x 2 5/16 in.)

framed: 16.8 x 15.2 cm (6 5/8 x 6 in.)

Gift of Maida and George Abrams 1995.74.1

ENTRY

Head of a Young Boy engages the viewer through the directness of the young sitter's intense and serious gaze. Light glistening off the boy's flowing locks and eyes and off his lace collar, tassel, and white shirt activates the image and gives it a striking immediacy unexpected in such a small painting. The copper support, along with the portrait's oval shape, smooth application of paint, and deep dark green background color, recalls early seventeenth-century Dutch, English, and French miniatures. The young boy's head does not project a shadow; this stylistic feature is characteristic of such portraits and may relate to the origin of painted miniatures in goldsmith work. [1]

The attribution of miniatures is often difficult, and caution must be exercised when considering the authorship of this work, which has traditionally been identified as a painting by Jan de Bray. [2] The boy, whose identity is unknown, seems to be about six to eight years old. [3] The style of his neatly coiffed shoulder-length hair, lace collar, and fashionable brown doublet, which has been left unbuttoned in its lower part to leave the shirt exposed, can be dated between 1650 and 1655. [4] De Bray did make a number of similar bust-length portraits of young boys during the 1650s and 1660s that are equally sympathetic and direct in their characterization of the sitter, and it is largely for this reason that this painting has been attributed to him. [5] None of these other portraits, however, is as small or refined as this one; furthermore, whereas in this painting the shoulders seem too small to support the size of the boy's head, De Bray's figures usually tend to have a greater sense of three-dimensionality [fig. 1]. De Bray often made bust-length depictions of young boys as elements within family portrait series, and regardless of whether this work

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was painted by him, it too may originally have been part of a series of images of children from a Dutch family.

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April 24, 2014

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Jan de Bray, *Head of a Boy*, c. 1655–1665, oil on copper, The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Acquired by Henry Walters 37.270

NOTES

- [1] See Torben Holck Colding, *Aspects of Miniature Painting: Its Origins and Development* (Copenhagen, 1953), 88; and Joaneath Spicer in conjunction with Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Small Northern European Portraits from the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore* (Washington, DC, 2000).

- [2] See Joaneath Spicer with Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Small Northern European Portraits from the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore* (Washington, DC, 2000), exhibition brochure no 36.
- [3] He appears to be about the same age as the sitter in Jan de Bray, *Portrait of a Boy Aged Six*, 1654, Royal Portrait Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague. See Ben Broos and Ariane van Suchtelen, eds., *Portraits in the Mauritshuis, 1430–1790* (Zwolle, 2004), 57, no. 8.
- [4] See, for example, Johannes Verspronck, *Portrait of André de Villepontoux (1616–1663)*, 1651, in Ben Broos and Ariane van Suchtelen, eds., *Portraits in the Mauritshuis, 1430–1790* (Zwolle, 2004), 316, no. 948.
- [5] The earliest such paintings are pendants of a brother (*Portrait of a Boy Aged Seven*, 1650, formerly in the Hermitage, Saint Petersburg, current whereabouts unknown) and sister (*Portrait of a Girl Aged Five*, 1650, Národní galerie v Praze, Prague). See Joachim Wolfgang Von Moltke, “Salomon de Bray,” in *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* (Marburg, 1938/1939), 11–12, 482, no. 165, and 483, no. 170.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is an oval copper panel. Thinly painted areas of the background reveal a tan priming layer. The paint was applied with a tight, fine, smoothly blended brushstroke, in a variety of techniques ranging from opaque paint in the face to glazes in the dark clothes and green background. Slight impasto can be found throughout the background and in the highlights of the clothing. Infrared reflectography at 1.5 to 1.8 microns^[1] revealed that the hair on the proper right side originally lay behind the boy's collar instead of partially covering it, and it also showed a few lines of underdrawing in the chest and hair.

The copper panel is in plane and the paint is in good condition. There is inpainting in the highlighted side of the collar. The painting was partially cleaned leaving remnants of an old varnish beneath the modern, clear, even varnish. It has not undergone treatment at the National Gallery of Art.

[1] Infrared reflectography was performed using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with an H astronomy filter.

PROVENANCE

(Rafael Valls Limited, London); purchased 1960s by Maida and George Abrams, Newton, Massachusetts; gift 1995 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1995 Adriaen Brouwer: Youth Making a Face, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1995-1996, not in brochure.

1998 A Collector's Cabinet, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1998, not in catalogue.

2000 Small Northern European Portraits from The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2000, brochure checklist no. 36.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

2000 Spicer, Joaneath, and Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. *Small Northern European Portraits from the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore*. Exh. brochure, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2000: no. 36.

To cite: Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Jan de Bray/*Head of a Young Boy*/c. 1650," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/93322> (accessed September 20, 2024).