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

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.
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


TECHNICAL SUMMARY

*Head of a Young Boy*

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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 Mr. and Mrs. George Abrams, Newton, Massachusetts; gift 1995 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY


BIBLIOGRAPHY