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Jacob Adriaensz. Backer, Harlingen 1608/9 – 1651 Amsterdam

A man dressed as an Oriental, presumably Marinus Lonyse (1598 – 1645), c. 1638-40

Oil on canvas, 64 x 53.1 cm

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Provenance: Private collection, United Kingdom (?), as by Gustaf Carl Pilo (according to an (18th/19th c.) English label to the reverse, no. 338 and no. 16); Sale Stockholm (Bukowskis), 27 May 2009, lot 257, as by Pilo; Jan Six, Amsterdam; private collection, New York, 2011 – 2024; Koetser Gallery, Zurich.

Literature: P.A.B van den Brink, 'Tussen Rubens and Rembrandt: Jacob Adriaensz Backer als portret-en-historie schilder in Amsterdam' (Kroniek van het Rembrandthuis 2016), pp. 18-20, fig. 12.

A man, wearing a fanciful goatee and a white turban faces us with a meaningful and concentrated, almost pensive look in his eyes. The exotic purple-red costume and additional turban are meant to mark him as an oriental, but there is little doubt that the model in question is Caucasian. There are many unanswered questions surrounding this hitherto unpublished painting. Its function is especially intriguing. Is it a portrait or a preparatory sketch for a larger painting? What can be said about the possible identification of the sitter and who may have been responsible for painting it?

An 18th or 19th-Century label stuck on the back of the canvas identifies the painter as the 18th-Century Danish court-painter from Swedish origin, Carl Gustaf Pilo (1711-1793), a name that still stuck to the painting in 2009, when the hand of the 17th-Century Amsterdam painter Jacob Adriaensz Backer (1608/09-1651) was recognized. Well indeed, the painting has absolutely nothing in common with the rococo and early neo-classicist portraits Pilo produced during his lifetime. Moreover, the attribution to Jacob Backer is without a single doubt correct.

Backer was one of the most successful history- and portrait painters in Amsterdam, from upon the time of his arrival in Amsterdam 1632 until his premature death in 1651.¹ He painted many portraits in his short career and was highly regarded by clients and colleagues alike because of the speed of his brush. Quite famous is the anecdote about a lady that arrived from Haarlem at Backer's studio in Amsterdam and was portrayed, on life size format, half-figured, including face, collar, several layers of clothing and two hands, in one single day. Apparently this was routine in Backer's workshop, according to his colleague Joachim von Sandrart, who had first hand knowledge.²

As many other painters in Amsterdam, like Rembrandt, Govert Flinck and Jan Lievens, Backer excelled in painting so-called *tronies*, literally 'faces'.³ These were oil studies of models that were quite often meant as preparation for a history painting and were sometimes preceded by a sketch on blue paper, like the well-known profile head of an old man, known in several versions, two of them probably by Backer's own hand, in Dresden and St. Petersburg. This model re-appeared as Hippocrates in Backer's history painting of *Hippocrates' visit to Democritus in Abdera*, nowadays in the Bader Collection in Milwaukee.⁴ Many of these *tronies* developed into autonomous pictures, either as allegory of one of the senses⁵ or simply as a *Shepherd* or *Singing shepherdess*, in some cases as pendants.⁶ These paintings were produced for the open market. In producing *tronies* of shepherds or other youngsters, like the *Allegory of taste* in Berlin⁷, again and again Backer made use of his own features. When comparing many of these 'faces' it becomes not only evident that Jacob Backer used himself as a 'cheap' model, but that he allowed himself quite a few liberties in the portrayal of his own features. Therefore these paintings should most certainly not be regarded as self portraits.

Here we touch upon an important feature in regard to the differentiation between a portrait and a *tronie*. Hirschfelder regards several of Backer's 'faces' *de facto* as portraits, like the *Man with beret and cane* in Braunschweig.⁸ Others like the very similar *Young man with a cloak and beret* in Würzburg, are not regarded as portraits, only because the features of the sitters would seem standardized.⁹ This is quite a complicated criterion, because drawing a line is quite a subjective undertaking. Perhaps it is useful to turn to two portraits that are not subject to any doubt: the 1644 dated companion pieces of Bartholomeus Breenbergh and his wife Rebecca Schellingwou in exotic fantasy costumes.¹⁰ What makes these two paintings in fact portraits and not *tronies*? First and foremost they do form a matching unity, a couple belonging together. Breenbergh can be easily recognized as a painter, holding his painter's palette and brush in his left hand, pointing at his wife with his right hand. The rather theatrical pose she takes is remarkable. Possibly Backer painted her as a model for his friend Breenbergh, who in turn may

have played the role of a painter of antiquity here, the *all' antica* presentation being a reference to ancient times. Furthermore the faces are most certainly not idealized, they are painstakingly individual.

That remains a striking argument in dividing *tronies* from portraits, but unfortunately not in all cases it can be so easily distinguished. Finally, *tronies* were often made in the process of preparing a larger painting, or were meant for the free market, whilst portraits were made in commission. An interesting aspect of the portraits of Rebecca Schellingwou and Bartholomeus Breenbergh is the empty space surrounding them. Typical *tronies*, like the spectacular *Young woman holding a fan* in the Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo-collection, stand much closer to the edge of the picture and they are framed accordingly.¹¹

When we turn our attention to the *Man dressed as an oriental* there is nothing in the pose that marks the painting as a portrait. On the contrary, this typical presentation, left shoulder to the picture plane, face turned to the left, no hands to be seen, was used by Backer every so often for his 'faces'. The dressing-up of the model in an exotic costume and a turban, too, might be an indication that the picture was meant as a study project for a large history painting or a *portrait historié*. The exotic necklace of precious stones the man has hung around his neck is another indication that the picture is a *tronie*, not a portrait in the strict sense. This remarkable necklace, apparently a studio prop, can be found on two other pictures by Backer, both to be dated around 1638, the *Boy with a red cloak and gold necklace*, in the Royal Museum in Antwerp and on a *Young man with a velvet cloak and gold necklace*.¹²

Although the painting is certainly not a portrait in the strictest sense, the concentrated gaze of the male model feels highly individual. According to Erna Kok, Backer portrayed one of his important customers, Marinus Lowysse, in this painting.¹³ Marinus Lowysse (1598-1645) was a rich merchant and heavily involved with the VOC and later WIC. In 1632 he married Eva Ment, the widow of the Governor General of the Dutch Indies, Jan Pietersz Coen. After Coen's death in 1629, his widow returned to the Netherlands. Marinus Lowysse married Eva Ment three years later, in 1632, but they probably had met before in Batavia.¹⁴ The couple was very wealthy and we know that they had commissioned a large painting from Jacob Backer in 1640, a *Portrait historié with Eva Ment, Marinus Lowysse, their children and Christ and the Canaanite woman*, nowadays in Middelburg.¹⁵

Although Marinus Lowysse is presented in a fashion that is quite similar as the *Man dressed as an oriental*, it is not easy to compare the faces, because the position of the head is very different. Nevertheless I tend to agree with Erna Kok that we are looking at the same model at a comparable age, even. The form of the nose is certainly similar and both men wear goatees and their eyebrows do compare well, too. Interestingly, the two turbans seem to have been winded around the heads in a very similar fashion, indicating that either the painter knew how to wind a turban or, more likely the sitter, Marinus Lowysse, knew how to do that. Since he had lived in the Far East, he may have been familiar with the correct way to wear a turban.

However, the story becomes even more fascinating when we include a third painting, again from 1640, a fragment from another huge canvas that until now was known as the history of *David and Bathsheba*, but was recently correctly re-interpreted by Erna Kok as another biblical love couple, *Isaac and Rebecca*.¹⁶ According to her, we can recognize Marinus Lowysse once again, dressed up as Isaac, wearing a red cloak and a white turban. Seeing the three faces side by side, all painted within a very short time frame, it is absolutely clear that the true portrait of Marinus Lowysse on the Middelburg picture differs slightly from the other two faces. It has been fully worked out and it does not present a specific mood, as in the *Man dressed as an oriental* or the somewhat skinnier and certainly more generalized face of the figure of Isaac. Although it is certainly possible that it was Marinus Lowysse who ordered the painting of *Isaac and Rebecca* from Jacob Backer, it may as easily have been someone else who did so.

What remains is the fact that Backer painted Marinus Lowysse wearing a red cloak and a white turban three times. In the *Man dressed as an oriental* and in the *Isaac and Rebecca* Backer allowed himself some liberties in playing with the model's features, much the same way he had toyed with his own. The rather elegant goatee we envisage on Marinus Lowysse's face in Middelburg has made way for a bristly and fiercer appearance. No doubt Backer was intrigued

by Marinus Lowysse's face and therefore re-used his features for another purpose, adding some changes in the process. The *Man dressed as an oriental* is therefore not a portrait, but a *tronie*, a character head in which he was able to capture a very specific expression, that he might need for a future history painting.

Peter van den Brink

1 See for more information on Jacob Backer Peter van den Brink et. al., *Jacob Backer (1608/09-1651)*. Exh. Cat. Museum Het Rembrandthuis, Amsterdam & Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, Aachen, Waanders, Zwolle 2008.

2 „(...) wurde seiner Geschwindigkeit halber vor andern berühmt, wie er dann mir selbst eine Frau gezeigt, die sich contrafäten zu lassen von Harlem ankommen und gleich selbigen Tag wieder nach Haus gereist, welche er in so kurzer Zeit mit dem Angesicht, Kragen, Pelz, Leibrock samt andern Kleidungen und beyden Händen in eine Lebens-große halbe Figur ansehnlich und wol gefärtiget. Dergleichen Proben hat er mehr gethan (...)”, see A.R. Peltzer, *Joachim von Sandrarts Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste von 1675. Leben der berühmten Maler, Bildhauer und Baumeister*. München 1925, p. 178, no. CLXI.

3 On tronies, see Dagmar Hirschfelder, *Tronie und Porträt in der niederländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts*. Berlin 2008.

4 On this topic, see Volker Manuth's catalogue entry in *Amsterdam/Aachen 2008* (o.c. note 1), p. 88-89, cat. no. 2.

5 Dagmar Hirschfelder, in *Amsterdam/Aachen 2008* (o.c. note 1), p. 104-107, cat. no. 9.

6 There are quite a few examples in Backer's oeuvre, his most famous example being the Shepherd with garland and flute in the Mauritshuis (Michiel Franken, in *Amsterdam/Aachen 2008* (o.c. note 1), p. 138-139, cat. no. 24). For other examples, see the oeuvre catalogue of Backer's pictures, in *Amsterdam/Aachen 2008* (o.c. note 1), nos. A25-A26, A27, A50, A51, A56, A102-A103.

7 *Ibid.*, no. A30. The painting is at present as a long-term loan in the Aachen Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum.

8 *Ibid.*, no. A108.

9 *Ibid.*, no. A107. On this topic and the existing differences of opinion, see Peter van den Brink, “Uitmunten schilder in het groot. De schilder en tekenaar Jacob Adriaensz. Backer”, in *Amsterdam/Aachen 2008* (o.c. note 1), p. 47.

10 On these two exotic portraits, see Rudi Ekkart, in *Amsterdam/Aachen 2008* (o.c. note 1), p. 140-143, cat. no. 25.

11 Michiel Franken, in *Amsterdam/Aachen 2008* (o.c. note 1), p.144-145, cat. no. 26.

12 See *Amsterdam/Aachen 2008* (o.c. note 1), nos. A53 and A55. Admittedly, only on the Antwerp painting, the necklace really is identical.

13 E-mail of 16 November 2010.

14 On Eva Ment and Marinus Lowysse, see Erna Kok, “Een liefdespaar onthuld. Jacob Adriaensz Backer's zogenoemde David en Bathsheba opnieuw geïdentificeerd als Isaak en Rebecca”, in *Oud Holland* (2010), p.

*. I sincerely want to thank Erna Kok for giving me insight in her article, even before publication.

15 The painting is extremely large, 210 x 270 cms. On this painting, see the oeuvre catalogue of Backer's pictures, in *Amsterdam/Aachen 2008* (o.c. note 1), no. A72 and the recent article by Erna Kok (o.c. note 12). Marten Jan Bok has been able to retrace the complete provenance of the picture.

16 *Ibid.*