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The Last, Unknown Portrait of Joost van den Vondel?

Abstract

In this article an interesting object of art is described in its literary context: a portrait from the Jagiellonian University Museum in Cracow which in the 19th century belonged to the aristocratic Polish Pusłowski family and was classified as a work of ‘an anonymous Flemish painter under Italian influence’ with the title *A Scholar in his study*. In the late 90s of the former century a very basic renovation was made. In fact this painting can possibly be a portrait of Joost van den Vondel by Philips Koninck – the last one perhaps. An anthropometric analysis of this portrait with other portraits of Vondel shows a very high probability of this hypothesis.

It was a complete surprise to me that while leafing through a book on the Jagiellonian University Museum in Krakow, Poland,¹ I came across a painting of Philips Koninck and read that it was probably presenting ‘Joost van del (!) Vondel, a Dutch humanist and poet.’ The surprise was even greater, as I have personally devoted years of study and research to this very author. I have translated his *Lucifer* and some minor poems into Polish and I wrote my Ph.D. thesis on his oeuvre. At the same time, I was completely unaware of the fact that this painting, which was supposed to be Vondel’s portrait, was hanging on a wall just a few meters from my faculty.

The first impression was, however, that the figure in the painting did not resemble Vondel at all, at least it did not look like the representations of him that I am familiar with from the works of Sandrart, Lievens, Koninck, Visscher or Flinck. The person in the painting appeared to me more like an old woman, rather than the most famous Dutch playwright of the Golden Age.

The history of the painting itself is quite mysterious. It used to belong to the art collection of the Polish aristocratic family Pusłowski, who purchased it most likely before 1890 from an unknown source. Its master was not recognised and the picture was classified as a work of ‘the anonymous Flemish painter un-

¹ J. Podlecki, S. Waltoś, *Collegium Maius of the Jagiellonian University*, Kraków 1999.

der the Italian influence'. In 1968, after the childless death of Franciszek Ksawery Pusłowski, the painting was given to the Jagiellonian University Museum in Collegium Maius and was exhibited under the title of *A Scholar in his Study*. In 1996 it underwent a complete renovation² – the layer of the old dirty varnish was removed and on the base of the sandglass a signature revealed itself: 'PH. de Koning. f'. The earlier history of the picture is unknown as it sank into oblivion for centuries. It has never appeared on auction lists and no tracks of its purchases or sales have ever been recorded. Moreover, it is not mentioned at all in the only monograph and catalogue on Koninck's art compiled by Horst Gerson.³

Attribution of a painting to such a famous artist, a friend of Rembrandt, initiated its detailed stylistic analysis and research which was carried out by Anna Jasińska, the custodian of the museum. Her interesting findings⁴ are worth a brief outline.

A Scholar in his Study is an oil painting on oak board (71.5 cm × 53.5 cm). It may be seen either as a portrait of a specific individual with strongly accentuated vanitative motifs (still life), or as an allegorical representation of Vanitas. Ms. Jasińska wrote:

The painting consists clearly of two parts. On one hand, it is a portrait of a man, on the other, it represents a still life. These two layers are linked together with a maxim *Sic transit Gloria Mundi* written under the niche with the flowers. From the iconographic point of view the painting recurs to the representations of St. Jerome. As such it demonstrates an interesting contribution to the vanitative painting which was remarkably developed in 17th century Holland.⁵

The vanitative motifs presented in the painting include:

- a human skull, not only a reminder of the inevitability of death, but also of rising from the dead;
- a burnt-out olive lamp symbolising death and despair;
- a sandglass in which all the sand has cascaded out – meaning that time has come to an end;
- a bouquet of flowers, typical for the vanitative, still lifes, conveying the following symbolic ideas: tulips (passing of time, sumptuousness), lily (immortality), rose (love and suffering), narcissus (egoism and indifference);
- a money pouch (the illusion of wealth in earthly life);

² Cf. D. BudziHo-Skowron, *Kompleksowa analiza obrazu holenderskiego z XVII wieku „Uczony w pracowni” Philipa Konincka (1619–1688)* [in:] *Opuscula Musealia* 9, 1998, pp. 77–81 (with an English summary).

³ H. Gerson, *Philips Koninck. Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung der holländischen Malerei des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 1936, reprinted in 1980.

⁴ A. Jasińska, *Nieznany obraz Philipa Konincka w zbiorach Muzeum UJ. Przyczynek do dziejów malarstwa wanitatywnego* [in:] *Opuscula Musealia* 9, 1998, pp. 57–76 (with an English summary).

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

- a bunch of keys (the access to knowledge and mysteries, power and wisdom);
- an old, worn out book (a symbol of learning, but also a warning to all those who become too proud of their wisdom);
- a glass for reading (most probably symbolising in this context the same idea as the book).

The repertoire of vanitative symbols applied is quite conventional and may be found in the works of many still life painters in the Dutch Golden Age: Claesz, Bosschaert, Dou. They were very often used in other paintings and drawings by Philips Koninck as well (for example, *The Old Man with the Sandglass, A Philosopher at his Study*).

In the background we can see a vaguely painted landscape presenting the world at dawn, promising a new day and hope, the victory over the darkness and evil.

The figure of the ‘scholar’ is shown in his right profile, one hand supports his head, the other one is laid on the skull. He is dressed in a night gown with a fur trimming on the collar and the cuffs. He is wearing a white night (?) cap with a lace hem and fancifully tied tapes. Such choice of clothing results in a cosy, informal presentation of the model. The portrayed man seems to be a person submerged deep in his thoughts, peacefully resigned, patiently waiting for the ultimate things. He also shows a striking resemblance to the numerous artistic representations of St. Jerome (Koninck himself was the author of such a drawing). Further, such portraits, being the conveyer of a moral *sensus allegoricus*, were especially popular in the circles of the humanists and scholars in 17th century Leiden.

The authenticity of the painting can leave no doubt. Its theme fits the scope of interests of Koninck. Significant details (type of face, handling of the painted model), the use of pigments and the manner of applying them, the colour scale applied, the visible influence of Rembrandt, and the type of the signature, as well as the dendrochronological investigation allow clearly for the association of this painting with other works of the artist.⁶

Anna Jasińska, inspired by Gerson’s study, dated the painting back to circa 1645 and classified it as one of the early works of Philips Koninck. According to Gerson, only the early works of Koninck were painted on board; he was also convinced that such colour scale and the evident influence of Rembrandt were typical for the early period of the artist’s output.

Taking into consideration the fact that Koninck and Vondel were close friends (the painter made, according to various sources,⁷ from 14 to 22 paintings and drawings of Vondel) and having compared the picture *A Scholar in his*

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ H. Gerson, *op. cit.*, *passim*, J.F.M. Sterck, *De portretten van Vondel* [in:] *De werken van Vondel*, 10 dln, deel IV, Amsterdam 1930, pp. 39–50.

Study with the other portrait of Vondel by Koninck (1665) and his drawing from 1678, A. Jasińska put forward a hypothesis that the man portrayed in the picture currently under discussion may indeed be the Dutch playwright.

This speculation, much more interesting for the *neerlandicus extra muros* than for the art historian, warranted further research. A. Jasińska was, however, not aware of two other works by Koninck which seem to be important for the interpretation of the painting, namely the portrait of Vondel from 1674 and one of the drawings from 1678 presenting the old poet in profile, sitting in an armchair. She also followed Gerson's assumption that only the early works of Koninck were painted on board, whereas his portrait of Vondel from 1662 was made on the same material. The model himself in the poem *Op mijne afbeeldinge, geschilderd door Filips Koning* wrote:

Ik telde vijf en zeventig,
Toen Koning mij, dus levendig,
Te voorschijn bracht op zijn panneel.⁸

This very fact that the portrait was painted on wood, allowed for dating the painting back to circa 1645. But if this work really *was* Vondel's portrait, the poet at that time would have been around 58 years old, whereas the person portrayed looks much older. On the portraits of Jan Lievens (1650) and Govert Flinck (1653) a 63- and 66-year-old poet seems much younger. In order to clear up this nagging doubt I sought help among the anthropologists in the Department of Criminalistics of the Institute of Forensic Research in Krakow. They analysed the painting *A Scholar in his Study* and compared it with two other portraits by Koninck (the above-mentioned painting from 1674, presenting the poet at the age of 87, and the drawing from 1678 presenting Vondel at the age of 91, one year before his death). The fact that all existing portraits of Vondel present the playwright *en face* or *en trois quarts*, whereas the painting under discussion shows the model in profile, was a serious impediment. Only the drawings by Koninck from 1678 show us the poet in profile, but they are too vague and sketchy to be of great help. One also has to remember that the subject of comparison is not a photograph, but the work of art, which assumes the freedom of the artistic vision and interpretation.

The anthropometric analysis of the facial features and hands allowed for drawing the following conclusions:

- the person presented in the painting *A Scholar in his Study* is a man of advanced age, much older than a 87-year-old Vondel from Koninck's portrait from 1674 (the visible flabbiness of tissues);
- there is a general resemblance of the facial proportions and features when comparing the portrait from the collection of the Jagiellonian University Museum

⁸ J. van den Vondel, *Op mijne afbeeldinge, geschilderd door Filips Koning* [in:] *Vondel. Volledige Volledige dichtwerken en oorspronkelijk proza*, ed. A. Verwey, Amsterdam 1937, p. 838.

to the other images of Vondel (high forehead, narrow lips, low upper lip, lip furrow, the narrow bridge of the nose, protruding and dropping chin, bony fingers, the strong furrow under the eye, the dropping lower eyelid) – however some of these similarities may be explained by the advanced age of the model as they are the natural consequence of the process of growing older;

- the shape of the nose is different in two paintings, however, this fact is not exclusive, as the nose, according to anthropometry, can look quite different *en face* and in profile – for example a crooked nose can seem straight; additionally the analysis was impeded by the shadow visible in the portrait – a dark spot of paint;

- the arches over the eyes and the corners of the mouth (raising *versus* falling) look different but this can be explained by the ageing of the model; the age factor can also be the reason for the androgynical representation (the senile atrophy of sexual qualities);

- the lack of beard – a little goatee of which Vondel took great care all his life and which was visible in all his portraits. However, this goatee is neither seen on the Koninck's drawings from 1678 and its lack may be explained by the senile weakness of the beard growth or the negligence about the poet's appearance.

The probability that the model from the painting from the Jagiellonian University Museum and the Vondel from the other painting is the same person was calculated to be at not less than 60 per cent probable. Moreover, the anthropologists advised to carry out a decisive experiment used in the criminalistics when comparing various identikits of the criminals or people missing (in their nature close to the technique of painting and drawing). *A Scholar in his Study* was to be collated with Koninck's portrait from 1674 and 5 other portraits painted at more or less the same time, *en face* or *en trois quarts*, representing a similar anthropological type, though not exactly the same age, and for full objectivity – all of them in black and white. 100 subjects were supposed to point out the same person. The experiment was carried out⁹ (the subjects were the students of the Faculty of Polish Studies at the Jagiellonian University) and 84 out of 100 people decided that the model from *A Scholar in his Study* and Vondel from Koninck's portrait are the same person. Hence, according to the norms established in the criminalistics, the probability that the portrait discussed presents Vondel is very high (such percentage of recognition of the identikits usually translates into 100 per cent confirmation of this result in practice).

It is also worth noticing that Vondel in Koninck's drawing from 1678 is dressed in exactly the same manner as the man in the painting from the collection of the Jagiellonian University Museum. They are both wearing a similar white

⁹ The other 5 people were: 1. a face of man from *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Sebastiaen Egbertsz de Vrij* by A. Pietersz, 2. *Portrait of Sir Robert Kerr* by Jan Lievens, 3. *Portrait of Jan Antonides van der Linden* by A. van den Tempel, 4. *Portrait of Michiel II Comans* by M. van Musscher, 5. *Portrait of Daniel Heinsius* by J. Lievens.



Ill. 1. Philips Koninck, drawing from 1678 (91-year-old Vondel, a year before his death); *De werken van Vondel*, Tiende deel 1663–1674, Amsterdam 1937, p. 25

cap and a gown with fur trimmings of the collar and cuffs. Hence, I would suggest dating the portrait back to 1678 or later. If it is Vondel (and it is highly probable), the painting must be at least 33 years older and could represent a last image of the poet. This proposal was approved and accepted by the art historians.

I would also put forward a hypothesis that Koninck's drawing from 1678 could serve as an inspiration when painting the picture under discussion. There is little probability that the aged, diseased playwright could go through the efforts of long posing. Maybe the portrait was made even after the death of Vondel, on the wave of nostalgia and mourning which was felt in Amsterdam when the *Princeps Poetarum* passed away and was painted partly from the drawing, partly from memory. This hypothesis can be proved correct by the employment of the vanitative motifs, suitable for the representation of a person both in the evening of his life, and after death.

In Vondel's oeuvre one can find a few *polonica*: *Bestand tussen Polen en Zweden*, *Geluck aen Louyze Marie, Koningin van Polen en Sweden*, *By-schriften*



Ill. 2. Philips Koninck, *Joost van den Vondel* (1587–1679), Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, SK-A-1954



Ill. 3. Philips Koninck, supposed portrait of Joost van den Vondel, Jagiellonian University Museum in Kraków, Collegium Maius, nr inw. 5447, fot. J. Kozina

op d' Afbeeldinge van de Koninglijcke Bruit van Polen, Vrye Zeevaert naer Oosten, and Aen Tobias Morstin. In his drama *Gysbreght van Aemstel* the archangel Raphael appears in front of Gysbreght and advises him:

[...] schep moed, en wanhoop niet,
 Maer volgh gehoorzaam na het geen u God gebied.
 Zijn wil is, dat ghy treckt na 'et vette land van Pruisen,
 Daer uit het Poolsch geberght de Wijsseelstroom kooft ruissen.
 Die d'oevers rijck van vrucht genoeghelijck bespoelt.
 Verhou u daer, en wacht tot dat de wraeck verkoelt.
 Ghy zult in dit gewest een stad, Nieuw Holland, bouwen,
 En in gezonde lucht, en weelige landouwen,
 Vergeten al uw leet, en overbrogten druck;
 Waer door uw naezaet klimt den bergh op van 't geluck. (vv. 1855–1864)

Nieuw Holland stands for the present Polish Paślęk which, until 1945, used to be called *Preußisch Holland* and was founded by the Dutch colonists in 1297. The last portrait of Vondel (which is most likely) hanging on the wall of Collegium Maius in Krakow may hence be seen as a symbolic summation of Dutch-Polish cultural relations in the 17th century...

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