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Adriaen Thomasz. Key
*Portrait of a Bearded Gentleman, Bust Length,
Wearing Gold Chains, 1575*

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ADRIAEN THOMASZ. KEY

(Antwerp c. 1544 – after 1589)

Portrait of a Bearded Gentleman, Bust-Length, Wearing Gold Chains, 1575.

Oil on oak panel

52.5 x 38.6 cm.; 20 5/8 x 15 1/4 in.

Inscribed upper left: 1575; and upper right: 58

Provenance

Collection of Evelyn Hugh Boscawen, 8th Viscount Falmouth (1887-1962);

Arthur Tooth & Sons, London, by 1927;

Anonymous sale, Christie's London, 22 February 1929, lot 148;

Where acquired by Colnaghi;

With Matthiesen Gallery, by 1939;

Anonymous sale, Christie's New York, 31 January 1997, lot 31;

Private collection, USA;

Anonymous sale, Stair Sainty gallery, New York, 24 October 2024, lot 474 (as 'Attributed to Adriaen Thomas Key');

Private collection, UK.

Literature

K. Jonckheere, *Adriaen Thomasz. Key (c. 1545-c.1589): Portrait of a Calvinist Painter*, Brepols 2007, pp. 95-96, no. A47 and p. 269 (ill.).

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Painted on oak panel, this arresting bust-length *Portrait of a Bearded Gentleman* is characteristic of Key's mature handling at the height of his practice. The unidentified sitter is presented close to the picture plane, turned three-quarters yet held in an almost confrontational stillness by the directness of his gaze. Against a plain, brownish-black ground, the head and starched ruff emerge with clarity.

As Koenraad Jonckheere observed, the physiognomy - sunken cheeks, the soft collapse of flesh beneath the eyes, and the fine web of wrinkles at the orbital rims - is not "drawn" but built through shadow and a restrained palette of greyish-ochre and muted carnation, modulated with exceptional tact.¹ The flesh is modelled by delicate transitions: greys cool the hollows at the temples and around the eye sockets, while warmer, ochre-inflected passages animate the cheeks and the bridge of the nose, suggesting Key's refinement, around 1574-75, of the cooler tonalities inherited from Willem Key (long and erroneously believed to have been Adriaen's uncle) into a more flexible, lifelike handling of flesh. The eyes, with bright irises punctuated by fine highlight strokes and a precise dab of lead white at the *sc/era*, are also typical of the artist. Equally telling is the minute blemish beneath the nose, rendered without anecdote, yet with uncompromising exactitude. The lips, pale and slightly desiccated, are described with a "fine sprinkling" of cracks. The colour of the plain background corresponds with that of the sitter's hair - a device Key used in quite a number of bust portraits, see for example the *Portrait of a Man, Pieter-Ernest, Count of Mansfelt* (fig. 1)

Key's handling of costume is no less articulate. The millstone ruff is constructed from crisp and repeated lobes, each fold differentiated by cool grey shadows and sharp white accents. This heightened attention to textiles corresponds to the broader development in Key's work during the 1570s, when, in dialogue with the courtly portrait idiom of Antonis Mor, he elaborated clothing with increasing realism. The fur collar is treated with more feathery strokes and warmer browns, setting up a calculated opposition of textures.

Although the panel bears inscriptions "1575" (upper left) and "58" (upper right), Jonckheere notes that both date and age were applied later by another hand.² The chronological claim, however, sits persuasively within the artist's documented trajectory, for 1575 is consistently identified as the most productive year of his career and a point of real consolidation in his portrait practice. By this moment Key had moved decisively beyond the more evidently inherited tonal habits of Willem Key. At the same time, and in increasingly conscious dialogue with the international portrait idiom of Antonis Mor, he sharpened his attention to costume. Crucially, 1575 also

¹ K. Jonckheere, *Adriaen Thomasz. Key (c. 1545-c. 1589): Portrait of a Calvinist Painter*, Brepols 2007, pp. 95-96

² *Ibid.* p. 95

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coincides with the cusp of Mor's death (c. 1575-76), after which Antwerp portraiture was, in Jonckheere's terms, effectively "orphaned": together with Frans Pourbus the Elder, Key emerged as one of the very few painters capable of rivalling Mor's authority as a society portraitist.³ Key's reputation - now firmly attached to the trade name "Key" adopted after 1568⁴ - translated into a faithful clientele, and Mor's patrons were said to have turned to him as a preferred alternative.

The resulting sequence of bust portraits produced between roughly 1575 and 1578 is marked by what Jonckheere characterises as a near-microscopic technical finish.⁵ Comparable portraits from the time include *Portrait of a Man* (1575, fig. 2) now at the Muzeul Național "Brukenthal" in Sibiu; *Bust Portrait of a Man* (1576, fig. 3) now at the Munich Alte Pinakothek; *Portrait of a Man* (1578, fig. 4) at the Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Ghent; and the *Portrait of a 65-Year-Old Man* (1578, fig. 5) at the Boijmans Museum in Rotterdam.

Adriaen Thomasz.'s clientele encompassed leading merchants and noblemen, including members of the De Smidt family (perhaps the wealthiest in Antwerp at the time), and extended remarkably to figures as politically opposed as the Catholic Duke of Alva (1568) and his Calvinist antagonist William the Silent (1579, see his portrait at the Rijksmuseum, fig. 6).

Despite this success, Key slipped into relative obscurity soon after his death. Karel van Mander, eloquent on Willem Key in the *Schilder-Boeck* (1604), is notably silent on Adriaen, an omission that contributed to the later blurring of identities and attributions. It was only in the mid-nineteenth century that his distinct artistic personality began to be properly recognised: Christiaan Kramm, writing in 1859, argued provocatively that Adriaen's work "by far surpasses" that of Willem Key, and that it had often been taken for the work of Antonis Mor. Koenraad Jonckheere's catalogue raisonné and monographic study (2007) finally restored a firmer documentary and stylistic basis for understanding Key's oeuvre and, crucially, the exceptional concentration of achievement around the mid-1570s.

The present picture was formerly in the collection of the Viscounts Falmouth at Tregothnan, Cornwall, the historic seat of the Boscawen family. It likely belonged to Evelyn Hugh John Boscawen, 8th Viscount Falmouth (1887-1962), who succeeded to the title in 1918. He served during the First World War as a Captain in the

³ Ibid. p. 54

⁴ A. Tummers and K. Jonckheere, *Art Market and Connoisseurship: A Closer Look at Paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens and Their Contemporaries*, Amsterdam 2008, pp. 51-52

⁵ See Jonckheere (2007), p. 55

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Coldstream Guards and was later an honorary Captain in the Royal Air Force. In 1947 he became Chairman of the Governing Body at Imperial College London.

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Fig. 1. Adriaen Thomasz. Key, *Portrait of a Man, Pieter-Ernest, Count of Mansfelt*, 1573, oil on panel, 48 x 34 cm. Present whereabouts unknown.

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Fig. 2. Adriaen Thomasz. Key, *Portrait of a Man*, 1575, oil on panel, 43 x 31.5 cm. Sibiu, Muzeul Național "Brukenthal".

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Fig. 3. Adriaen Thomasz. Key, *Portrait of a Man*, 1578, oil on panel, 43 x 37 cm. Munich, Alte Pinakothek.

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Fig. 4. Adriaen Thomasz. Key, *Portrait of a Man*, 1578, oil on panel, 48.5 x 34.7 cm. Gent, Museum voor Schone Kunsten.

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Fig. 5. Adriaen Thomasz. Key, *Portrait of a 65-Year-Old Man*, 1578, oil on panel, 45.5 x 36 cm. Rotterdam, Boijmans Museum.

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Fig. 6. Adriaen Thomasz. Key, *Portrait of William of Orange*, 1579, oil on panel, 48 x 35 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

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