



*Reconsidering a portrait of a Man, circa 1540
A Proposed Attribution to Peter de Kempeneer*

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INSTITUTE OF OLD MASTERS RESEARCH

Portrait of a Man, circa 1540 (shortly before 1537):
A Proposed Attribution to Peter de Kempeneer



Oil on panel (poplar), 71.8 x 51.5/52 cm.
Private collection, Madrid

Micha Leeflang (December, 2025)

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Prologue

Since the present painting with a *Portrait of a Man with a Skull* is unsigned and exhibits a level of quality characteristic of a great master, its attribution has been the subject of ongoing debate among art-historians, conservators, and scholars since the early twentieth century. Based on a close visual inspection of the painting and the results of the technical research conducted, this study offers a new perspective and connects the work to the Flemish painter Peter de Kempeneer during his long stay in Italy.

In 1906 the panel was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York as a portrait by the Venetian painter Lorenzo Lotto (Venice, c. 1480 – Loreto, 1556/57), one of the leading Venetian-trained painters of the earlier 16th century.¹ Without any reservations, it was first attributed to the Italian painter by Fry (1906, Fig. 2), then by Berenson (1932, 1936) and later by Wehle (1940).² Although there are some similarities such as the green curtain closing the back of the composition this attribution was quite rightly rejected in the 1953 monograph on Lotto by Anna Banti and Antonio Boschetto.³ They thought that the portrait was the work of an artist influenced by the art of Venice and the Friuli region. In 1986, Zeti was the first to suggest a Flemish or German trained painter, based on the ‘an unusual mixture of Venetian and northern elements’.⁴

In 2023, in the Sotheby’s sales catalogue, there was also doubt as to whether we were dealing with an Italian painting here, despite the poplar wood and the man’s clothing (especially the collar) that seem to have an Italian origin.⁵ Zverera suggest, as Zeti in 1986, based on the pictorial surface and the treatment of the flesh a northern artist settled in Italy, influenced by Venetian and Lombard painters. The man’s posture turned in three-quarter view to the left, as well as the position of his hands, does in her opinion recall the models of Joos van Cleve (Cleves, c. 1485/1490 – Antwerp, 1540 or 1541), Jan Cornelisz. Vermeyen (Beverwijk, ca. 1500 – Brussels, 1559) and to a lesser degree Willem Key (Breda, c. 1516 – Antwerp, 1568).

The man’s pale skin and the green curtain in the past considered as Italian are equally elements that can often be found in Vermeyen, for example in the *Portrait of Felipe Guevara* (Fig. 1), which Asbjorn Lunde (who also bought the present painting from the Metropolitan in 2015) gave in 1982 to the Clark Art Institute, although Vermeyen’s models often look straight at the viewer, unlike here. It therefore seems that this painting was produced in the mid-Cinquecento by an artist whose origin and training was Flemish, but who had settled in Italy and was influenced by the painters of north Italy and Venice.

The purpose of this study is to substantiate a thesis already advanced by scholars such as Zeri (1986) and Zvereba (2023), namely that the present painting was executed by a master

¹ <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/lorenzo-lotto>

² R. Fry, ‘Some Recent Acquisitions of the Metropolitan Museum, New York’, in: *The Burlington Magazine*, May 1906, p. 136, pl. I (as Lorenzo Lotto); B. Berenson, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance*, Oxford 1932, p. 310 (as Lorenzo Lotto); B. Berenson, *Pitture italiane del rinascimento*, Milan 1936, p. 266 (as Lorenzo Lotto); H.B. Wehle, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: A Catalogue of Italian, Spanish, and Byzantine Paintings*, New York 1940, p. 196–197, no. 06.1324 (repr. as by Lorenzo Lotto).

³ Anna Banti and Antonio Boschetto, *Lorenzo Lotto*, Florence 1953.

⁴ F. Zeti, in: F. Zeri and E.E. Gardner, *Italian Paintings: A Catalogue of the Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, North Italian School*, New York 1986, p. 77, no.06.1324, pl. 68 (as North Italian School, second quarter of the 16th century).

⁵ Alexandra Zvereva in Sotheby’s sale catalogue ‘L’Œil infatigable – Tableaux de la collection Asbjorn Lunde’ (lot no. 109), Paris 2023.

trained in the Low Countries and active in Northern Italy around 1535–40. This line of inquiry limits the possibilities of authorship to those artists belonging to the first generation of Flemish Romanists whose presence in Italy is documented during first half of the sixteenth century and whose works offer tangible stylistic affinities with the portrait under examination. Within this group I have selected, Jan Cornelisz. Vermeyen, Jan van Scorel (Schoorl, 1495 - Utrecht, 1562), Michel Coxie (Mechelen or Liège, 1499 – Mechelen, 1592), Jan Sanders van Hemessen (Hemiksen, c. 1500- Antwerp, 1556/1557), and Peter de Kempeneer (Brussels, 1503 - c. 1580) as potential authors, ultimately concluding that the style and technique observable in the Italian-period works of the latter correspond most convincingly to the portrait in question.



Fig. 1. Jan Cornelisz. Vermeyen, *Portrait of Felipe Guevara*, 1531. Oil on panel, 55.9 x 47.6 cm. The Clark Art Institute (Williamstown, Sterling and Clark Institute of Arts, Gift of Asbjorn R. Lunde, 1982), inv. 1982.128.

Provenance

With Dowdeswell & Dowdeswell, London, by 1905-06; Rogers Fund, 1906; From whom purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 1906 (inv. no. 06.1324); anonymous sale, Sotheby's, New York, 29 January 2015, lot 10 (as Property from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, sold for the Acquisitions Fund); bought by Asbjorn Lunde (1927-2017, born in Staten Island, New York City, to Norwegian immigrant parents); sold on 23 March 2023 at Sotheby's, Paris (lot no. 109), 'L'Œil infatigable – Tableaux de la collection Asbjorn Lunde', where acquired by the present owner.

Literature

R. Fry, 'Some Recent Acquisitions of the Metropolitan Museum, New York', in: *The Burlington Magazine*, May 1906, p. 136, pl. I (as Lorenzo Lotto, Fig. 2);
 'Principal Accessions', in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. 1, no. 5, April 1906, p. 73 (as an early work by Lorenzo Lotto);
 M.H. Bernath, *New York und Boston*, Leipzig 1912, p. 82 (as by Lorenzo Lotto);
 B. Berenson, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance*, Oxford 1932, p. 310 (as Lorenzo Lotto);
 B. Berenson, *Pitture italiane del rinascimento*, Milan 1936, p. 266 (as Lorenzo Lotto);
 H.B. Wehle, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: A Catalogue of Italian, Spanish, and Byzantine Paintings*, New York 1940, p. 196–197, no. 06.1324 (repr. as by Lorenzo Lotto);
 A. Banti and A. Boschetto, *Lorenzo Lotto; Regesti note e cataloghi di Antonio Boschetto*, Florence 1953, pp. 109, 137 (as Northern School with Venetian or Friulian influence, 16th century);
 L. Coletti, *Lotto*, Bergamo 1953, exh. cat., pl. 121a (as Lorenzo Lotto);
 P. Zampetti, *Mostra di Lorenzo Lotto*, exh. cat., Venice 1953, p. 149, cat. no. 89 bis (repr., as Emilian School);
 B. Berenson, *Lotto*, Milan 1955, p. 138, pl. 284 (as not by Lotto);
 B. Berenson, *Lorenzo Lotto*, English edition, New York 1956, p. 103, pl. 284 (as Italian School);
 P. Bianconi, *Tutta la pittura di Lorenzo Lotto*, Milan 1955, p. 77 (as Italian School);
 B.B. Fredericksen and F. Zeri, *Census of Pre-Nineteenth-Century Italian Paintings in North American Public Collections*, Cambridge, Mass. 1972, pp. 234, 527, 605 (as North Italian School, 16th century);
 D. Sutton, *Letters of Roger Fry*, London 1972, vol. I, p. 245, no. 164, note 3, p. 246, no. 166 and p. 251, no. 173 (as Lorenzo Lotto);
 G.M. Canova, *L'opera completa del Lotto*, Milan 1975, p. 125, cat. no. 377 (as Brescian School);
 F. Zeri and E.E. Gardner, *Italian Paintings: A Catalogue of the Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, North Italian School*, New York 1986, p. 77, no.06.1324, pl. 68 (as North Italian School, second quarter of the 16th century);
 K. Baetjer, *European Paintings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, By artists born before 1865, A summary catalogue*, New York 1995, p. 105-106, fig. 06.1324 (as North Italian Painter, 2nd quarter 16th century).
 Enrico Maria Dal Pozzolo, *Lorenzo Lotto. Catalogo generale dei dipinti*, 2021, vol. 78, fig. p. 495.

Exhibitions

New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, April 1906, no. 17 (as Lorenzo Lotto);
 Venice, Palazzo Ducale, *Lorenzo Lotto*, 1953, no. 89 bis (as Lorenzo Lotto).

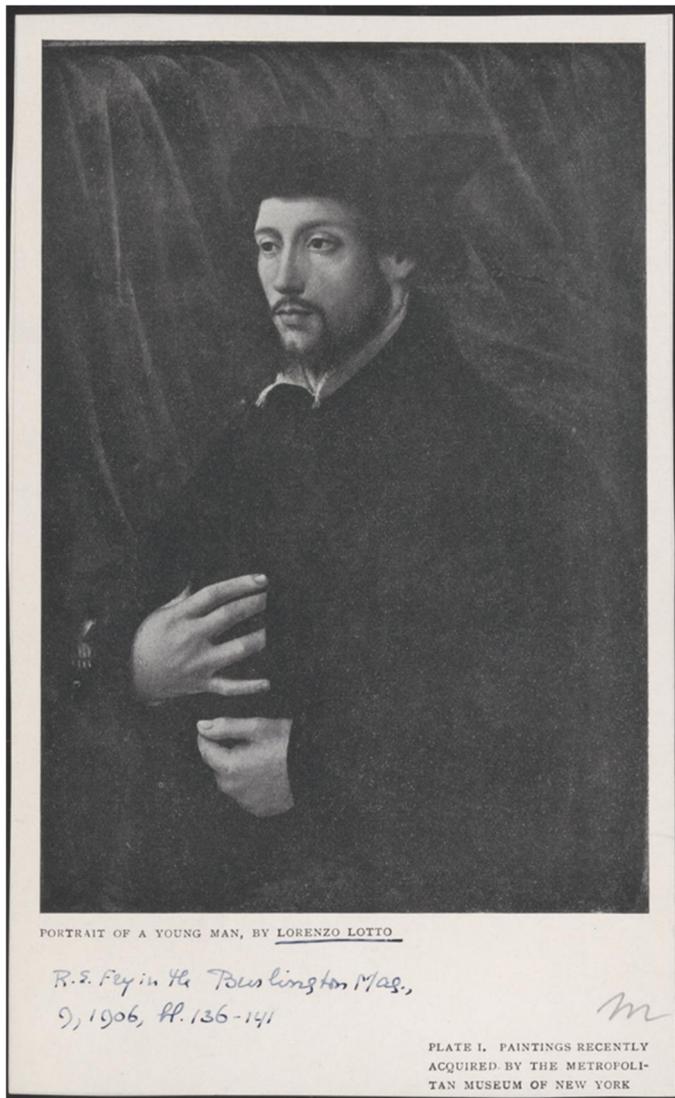


Fig. 2. First publication of the painting: Fry, 'Some Recent Acquisitions of the Metropolitan Museum, New York', in: *The Burlington Magazine*, May 1906, p. 136, pl. I (as Lorenzo Lotto).

Description

The painting depicts a man in half-length, his face and torso turned three-quarters to the left. To the subject's right (left in the painting) lies a skull, without a jawbone, on a table covered with a blue tablecloth with a red stripe and on either side two thin black stripes, trimmed with green fringes. The sitter is positioned in front of a green velvet curtain which hang down in wide folds and slightly diagonally to the right.

The sitter is wearing the black attire of a doctor, whether of law, theology, medicine or some other discipline. Although it is suggested that the human skull, placed by his side, is a reference to the profession of the person depicted, namely a Doctor of Medicine, in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, skulls primarily symbolized the transience of life and the vanity of earthly possessions. They were considered a warning of death and impending mortality. The skull was a prominent motif in art, particularly in Vanitas paintings, which emphasized the transience and futility of earthly pleasures. It may also be proposed that the sitter belonged to the clergy, given both his attire and the particular form of his hat.

Under his black cloak, the man wears a white shirt, the collar of which is visible at the neck. The points of the collar are adorned with white tassels. This is a striking element, and we see it, among other works, in the *Portrait of a Man* by Mazzola Francesco, known as

Parmigianino (Parma, 1503 – Casal Maggiore, 1540) from about 1530 in Rome (Fig. 3). On his head, he wears a black hat, probably made of dark silk velvet. His dark brown hair falls partially over his ears, and he has a thin forked beard and a moustache. His face is characterized by a straight nose, full lips, dark eyes with bags under them, two wrinkles on his forehead, and a dimple in his chin.

The prominently depicted hands, which seem to catch the light, contrast sharply with the dark robe. With his left hand, the man holds the edge of his cloak, and with his right hand, he partially tucks into the robe. The little finger of his right hand is elegantly bent.



Fig. 3. Mazzola Francesco, known as Parmigianino (Parma 1503 - Casalmaggiore 1540), *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1530. Oil on panel, 58 x 46 cm. Rome, collection Borghese.

The sitter is not wearing any identifying jewellery. He is depicted rather plainly. Black clothing was, however, a sign of wealth and status, especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁶ Due to the complex production process, it was a costly colour that was not available to everyone and was associated with power and prestige. Combined with the skull, which alludes to transience, the sober representation seems to be a deliberate choice by the portraited man.

⁶ In the second quarter of the sixteenth century, the preference for bright colours shifted to a duller, darker palette: black, dark brown, gray, wine red, dull blue, yellow, and olive green. From the third quarter onward, the strict Spanish regime in the Netherlands forced a further suppression of colour. Black became fashionable, perhaps with a shimmer of silver or gold thread.



Detail of: Flemish painter, active in Italy, *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1540 (shortly before 1537). Oil on panel (poplar), 71.8 x 51.5/52 cm.

Since there are not many clues to the location and identification of the sitter, the blue tablecloth may provide a possible indication. Although blue textiles were produced in several locations in the Western world, such as Spain, Italy, England, France, and Germany, the Italian cities Genoa and Venice were in the sixteenth century the most prominent production centres.⁷ To produce blue textiles both woad, a flowering plant, and imported indigo dyes were used. Genoa was famous for a durable cotton cloth dyed with indigo, that became increasingly important, and Venice was a major centre for textile production and dyeing using woad and indigo, with specialized guilds such as the *Arte dei Tintori* controlling the quality of the dye. Blue fabrics, including silk, cotton, and linen, were used for a variety of purposes, from clothing to tapestries, to decorate homes and palaces, and ecclesiastical vestments.

Support

The support is made of one plank of poplar wood (*Populus alba o nigra*) with a vertical grain (Fig. 4).⁸ Poplar wood is the most common used type of wood in Italy during the fourteenth until the sixteenth century. The panel is slightly concave. In the past two horizontal crossbars had been attached to the reverse of the panel to reinforce the panel and keep it flat. This is a type of reinforcement system, that was common in the sixteenth-century Italian period. These bars were usually inserted into dovetailed rails carved into the wood, which could

⁷ Lieke Smits in: M. Leeflang and C.J. Van Schooten (eds.), *Middeleeuwse borduurkunst uit de Nederlanden* (exh.cat. Museum Catharijneconvent), Utrecht/ Zwolle 2015, p. 140-153.

⁸ Adelina Illán Gutiérrez and Rafael Romero Asenjo, *Estudio Técnico y analítico de la obra Retrato de Clerigo con Calavera, Anónimo de escuela Italiana o Flamenca S. XVI*, 29 October 2024.

indicate that the support was slightly thinned, perhaps 5 or 6 mm. The crossbars have now been removed.



Fig. 4. Reverse of: Flemish painter, active in Italy, *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1540 (shortly before 1537). Oil on panel (poplar), 71.8 x 51.5/52 cm.

Privat collection, Madrid. Below: detail on incised lines for the crossbars.



Oak is dominant, for instance, in The Netherlands and in northern France, poplar in Italy and softwoods in Germany.⁹ Walnut, chestnut and lime, are characteristic of southern France, the Viséu School and certain German schools, but are by no means dominant there. That artist used the local wood, regardless of their training, is for example confirmed by the fact that Leonardo da Vinci (1452 – 1519), who painted on poplar in Italy, used walnut when working in France, just as sixteenth-century French painters did. And that the Flemish painter Justus of Ghent (c. 1410 – c. 1480) used poplar while he was working in Urbino on the series of portraits for Duke Federigo di Montefeltro rather than the oak that was customary in Southern Netherlands.

Some numbers are painted on the reverse of the present painting as well. In the top, left corner: 06.132 (Fig. 5, left). This is perhaps an inventory number of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, although it does not correspond to the number on the label on the frame on the front (Fig. 5, right). In the right corner we see the number 3A in thick black paint.

Paper strips have been glued to the back along the edges of the panel and over the frame (Fig. 5, left). This has now been removed, but traces of the paper and a clear colour difference is still visible.

⁹ Jørgen Wadum, Christina Currie, Noëlle Streeton, Jean-Albert Glatigny and Nicole Goetghebeur, *Wooden Supports in 12th–16th-Century European Paintings*, see online: <https://marette.smk.dk/-9728.html>



Fig. 5. Top: left top corner on the reverse of: Flemish painter, active in Italy, *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1540 (shortly before 1537). Oil on panel (poplar), 71.8 x 51.5/52 cm. Traces of paper are still visible at the frame and the panel. Bottom: the metal plate on the frame (Metropolitan Museum of Art).

Groundlayer

The white-ochre coloured groundlayer is made of mainly gypsum (instead of chalk, that was common in the Netherlands) and also includes silica particles and traces of calcite.¹⁰ Its binder is animal glue, which is now very discoloured, which is why it shows an ochre or brown colour in the stratigraphies. Its thickness ranges between 30 and 60 µm. It was applied by a broad brush, as seen on the X-ray images (Fig. 6).

On top of this groundlayer an green-ochre-brownish coloured *imprimatura* (intermediate layer) was applied, possible an emulsion oil-protein or *tempera grassa* based.¹¹ As oil paints gradually replaced egg-based tempera paints as the painting medium of choice. During the transition period, artists sometimes mixed materials, combining oils with tempera paint to create a blend known as *tempera grassa*. Recent research showed that adding oils to tempera paint does not slow its drying time, as had long been assumed. This *imprimatura* contains mainly leadwhite, verdigris (green) and red lead. And there are

¹⁰ These technical details are taken from: Adelina Illán Gutiérrez and Rafael Romero Asenjo 2024.

¹¹ From the second half of fifteenth century onwards many artists experimented with drying oils (nut, poppy, linseed) either in form of an additive to egg emulsion (what is usually called *tempera grassa*, 'fat' tempera) or in combination with tempera (painting with oils on top of an underpainting with tempera or *tempera grassa*).

smaller amounts of ochre, red earths and carbon black (this latter, possibly from the underdrawing). The presence of verdigris in this mixture is surprising, although it could be explained by its drying capacity in oily media. The thickness of this layer ranges between 30 and 45 μm .



Fig. 6. X-ray photograph of: Flemish painter, active in Italy, *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1540 (shortly before 1537). Oil on panel (poplar), 71.8 x 51.5/52 cm. Privat collection, Madrid.

Underdrawing

Although no clear underdrawing is visible with infrared reflectography, the presence of carbon black in the samples and some minimal lines suggests that an underdrawing was applied. This may have consisted only of contour lines and was accurately followed in paint, making it now almost invisible.

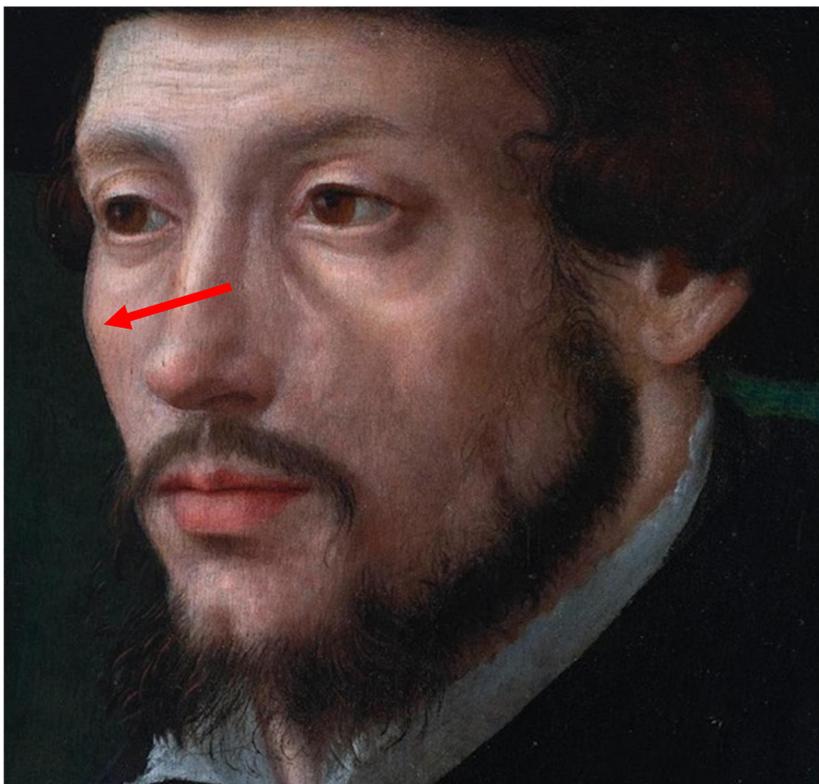
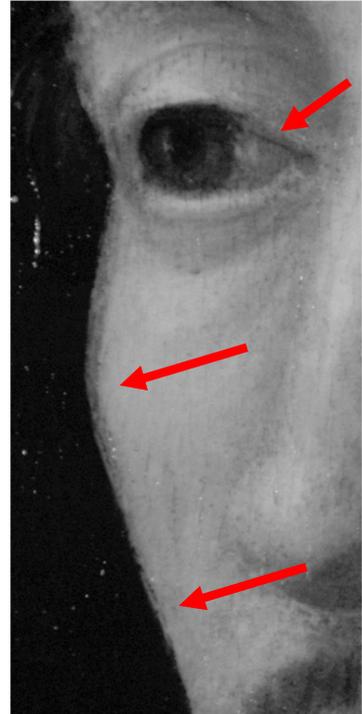


Fig. 7. IRR-detail of the face, of: Flemish painter, active in Italy, *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1540 (shortly before 1537). Oil on panel (poplar), 71.8 x 51.5/52 cm. Privat collection, Madrid. Red arrow indicates some contourlines of the underdrawing and small pentimenti.



We see more often no underdrawing or minimal markings in portraits during the preparatory phase.¹² This is also the case with painters who, for other works, such as religious scenes, did use extensive underdrawing. They may have made a drawing on paper

¹² See for example Joos van Cleve: Micha Leeflang, *Joos van Cleve. A Sixteenth-Century Antwerp Artist and His Workshop*, Turnhout 2015, p. 91-164.

from life and then used this drawing as a reference when creating the painting. In this case, they worked directly in paint, skipping the underdrawing phase. In the case of South Netherlands portraits, this lack of underdrawing may also have had to do with the very transparent way of painting, where the underdrawing would then show through the paint layers too quickly and would be considered a distraction.

The outer contours of the left hand in the present painting have been slightly altered (Fig. 8), as has the left side of the face (Fig. 7). These pentimenti are visible both in the IRR and to the naked eye. The lines of the underdrawing are not visible to the naked eye. The lower red arrow in Fig. 7 top, left points out a contourline of the underdrawing, that seems to have been made with a dry material. The line looks a bit grainy. A similar line can be seen in the IRR-image of the mouth (Fig. 7, bottom, right), and at the bottom of the left hand (Fig. 8).

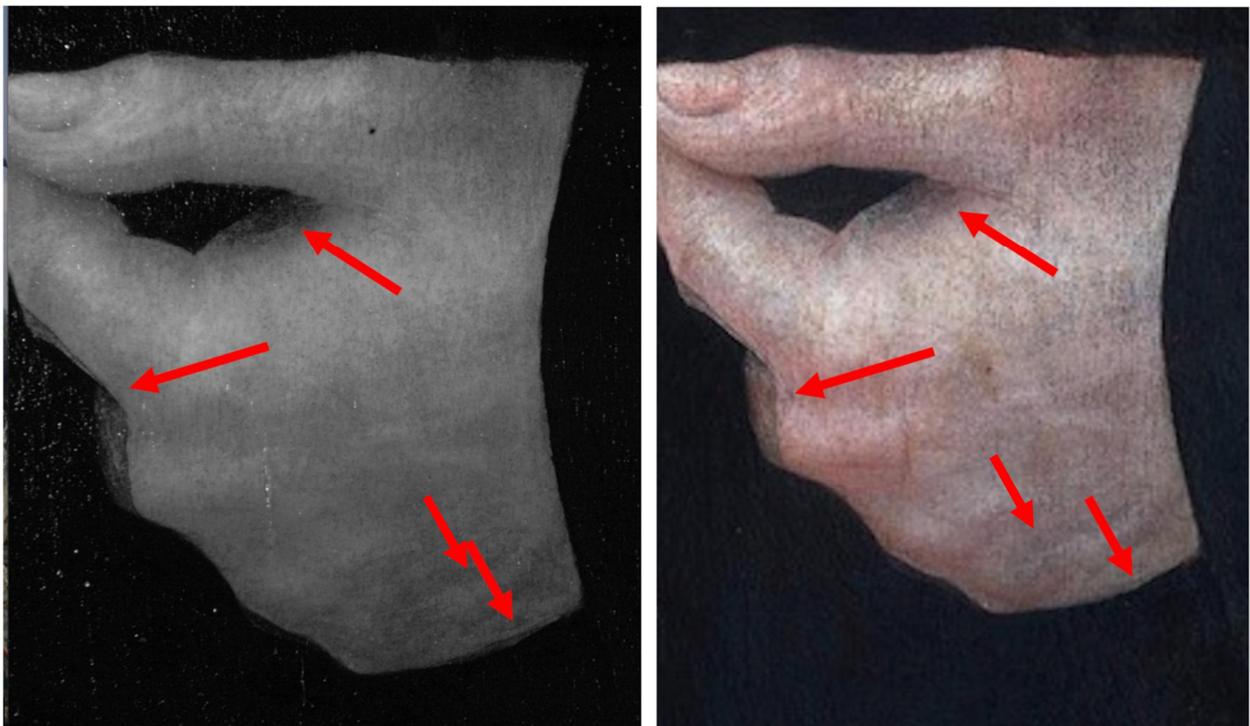


Fig. 8. IRR-detail of the right hand, of: Flemish painter, active in Italy, *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1540 (shortly before 1537). Oil on panel (poplar), 71.8 x 51.5/52 cm. Privat collection, Madrid.

Paintlayers

On top of the ground and *imprimatura* the artist added only one or two layers of paint (Figs. 9-10). These paintlayers were applied thinly and smoothly. Seven paint samples were taken and analysed, and the following pigments were identified: lead white, azurite (blue), yellow earth, vermilion (red), red earth, brown earth, umber (brown), carbon black, bone black and verdigris (green).

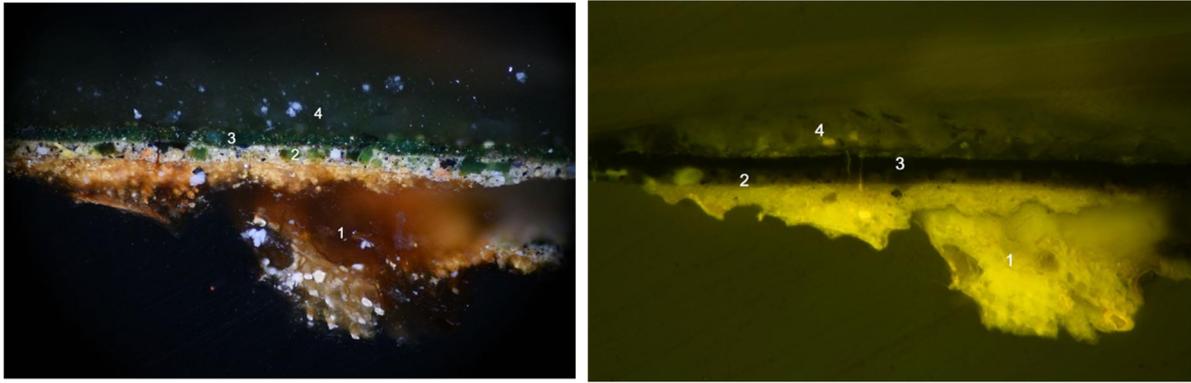


Fig. 9. Left, cross section of paint sample, green curtain:

1. Groundlayer: White-ochre colour: gypsum, silica, and traces of calcite, carbon black
2. Imprimature: Greenish ochre colour: white lead, verdigris, red lead, carbon black, ochre and red earths, silica
3. Paintlayer: verdigris, white lead, bone black
4. Resinous varnish

Right: UV-image of the same sample. The groundlayer is divided into two sublayers.

For the green curtain (Fig. 9, left) mainly verdigris (3) is used, combined with lead white and carbon black. A UV-fluorescence image of the sample (Fig. 9, right) shows clearly that the groundlayer (1) is divided into two sublayers and has a high animal glue content, thus exhibiting strong fluorescence. The varnish layer (4) contains numerous pigment and dirt particles.

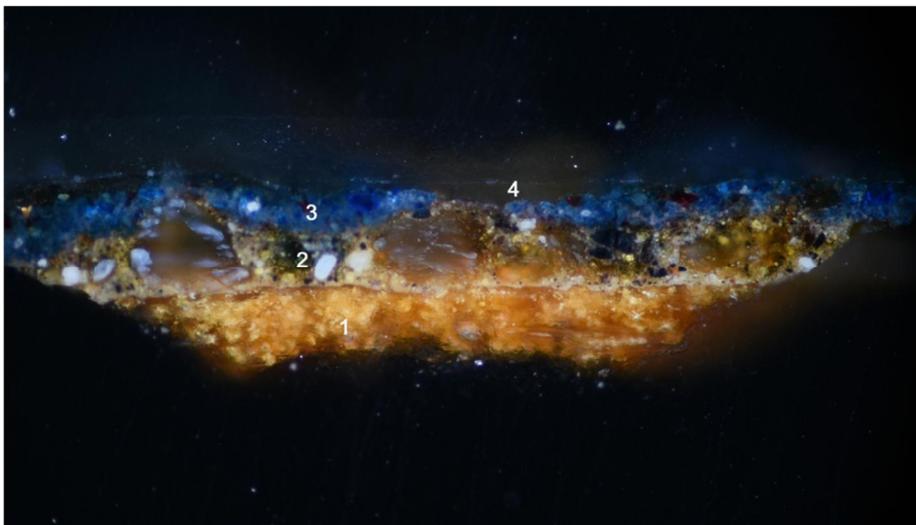


Fig. 10. Cross section of paint sample, tablecloth:
 1. Groundlayer: White-ochre color. Majority of gypsum, silica, calcite (tr), carbon black (tr)
 2. Imprimature: Greenish ochre color. White lead, verdigris, red lead, carbon black, ochre and red earths, silica
 3. Paintlayer: Azurite, white lead, red earth (tr)
 4. Resinous varnish

For the skull, mostly white lead (Pb), copper blue (Cu), earths (Fe), and traces of carbon black (P, Ca, Fe) and vermilion (Hg, S) were used. The sample taken from the tablecloth (Fig. 10) contains primarily azurite (Cu) and lead white (Pb). The black areas, such as the attire and headgear, are painted with bone carbon black (phosphorus, P, Ca) combined with white lead (Pb). The dark brown hair to the right of the ear contains mainly earths (Fe) and umber (Fe, Mn), mixed with vermilion (Hg, S) and bone black (P, Ca, Fe). The flesh tone of the face shows mainly white lead (Pb) combined with some vermilion (Hg, S),

earths (Fe) and umber (Fe, Mn).¹³ The binding medium is a drying oil, and retouches were done with calcite and quartz.

Man with Skull

The inclusion of skulls in portraiture originated in the Renaissance.¹⁴ In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these images were particularly popular in the Netherlands (Figs. 11-15) and Germany (Figs. 16-17) reflected cultural attitudes toward death and mortality. The skull is a key element of the 'Memento Mori' (Latin for 'Remember death') genre. It serves as a powerful visual reminder of death, prompting reflection on life's transience.

Although we see skulls in Italian paintings of saints, it is less common in Italy to include a skull in a portrait (Figs. 18-20). Although some examples exist, interestingly connected to Lorenzo Lotto, the artist the present painting was attributed to in the past.



Fig. 11. Left: Aelbrecht Bouts, *(Self-)Portrait of a Man holding a Skull*, ca. 1519-1524. Oil on panel, 42.6 x 33 cm. Sibiu, Muzeul Național Brukenthal.

Right: Follower of Jan van Scorel, *Portrait of a Man with a Pansy and a Skull*, 1535. Oil on wood, 27.6 x 21.4 cm. London, The National Gallery, NG1036.

In case of the *Portrait of a Man* by a follower of the Northern Netherlandish painter Jan van Scorel (Schoorl, 1495 - Utrecht, 1562) the sitter's identity and the exact artist is unknown.¹⁵ The sitter was however clearly a man of means. As with our portrait, his clothes are rich but sombre. He wears a black or dark grey hat and doublet, and a purple coat lined with grey damask. His white shirt is finely woven and the laces at his neck have gold tips; he wears four

¹³ The presence of titanium (Ti) could be explained by a later retouching in this spot (see UV-image).

¹⁴ Sara van Dijk and Matthias Ubl (eds.), *Remember me/ Vergeet me niet, Portretten uit de Renaissance*, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (exh.cat. 2021-22), p. 39-45.

¹⁵ <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/follower-of-jan-van-scorel-a-man-with-pansies-and-a-skull>.

gold rings. His clothing suggests that the portrait was painted in about 1535 in the regions of the Low Countries north of the Rhine and the Meuse.

His hand is resting on a damaged skull, which has lost most of its teeth and its lower jaw. Since the skull as a symbol of death is here combined with pansies in the sitter's left hand, the man is clearly meditating on death, hence his solemn and distant expression.¹⁶



Fig. 12. Dirck Jacobsz, *Portrait of Pompejus Occo* (1483-1537), c. 1531. Oil on panel, 65 cm x 53.5 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, SK-A-3924.

The *Portrait of Pompejus Occo* (1483-1537) painted by the Amsterdam Dirck Jacobsz (1496 – 1567) shows the man half-length behind a marble ledge. Here too, the skull is combined with a flower. His left hand rests on a skull without a jawbone, and between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand he holds a pink carnation, symbol of resurrection and the hope of eternal life. The X-radiograph shows several versions of the sitter's left hand; the skull was added later. The first painted version of the hand is now covered by the skull.¹⁷

The sitter was identified by Sterck in the 1920s on the basis of a comparison with his portrait on the left wing of Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen's *Triptych with the Virgin and Child* dated 1515.¹⁸ Pompeius Occo (c. 1483-1537), came from an east Frisian family, grew up in Augsburg, and settled in Amsterdam in 1511 as the representative of the Augsburg mercantile and banking house of the Fuggers. He became a key figure in the Northern European economy and was one of Amsterdam's most prosperous residents. Occo's portrait expresses the widespread awareness that all earthly prosperity is fleeting.

¹⁶ Pansies could stand for thoughts (*pensée*, which means 'thought', is the flower's French name).

¹⁷ J.P. Filedt Kok, 2010, 'Dirck Jacobsz., *Portrait of Pompejus Occo* (1483-1537), Amsterdam, c. 1531', in J.P. Filedt Kok (ed.), *Early Netherlandish Paintings*, online coll. cat. Amsterdam: hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.8833 (accessed 22 July 2025 15:02:47).

¹⁸ Sterck 1926, p. 263-65.

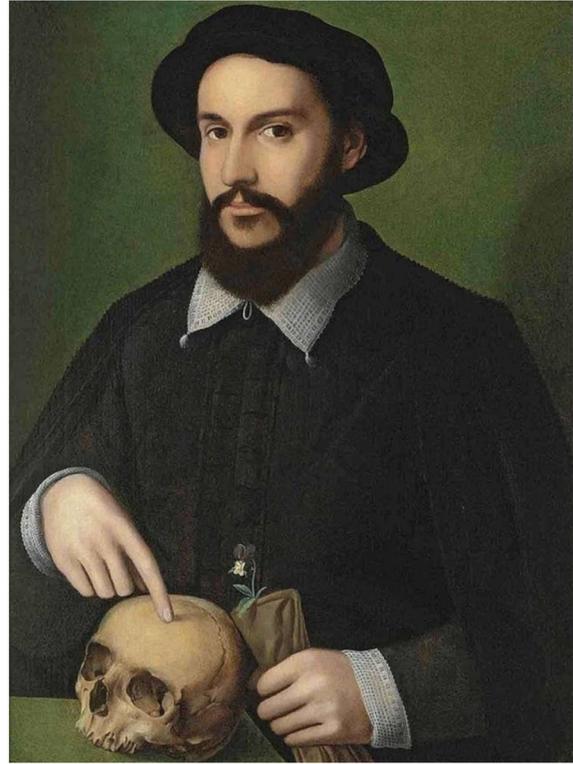


Fig. 13. Left: Follower of Pieter Coecke van Aelst, *Portrait of a Man with a Skull*, 1550. Oil on panel, 87.9 x 101.6 cm. Inscription: to left of sitter: A[nn]o 1550; to right of sitter: AETATIS[colon] 34. London, The Courtauld, P.1947.LF.284.

Fig. 14. Right. Master of 1540's, *Portrait of a Man with a Skull*, c. 1540-1550. Oil on panel, 43.5 x 33 cm. Sold at Christie's, London 2011.

The combination of a skull and a flower is a common theme, as seen in the work of Pieter Coecke van Aelst's successor (Fig. 13). In this piece, the subject is also holding a pair of gloves. This is another common combination. An example of this can be seen in the *Portrait of a Man* by an Antwerp painter and Southern Netherlandish master from the 1540s (Fig. 14). Wearing gloves indicated status and wealth, as well as a willingness to marry; a glove could serve as a sign of a marriage proposal. Wearing gloves also indicated that the person depicted did not perform manual labour.

There are also many portraits in which the men are depicted with a skull painted by German painters. We also see the combination of skull and gloves in the work of the Bartholomäus Bruyn (region Lower Rhine, c. 1493 – Cologne, 1555). In his *Portrait of a Gentleman* (Fig. 17), traditionally identified as the Cologne councillor Johan van Ryndorp (1505–1551/2), the sitter, like the present portrait, does not look at the viewer but rather out into the picture plane. A connection to German painting has therefore been suggested by some of the specialists consulted. Like the Northern (Dutch) and Southern Netherlandish men (Flemish), German painters travelled to Italy in the sixteenth century to study the classical antiquity and Renaissance art of their Italian contemporaries, among them Albrecht Dürer (Nurnberg, 1471 - Nurnberg 1528) and Hans van Aachen (Cologne, 1552 - Prague, 1615). However, little further evidence was found for this.

Interestingly, Bruyn is mainly praised for his Dutch influence in his portraits. Regarding the *Portrait of a Knight of an Order* in Vienna (Fig. 16), it is emphasized that in numerous portraits, Bruyn painted a vivid picture of the bourgeoisie of his native Cologne

and the nobility of the Lower Rhine. The skull, hourglass, and Latin inscription also remind the viewer of the transience of existence, and are considered to be more typical Netherlandish elements.¹⁹ That is why the link between the painting in question and Netherlandish painting seems to be stronger than that with German painting.



Fig. 15. Follower of Pieter Jansz. Pourbus (c.1523-1584), *Portrait of a Gentleman*, 16th century. Oil on panel, 55 x 44 cm. Sold at Titan Fine Art, London.

This 26-year-old (inscribed below the coat of arms) man also does not look directly at the viewer. This is consistent with the present portrait and the portraits also depicted here of a follower of Jan van Scorel (Fig. 11, right) and Bartholomeus Bruyn (Fig. 17).

¹⁹ <https://www.khm.at/en/artworks/portrait-of-a-knight-of-an-order-363>



Fig. 16. Left: Bartholomäus Bruyn, *Portrait of a Knight of an Order*, 1531. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum. Inscription: VIVE MEMOR LETI FVGIT. HORA.



Fig. 17. Right: Bartholomäus Bruyn, *Portrait of a Gentleman*, traditionally identified as the Cologne councillor Johan van Ryndorp (1505–1551/2), with inscription lower left: VNIVERSA, VANITAS, PRETER, AMARE, DE / VM. Oil on panel, 83 x 57 cm. Sold at Dorotheum, Vienna. The inscription VNIVERSA VANITAS PRETER AMARE DEVM matches with the memento mori motif of the skull and can be interpreted as 'All is Vanity but loving God', deriving from the famous text *De Imitatione Christi* (Thomas a Kempis, Augsburg, circa 1470).



Fig. 18. Left: Attributed to Lorenzo Lotto, *Portrait of a Man with a Skull*, c.1545. Oil on canvas, 114.5 x 90.2 cm. London, The Courtauld Gallery, P.1978.PG.225

As already noted, the Memento Mori motif of a skull is less common in Italian portrait painting. In the painting, attributed to Lorenzo Lotto, in the Courtauld Institute in London (Fig. 18), the element is combined with a pair of gloves in the sitter's left hand. Unlike our painting, the subject here looks directly at us. In the two other Italian examples (Figs. 19-20), the men are looking out of the picture plane.



Fig. 19. Venetian School, *Portrait of a Venetian Merchant holding Money and a Skull*, 16th century. Oil in canvas, 90.2 x 76.2 cm (sold at Blackwater London).

Fig. 20. Right: Bernardino Licinio (Poscante, near Bergamo, c. 1489 - Venice, 1565), *Portrait of a young Man with a Skull*, 1524. Oil on canvas, 75.7 x 63.3 cm. Oxford, Asmolean Museum, A721/

Former attribution

As mentioned, the present painting was attributed to Lorenzo Lotto (Venice, c. 1480 – Loreto, 1556/57, Fig. 21) for a long time. Lotto was one of the leading Venetian-trained painters of the earlier sixteenth century and painted portraits and religious works exclusively.²⁰ His early works are strongly influenced by Giovanni Bellini (Venice, about 1435 – 1516). Lotto worked in various places in Italy and absorbed a wide range of other influences, from Lombard realism to Raphael. He was deeply religious, and his late paintings become intensely spiritual.

Unable to compete with Titian, Lotto worked mainly outside Venice. He is recorded at Treviso in 1503 (where he painted the *Portrait of Bishop Bernardo de' Rossi*, Fig. 22), then in the Marches, and in Rome, probably in 1508. From 1513 to 1525 he resided mainly at Bergamo in Lombardy, where he painted several major altarpieces, and also portraits like, the *Portrait of a Married Couple*²¹ (Fig. 23) in which a green curtain is hanging in the background, and a woollen tapestry in laying on the table, and the *Portrait*

²⁰ Miguel Falomir and Enrico Maria Dal Pozzolo (eds.), *Lorenzo Lotto. Portraits*, exh.cat. Prado, Madrid 2018; and also: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/lorenzo-lotto>

²¹ Based on the images, this painting also appears to have a dark imprimatura, like the painting in question.

of a *Man with a Rosary* (Fig. 24) with a green drapery as well. From 1526 onwards he stayed a period in Venice. And then after a period of long absences in archival documents, in 1552 he joined the Holy Sanctuary at Loreto, and becoming a lay brother. During that time, he decorated the basilica of Santa Maria and painted a *Presentation in the Temple* for the Palazzo Apostolico in Loreto. He died in 1556 and was buried, at his request, in a Dominican habit.



Fig. 21. Lorenzo Lotto, (possible) *Self-Portrait*, 1540s. Oil on panel, 43 x 35 cm. Madrid, Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection.

Fig. 22. Lorenzo Lotto, *Portrait of Bishop Bernardo de' Rossi*, 1505. Oil on panel, 52 x 40 cm. Naples, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte.

Attribution to a Romanist painter

The painting discussed here was sold in 2023 at Sotheby's Paris as 'a Dutch (Flemish) painter active in Italy around 1540-1550, influenced by Venetian and Lombard painters'. This is confirmed using a gypsum based groundlayer and a support made of poplar. As mentioned, the man's posture turned in three-quarter view to the left, the position of the hands as well as the inclusion of the skull, recalls however Netherlandish portraits.

In the sixteenth century, numerous Netherlandish (Dutch and Flemish) artists travelled to Italy, including Rome, to study classical art, the Italian Renaissance masters, and to establish themselves as painters.²² These artists, including portrait painters, contributed to the artistic exchange between Northern Europe and Italy, influencing and being influenced by the Italian art scene.

²² Till-Holger Borchert, *The Age of Van Eyck: The Mediterranean World and Early Netherlandish Painting, 1430–1530* (exhibition catalogue), New York 2002; Anne-Claire de Liedekerke (ed.), *Fiamminghi a Roma, 1508–1608: Artistes des Pays-Bas et de la principauté de Liège à Rome à la Renaissance* (exhibition catalogue), Ghent 1995.

These painters as referred to as so-called Romanist or Mannerist painter.²³ 'Romanism' is a painting style used by art historians for painters from the Low Countries who had travelled to Rome in the sixteenth century and had been influenced by the leading Italian artists of the period, such as Michelangelo (Caprese, 1475 – Rome, 1564), Raphael (Urbino, 1483 – Rome, 1520) and Leonardo da Vinci (Anchiano (Vinci), 1452 - Amboise, 1519).²⁴ On their return, these Northern artists, Romanists, introduced a Renaissance style based on what they had seen in Rome. The style remained influential until the early seventeenth century, after which it was displaced by the Baroque.



Fig. 23. Lorenzo Lotto, *Portrait of a Married Couple*, c. 1523 - 1524. Oil on canvas, 96 x 116 cm. Saint Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum

²³ See among others: Ilja M. Veldman, 'Romanisme', in: Grove Art Online, Oxford Art Online, Oxford University Press (2003); Jane Turner, *The Dictionary of Art*, Londen 1996 (part 26), p. 728; G.J. Hoogewerff, *Nederlandsche schilders in Italie in de 16de eeuw: De geschiedenis van het Romanisme*, Utrecht 1912; M. J. Friedländer, *Die niederländischen Romanisten*, Leipzig 1922.

²⁴ The term Romanists goes back to Domenicus Lampsonius (Bruges, 1532 – Liège, 1599) who wrote about Jan van Scorel in the sixteenth century: 'Ick werd altijd geroemt den eersten, die bewesen / den Nederlanden heb, dan wie wil Schilder wesen / moet Room besoecken gaan (...)' (I have always been praised as the first who has proven / the Netherlands, so whoever wants to be a painter / must visit Rome ...). Jo Tollebeek (ed.), *De schilderkunst van de Middeleeuwen en de vijftiende eeuw*, Amsterdam 2006 (De Schilderkunst der Lage Landen, volume 1, p. 164.



Fig. 24. Lorenzo Lotto,
Portrait of a Man with a
Rosary, c. 1520. Oil on
panel, 78,5 x 62 cm. Nivå.
The Nivaagaard Collection,
0033NMK

The first group of artists who went to Rome to study both the contemporary Italian art and the classical antiquities include Jan Gossart (Maubeuge?, c. 1478 – Middelburg, 1532), Jan van Scorel, Maarten van Heemskerck (Heemskerck, 1498 – Haarlem, 1574), Pieter Coecke van Aelst (Aalst, 1502 – Brussels, 1550), Lambert Lombard (Luik, 1505/1506 – Luik, 1566), Jan Sanders van Hemessen, Michiel Coxie and Frans Floris de Vriendt (Antwerp, 1515/1520- Antwerp, 1570).

The second group of Romanists in the second half of the sixteenth century included Dirck Barendsz (Amsterdam, 1534 – Amsterdam, 1592), Adriaan de Weerd (Brussels, c. 1510 – Cologne, c. 1590), Hans Speckaert (Brussels, 1540 – Rome, 1577) and Bartholomäus Spranger (Antwerp, 1546 – Prague, 1611). The latter two artists did not return home, but Spranger exerted a great influence through other Northern artists who spent some time at the Prague court, where he worked. This later generation of artists is usually referred to as Mannerists. They had a better sense of proportion and used a simpler formal language than the first generation of Romanists.

For the painting discussed here, we must look at the first group of Romanists, and to someone who was not only studying art but also found influential patrons in Italy. It was suggested that 'the man's posture, turned in three-quarter view to the left, as well as the position of the hands, recall the models of Joos van Cleve, Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen and to a lesser degree Willem Key'.²⁵ Joos van Cleve did however not travel to Italy himself but incorporated the Italian Renaissance art within his work, by seeing this painting in or close home in Antwerp. Although he experienced with his painting technique, he remained close to the traditional Flemish layering of paintlayers and did not made use of poplar wood (but

²⁵ Alexandra Zvereva in Sotheby's sale catalogue 'L'Œil infatigable – Tableaux de la collection Asbjorn Lunde' (lot no. 109), Paris 2023.

oak) as a support, gypsum (but chalk) as groundlayer and almost never added a coloured imprimatura.



Fig. 25. Circle of Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen, Portrait of a man (Juan de Valdés?), c. 1530-40. Oil on panel (limewood), 40.6 x 31.2 cm. Sold at Christie's London, 2022 (Old Master Paintings & Sculpture Online).²⁶

Fig. 26. Workshop of Jan Cornelisz. Vermeyen, Portrait of Ferdinand I, Holy Roman Emperor (1503-1564), 1530-40. Oil on panel, 49.5 x 35.5 cm. Sold at Christie's London, 2017 (Old Masters including Old Master & British Drawings and Watercolours).²⁷

The portraits by Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen as mentioned in the prologue show some similarities to the present painting (Figs. 1, 25-26). According to his epitaph, Jan Vermeyen was born in Beverwijk, a village about 10 kilometres north of Haarlem.²⁸ The will that he

²⁶ P. Elvy, 'A Tale of Two Sitters: Juan and Alfonso de Valdés', *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*, XL, no. 1, 2015, pp. 105-114, as 'Vermeyen'.

²⁷ W. Hilger, *Ikongraphie Kaiser Ferdinands I. (1503-1564)*, Vienna, 1969, pp. 47-49, 145-146, no. 8, as 'Jan Vermeyen'; M. J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, XII, Leyden and Brussels, 1975, p. 89, under 'Supplement to Jan C. Vermeyen', as 'The best [portrait] of...Ferdinand known to me, done about 1530 and possibly by Vermeyen'; G. Heinz and K. Schutz, *Portraitgalerie zur Geschichte Österreichs von 1400 bis 1800*, Vienna, 1976, pp. 66-7, under no. 26; H.J. Horn, *Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen: Painter of Charles V and his Conquest of Tunis-Paintings, Etchings, Drawings, Cartoons & Tapestries*, Doornspijk, 1989, II, p. 489, no. A15, illustrated, as 'Shop of Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen, circa 1530'.

²⁸ J.P. Filedt Kok, 2010, 'Jan Cornelisz. Vermeyen, *Portrait of Erard de la Marck (1472-1538)*, Mechelen, c. 1528 - c. 1530', in J.P. Filedt Kok (ed.), *Early Netherlandish Paintings*, online coll. cat. Amsterdam: hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.6424 (accessed 22 July 2025 16:18:24).

made on 24 September 1559 states that he was about 55 years old at the time ('omtrent vive(n)vyftich jaere(n)'), so he must have been born around 1503.⁷ He was buried in the Sint-Gorickkerk (Church of St Géry) in Brussels in 1559, which contained his epitaph and paintings by him.²⁹ Nothing is known about his first marriage, but it is assumed that his first wife died before he left for Spain in 1534. He probably married his second wife, Jida de Neve, in Brussels after his return to the Netherlands in 1540. Their son Hans Vermeyen (before 1559-1606) was a goldsmith who became a master in 1590 and was employed by Emperor Rudolf II.

Although nothing is known for sure about Vermeyen's artistic training, there is a clear influence of both Jan Gossart and Jan van Scorel in his early works. Van Mander relates that Vermeyen and Jan van Scorel were friends and business partners. He was in the service of Margaret of Austria at the court in Mechelen between 1525 and her death in December 1530. In 1529 he received an annual stipend of 100 Flemish pounds. The works he painted for the regent were primarily portraits of her family and other relatives, and it was for this reason that he visited Augsburg in 1530. He did some work for Margaret's successor, Mary of Hungary, the sister of Charles V, between 1530 and 1533, but he was probably not employed by her.

Vermeyen probably stayed in Spain from 1534 until 1540. He accompanied Emperor Charles V on the military expedition to and conquest of Tunis in 1535, and in 1538 he is referred to as 'painter to His Royal Majesty'. In 1536 and 1538 the council of Brabant granted him the exclusive rights to publish prints of those events. Between 1546 and 1550 he designed a set of twelve tapestries for Mary of Hungary depicting scenes from the Tunis expedition, of which ten cartoons still survive in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. The tapestries were woven between 1551 and 1553 in Brussels by Willem Pannemaker. Payments for paintings in the Church of the Abbey of St Vaast in Arras are documented from 1548, and as late as 1561, two years after his death, to his widow. He owned land in the north of Holland jointly with Jan van Scorel, and in 1552 was involved in a project to dam the river Zype and polder the area.

None of the paintings by Vermeyen that Van Mander describes have survived. In 1872 Houdoy published a list of paintings, mostly portraits, which Vermeyen completed for Margaret of Austria in the period 1525-1530 (the artist requested payment for the materials used in making them in 1533).

Very characteristic of Vermeyen's portraits is the strong emphasis on the hands and especially the speaking gesture. During the 1530s and 1540s, Netherlandish painters began increasingly to experiment with the expressive potential of hands in their portraits.³⁰ Indeed, as Friedländer stated, unlike the mouth, gesture and hands could speak 'a language the eye could understand'.³¹ These gestures were used to express and convey qualities of the sitter's personality or profession to the viewer, showing their 'vitality and willpower...[or used to] address the beholder in an indicatory or expository manner'. Frequently, such 'speaking

²⁹ The church was demolished in 1799.

³⁰ https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/old-master-paintings-sculpture-online/circle-jan-cornelisz-vermeyen-beverwijk-1504-1559-brussels-104/156258?sc_lang=en

³¹ M.J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Anthonis Mor and his Contemporaries*, Leiden/Brussels 1975, XIII, p. 72.

portraits' became a popular conceit in catering to humanist interests in ideas of veristic portraiture, which lacked 'only voice'.³²

Unusually for a portrait painted by a Netherlandish artist, the support for the *Portrait of a man (Juan de Valdés?)*, sold at Christie's in 2022 (Fig. 25) and attributed to a painter from the circle of Vermeyen, is made of limewood, rather than the typical oakwood, favoured throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This suggests that the panel was plausibly not painted in the Netherlands, but more likely in Germany or Central Europe. Given that Jan Cornelisz. Vermeyen worked for several years as a court painter in Augsburg and Innsbruck in the early 1530s, important cities in the imperial domains, it is not unlikely that painters working in the cities, or also traveling with the court, were asked to paint portraits in these places, following the prevailing court style that Vermeyen developed.



Fig. 27. Right: Jan van Scorel, *Portrait of Joris van Egmond (1504-1559)*, c. 1535-40, Oil on panel, 57.2 cm x 80.8 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, SK-C-1618

The green curtain draped behind the sitter is an element found in several works by Vermeyen, his workshop and circle, like the *Portrait of Felipe Guevara* (Fig. 1) and the *Portrait of Ferdinand I, Holy Roman Emperor* (Fig. 26). However, while the portrait clearly betrays knowledge of Vermeyen's style, the unknown painter seems also to have been aware of the work of other contemporary portraitists working in the mid-sixteenth century, like Jan Sanders van Hemessen (Fig. 28, 28a) and Jan van Scorel (Fig. 27).

³² V. Sintobin in M. Ainsworth and K. Christiansen (eds.), *From Van Eyck to Bruegel: Early Netherlandish Painting in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York 1998, p. 198.



Fig. 28a. Jan Sander van Hemessen, *Portrait of a Man*, 1535-40. Oil on oak panel, 91,7 x 73 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-C-1838 (on loan from the Broere Charitable Foundation). Top: detail of the present painting.



Fig. 28. Left: Jan Sander van Hemessen, *Portrait of a Man*, 1540-45. Oil on oak panel, 58 x 44 cm. Private collection (in 2000 on sale as portrait painted by Willem Key).

Fig. 29: Willem Key (attributed to), *Portrait of a Man*, called Mark Ker (d.1584), 1551. Oil on panel, 39.3 x 29 cm. Edinburg, National Galleries of Scotland, NG 1938

Particularly regarding the three-quarter view of the sitter, half-length. Scorel's figures frequently look off to a point outside the painting, but not at the viewer, which is comparable to the present *Portrait of a Man with a Skull*. As Molly Faries pointed out, that in its general composition and type, the present portrait does relate to a good number of works by Scorel.³³ The figure is half length and turned into three quarter view; and the hands, in particular, evoke a sense of elegance and decorum. Nevertheless, she emphasized that Scorel always used oak supports and underdrew on a white ground. In that sense, the technique of the present painting differs significantly. In portraits by Scorel, the flesh often appears smooth and taut, even schematized to a degree. This is also true of hands. The modelling in present portrait is, as Faries indicates, softer and more rounded than I would associate with Scorel's portraits.

In the case of Van Hemessen's portraits, the subjects all look directly at us. He places, even more than Scorel, more emphasis on the elegantly executed hands, as we see when comparing the portrait in the Rijksmuseum from around 1535-1540 (Fig. 28a) with the present portrait, also created around the same time. Subtly curved fingers (note the little finger in particular) with clear lighting from one side. However, both Van Hemessen and Scorel as well as the portraits of Joos van Cleve, Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen, and Willem Key, retain, despite their Italian influences, a Southern Netherlandish/ Flemish appearance, particularly from a painting technique perspective. They always painted on a light ground layer and almost always used oak supports. Therefore, they cannot be considered as the creators of the present work, and we must look further for artists who, during their stay in Southern Europe, adopted the painting techniques and materials of their Italian (and Spanish) colleagues.

Some Northern artists also frequently collaborated with important Roman artists.³⁴ Jan van Scorel, who served the Dutch (Utrecht) pope, Adrian VI, in the early 1520s, was curator of the Vatican collection in the Belvedere, succeeding Raphael in this job, but as already noted, remained true to his Dutch techniques and materials.

Michiel Coxie was trained as a fresco painter in Rome. He produced frescoes in the Santa Maria dell 'Anima in Rome, an exceptional commission for someone from above the Alps. Back in the Netherlands from 1539 onwards, his Italianate style was appreciated by the Habsburg rulers. For example, Philip II had him make copies of the Ghent Altarpiece by the brother Hubert and Jan van Eyck and of *The Descent from the Cross* by Rogier van der Weyden. And Mary of Hungary commissioned him to provide her Palace in Binche with frescoes (1546-1549).

Although not many portraits are attributed to Michiel Coxie, the *Portrait of a Man* in the National Gallery in London is worth mentioning (Fig. 30). First of all, it is also a portrait of a man with a skull. Moreover, the work was purchased in 1845 as "the Gallery's first Holbein", which again emphasizes the complexity of portrait attribution and the relationship between German, Dutch, and Italian painting. The portrait's authenticity was quickly cast into doubt. Recent dendrochronological analysis of the panel shows that it was made after Holbein's death. The sitter is uncertain, but the coat of arms in the upper corner suggests he came from Brussels, Leuven, or the surrounding area and is probably a member of the Heverlee family. Michiel Coxie was the most important portrait painter working in Brussels

³³ Correspondence Molly Faries and Carlos Herrero Starkie, 7 jul 2024.

³⁴ Michiel Plomp, 'Dutch and Flemish Artists in Rome, 1500–1600', in: In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 2000 – (...).
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/noro/hd_noro.htm (October 2002)

when the portrait was made, and stylistic comparison with his other paintings confirms him as the artist. It is striking, however, that the portrait also looks very Flemish and shows few of the strong light-dark contrasts more characteristic of Coxie's religious work (Fig. 30a). For example, the wing panel with *Saint John the Evangelist*, with his slightly turned head, his gaze directed outward rather than at the viewer, and the emphasis on the graceful hands, is more similar to the portrait in question. Nevertheless, we have little further basis to connect the portrait in question to Coxie.



Fig. 30. Michiel Coxie, *A Man with a Skull*, about 1560 or later. Oil on panel, 97 × 75.4 cm. London, The National Gallery, NG195;

Fig. 30a. Michiel Coxie, *Saint John the Evangelist*, 1540 (wing of an altarpiece. Oil on panel, 230 x 90 cm. Prague, Saint Vitus Cathedral.

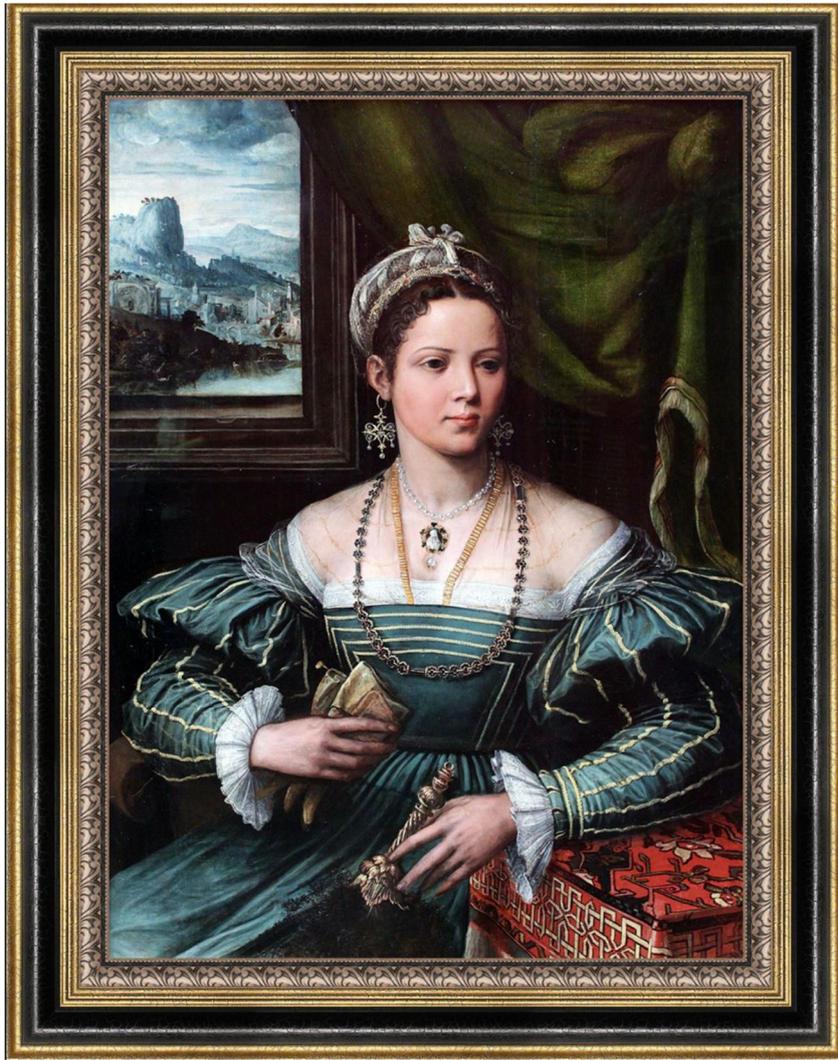


Fig. 31. Pieter de Kempeneer, also known as 'Pedro Campaña', *Portrait of a Lady*, c. 1535. Oil on poplar wood, 113.7 x 79 cm. Frankfurt, The Städel Museum.

Pieter de Kempeneer, also known as 'Pedro de Campaña'

A very interesting comparison with the painting discussed here is the *Portrait of a Lady* in the Städel Museum in Frankfurt (Fig. 31). Like the present work, it is painted on poplar wood. The attribution of this portrait has long been disputed. At first glance, there seems to be an inherent contradiction in a monumental Italian portrait that incorporates a small, finely detailed Netherlandish landscape. The attribution to the Southern-Netherlandish painter Pieter de Kempeneer (Brussels, 1503 - c. 1580) offers a plausible explanation.

Trained by Bernard van Orley (Brussels, 1490 - Brussels, 1542),³⁵ one of the leading painters and designers of cartoons for tapestries from Brussels, De Kempeneer (Figs. 34-35) went to Italy (Bologna, Venice and Rome), where he painted the Städel portrait on poplar wood, among other works. In Italy, he probably had contact with early Roman mannerist painters such as Perino del Vaga (1501-1547) and Polidoro da Caravaggio (1492/1495 -

³⁵ Although Bernard van Orley (Brussels, 1490 – Brussels, 1542) probably never visited Italy he is mentioned as a Romanist painter. He became familiar with the Italian style through prints and cartoon designs by Raphael for the papal tapestries that were woven in Brussels, and his fellow artists in Brussels.

1543).³⁶ He also met Cardinal Domenico Grimani (Venice, 1461- Venice, 1523), the son of the Doge of Venice (Antonio Grimani and an art lover, who became his patron. According to the Jesuit priest Luigi Lanzi (*Storia pittorica della Italia. Bassano: a spese Remondini di Venezia*, 1795-96), Pieter de Kempeneer painted at the request of Cardinal Grimani in Venice several portraits of important people close to him. The known portraits of Domenico Grimani are painted by Lorenzo Lotto (Fig. 32), who painted the cardinal in front of a green curtain and sitting behind a table with a tapestry. Another portrait is painted by Cristofano Altissimo, that is dated 1565 and is part of the so-called Clovio series in the Uffizi, Florence. Altissimo based his composition, head and shoulders only, on Lotto's prototype. Domenico Grimani also appears in a *Portrait of two Cardinals* in the Accademia, Venice (Fig. 33), where the face is shown in reverse. It's plausible to assume that Peter de Kempeneer encountered the work of Lorenzo Lotto in Venice and possibly found inspiration there for his own Italianate portrait paintings, featuring green draperies and thick woollen woven carpets on tables (like the present painting and Fig. 31).



Fig. 32. Lorenzo Lotto, *Portrait of Cardinal Domenico Grimani*, 16th century. Oil on canvas. The Schorr Collection, UK.

Fig. 33. Painter from the Veneto, copy after Palma il Giovane, *Portrait of Domenico (left) and Marino Grimani (right)*, 17th century, oil on canvas; ø 127 cm, Museo di Palazzo Grimani, Venice (deposit Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice).

³⁶ For Pieter de Kempeneer see: Enrique Valdivieso, *Pedro de Campaña, Un pintor flamenco en la Sevilla del Renacimiento*, Sevilla 2024; <https://www.museodelprado.es/aprende/enciclopedia/voz/campaa-pedro-de-pieter-kempeneer/e372dc3c-ad4e-3d9d-4d1b-b9aa8096bab1>; Rudi Schrever, 'Pieter de Kempeneer (1503-ca.1580) – Zuid-Nederlandse kunstschilder', online: Historiek.net <https://historiek.net/pieter-de-kempeneer-zuid-nederlandse-kunstschilder/96498/>

After Grimani's death in 1523, De Kempeneer travelled on to Rome, where he first came into real contact with the work of Raphael (1483-1520), which would have a lasting influence on his further oeuvre.



Fig. 34. Left: Francisco Pacheco (1564–1644), Portrait of Pedro de Campaña (Pieter Kempeneer), between 1600 and 1620. Engraving, 16.9 x 21.2 cm. Lissabon, Lázaro Galdiano Museum

Fig. 35. Right: Pieter de Kempeneer, also known as 'Pedro de Campaña', Self-Portrait, c. 1550. Oil on panel, 27 x 20 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado, P008293

Furthermore, we know from references in, among others, the painter's handbook of Francisco Pacheco (1564-1644) and the 'Groot Schilder-boeck' (*Great Painting Book*) by the Liège painter Gerard de Lairesse (1640-1711) that in 1529/1530 he collaborated on one of the cartouches on a triumphal arch erected in Bologna on the occasion of Emperor Charles V's coronation by Pope Clement VII.

It is unclear how long and where de Kempeneer stayed in Italy afterward, but it is certain that a few years later he continued to Seville in Spain, where he quickly became well-known as Pedro de Campaña with his religiously themed paintings, often characterized by an expressive colour palette.

In August 1537 he decorated the cathedral organs in Seville. His arrival in the city coincided with a period of great economic and artistic development, marked by a notable increase in demand for religious painting among both the clergy and the aristocracy and the nascent bourgeoisie. Initially, his painting remained very much in the Flemish style, characterized by firm and energetic drawing, angular forms, and a great interest in the expressiveness of the figures. This was one of the great innovations he introduced to the local artistic scene, which until then had been dominated by the solemn but expressionless painting of Alejo Fernández.

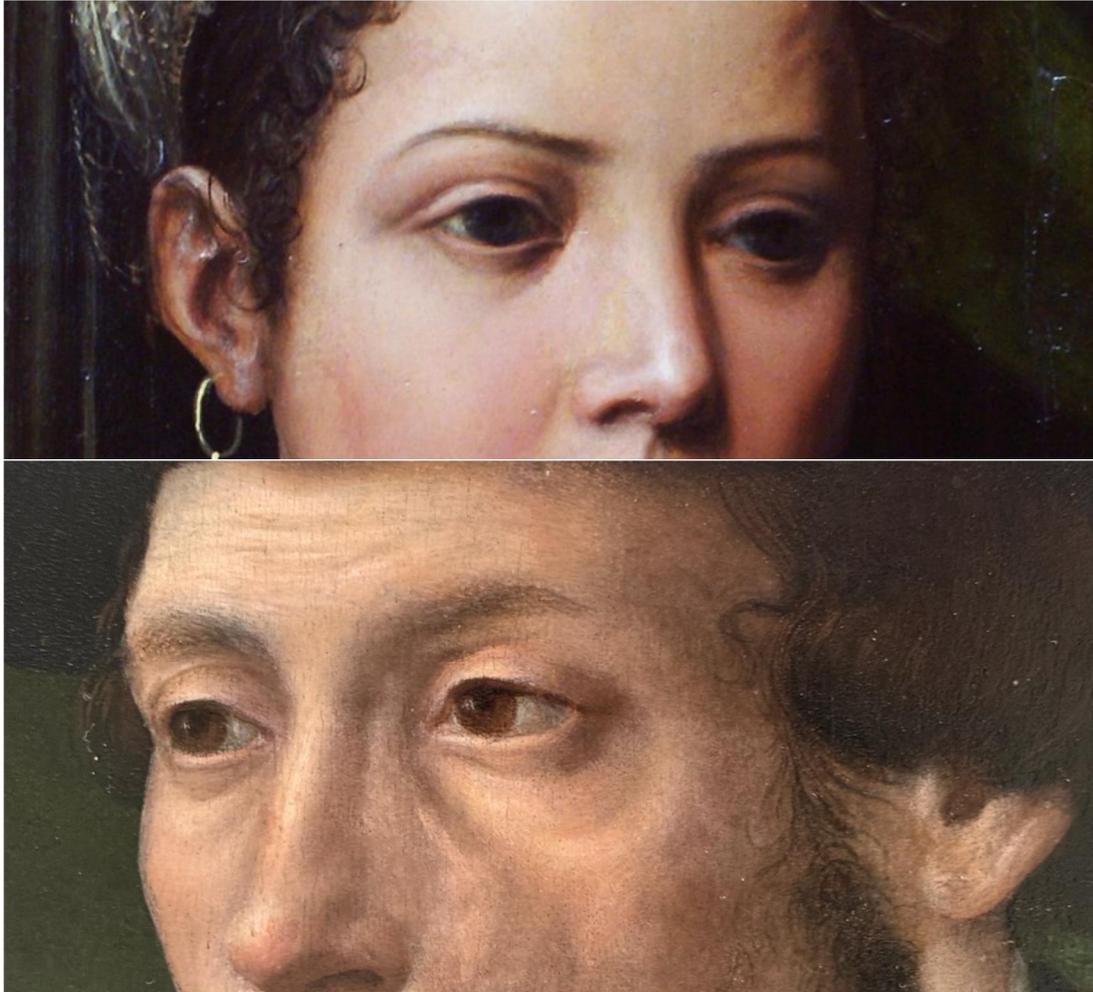


Fig. 36. Top: Detail of Pieter de Kempeneer, *Portrait of a Lady*, c. 1535. Oil on poplar wood, 113.7 x 79 cm. Frankfurt, The Städel Museum; and bottom: *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1540 (shortly before 1537). Oil on poplar wood, 71.8 x 51.5/52 cm.

From 1550 onwards, a greater influence of Italian painting can be seen in his work, perhaps because of the presence in Seville of the painter Luis de Vargas (1502-1568), who returned to Seville from Italy and developed a type of art heavily influenced by the style of Raphael's disciples. Together with Luis de Vargas he founded a painting academy. Luis de Morales (c. 1509-1586), nicknamed 'El Divino' (literally, 'The Divine') for his passion for mystical religious paintings, is considered one of his most famous students.

From this time on, Campaña's painting displayed a tendency toward the forms of Italian classicism, as can be seen in the *Altarpiece of the Purification*, De Kempeneer's *magnum opus*, which is over three meters high and depicting *The Descent from the Cross* in a masterly palette, which now hangs in the Sacristia Mayor of Seville Cathedral. At the end of 1562, Pedro de Campaña left Seville and returned to Brussels, where, from May 1563, he took over the management of the city's tapestry factory, replacing Michiel Coxcie, and worked as an engineer in the service of the Duke of Alba.

While comparing a portrait of a man and a woman, even if they are by the same artist, is always difficult, similarities can be found between the work in Frankfurt and the present painting. Often, the women have smoother and paler, and in this case a more pinkish, skin

tones. But if we look at the three-quarter pose, the sitter's gaze, which looks at a point outside the painting and the way the eyes are painted, there are certainly similarities (Fig. 36). The upper eyelid is indicated with a dark line. The eyelid itself is accentuated with a light brushstroke, and the bags under the eyes are indicated with slightly darker brushstrokes. The iris and pupil are simply indicated.

The comparison between the man's portrait and Pieter de Kempeneer's self-portrait is more convincing (Figs. 37-38).³⁷ The self-portrait, now in the Prado in Madrid,³⁸ is a type of work rarely produced in sixteenth-century Spain (Fig. 35).³⁹ It is fundamental for a knowledge of the origins of portraiture in Spain and the role of Pieter de Kempeneer in Seville in its emergence.⁴⁰ The exquisite, fine brushstrokes reveal the exceptional quality of Campaña's work and his Flemish roots. Painters often saw their self-portraits as a vehicle for displaying their pride and personal ambitions. These appear to have been some of the concerns that prompted Pieter Kempeneer to portray himself with the determined attitude and elegant poise suited to a successful artist. The carefully reproduced facial features, and particularly the intense gaze, together with the prominence of the red hair and beard and the use of strong chiaroscuro to mark the

volumes and outlines denote not only an exquisite command of technique with its roots in Flemish art, but also a desire to produce a very personal image.

³⁷ I thank José Juan Perez Preciado and Leticia Ruiz (both from the Museo del Prado) for sending the technical information of the self portrait of Pedro de Campaña.

³⁸ A remarkable recent acquisition. The portrait is acquired with funds from the bequest of Carmen Sánchez García at Bonanova Subastas, Barcelona, 2019.

³⁹ <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/self-portrait/2b082cc1-65ae-4b63-bab9-8aea5d0e2975?searchid=d527880e-b4fd-4b6f-a860-e01db86ac930>

⁴⁰ Angulo Íñiguez, Diego, *Pedro de Campaña*, Laboratorio de Arte de la Universidad, 1951; José Rogelio Buendía, *La Pintura Española del Siglo XVI. Separata de: Historia del arte hispánico, vol II: El Renacimiento*, Editorial Alhambra S.A., 1980, pp. 255, f.21; Francisco Pacheco, *Libro de descripción de verdaderos retratos de ilustres y memorables varones*, Prevision Española; Serrera, J.M., "Pinturas y pintores del siglo xvi en la Catedral de Sevilla": *En La Catedral de Sevilla*, Sevilla 1985; Francisco Pacheco, *Libro de Descripción de Verdaderos Retratos de Ilustres y Memorables varones. fac. 1599*, Diputación Provincial, Sevilla 1985, n.40 p. 289-294; Pacheco, Francisco, *Arte de la pintura, su antigüedad y grandezas: descriuense los hombres eminentes que ha auido en ella... y enseña el modo de pintar todas las pinturas sagradas. 1649 por Simón Faxardo*, 1990 [1649], p. 137, 273, 348, 544, 549; Nicole Dacos Crifò, 'Entre Bruxelles et Séville Peter de Kempeneer en Italie', in: *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* (1993), vol. 44, nr. 1, p. 143-164; Nicole Dacos Crifò, 'Peter de Kempeneer', in: *Fiamminghi a Roma. 1508-1608: kunstenaars uit de Nederlanden en het prinsbisdom Luik te Rome tijdens de Renaissance*, Brussels 1993, p. 240-245; Enrique Valdivieso, *Pedro de Campaña*, Fundación Sevillana Endesa, Sevilla 2008; L. Ruiz Gómez, *Pedro de Campaña. Peter Kempeneer. Autorretrato*, Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, Madrid 2020, p. 30-32; Leticia Ruiz, 'Pedro de Campaña. (Peeter Kempeneer) Autorretrato', *El legado de Carmen Sánchez: "La última lección"*, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid 2021, p. 33-36, no. 2. See: <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/self-portrait/2b082cc1-65ae-4b63-bab9-8aea5d0e2975?searchid=f5a32c28-b9d4-8e8e-9029-312e569848ac>; Painting was acquired in 2018/2019 at Bonanova Subastas, Barcelona, see: <https://www.bonanovasubastas.com/es/lote/1812-1044-1044/679-20532-pieter-van-kempeneer>



Fig. 37. Detail of the eyes and nose: Top: *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1540 (shortly before 1537). Oil on poplar wood, 71.8 x 51.5/52 cm, and bottom: Pieter de Kempeneer, also known as 'Pedro de Campaña', *Self-Portrait*, c. 1550. Oil on panel, 27 x 20 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado, P008293.

And here again, we see a three-quarter position of the subject, a strong contrast between the light and dark areas of the face, and a gaze not directly at the viewer but somewhere outside the painting (although in this case is less clear, which can probably be explained by the artist looking at a mirror to paint his portrait).

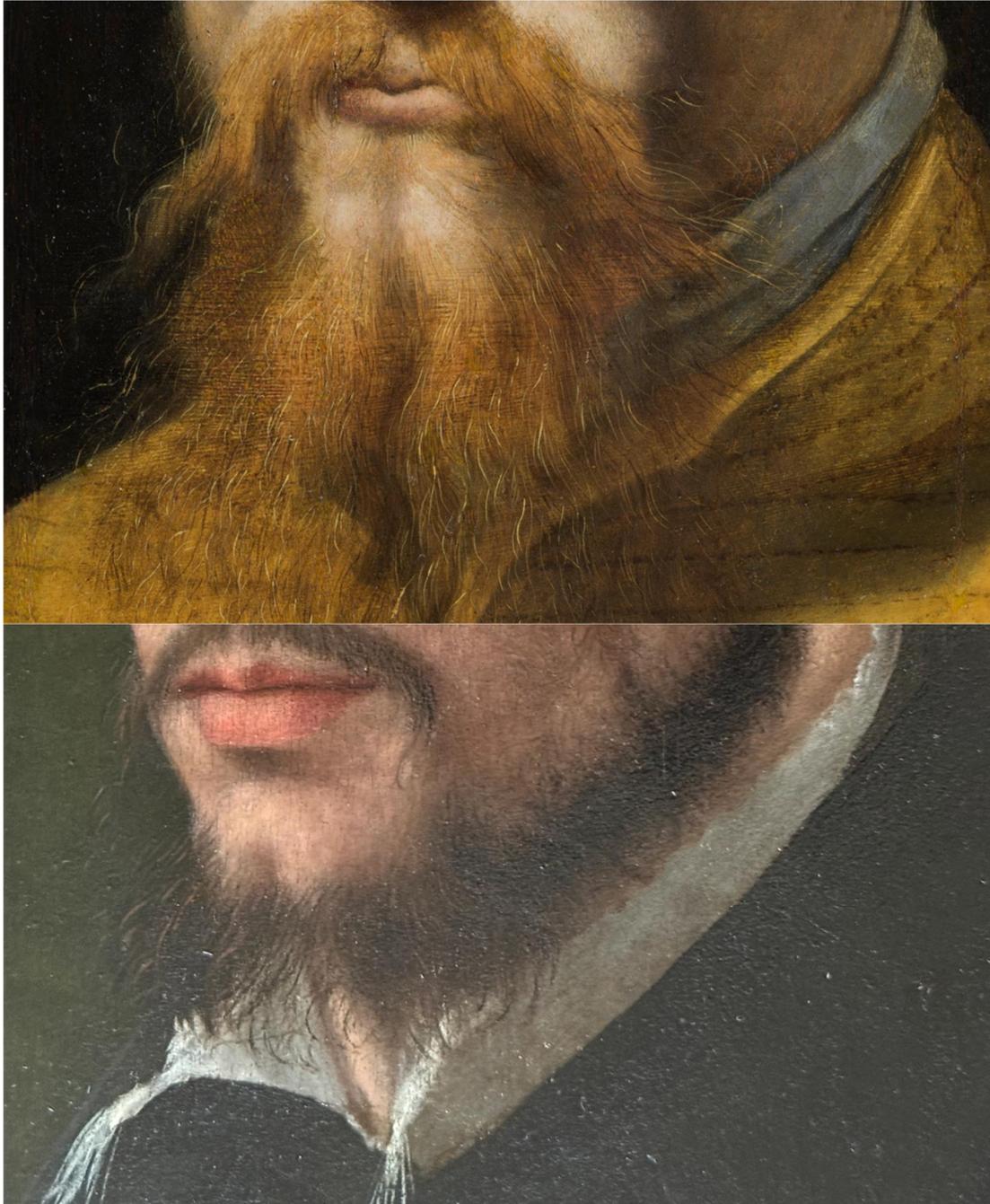


Fig. 38. Detail of the mouth and beard: Top: *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1540 (shortly before 1537). Oil on poplar wood, 71.8 x 51.5/52 cm, and bottom: Pieter de Kempeneer, also known as 'Pedro de Campaña', *Self-Portrait*, c. 1550. Oil on panel, 27 x 20 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado, P008293.

The transparent painting style and the way the beards are painted are also similar on both men. The facial hair is painted with a fairly transparent base tone. Then, with a fine brush, individual hairs are painted in both lighter and darker shades. These give the beard a shaggy yet realistic look. Also striking is the dimple in the chins of both men, which isn't a technical characteristic, but is nevertheless striking and allows for a more convincing comparison.

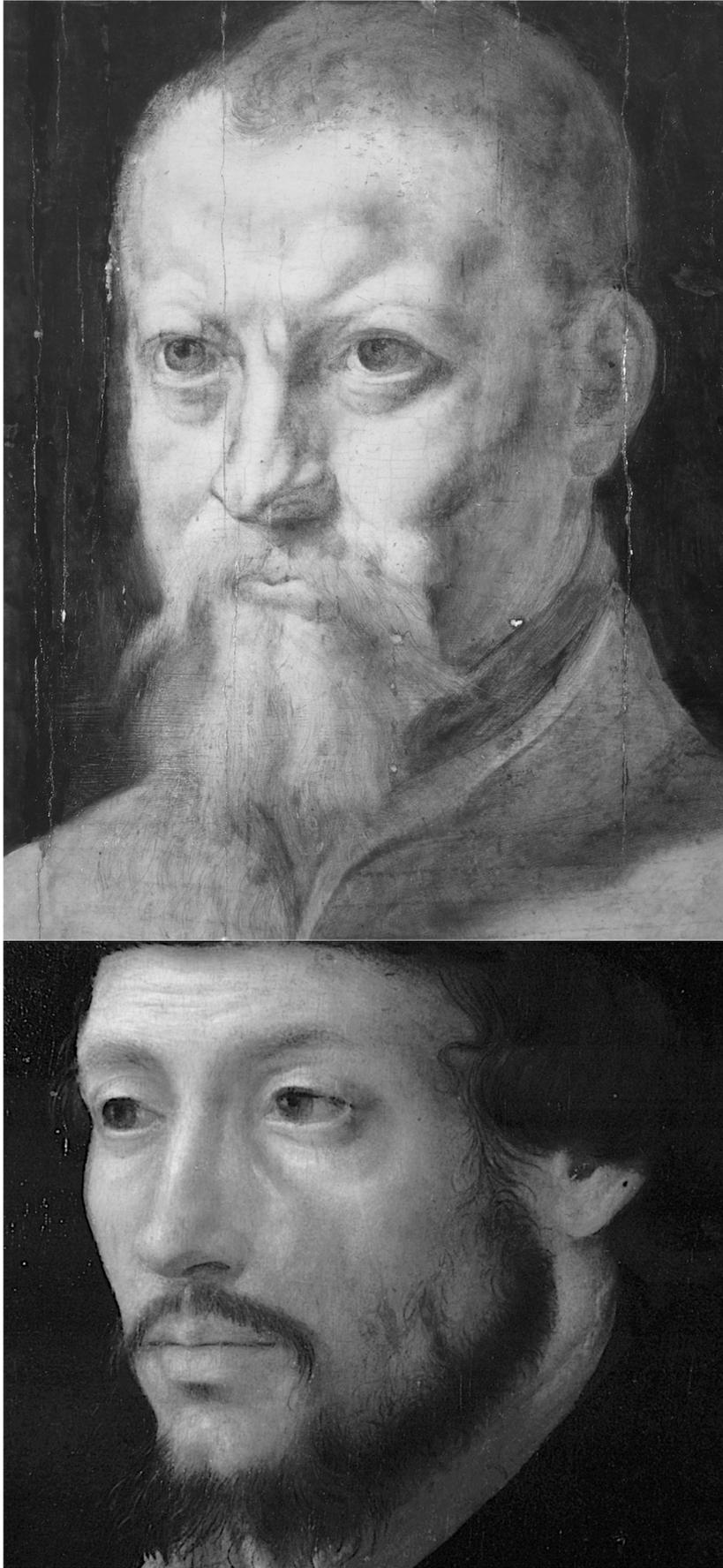


Fig. 39. IRR-Detail of the: Top: Pieter de Kempeneer, also known as 'Pedro de Campaña', *Self-Portrait*, c. 1550. Oil on panel, 27 x 20 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado, P008293; bottom: *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1540 (shortly before 1537). Oil on poplar wood, 71.8 x 51.5/52 cm.

The facial colour is different. The self-portrait appears paler/yellowish, while the *Man with the Skull* appears pinker/redder. This can, of course, be explained by the sitters. Pedro de Campaña (Pieter de Kempeneer) was a red-haired man with blue eyes and may therefore also have had a pale skin. The *Man with the Skull*, possibly an Italian gentleman, had dark hair, brown eyes, and possibly a slightly darker skin colour. This, of course, requires a different use of colour.

Conclusion

A painting that once formed part of collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and was attributed for over fifty years to Lorenzo Lotto by the most distinguished authorities must undoubtedly be the work of a master. My examination of the painting in situ confirms the exceptional quality of its execution, further evidenced by the remarkably well-preserved paintlayers, used pigments and the well-preserved panel.

Since A. Boschetto rejected the attribution to Lorenzo Lotto in 1950, the work has been the subject of intense scholarly debate. Some authors argue that it is the work of a Venetian master strongly influenced by artists from the Low Countries, but used local materials such as the poplar wood support, a gypsum-gesso groundlayer, and a coloured *imprimatura*.⁴¹ The subject's clothing also seems to betray an Italian origin. Others have suggested a German or even French origin.⁴² More recently, a third theory has emerged. The painting is the work of a master trained in the Low Countries who was active in Italy around 1540, where he fully mastered Italian painting techniques and materials. This interpretation is based on the subject's three-quarter pose (very Dutch/Flemish), his slightly melancholic gaze into the distance, and the iconographic motif of the memento mori.

This study aims to provide new evidence supporting this latter view by comparing the painting with works by Dutch artists active in Italy around 1530–1540, whose oeuvres show stylistic and technical similarities with portraiture, both the Flemish/Dutch tradition and Italian portraiture. These artists include Jan Cornelisz van Meyeren, Jan Sanders van Hemessen, Jan van Scorel, Michel Coxie, and Peter de Kempeneer. Joos and Cornelis van Cleve, as well as Willem Key, do show certain significant parallels but are excluded due to the lack of documentation confirming their presence in Italy and the fact that their known works were executed exclusively on oak panels.

Of all the possible attributions, that to Peter de Kempeneer is the most plausible. He spent over ten years in Italy, and written sources indicate that he painted portraits during his Venetian period, including for the great art collector Cardinal Grimani. Kempeneer's work displays stylistic roots in the Flemish tradition but is executed with a distinctly Venetian/Italian painting technique. These technical characteristics are evident in two portraits: a *Portrait of a Lady*, circa 1535, oil on poplar wood, Stadel Museum in Frankfurt; and a self-portrait, oil on panel, Museo del Prado, circa 1550. Comparison between these

⁴¹ To quote Till Holger Borchert 'portraiture in the first half of the sixteenth century, is very similar in terms of decorum and distinguishes mostly by way of technique. I would, however, think that we're looking at a painting that is connected to the Habsburg part of the world, rather than the French one and in my view, if it was made in Italy, more likely in the Veneto or Lombardy than Tuscany. It could have also been produced in Spain by a Northern artist'. Correspondence Till Holger Borchert and Carlo Hererro Starkie, 29 November 2023.

⁴² Marina Aarts points to a possible German origin; Mauro Natale and Peter van den Brink to a French one.

works and the present painting of a Man with a Skull reveals remarkable technical similarities, such as the modelling of the face through strong light-shadow contrasts, the use of a darker, coloured *imprimatura*, and the characteristic depiction of the beard (in case of the Self-Portrait, and also evident in his religious works). Stylistic parallels also emerge in the three-quarter pose, the dark background, the outward gaze (the subject is not looking at the viewer), and the presence of the green curtain, which is also seen in his *Portrait of a Lady*, painted in Italy around 1535.



Detail of the face: left: Pieter de Kempeneer, also known as 'Pedro de Campaña', *Self-Portrait*, c. 1550. Oil on panel, 27 x 20 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado, P008293; right: *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1540 (shortly before 1537). Oil on poplar wood, 71.8 x 51.5/52 cm.

This study, which includes both a proposal and a possible rediscovery of an unknown work from Kempeneer's Italian period, should encourage historians and specialists in mid-sixteenth-century Venetian painting to reexamine the numerous anonymous Venetian portraits from that period for similarities with this artist and the present portrait. Given his long stay in Italy, Kempeneer must have produced a considerable body of work before leaving for Spain in 1537. In Seville—where he became known as Pedro de Campaña—his extensive work established him as the city's most celebrated painter during the second third of the sixteenth century. He remained there until 1562, when he returned to Antwerp to succeed Michel Coxcie as director of the Brussels tapestry factory. This position testifies to the high esteem he enjoyed in his native city, despite the fact that he had created most of his oeuvre in Italy and Spain.

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