

Basic Detail Report



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Title

Portrait of a Dutch navigator

Date

c 1685

Primary Maker

Jan Verkolje

Medium

Oil paint, canvas

Dimensions

Overall: 841 x 740 x 95 mm, 5.3 kg Sight: 588 x 484 mm

Display Dimensions: 625 x 500 mm

Name

Painting

History

This picture is unsigned and undated but attributed to Jan Verkolje (1650–1693) and for many years has been thought to be a portrait of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) commander Willem de Vlamingh (1640 - 1698) who explored parts of the coast of western Australia in 1697 while searching for the crew of the missing ship *Ridderschap van Holland* which disappeared while on route from the Cape of Good Hope to Batavia in 1694. However, recent research suggests that the portrait may not be of de Vlamingh. The earliest known reference to the painting is from an exhibition at the Royal Academy of Art, London in 1878 when it was lent by John Evans, Esquire and described in the catalogue as 'Portrait of a Young Dutch Naval Officer'. John Evans was a Fellow of the Royal Society (1864–1908) and served as President of several other prestigious societies. He was a trustee of the British Museum and was created a Knight of the Order of the Bath in 1892. His eldest son Arthur (later Sir Arthur Evans the archaeologist famous for his discovery and reconstruction of the Palace of Knossos on the island of Crete) is believed to have inherited the majority of his father's collections but the painting may have passed to his second son Lewis (1853-1930) who was a noted collector of scientific instruments - particularly astrolabes, of which he reputedly developed the largest collection in the world. His collection formed the basis of the book - *The astrolabes of the world* by Robert Gunther, published by Oxford University Press in 1932. The painting was sold at Christie's London in 1994 described in the catalogue as 'Jan Verkolje (1650-1693) - Portrait of a Navigator, said to be De Vlamingh'. It was acquired by the museum in 1996. By coincidence a preliminary ink study for the picture (described as 'Jan Verkolje - Portrait of a navigator') surfaced in 2000 at Christie's Amsterdam auction. Two arguments against the sitter being de Vlamingh are: (1) Willem de Vlamingh was

53 at the time he explored the western Australian coast, whereas the sitter in the painting appears much younger, and (2) as a Delft painter, Jan Verkolje's subjects were generally residents of Delft and it is unlikely that he would have travelled to Amsterdam – Willem de Vlamingh's home. As the painting is unsigned, a high-resolution image of the picture was sent to an expert at the National Gallery, London who concluded that both the painting and the preliminary sketch are by Jan Verkolje. Jan Verkolje (1650-1693) was born in Amsterdam, the son of a locksmith and only took up drawing after an accident forced him to convalesce in bed for an extended period. After he recovered he became the pupil of painter Jan Lievens until moving to Delft in 1672 where he was accepted into the town's guild of St Luke (Saint Lucas-gild) as a master painter the following year. To become a master, a painter had to have first served a six-year apprenticeship and then successfully submitted an example of their work to the guild. Guilds were common in the main towns throughout the Netherlands and brought together a broad and varied assembly of artists, artisans and craftsmen who, once members of the guild, were permitted to ply their trade within the designated town. Many of the guilds were named after the evangelist St Luke – regarded as the patron Saint of artists. Apart from artists, members of the Delft guild of St Luke included stone masons, sculptors, glassmakers, weavers, book binders, engravers, silversmiths and various other trades. Each of these was identified by a distinctive escutcheon bearing insignias of their trade. Guilds offered their members protection from outside competition and once a member was admitted they retained a strong association with the town, with the guild actively supporting their interests locally. The Delft guild of St Luke was controlled by an annually elected group of six 'Headmen' and master painter Jan Verkolje served as one of these in 1678, 1682, 1683 and 1687. While membership of a town guild provided protection it also meant that members were effectively unable to work freely in other towns. In this regard, Jan Verkolje's membership of the Delft guild of St Luke from 1673 on, supports the argument that he is unlikely to have painted the portrait of Amsterdam resident Willem de Vlamingh. The work of Verkolje and his peers, Johannes Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch among them, appealed to the increasingly wealthy Protestant middle class in the Netherlands, who preferred scenes that reflected their own tastes and interests, instead of paintings with religious or mythological subject matter. His works were often small portraits, interiors or historical subjects and were noted for their outstanding finish. Verkolje worked in the period of the so called 'Golden Age' of the Dutch republic (1581 –1795) when, following separation from Spanish rule, the United Provinces in the north became the centre of wealth in Europe as its traders united to form the most powerful trading company in the world – the Dutch East India Company. Coinciding with this period of new-found wealth and confidence was a new emphasis on successful individuals who had made contributions to the success of Dutch society through scientific, religious, political, commercial or other fields. Verkolje's Portrait of a Navigator demonstrates great skill in the use of light and shadow to bring depth to the figure, while the exceptional treatment of the shimmering pink ribbons on the shoulder, neck, cuff and garter is typical of textiles in many of Verkolje's portraits. The arrangement of the sitter beside a table bearing references to their life is also a tableau Verkolje often employed as seen in his portrait of Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, the zoologist, pioneer of microscopy and resident of Delft, painted in 1686. Another example of a Verkolje painting exhibiting these compositional hallmarks is the portrait of Petronella Boogaart, signed and dated 1679. However, unlike the portrait of Leeuwenhoek, reference to the sitter's life and position in society are indicated here by the complete absence of objects associated with career. For the sitter in this case is a gentlewoman, a person of wealth who by definition, did not

work, and, as indicated by the book held in her hands, had time for leisure pursuits. Again Verkolje demonstrates his mastery in depicting textiles in Petronella's exquisite dress and golden shawl. Beautiful in her youth, dressed in the height of fashion and ornamented with expensive bracelets, necklace and earrings - Petronella Boogaart is represented as the epitome of gentility. However, of particular interest in regard to the museum's painting Portrait of a Navigator, is the carpet Petronella is leaning on. A comparison of the two paintings clearly shows the carpet's design elements - a prominent pale blue 'petalled' motif, black 'wings' design and white background border - are common to both paintings and indeed the same carpet appears to have been used in both paintings. And given this coincidence, it is not unreasonable to assume that both paintings were completed around the same time - that is about 1679, fifteen years before Willem de Vlamingh's exploration of the western Australian coast. Research into the life of Petronella Boogaart reveals that she was born in 1661 and was 18 years old when the portrait was painted. She was the daughter of Adriaan Boogaart van Beloy's burgomaster (Councillor) of the city of Delft and one of the seven directors of the Delft chamber of the VOC. The VOC was controlled by 60 directors representing the interests of each of the six city provinces making up the union, with 20 from Amsterdam, 12 from Zeeland and 7 each from Rotterdam, Delft, Enkhuizen and Hoorn. Ultimate power lay in the hands of the board of '17 Gentlemen' who controlled the company, meeting in Amsterdam 2 to 3 times a year. Of the 17 directors making up this all-powerful board, 8 were elected from Amsterdam, 4 from Zeeland, while the remaining cities elected 1 each, with another director elected in rotation from the 5 smaller cities. In 1684 Petronella married the wealthy 26 year old Franco Reijerszn van der Burcht who, in the same year, was himself elected a director of the Delft chamber of the VOC. Petronella was also one of nine children, and one of her brother's - Nicolaes Boogaart van Beloy's (1662 -1746) also later became a director of the VOC chamber of Delft. Taking these connections into account it appears likely that the sitter in Portrait of a Navigator is either Petronella's husband Franco or possibly her brother Nicolaes. Both men lived in Delft, were well-connected to the VOC and were young men around the time Jan Verkolje was commissioned to paint the portrait of Petronella Boogaart. Ultimately identification of the sitter may be revealed through further research into the background scene in Portrait of a Navigator. What historic episode does it refer to and what part did the sitter play in it? In time we may find answers to these questions but for now at least, the evidence suggests this is not a portrait of Willem de Vlaming. [For an illustrated version of this information see the article in 'A question of identity - Who is the man in the portrait?' in the museum's quarterly magazine SIGNALS 118, March 2017]