SPHINX FINE ART



Nicolaes Maes (Dordrecht 1623 - Amsterdam 1693)

Portrait of a Gentleman, Three-Quarter Length, in a Brown Tunic with a Red Cloak in a Wooded Landscape, at Sunset

signed and dated ‘MAES. 1676’ (lower left)
oil on canvas
54.9 x 46 cm (21⅝ x 18⅛ in)

In this accomplished portrait, Nicolaes Maes presents the viewer with a confident young man with a disarmingly open gaze and jaunty demeanour. Although painted centuries ago, the portrait possesses a powerful immediacy and timeless appeal.

The sitter is posed nonchalantly with one arm akimbo and the other propped up against a mossy rock. His hair is worn long with luxurious curls falling below his shoulders, which matched by the brightness of his eyes, the smoothness of his skin and the hint of facial hair above his upper lip, indicate that he is a very young man. He wears a simple and elegant informal garment known as a vest in the seventeenth century. It fastens at the chest with decorative clasps, revealing his shirt underneath in a fashionably negligent manner. Dominating the composition is the gentleman’s requisite cloak which wraps around his shoulders, falling in luminous folds and giving him a classical air. The sitter is obviously aspiring towards a romantic look in his choice of dress and hairstyle and in the dramatic nature of his surroundings. The grotto he shelters under is appropriately dark, craggy and overgrown, and the ivy tendril climbing up the rock at the left of the painting adds to the lyricism of the scene.

Maes' *Portrait of a Young Woman* in the Hermitage was painted two years after the present painting, and reveals similar choices in composition and palette. Maes' portraits of this period clearly favour red, gold, brown, ochre and russet tones, all of which were very much in vogue towards the end of the seventeenth century. The young woman in the Hermitage portrait is posed against a backdrop of sumptuous red drapery, emphasizing a soft femininity, while the surroundings of the present portrait suggest masculine vigour and poetic sensibility. In both portraits, Maes is clearly influenced by the paintings of Sir Anthony van Dyke who decades earlier mastered the skill of portraying his subjects with casual elegance and timeless grace by generalising dress details and focusing on the lustre and richness of the fabrics.

Born in Dordrecht, Maes spent his late twenties studying under Rembrandt in Amsterdam before returning to Dordrecht and establishing himself as an independent painter around 1653. Maes' employment of colour, chiaroscuro and brushwork, particularly in his early paintings of religious and genre subjects, is clearly inspired by Rembrandt. Gradually Maes increased his production of portraiture and by the 1660s devoted himself exclusively to painting people's likenesses. His output during the 1670s and 1680s was prolific. He settled for good in Amsterdam in 1673, where he became a highly sought after artist, filling a void after the deaths of portrait specialists Bartholomeus van der Helst and Abraham van den Tempel. A favourite format employed by Maes during this period was the three-quarter length portrait, with the sitter leaning against a rock or column, in natural surroundings, with a setting sun in the distance, as exemplified by both works discussed here.

A note on provenance: William Berry (1879-1954), created 1st Viscount Camrose in 1941, controlled the largest media empire of his day, owning the Sunday Times, Financial Times and Daily Telegraph, as well as other newspapers and magazines. In 1935 he bought Hackwood Park, built for the 1st Duke of Bolton at the end of the seventeenth century and altered by Samuel and Lewis Wyatt in the early nineteenth century. The heirs of the Duke of Bolton had let Hackwood between 1850 and 1935, so Camrose also acquired much of the original furniture and contents. This he complemented, continued by his son, John Berry, 2nd Viscount Camrose (1909-1995), with a fine collection of Old Master and later paintings, including most notably Van Dyck's *Portrait of the Abbé Scaglia* (National Gallery, London; inv. no. 6575)

Provenance:

with Leggatt, London, 1929.
Sir William Ewert Berry, 1st Viscount Camrose (1879-1954), Hackwood Park, Basingstoke, by whom bequeathed with Hackwood to his son
Sir John Seymour Berry, 2nd Viscount Camrose (1909-1995);
Christie's, London, 9 July 1999, lot 44.
Anonymous sale [The Property of a Gentleman], Sotheby's, London, 10 July 2003, lot 135;
Private Collection.

Literature:

Richard Haslam, 'Hackwood Park, Hampshire – II', in *Country Life*, December 17 1987, p.59, illustrated;

L. Krempel, *Nicolaes Maes*, Berlin 2000, p. 318, cat. no. A 181, reproduced plate 249.

Artist description:

Nicolaes was the son of the prosperous Dordrecht merchant Gerrit Maes and his wife Ida Herman

Claesdr. He learnt to draw from a ‘mediocre master’ (Houbraken) in his native town before he studied painting with Rembrandt in Amsterdam. His training in Rembrandt’s studio must have taken place between 1648/50 and 1653. By December 1653 Maes had settled in Dordrecht and made plans to marry, while a signed and dated picture of 1653 confirms that the 19-year-old artist had completed his training and embarked on an independent career. Maes continued to reside in Dordrecht until 1673.

Maes’s few pictures of biblical subjects and all his approximately 40 genre paintings date from c. 1653 to c. 1660. Though indebted to Rembrandt’s example, the early religious works exhibit a precocious originality in the interpretation of the sacred text and iconographic tradition. For instance, in the *Expulsion of Hagar* (1653; New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art) Hagar’s inconsolable response to her dismissal and the characterization of Ishmael as a prematurely embittered outcast mark it as one of the most poignant renderings of a theme that was especially popular among Rembrandt’s students. This and other biblical pictures are of cabinet size; *Christ Blessing the Children* (London, National Gallery) is Maes’s only religious work with lifesize figures.

For a brief period in the mid-1650s Maes ranked among the most innovative Dutch genre painters, owing to his talent for pictorial invention and for devising expressive poses, gestures and physiognomies. He adapted Rembrandt’s brushwork and chiaroscuro to the scenes of domestic life that provided the favourite subject-matter for genre artists working in the third quarter of the century. The poetic deployment of light and shade and the adeptly designed figures invest his paintings of interior scenes with women absorbed in household tasks with an atmosphere of studious concentration. In pictures of spinners, lacemakers (e.g. *The Lacemaker*, 1655; Ottawa, National Gallery) and mothers with children, dating from 1654 to 1658, household work assumes the dignity and probity claimed for it by contemporary authors of didactic literature on family life. Maes also executed a small group of works that show everyday events taking place on the doorstep of a private house. Some depict milkmaids ringing the doorbell or receiving payment for a pot of milk (e.g. London, Apsley House); others represent boys asking for alms from the residents. As in the interior scenes, Maes’s pictorial gifts transformed these mundane transactions into events of solemn dignity. Another type of genre painting from the mid-1650s shows a single, nearly lifesize female figure in half or three-quarter length. An elderly woman says grace before a modest meal, prays amid vanitas symbols or dozes over a Bible, exemplifying, respectively, spiritual vigour and spiritual lassitude in old age.

In many of his pictures, for example the *Woman Plucking a Duck* of 1655 or 1656 (Philadelphia, PA, Museum of Art), Maes developed an innovative approach to the representation of interior space. He was among the first Dutch genre painters to depict the domestic interior not as a shallow, three-walled box but as a suite of rooms. His new disposition of domestic space resulted primarily from the narrative requirements of these paintings. While he demonstrably perused perspective handbooks, he resorted neither to a mathematically constructed space nor—with one exception—to *trompe l’oeil* illusionism. Maes pursued his experiments for only a brief period (1655–7), but his achievement exercised a decisive influence on the Delft painters Johannes Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch and thus had lasting consequences for the representation of interior space in 17th-century Dutch painting.

While concentrating on his genre and history paintings, Maes embarked on a productive, 35-year career as a portrait painter. During the second half of the 1650s, when his output of subject pictures gradually diminished, his production of portraits steadily increased. Some 25 single, pendant and group portraits from the period 1655–60 have been preserved.

However, from c. 1660 until the end of his career, Maes worked exclusively as a portraitist. He settled in Amsterdam in 1673, making a bid to fill the vacancy left by the deaths of the portrait specialists Bartholomeus van der Helst and Abraham van den Tempel. Soon, wrote Houbraken, ‘so much work came his way that it was deemed a favour if one person was granted the opportunity to sit for his portrait before another, and so it remained for the rest of his life’. Hundreds of surviving portraits from the 1670s and 1680s corroborate Houbraken’s report. Most are pendants in one of two favourite formats: a smaller rectangular canvas with a half-length figure within a painted oval; and a larger canvas with a three-quarter-length figure, usually shown leaning against a fountain, rock or column. In both types, the setting is often a garden or terrace before a sunset sky. There are several group portraits of children or families, depicting the sitters full length in landscape settings, but only one corporate group, the *Six*

Governors of the Amsterdam Surgeons' Guild(1680–81; Amsterdam, Rijksmueum), is known. During his 40-year career, Maes's painting technique evolved continuously, but his exceptional skill with the brush never faltered. In the genre and history pictures of the prolific period 1653–5, his colour, chiaroscuro and brushwork owe a clear debt to Rembrandt's work of the mid-1640s, particularly to the latter's *Holy Family in the Carpenter's Shop* (1645; St Petersburg, Hermitage). Maes restricted his palette to blacks, browns, whites and reds and employed techniques ranging from a meticulous 'fine painting' style in the description of wooden furniture or a wicker cradle to a grainy—occasionally even pastose—application of richly graduated tones in the execution of fabric and flesh. After the middle of the decade, he increasingly favoured a clearer light, smoother textures and more definite contours.

Maes's mature style developed gradually during the 1660s in response to the Flemish mode of portraiture developed by van Dyck and introduced into the northern Netherlands in the previous decade by such artists as Govaert Flinck, Adriaen Hanneman and Jan Mijtens. From the early 1660s onwards, Maes regularly employed staging and accessories derived from Flemish portraiture. Although Houbraken reported that Maes once travelled to Antwerp, direct contact with Flemish painting contributed less to his development than his study of works by Mijtens, whose colouring and technique evidently inspired the glistening reds and blues and brilliant brushwork of his later paintings. Despite the general trend of his style, in some of his most sympathetic portraits of the 1660s Maes continued to utilize a plain background and a subdued palette (e.g. the *Portrait of a Widow*, 1667; Basle, Kunstmuseum).

The portraits of the 1670s and 1680s generally feature the same imaginary garden or architectural setting with a foreground composed of columns, fountains, terraces and billowing curtains, but they exhibit a novel repertory of graceful poses and refinements in technique and colouring. The pale, solidly modelled countenances preserve—according to Houbraken's reliable testimony—an accurate likeness of the sitter, but the brilliantly rendered hair and clothing increasingly dominate the image. Satiny fabrics in a broader and brighter range of reds, blues, oranges, golds and violets shimmer with dashing, scumbled highlights, while the elaborate curls of the period's long hairstyles are described with a breathtaking show of tonal painting in greys and browns (e.g. the *Portrait of a Young Man*; Munich, Alte Pinakothek).

About 160 drawings by Maes have survived, making him one of the few outstanding Dutch genre painters of his generation whose practice as a draughtsman can be partially reconstructed. For the compositional projects Maes used a variety of media: red chalk, pen and ink and combinations of chalk and wash or ink and wash. Most are cursory sketches, for example the study in pen and wash (Berlin, Kupferstichkab.) for *The Lacemaker* (1655; Ottawa, National Gallery). The figure studies also exhibit a wide variety of media and techniques. They range from spare contours delineated with the pen or brush to exquisitely refined studies in red chalk (e.g. another study, Rotterdam, Boymans–van Beuningen, for*The Lacemaker*) to broadly pictorial drawings executed in a combination of chalk, ink, wash and bodycolour.

While early collectors of Maes's subject pictures remain unidentified, the known sitters in his portraits attest that in this field Maes enjoyed from the outset the patronage of Dordrecht's political and mercantile élite. Jacob de Witt, whom he portrayed in 1657, was a member of the city's Old Council and the father of Grand Pensionary Johan de Witt, the political leader of the United Provinces. A contract of 1658 records that Maes acquired a house from Job Cuijter in exchange for a cash payment and the portrait of Cuijter with his family. In 1659 or 1660 Maes painted a portrait of Jacob Trip (The Hague, Mauritshuis), the first of several pendant portraits with Trip's wife Margaretha de Geer (both of whom were portrayed by Rembrandt about the same time). Among Holland's wealthiest families, the Trips and de Geers amassed fortunes from Swedish iron mines and the manufacture of armaments.

During his last years in Dordrecht and during his Amsterdam period, Maes continued to work for a varied clientele at the highest social levels, including the Utrecht University professor of theology Gijsbert Voet; the preacher Cornelis Trigland; Hieronymus van Beverningk, Treasurer-General of the United Provinces, diplomat and one time close confidant of Johan de Witt; the Amsterdam burgomaster Gerrit Hendriksz. Hooft and the Lieutenant-Admiral of Zeeland. A few of these portraits were reproduced in prints.

Collections

Maes is represented in the following collections: Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; Hermitage, St Petersburg; Metropolitan Museum of Arts, New York City; Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Kunsthistorisches, Vienna; Louvre, Paris; Mauritshuis Royal Picture Gallery, The Hague; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; National Gallery, London; Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, California; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; The Royal Collection, London; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; Bowes Museum, County Durham, UK; Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, England; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Centraal Museum Database, Utrecht, Netherlands; Columbia Museum of Art, South Carolina; Crocker Art Museum, California; Dordrechts Museum, Netherlands; Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, Finland; Harvard University Art Museums, Massachusetts; Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, University of Glasgow, Scotland; Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands; Musée des Augustins, Toulouse, France; Musée des Beaux-Arts de Bordeaux, France; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Ringling Museum of Art, Florida; Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.; The Wallace Collection, London; Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid; Timken Museum of Art, San Diego, California, amongst others.