

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



Juan Pantoja de la Cruz (Valladolid 1553 - Madrid 1608)

Portrait of a Lady of the Court of Philip III

oil on canvas

98.3 x 71.2 cm (38¾ x 28 in)

The sitter in *Portrait of a Lady of the Court of Philip III* is the archetypal image of aristocratic beauty of the sixteenth-century Spanish court, her pale skin offset by dark eyes and hair and the sombre black of her gown. Her face is framed by the rigid starched lace of her exquisitely detailed ruff and her wrists are adorned with strings of pearls.

The multiple gold rings on the lady's fingers match the costly ornaments that decorate her hair while her pearl droplet earrings are set in a coral floral motif. In her left hand she draws attention to the intricately wrought cross tied to a chain around her neck and in her right she demurely clasps a closed fan - a slight fleck of red paint on the tip hinting at a bright decoration concealed within. The sobriety of her thick black gown is tempered by decorative gold studs adorning the front panel of the dress, some set with a cabochon jewel and pearl edging. The cross and the fan are two powerful symbols that characterise the Spanish tradition of female portraiture: the cross demonstrating the strength of a fiercely Catholic nation and the fan denoting feminine mystique and elegance.

Courtiers were encouraged to dress modestly and moderately in the Spanish Hapsburg court where, 'a notoriously chill social decorum was de rigueur'.¹ The dress of the lady in question here closely adheres to Baldassare Castiglione's (1478-1529) suggestion in his *Book of the Courtier* (1528) that an ambitious courtier should adopt a 'grave and sober' mien, that he should dress, 'if not in black, then at least in some colour on the dark side.' Furthermore, Castiglione recognised the Spanish preference for reserve by stating that, 'our Courtier's dress will show that sobriety which the Spanish nation so much observes, since external things often bear witness to inner things.'²

Close observation of *Portrait of a Lady of the Court of Philip III* reveals a pendiment of a wider ruff suggesting Juan Pantoja de la Cruz had originally conceived of the painting with an extensive ruff - perhaps similar to the one worn in [Portrait of a Lady Wearing a Large Ruff](#) - but subsequently reduced it to its current size. These larger ruffs became particularly popular in the later sixteenth-century and were decorated with increasing amounts of lace.

Between 1600 and 1607 Pantoja painted sixty-six portraits of thirty-nine different members of the royal family as well as other members of the aristocracy. Although the identity of this woman is unknown, she is most likely a member of the extended royal family, the wife of a courtier of Phillip III (1578-1621) or a lady-in-waiting to his wife, Margaret of Austria (1584-1611).

As a pupil of Alonso Sánchez Coello (c.1531-1588), Pantoja would have been educated in the methodology of Spanish state portraiture first established by Antonius Mor van Dashorst (c.1519-1575). Mor's representations of the Spanish court combined monumental scale with meticulous, ornamental details, stiffness of posture, sombre coloration and neutral backgrounds. A Dutch émigré, Mor was the most successful court portraitist of his day working in all of the European courts. He had a great influence on the development of royal and aristocratic portraiture, particularly in Spain, where his ceremonious but austere style ideally suited the rigorous etiquette of the court.³

Portraiture completed during the long reign of Philip II (1527-1598) initially worked from Mor's example but became more 'Spanish' to reflect the religiosity and formality of the Hapsburg court. Coello was the pioneer of the great tradition of 'Spanish' portraiture and had studied with Mor in Flanders in 1550. His return to Spain on the recommendation of the widowed Infanta Juana (1479-1555), Regent of Spain, ensured his position as the principal court painter to Phillip II. Coello's style fused the objectivity of the Flemish tradition that he had learnt from Mor with the sensuality of Venetian painting, particularly seen in Titian's (c.1480/85-1576) work.

Pantoja trained and became *official* in the workshop of Coello and his style, with its restrained demeanour and close attention to pattern and detail, was influenced by that of his mentor. Indeed an earlier sale of the present work attributed it to Pantoja's master (see Provenance). Coello's [Portrait of the Infanta Catalina Michaela of Austria](#) is very closely comparable to *Portrait of a Lady of the Court of Philip III*. Both works show the aristocratic women caught in a rigid pose, their right hand holding an item of jewellery. The microscopic decorative details of their costume and jewellery is cleverly balanced by a preference for restrained colour in the rest of the composition. The paintings are simply conceived yet wonderfully rich in the tactile representation of materials - both fabric and metallic.

In 1587, Pantoja married a woman of substantial means and was able, after Coello's death, to set himself up as an independent painter. Pantoja painted the future Philip III in 1590 and again in 1598 on his accession to the throne, after which he was appointed the official portrait painter for the court. In addition to portraiture, Pantoja executed religious works, which in his later career took on a naturalist expressiveness influenced by Caravaggio's (1571-1610) circle, as well as still life paintings, miniatures and frescos.

Pantoja's [*Portrait of Diego de Villamayor*](#), originally part of the renowned collection of the Amsterdam banker William Coesvelt, and one of the first Spanish paintings to be acquired by the Hermitage, reveals the artist's preference for capturing his sitters' likenesses in a hieratic fashion, emphasising their status and authority. Like the noblewoman in the present portrait, de Villamayor is portrayed against a dark background, which serves to highlight the intricate detail of his magnificent suit of armour. His strong facial features are boldly delineated and emphasised by the heavy ruff around his neck.

Though Spanish portraiture in the seventeenth century adhered to a much more rigid interpretation of Italian Mannerism the finished works are undeniably beautiful. Moreover, the influence of the Italian High Renaissance is also often very apparent. Pantoja's treatment of faces, for example, exposes his study of Venetian portraiture, in particular that of Titian, as well as sharp psychological insights.⁴ If one compares the present work to Titian's [*Portrait of a Woman*](#) (c.1536) the connection is quite evident. This is partly in the almost identical pose of the two women but mostly in the sitters' expressive gazes which are simultaneously restrained whilst filled with personality, intensity and concealed emotion.

Portrait of a Lady of the Court of Philip III has enjoyed an exalted, international provenance over the years. It was possibly part of the collection at Thirlestaine House (now Cheltenham College) where John Rushout, 2nd Baron Northwick (1770-1859) developed a love of art from the diplomat and antiquarian Sir William Hamilton (1730-1803) and amassed a sizeable collection of Old Masters, miniatures, enamels and prints. Later, having possibly been in a Parisian collection, it was purchased in New York by the American entrepreneur and art patron, Thomas Barlow Walker (1840-1927) who, in 1927, established the Walker Art Centre - today considered one of the United States' preeminent museums of contemporary art. From the 1940s onwards, the collection began to focus solely on contemporary art leading to the sale of some of its earlier works (see Provenance). After public sale in 1971, the present work was purchased by the Spanish Ambassador to the United Nations, D. Jaime de Pinies.

¹ Moffitt, J. F., *The Arts in Spain*, (Thames and Hudson, London, 1999), pp. 102-103.

² Shortly after its publication, *Il libro del Cortegiano* was widely disseminated and translated into Spanish, German, French, and English; 108 editions were published between 1528 and 1616.

³ His best known work is perhaps a portrait of Mary Tudor (1516-1558), painted in London on her marriage to Phillip II in 1554, now in the Museo del Prado, Madrid.

⁴ Pantoja is known to have made direct copies of works by Titian; see, for example, *Charles V*, 1599, Escorial, Madrid.

Provenance:

Possibly Lord Northwick, Thirlestaine House, Cheltenham;

said to be in the collection of Comte A. de Ganay, Paris;
Edward Brandus, New York;
from whom purchased by T. B. Walker (as '*Portrait of Margaret of Parma* by Alonso Sanchez Coello');
The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, by January 1950;
their sale, New York, Parke-Bernet, 21 April 1971, lot 88, as '*School of Juan Pantoja de la Cruz*',
where acquired by D. Jaime de Pinies, Spanish Ambassador to the United Nations;
by descent to his son, the previous owner.

Literature:

R. Hilton (ed.), *Handbook of Hispanic Source Materials and Research Organisations in the United States*, Stanford 1956, p. 247 (as in the possession of the Walker Art Center);

J.A. Gaya Nuño, *La pintura española fuera de España*, Madrid 1958, p. 265, no. 2137.

Artist description:

Juan Pantoja de La Cruz was a Spanish painter, one of the best representatives of the Spanish School of court painters.

Very little is known of the formative years of Pantoja as a painter. He was a pupil of the court painter Alonso Sánchez Coello (1531/32-1588) in Madrid and he must have assisted him in complying with his duties as painter of the Spanish King Philip II (1527-1598). Pantoja probably continued to work in his master studio after completing his training. He married in 1585, beginning to paint for the court around that time. After Sánchez Coello's death, Pantoja took over his master workshop and became court painter to Philip II of Spain.

Pantoja kept working for the court and the nobility. After Philip II's death, Philip III (1578-1621) confirmed Pantoja's status as court painter. When the court settled in Valladolid in 1601, Pantoja moved to the new capital, remaining in this city several years.

Pantoja painted a great number of state portraits with the combined forces of his studio, his attendants, apprentices and collaborators. He was primarily a portrait painter to the royal family and to the higher aristocracy. Pantoja also painted religious works, primarily commissioned by the Spanish Queen Margarita of Austria (1584-1611), wife of Philip III. Pantoja painted still lifes as well but, like his ceiling frescoes, these have not survived.

Juan Pantoja de La Cruz represents one of the highest points in the Mannerism aesthetic of portrait painting. He followed the Spanish tradition of royal portraits, initiated with the famous portrait of Charles V (1500-1558) by Titian (c.1493/1490-1576). His art was severely criticised by historians who were prejudiced against non-Italian portraiture, and therefore dismissed him as an "uninspired, dull" though "painfully hard-working" painter at the court of Philip III.

In his best works, Pantoja introduced an impressive combination of sophistication and geometric abstraction achieved by means of powerful contrast of light and shadow. His portraits are noted for the meticulous detail of representing the intricate embroidery of dresses and jewellery designs. The subject is usually portrayed standing against a dark background. the face and hands are depicted with a more flat and subtle technique.

Pantoja was also a highly versatile painter at home in all genres. He supplied the Spanish court and the aristocracy with religious paintings, mythological canvases and historical compositions, pantoja's religious paintings are executed with a more realistic and dramatic style than his portraits. they range from a coldly distant academism to a more advanced tenebrism close to the Baroque.

Juan Pantoja de La Cruz was held in high esteem as a animal painter. He was also known as a landscape and still life painter who exploited the new secularized art forms that spread across Europe at the close of the sixteenth century.

Pantoja returned with the court to Madrid and died there on 26 October 1608.

