SPHINX FINE ART



Anglo-Netherlandish School Mid-Sixteenth Century

Portrait of a Gentleman, traditionally said to be Edward Seymour, 1st Duke of Somerset (c.1500-1552)

oil on panel
45.7 x 38 cm (18 x 15 in)

This is a portrait which depicts its subjectas a man of significant means and great importance. Its simple composition ensures attention is focused on the luxurious costume and thus emphasises the sitter's affluence. Elements such as the silk black work on his shirt, the large ring, or the gold aglets on his bonnet, all reflect his wealth. Similarly his gown, in view of the quantity and quality of its fur, marks the sitter down as someone of high status. The sitter also draws attention to his chain, which is unusually decorative, and a further sign of his prosperity.[1]

This painting has a particularly noteworthy provenance, having once been part of William Beckford's famed collection, and it was later sold in the celebrated Hamilton Palace sale. Beckford was one of the most famous art collectors in early nineteenth-century England, having inherited a vast fortune and the Fonthill Estate in Wiltshire at the age of nine. Described by contemporaries as 'the richest commoner in England', between 1796 and 1813 he built Fonthill Abbey, a vast Gothic revival country house, which housed his ever burgeoning collection of art, antiques and books. However, the extravagance of Beckford's building projects and collecting habits, combined with the collapse of sugar prices on which much of his wealth was based, forced him to put Fonthill and its contents up for auction in 1822. It is slightly unclear whether our painting was part of Beckford's collection at this point, but if it was it was withdrawn along with a small group of his most prized works.[2] The painting was certainly part of the Beckford's new collection in Bath,[3] and is recorded as being hung in the Scarlet Room of his house at

Lansdown Crescent (fig. 2).[4]

After Beckford's death in 1844, his daughter Susan Euphemia, Duchess of Hamilton (1786-1859) inherited Lansdown and its contents. She eventually sold Lansdown and much of the contents, but not before she had removed some the greatest works, including the present painting, for the Hamilton collection. The work remained in the ducal collection until 1882, when it was part of the famous sale of Hamilton Palace's contents. The scale and scope of the artistic treasures offered in Hamilton Palace sale hadn't been seen in a generation, and the present work was bought by a dealer on behalf of Sir James William Carlile (1823-1909), a businessman in whos family the painting stayed until the 1990s.

The subject of the present work has traditionally been identified as Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset (c. 1500 – 1552). Seymour was one of the dominant figures in the court of Henry VIII, and his younger sister, Jane Seymour became Henry's third wife. After the Henry's death in 1547, Seymour's nephew became Edward VI. However, as the new king was only nine years old, Seymour was appointed Lord Protector of the Realm, to govern on Edward's behalf until he became old enough to do so himself. However, Seymour was to prove a poor ruler, and in 1550 he fell from power, and was eventually executed in 1552. Sadly it is impossible to say with any certainty whether our portrait really does depict Seymour. Roy Strong has written that the only certain portrait of Seymour is a miniature by Nicholas Hilliard (collection of the Duke of Bucceleuch and Queensbury), on the basis of which also he also identifies a portrait at Longleat.[5] Given that it was thought that the sitter was Seymour, it is unsurprising that Beckford, and then the Duchess of Hamilton, ensured that our portrait remained in the family collections whilst so many other works were sold. Beckford was a descendant of Seymour, and the decoration of Fonthill reflected the fact that his ancestry was a source of pride for him.[6] Whatever his identity, the portrait unambiguously depicts a figure of great wealth and importance.

The artist of the present work remains elusive, but it does reflect the influence that visiting artists had on English painting in the sixteenth century. During this period many craftsmen, including painters, travelled from the Continent, and in particular the Netherlands, to work in England. The painters mainly worked in the genre of portraiture, and inevitably the stylistic influence of visitors such as Antonis Mor, Hans Eworth and Steven van der Meulen (to whom our painting has previously been attributed), was gradually absorbed by native artists. Unfortunately little is known about many of these artists, although in recent years scholars have started to examine this period in greater detail.

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[1] We are grateful to Professor Mary Haywood for sharing her thoughts on the sitter's costume.
[2] Although the present work was certainly owned by Beckford, as it appears in his posthumous inventory of 1844, it is unclear when exactly he acquired the painting, and whether lot 11 of the 1822 sale relates to our portrait or instead is a painting today in the Wallace Collection (inv. no. P532).
[3] The 1822 auction was cancelled, when the contents were instead sold en masse to John Farquhar (1751-1826), with Beckford retaining a few select works. Farquhar re-auctioned Fonthill and its contents the following year, but there was no portrait of the Duke of Somerset listed in the 1823 catalogue, suggesting Beckford retained the work for his collection. Additionally the catalogue for the Hamilton Palace sale in 1882 specifically states that the present work came 'From Fonthill', whereas other works are described more generally as 'From the Beckford Collection'.
However, the Wallace Collection's picture closely matches the 1822 description, and particularly compelling is the added inscription reading 'M. LE COMTE DE HERTFORD'. This tallies Christie's cataloguing in the 1822 sale, when they used the French version of one of Edward Seymour's titles. We are grateful to Dr Hayley Flynn of The Wallace Collection for her assistance in researching the provenance of the present work.
[3] For a full discussion of the development of Beckford's collection, see Tuohy, T., 'William Beckfords three picture collections: Idiosyncrasy and innovation' in *The British Art Journal,* vol. 2. No. 1 (Autumn 2000), pp. 49-53.
[4] *Inventory of Beckford's property at 19 and 20 Lansdown Crescent, Lansdown Tower and Lansdown Farm,* 1844 (Edward English & Son, Bath, and Robert Hume) p.13.
[5] Strong, R., *Tudor & Jacobean Portraits* (London, National Portrait Gallery, 1969), p. 295.

[6] Rutter, J., *Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey* (J. Rutter, Shaftesbury, 1823), pp. 37-38.

Provenance:

William Beckford (1760-1844);
possibly his sale, Fonthill Abbey, October 2, 1822, lot 11 (as Holbein), withdrawn;
kept by Beckford and hung in the Scarlet Room, 19-20 Lansdown Crescent, Bath;
by descent to his daughter Susan Euphemia, Duchess of Hamilton (1786-1859);
by descent to her son William, 11th Duke of Hamilton (1811-1863);
by descent to William Douglas-Hamilton, 12th Duke of Hamilton (1845-1895);
his sale, Christie's, Hamilton Palace, June 17, 1882, lot 8 (as Holbein);
where purchased by the dealer E.F.White on behalf of Sir James William Carlile (1823-1909),
Ponsbourne Park, Hertfordshire
by descent to his daughter, Alice Woodhams Gregg (1852-1918), Temple Grafton Court, Warwickshire;
by descent to her granddaughter, Noelle Sandwith (1927 – 2006);
sale, Phillips, 18 June, 1996, lot 21 (as attributed to Steven van der Meulen).

Literature:

Possibly, John Rutter, *A Description of Fonthill Abbey* (J. Rutter, Shaftesbury, 1822), p.40;
Inventory of Beckford's property at 19 and 20 Lansdown Crescent, Lansdown Tower and Lansdown Farm, 1844 (Edward English & Son, Bath, and Robert Hume) p.13;
History of the Carlile Family (Paisley Branch) by Some of its Members (Warren & Son, Winchester, 1909), p.45.