

HENRI GASCARS

(Paris 1635 - Rome 1701)

Portrait of a Lady, Seated Three-Quarter-Length, in a White and Gold Gown with a Blue Robe, a Garden Beyond

oil on canvas
in a painted oval
95.9 x 129.9 cm (37¾ x 51½ in)

Exhibited: New York, Wildenstein, *A loan exhibition of fashion in headdress, 1450-1943*, 25 April-27 May 1943, no. 33.

Literature: L. Nikolenko, *Pierre Mignard: The Portrait Painter of the Grand Siècle*, Munich, 1982, p. 104, no. 5, as 'possibly by Henri Gascars'.

THIS ELEGANT AND SENSUAL PORTRAIT BY HENRI Gascars can be compared to a highly similar example by Gascars of The Duchess of Portsmouth and Aubigny, held in a private collection. The sitter's relaxed pose within a feigned oval, reclining on one arm and gazing dreamily at the viewer, and informal and revealing gown, give the portrait a marked intimacy. Such displays of graceful feminine languor and negligent undress were highly fashionable in the English Restoration court and Gascars excels in appealing to his audience's voyeuristic inclinations. The opulence and refinement of the drapery, which is as integral to the image as the delicate modelling of the sitter's features, can be attributed to Gascars' Parisian training. A seventeenth-century critic described his portraits as 'made up with Embroidery, fine cloaths, lac'd drapery, and a great Variety of Trumpery, Ornaments',¹ which were clearly then, as now, the hallmarks of Gascars' success as a portraitist.



Henri Gascars, *Portrait of a Lady with her Dog*, Private Collection (Figure 1)

The style and format of the present work has distinct parallels with Gascars' *Portrait of a Lady with her Dog* (fig. 1). Both women display the requisite curled locks of hair bound with ropes of pearls as well as pearl earrings and necklaces. Their shifts are conspicuously visible under luxurious robes and drapery, arranged in a voluptuous and titillating manner, and they are identically posed in front of lustrous red tasselled curtains, which are parted to reveal classically inspired landscapes.

Gascars is thought to have been the son of Pierre Gascar, an obscure Parisian painter and sculptor. He travelled to Rome in 1659 and was back in Paris by 1667, although he may have spent time in the Netherlands in the same year. In 1672, Gascars' *morceau de reception*, a portrait of Louis de Bourbon, the Grand Dauphin, was rejected by the Académie Royale, and two years later Gascars departed for England where he was better received. He worked at the Restoration court and found particular favour with Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth and mistress to Charles II.² Gascars' portraiture reveals the influences of his contemporaries at court, particularly that of Sir Peter Lely (1618-1680), from whom he adopted the use of repeated poses for convenience. Catherine Macleod writes, 'At a time when Lely's own production was becoming even more repetitive, Gascars briefly threatened his dominance with the combination of a fashionable and powerful patron and French stylistic elements that must have had the glamour of novelty in the eyes of the court'.³ Gascars returned to Paris in 1679, where he was received as a member of the Académie Royale the following year with portraits of Louis Elle the Elder and Pierre de Sève the Younger (both in the Château de Versailles). In 1681 he travelled again to Italy, visiting Modena and Venice and eventually settling in Rome. Gascars' *oeuvre* is best known by the large number of engravings made after his portraits.

We are grateful to Dr. Julia Marciari-Alexander for confirming the attribution to Gascars on the basis of photographs.

¹ Bainbridge Buckridge, 'An Essay towards an English School of Painters' in R. De Piles, *The Art of Painting and the Lives of the Painters*, London, 1706, p.421.

² A portrait of a woman, similar to the present work, and presumed to be Louise de Kéroualle, formerly in the collection of William Randolph Hearst appeared at Sotheby's, New York, 18 June 1974, lot 126, as 'circle of Willm Wissing.'

³ Macleod, C., "Good, but not Like": Peter Lely, Portrait Practice and the Creation of a Court Look' in Macleod and Julia Marciari Alexander, *Painted Ladies: Women at the Court of Charles II*, National Portrait Gallery, London, 2001, p.59.

