An Antiquarian Depicted. The Visual Reception of Georg Zoëga

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The paradox of being forgotten is that one must first be remembered. What is not in some way or another remembered will not be forgotten. In this chapter, I will discuss the visual reception of Zoëga. The portrait as a genre is documentation and remembrance, but also interpretation. Although we may have a tendency to focus on those images that come closest to an actual representation of a self-fashioning Zoëga, the posthumous portrait is equally important—if indeed we are concerned with precisely how Zoëga has been remembered. Together these images draw a meandering line of the shifting perceptions of Georg Zoëga, spanning almost a century and a half.

In an article from 1904 about portraits of Zoëga, the Danish man of letters Frederik R. Friis suggested that renderings of Zoëga had perhaps once been more numerous. To Friis, Zoëga’s high scholarly standing and his many artist acquaintances stood in strange contrast to the very few known portraits of him. This presumption perhaps owes more to what characterized the culture of late eighteenth-century Rome, than to anything biographical. At least it speaks against what Øjvind Andreasen has remarked about Zoëga, namely that he disliked being portrayed. Friis’s remark is interesting however as it suggests a visual absence—that something about the person Zoëga is missing or wanting.

The artistic portrayals of Zoëga discussed here fall into three groups: contemporary portraits, posthumous renderings and finally portraits later identified as depictions of Zoëga. This paper owes part of its inspiration to Janet Browne’s study on depictions of Charles Darwin, where she discusses the role

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1 Victoria Gordon Friis, ARCA, kindly revised and improved the English draft.
4 For images not discussed here see: Dansk Biografisk Leksikon, XVI, (København: Gyldendal, 1984), 162.
of images in the construction of an individual’s “scientific reputation” and in the “making of renown”.5

Contemporary Portraits

The earliest known depiction of Zoëga—at the age of about 30—is a painting in profile by the Danish artist Johan Herman Cabott (1754–1814).6 In a letter from 1786, Zoëga mentions sitting for Cabott, and he remarks that the artist was a gifted portrait painter.7 Despite the fact that this portrait is perhaps the most true-to-life painting of Zoëga, it has never been widely known or reproduced.8

The painting is one of 22 portraits of members of the Accademia Volsca, a learned society founded by Cardinal Borgia in 1765, modelled on the Accademia Etrusca in Cortona.9 Several Danes were counted among its members. The portraits originally formed part of the library of Cardinal Borgia and are now the property of Congregazione per l’Evangelizzazione dei Popoli in Rome.10

The Accademia Volsca paintings are all designed in a similar fashion. The sitter is shown with only the head and shoulders visible. The shape of the paintings is that of a medallion. This type of collective portraiture draws on formats and traditions already established in antiquity. As a genre, such series of portraits (mostly of illustrious men) touch on two important elements in connection with remembrance: namely selection and connectedness. The emphasis of the portrait is not its subject alone but also on the subject’s inclusion in a particular commemorative context, in this case Zoëga in the role as a Borgia protégée.

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7 Dated 3.11.1786. Ø. Andreasen, K. Ascani (hrsg.), *Georg Zoëga. Briefe und Dokumente*, 11, (Kopenhagen: Gesellschaft für dänische Sprache und Literatur, 2013), 131, n. 313. The painting is dated 1787 and the letter also indicates that Zoëga had not yet seen the finished result.
8 The portrait adorns the recently published volumes of Andreasen, Ascani, *Georg Zoëga*.
10 Inv. n. PF 365.