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RHETORIC AND AUTHENTICITY IN THE PORTRAITS OF KING CHRISTIAN IV OF DENMARK

Summary

This article attempts to interpret a representative selection of royal portraits — mainly those painted by Karel van Mander III — from the point of view of Baroque rhetoric, thereby considering the stages of artistic production as well as the portrait’s function in Danish diplomacy during the difficult years of the 1640’s.

For Reiner Haussherr
in honor of his 65th Birthday

On his embassy to Spain in 1640, Hannibal Sehested, counselor to the realm and the king’s future son-in-law, unveiled a large portrait of Christian IV in his reception room in Madrid. The portrait seems to have been given a prominent place, adorned as it was with a heavy golden frame, silk fringes and ribbons.¹

The politically delicate negotiations between the Catholic great power Spain and Protestant Denmark at the eve of the peace conference at Münster and Osnabrück thus took place under the watchful eye of the king, present in effigie. This seems to have been the first time the Kingdom of Denmark was represented at such an occasion by the king’s portrait and not by his coat of arms. Such a novelty certainly indicates a change with regard to the idea of royal power. At the same time, however, it demonstrates the importance and prestige portraiture had acquired in Denmark by the 1640’s. This probably was due largely to the activity of two Netherlandish artists

attached to the Danish court from the 1630’s onward: Abraham Wuchters (1608-82) and Karel van Mander (III) (ca. 1610-79). These two artists raised portrait painting to a level it had previously reached only rarely in Denmark. It is probably not anachronistic to presume that few, if any, portraits of earlier Danish kings had possessed, even in the eyes of their contemporaries, the expressive qualities necessary for serving a function like the one described here.

During the second part of the 17th century it evidently became the rule all over Europe to use royal portraits instead of, or complementary to, coats of arms in diplomatic missions. Julius Bernhard von Rohr, in his Einleitung zur Ceremonialwissenschaft der großen Herren ..., first published in 1728 but also reflecting earlier customs, states that ambassadors

Ihre Zimmer, insonderheit die Audienz- und Parade-Zimmer … auf das properste ausmeublieren (lassen). In den Audienzzimmern sichten man mehrentheils das Portrait ihres Durchlauchigsten Committentens in Lebens-Größe, und über denselben einen Baldachin von Sammet oder Drap d’Or. Vor dieses Bild muß ein jeder Respect haben, und darf man ihn nicht leichtlich den Rücken zukehren …

We do not know if Christian’s portrait claimed the same respect in Madrid in 1640, however it is certainly possible that his portrait was honored in such fashion.

The situation described by Rohr suggests a connection between the portrait and beholder comparable to the one between living persons. From this point of view, the idea that the portrait could be imagined to be addressing the beholder was only logical. To Rogier de Piles, the leading French art critic around 1700, this was even a criterion of quality in portraiture. In his Cours de Peinture par Principes (1708) he writes: “Enfin il faut que dans ces sortes d’attitudes les portrait semblent nous parler d’eux memes, et nous dire, par example: tiens, regarde-moi, je suis ce Roi invincible environné

\footnote{See note 1, Eller, pp. 105 ff.}

\footnote{Julius Bernhard von Rohr: Einleitung zur Ceremonielwissenschaft der großen Herren. 2nd ed. Berlin 1733. Rpt. and Introduction Monika Schlechte. Weinheim 1990, p. 395. In 1676 on his embassy to the Netherlands Just Høg had the king’s portrait as ostentatiously installed as described by Rohr; see also note 1, Eller, p. 148, n. 50.}