The Portraits of Jan Sanders van Hemessen

One of the pleasant surprises of the great show of Flemish sixteenth century painting held at Brussels in 1963 was a highly polished portrait of a young gentleman posed in an airy mountainous landscape (Fig. 1). A treasure of the collection of the Earl of Warwick, it had been spotted by Paul Philippot as the work of Jan Sanders van Hemessen, an important artist of the Italianate generation at Antwerp during the period following the death of Quentin Massys in 1530. Though highly attractive, the attribution has not since received much discussion. A further look at the portrait is definitely merited, both because of its obviously fine quality and also considering the dearth of knowledge about just what constitutes Hemessen’s portraiture. Van Hemessen is known as a creative and original master of genre-like moralities and impassioned religious pictures, but up to now his contribution to the art of the portrait has been almost entirely neglected, chiefly because of a lack of evidence. If the Warwick panel may be called his, as appears likely, then our estimation of his role in this flourishing area of Netherlandish Mannerism might need some revising.

Fresh with a lucid impression of fashionable Italian portrait style, particularly the exquisite young men of Angelo Bronzino, the Warwick Castle Portrait of a Young Man emerges as an accomplished product of a cosmopolitan Antwerp master of the 1540's, the decade to which it ostensibly belongs. Though largely reminiscent of Bronzino in the smooth, placid features and even in details like the precise notation of the nubby pile of fabric along the silhouette of the cloak, the figure has none of the proud self-assurance of the Florentine but reflects the sober disquiet of the Reformation troubled Netherlands. The pale hands with their twisted, involuted fingers are undeniably Flemish, revealing an emulation of the courtly gestures of the portrait subjects of Jan Gossaert. The idea of placing the sitter in front of a tall mountain perhaps also finds its source in northern art, in the marvelous alpine portraits of the Swabian painter Wolf Huber and their Netherlandish derivatives. But the diffused, atmospheric treatment of the mountainscape again seems remarkably Italianate, and may possibly

1. Catalogue, Le Siècle de Bruegel, Brussels 1963, 113, Cat. No. 134. The subject holds a slip of paper with the inscription, ‘AETATIS SUAE 24’, and the motto, ‘FORTUNE LE VEULT’. Dielitz assigns the motto to several families, including the DuBois and Sersanders. (J. Dielitz, Die Wahl- und Denksprüche, Frankfurt 1884, 114). The sitter may be a member of the DuBois family of Antwerp (or Boschaert) or of the prominent Sersanders family of Ghent. For these, see Biographie Nationale de Belgique, VI, Brussels 1878, 188-89, and XXII, Brussels 1914–20, 280-84.

2. Some pertinent comments on Hemessen’s portraits may be found in L. Baldass, ‘Bildnisse des Niederländischen Romanismus’, Städels-Jahrbuch, VI, 1930, 87-90.

3. See the remarks of Gert von der Osten, ‘„Paracelsus“—Ein Verlorenes Bildnis von Wolf Huber?’, Walfr-Richartz-Jahrbuch, XXX, 1968, 201-14. The author is indebted for this reference to Dr. Colin Eisler, who provided valuable assistance in the preparation of this article. Thanks also go for help and encouragement to the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres and to the owner of the Hemessen portrait illustrated in fig. 10, who prefers to remain anonymous. Further contributions were made by Professor Robert A. Koch, Professor Charles Sterling, Dr. Italo Faldi, Dr. Ernst Brochhagen, the late Georges Martier and the portraitist Timothy Wilkins.