EARLY MODERN FACES
EUROPEAN PORTRAITS 1480–1780

NEWCOMB ART GALLERY
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1. Francisco de Zurbarán (1598–1664)

Veil of Saint Veronica, c. 1630

Oil on canvas, 107.3 x 79.4 cm (42¼ x 31¼ in)

Condition: good


Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation 1980.9

This work is one exquisite example among more than a dozen Veronica veils that the Spanish artist Francisco de Zurbarán painted during his lifetime. Sometimes referred to as a “divine trompe-l’oeil,” the painting approaches the representation of a holy likeness through the use of illusionistic techniques (Caturla 1965, 203). A cloth appears to hang in mid-air, suspended by strings, while tacks secure the central folds. Delicate traces of red paint conjure Christ’s face, suggesting a coalescing apparition. He turns towards the viewer in three-quarter view, as if catching our glance in a passing moment. Zurbarán thus stages an interactive viewing experience of seeing and being seen, positioning the viewer as a spectator of Christ’s suffering.

The legend of Veronica, recorded in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, memorialized an event from the Passion when, on the way to Golgotha, Christ wiped his face on a woman’s veil, miraculously leaving an imprint on the fabric. Later, the woman’s name was reconfigured as the derivation of the term for vero eikon or “true icon.” Though this legend was widely accepted as the Veronica image’s origin, the idea of a true portrait of Christ can be traced back earlier to the first purported representation, the Mandylion of Edessa, said to have been done in Christ’s own lifetime. Purloined from Constantinople in the twelfth century, it was brought to the West, where it disappeared. The renowned Veronica veil in the papal collections would emerge in its place as the officially-sanctioned true portrait of the Savior. The link between the western Church and the Veronica veil was secured when it was elevated as a cult image to coincide with the adoption of transubstantiation as Church dogma. Though the Vatican restricted access to the original, copies of the image spread throughout Europe in engravings, paintings, and illustrated psalters, as if echoing the unbounded capacity of the divine body to reproduce itself in the Mass. It was also included as one of the instruments of Christ’s Passion (arma Christi) (see cat. 2).

The Veronica veil embodies the dialectical tension between relics (miraculous physical remnants) and portraits (deliberate representations of a likeness). As a contact relic, the original veil was understood as an acheiropite, or image not made by human hands. Envisioned as a true portrait, it became closely associated with the idea of Incarnation, which insisted on Christ’s dual nature as the divine made human. The image spurred heated debates about the function of representative art. At stake was the belief that neither relics nor images were appropriate objects of worship, an argument long supported by Judaic tradition as well as by Pauline theology. Supporters of images contended that imprints like the Veronica veil could serve as physical evidence of Christ’s lived humanity, and as evidence that He wanted his followers to recognize and remember Him in hopes of a future coming. Moreover, if images could inspire devotion, art could promote Christ’s teachings among the illiterate masses and non-believers. The use of images like the Veronica veil to inspire correct piety was reaffirmed at the last session of the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century following the Protestant rejection of holy images.

In response to the Tridentine resolutions, Zurbarán and his contemporaries developed a novel artistic idiom to express sincere dedication to Christ. In the Veronica veil, Zurbarán envisioned a portrait of a suffering, human Christ in whom the viewer might see himself or herself reflected. Placed on an altar or in a private space of worship, this work could inspire contemplation of His sacrificial act and its power of salvation, or even induce a visionary experience.

The Blaffer painting demonstrates a technical mastery and creative re-imagining of the subject. Zurbarán’s adaptation differs significantly from earlier interpretations, which render Christ’s face frontally. The lifelike portrait serves not only to enhance the illusory quality of the subject, but also to announce Zurbarán’s ability as an artist well-versed in draftsmanship and representation. He synthesizes elements of the original relic and the conventions of portraiture, reasserting the value of artistic agency. The original Veronica imprint, after all, required no artist, thus relegating representative art to a lower position than its miraculous counterpart. In response to this dilemma, Zurbarán used red pigments to echo Christ’s bodily fluids—blood and sweat—thereby subordinating the physical remnants of the relic to his own artistry. In so doing, Zurbarán inserted himself into the work as the interpreter of Christ’s image. Finally, the artist referred to his trade in the draped cloth which appears almost like an unstretched canvas. Bringing the focus to the “image within the image,” he effectively abandoned the actual canvas, invoking instead a miraculous vision that transcends the two-dimensional strictures of the picture plane.

——S. W.

Beling 1994, 1998

Caturla 1963

Clifton, Nirenberg and Neagly 1997

Delenda 2009

Kessler and Wolf 1998

Stoichita 1995
10. Ferdinand Bol (1618–1680)
Portrait of a Gentleman, possibly Sir John Hebdon, 1659
Oil on canvas, 133.7 x 106.4 cm (52 5/8 x 41 7/8 in)

Signed and dated lower right: FBol fecit Ao 1659
Condition: good
Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation 1977.5

Until the 1950s, it was assumed that the sitter in this portrait was a long-forgotten and unremarkable Dutch gentleman. The issue was complicated, however, by the existence of five identical bust-length copies of the portrait, all attributed to the Dutch artist Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680), whose signature is found on the Blaffer work and on three other versions. In the early 1950s, when one version was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London, the sitter was identified as Sir John Hebdon (1612–1670). The British agent of Tsar Alexis I of Russia (1629–1676), Hebdon was anything but ordinary. His appearance in a Dutch painting attests to the trans-national networks that were then forming between Restoration England, the trade capital of Amsterdam, and the burgeoning imperial power of Alexis I’s Russia.

Hebdon was a peripatetic merchant, ambassador, and sometime-spy, acquiring anything and everything for the demanding tsar, from exotic songbirds and soldiers to physicians, alchemists, actors, and state secrets. In 1652 he was even responsible for discovering the whereabouts of a pretender to the Russian throne (Hebden 2003, 5). After capturing the offender, Hebdon returned him to Russia, a feat which must surely have pleased Alexis. As the tsar’s most prominent emissary, Hebdon was dispatched on missions to repair relations with the English king, Charles II, following the Restoration, to Venice to establish trade, to Amsterdam, repeatedly, to acquire luxury goods, and to other far-flung regions of Europe.

In 1659 Hebdon received a Grant of Arms (the right to heraldry, restricted in England to the aristocracy) for thirty-five years of service as a liaison to the Russian empire, an event which likely prompted the creation of this portrait. Documentation confirms his presence in Amsterdam in that year, when he must have engaged Ferdinand Bol to memorialize his newly acquired noble status. Bol was one of Rembrandt’s foremost students, and had already established his reputation as a skilled portraitist. He would have been an attractive choice for this illustrious client.

The beautiful mess of papers on the small table in the lower right may be Hebdon’s Grant of Arms, or perhaps official documents issued from the tsar himself. One clue suggests the latter. On the particularly ornate stationery, a motif emerges from the loose brushwork. The blurry form appears to be a double-headed eagle, the symbol of the Russian empire. This extraordinary detail is also a reason to assert the identity of the sitter as Hebdon (Neumeister and Krempel 48).

The existence of the five other versions also speaks to the sitter’s cross-cultural activities. In an effort to concretize his diplomatic relations, Hebdon may have commissioned the additional copies of this larger original, sending them to his various trade partners abroad. Doing so would have helped to ensure positive relations with associates, his portrait functioning as a sort of business card or token of commercial and diplomatic friendship and obligation.

Such portraits depicted power through culturally-coded gesture. Note the commanding placement of Hebdon’s right arm on his hip. This posture is the body language of self-possession and authority, adopted from military poses found in early modern portraits (Spicer 86, 90). The emphasis on Hebdon’s jowly face, pockmarked cheeks, flat eyes, and large hands also conveys his age, wisdom, and experience. Depicting his subject in an understated black overcoat and the unadorned fallen collar typical of the 1650s, Bol draws attention to Hebdon’s imperious expression and the remarkable manner in which he presides over the disorderly pile of official correspondence.

Ferdinand Bol was the son of a well-to-do Dordrecht physician. He moved to Amsterdam, and apprenticed with Rembrandt from 1636 until 1642. Rembrandt certainly influenced his pupil’s propensity for subdued scenes and dynamic lighting. Bol’s portraits after 1650 reveal a taste for interior settings as well as a more fully-developed personal style, evident in this portrait. The emphasis on the eyes, hands, and mouth as the vehicles of expression is a hallmark of Bol’s mature work. Highlighting Hebdon’s temperament and individuality in this manner, Bol lends his subject a visual presence striking in its economy of form and color. —S.W.

Blankert 1982
Hebden 2003
Liedtke 1995
Longworth 1984
Neumeister and Krempel 2005
Spicer 1991

Fig. 14. Detail of the stationery with the Russian imperial double-headed eagle.