

PAUL VAN SOMER

(Antwerp c.1576 - London 1621)

Portrait of a Gentleman, Three-Quarter-Length, in a Black Doublet with a Medallion on a Gold Chain, a Sword in his Left Hand, a Letter in his Right

inscribed and dated 'AETATIS. SUAE 39. ANNO. 1.60.6.' (upper right)
oil on canvas
99.7 x 73.7 cm (39¼ x 29 in)

Provenance: Anonymous sale, Christie's, London, 20 December 1906, Lot 157 (6 gns. to Gurney); anonymous sale, Sotheby's, London, 18 October 1995, Lot 51.

THE BULKY FRAME OF THE GENTLEMAN DEPICTED in Paul van Somer's portrait is positioned squarely in the centre of the canvas, giving him a proud and defiant air that suits his stern facial expression. One of his hands is pushed to the forefront of the composition holding a letter and the other prominently displays a sword, indicating his strength and valour. The man's status and authority is confirmed by the three loops of heavy gold chain hanging from his neck holding a medallion with the profile portrait of Archduke Matthias of Austria (1557-1619), who reigned as King of Hungary from 1608 to 1619, King of Bohemia from 1611 to 1617 and as Holy Roman Emperor from 1612 to 1619. The bestowing of Matthias' favour on the present sitter was clearly an event worth commemorating in a portrait; particularly notable as the work is dated 1606, the date of the Peace of Vienna between Archduke Matthias and István Bocskai, Prince of Transylvania.

Portrait of a Gentleman, Three-Quarter-Length, in a Black Doublet with a Medallion on a Gold Chain, a Sword in his Left Hand, a Letter in his Right, adheres to a conventional format particularly in the sitter's hieratic pose against a plain dark background, with the coat of arms of the Ströling family in the upper left and an inscription in the right. The gentleman's stance is rigid; his face, however, is painted in a naturalistic style, breathing life into the portrait and offering the viewer a sense of the sitter's character. The details of the gentleman's lace collar and cuffs, pinked and patterned doublet sleeves and decorative sword scabbard are especially finely rendered.

Van Somer's talent for depicting character as well as intricacies of costume is similarly reflected in his portrait of *Lady Elizabeth Grey, Countess of Kent*, in the Tate Gallery, London (fig. 1). The portrait dates to c.1619 and van Somer's style has evolved slightly from the present picture, allowing for a more relaxed image, greater background detail and three-dimensionality. The parallels are still apparent however, as Lady Grey is depicted three-quarter-length, like the gentleman in the present portrait, and like him has one hand resting on a table while the other holds a fan, an attribute of femininity and gentility, just as the sword is of masculinity. Although Lady Grey's clothing is predominately black as in the present painting, the sartorial detail captured by van Somer, is luxurious and fine. While at the English court, van Somer's work, such as *Lady Elizabeth Grey, Countess of Kent*, shows stylistic links with that of Robert Peake (c.1551-1619) and Marcus Gheeraerts II (1561-1635/6), although it was grounded in the more prosaic style of early seventeenth-century Antwerp painting.

Van Somer received his initial training in Antwerp and may have been a pupil of the Flemish painter Philip Lisaert (fl.1530-1588) who taught his older brother Berneart van Somer (before 1575-1612). After travelling extensively through Europe, van Somer is thought to have arrived in England c.1616. At this time, Henry, Prince of Wales, was a great patron of the arts and together with his mother, Anne of Denmark, arbitrated taste and helped to redefine the early seventeenth-century artistic sense. Van Somer rapidly became a favourite artist of Queen Anne and possibly even her official painter. After his death, van Somer's wife continued to receive substantial payment from the court for his work. Van Somer's success in establishing royal patronage may have paved the way for his fellow countrymen such as Sir Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641) to achieve such prominence in the English court in succeeding generations.



Paul van Somer,
Lady Elizabeth Grey, Countess of Kent,
c.1619,
Tate Gallery,
London
(Figure 1)

ÆTATIS. SVÆ 39
ANNO. 1606.

