

CIRCLE OF BARTHEL BRUYN THE ELDER

(Wessel 1493 - Cologne 1555)

Portrait of a Gentleman

oil on panel
45.7 x 38 cm (18 x 15 in)

Provenance: William Beckford;
his sale, Fonthill Abbey, October 2, 1822, lot 11 (as Holbein), withdrawn;
thence by descent to Susanna Euphemia, Duchess of Hamilton;
thence by descent to William Douglass-Hamilton, the 12th Duke of Hamilton;
his sale, Christie's, Hamilton Palace, June 17, 1882, lot 8 (as Holbein);
E.F. White, London;
Alice Woodhams Gregg, Temple Grafton Court.

PREVIOUSLY ATTRIBUTED TO HANS HOLBEIN (?1460/65-1534) in a sale at Fonthill Abbey in 1822, *Portrait of a Gentleman* is now viewed to be by an artist from the circle of Barthel Bruyn the Elder, as suggested in communications by the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague. The painting depicts a gentleman set against a plain background, his left hand looks to be in motion, extending out of the picture, intensifying the connection felt between sitter and viewer. Key features of the face, such as his nose and eyes, are exaggerated allowing for greater expression. The detailed dress of the sitter dominates the work, and the fur, necklace and signet ring serve as indicators of the sitter's wealth, thus informing the viewer of the individual's status. The painting is typical of portraiture of the period and shares many characteristics with portraits by Bruyn the Elder (fig. 1).

A German painter active in Cologne, Bruyn the Elder founded an important school of painting, bringing to an end the Gothic tradition of portraiture, which focused on generic representations, by introducing Italianate-Flemish Renaissance forms that heightened the engagement between sitter and viewer, and gave greater attention to individual identity than a mere natural representation. Such techniques, apparent in *Portrait of a Gentleman*, suggest that the artist was exposed to these new methods of portraiture, introduced by Bruyn the Elder, whilst preceding the more extensive characteristics of Mannerist portraiture.

The painting has a fascinating provenance, having been housed in two of the country's most impressive residences. Its first recorded appearance is at Fonthill Abbey, the largest private house ever built in Britain, famous for its ninety-metre octagonal tower. A building of incredible magnitude and opulence, it was built by the exceedingly wealthy and eccentric William Beckford at the turn of the eighteenth century. However, due to mounting running costs of £30,000 a year, Beckford sold Fonthill Abbey and many of its artefacts in 1822 - the present work being withdrawn from that sale. The tower collapsed



Barthel Bruyn the Elder,
Portrait of a Knight,
Gemäldegalerie,
Kunsthistorisches Museum,
Vienna
(Figure 1)

in 1825 and by 1858, the remaining parts of the abbey were destroyed.

The painting, along with other fine works from Fonthill Abbey, such as a portrait of Philip IV of Spain by Velasquez, now in the National Gallery, London passed into the hands of the prestigious Hamilton family, who lived in Hamilton Palace. Built in 1695 in Scotland, Hamilton Palace was a grand and ostentatious building before its decline and eventual demolition in 1965. In 1882, in order to raise funds, William, the 12th Duke of Hamilton, organized a great sale, through Christie's, of the family's substantial collection. It comprised of 2213 lots, in which *Portrait of a Gentleman* was sold as a Holbein, although it is now recognised as belonging to the circle of Bruyn the Elder.

