

RCEWA – *Portrait of a Young Man* by Piero del Pollaiuolo

Statement of the Expert Adviser to the Secretary of State that the painting meets Waverley criterion three.

Further Information

The 'Applicant's statement' and the 'Note of Case History' are available on the Arts Council Website:

www.artscouncil.org.uk/reviewing-committee-case-hearings

Please note that images and appendices referenced are not reproduced.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Brief Description of item(s)

Piero del Pollaiuolo (about 1441 – before 1496)

Portrait of a Young Man, late 1460s - early 1470s

Oil and tempera on panel, 49.2 x 35.5 cm

The portrait is in good condition, painted on rather a thick panel with two modern battens on the reverse. The remains of the barb at top right and along the left edge suggest the painting has not been cut down. Red pigments used in the sleeves and collar have faded, and the incised design of the brocade sleeves is visible. There is relatively little evidence of repainting, with the exception, perhaps, of retouching to the eyebrows.

2. Context

Provenance:

First recorded in the collection of G. M. G. Wilshere (Frythe, Welwyn, Hertfordshire); sold to Mendelsohn Bartholdy as 'Florentine School' to Sotheby's, 21 October 1942, lot no. 100; by 1950, collection of Sir Thomas Merton, Maidenhead; sold as Cosimo Rosselli, Christie's, 13 December 1985, lot no. 78.

Exhibitions:

Art in Britain, exh. cat, Royal Academy, London 1960, cat. no. 342

Christie's *Important Old Master Pictures*, 13 December 1985, lot no. 78

Selected Literature:

A. Scharf, *Catalogue of Pictures and Drawings from the Collection of Sir Thomas Merton, F.R.S., at Stubbings House, Maidenhead*, privately printed 1950, p. 36, cat. no. 14

Alison Wright, *The Pollaiuolo Brothers: The Arts of Florence and Rome*, New Haven & London 2005, pp. 133-4, ill. p.135, pp. 520-1, cat. no. 48

3. Waverley criteria

This portrait, by one of the leading artists driving and responding to the demand for portraits in 15th century Florence, meets **Waverly criterion 3**, as it illustrates a key moment in the development of Florentine portraiture, crucial to the study of portraiture in the European canon.

DETAILED CASE

1. Detailed description of item(s) if more than in Executive summary, and any comments.

This life-size portrait of a youth is a rare surviving work by Piero del Pollaiuolo (about 1441 – before 1496), who, together with his brother Antonio, was at the forefront of innovations in Florentine portraiture in the third quarter of the fifteenth century, when Florence was one of the three greatest artistic centres in Europe. It combines the serene naturalism, animation and attention to illusionistic detail that characterise Piero's work.

A young man, apparently in his early teens, looks at the viewer from below his thickly lashed eyelids. Painted at life-size and almost full-face, the boy turns his oval face towards us, bringing a slight asymmetry to his richly-clad shoulders. His splendid attire leaves no doubt about his high social status. He is sumptuously dressed, in a dark velvet quilted jupon trimmed with gold brocade and fringing. Illusionistic cross-hatching, suggestive of gold threads, is still visible in his red brocade sleeves and collar (these have faded slightly, to reveal the careful incisions outlining the fabric design).

Dated to around 1470, it is a relatively early work of Piero's artistic maturity, painted as he was establishing himself as an assured, sought-after painter of prestigious civic commissions and high-profile portraits of the Florentine elite.

The near frontal posture of this portrait is striking. Full-face portraits had previously been reserved for images of Christ. In a slight turn of the head, the sitter nearly evades this radical comparison. Nonetheless, this portrait may predate the National Gallery's arrestingly full-face *Portrait of a Young Man* (NG626) by Botticelli by about a decade.

Portrait of a Young Man exemplifies the fluidity and inventiveness of portraiture circa 1470, when painted portraits engaged with older typologies, such as profile portraits, and newer ones, such as the three-quarter-length poses used in portraits by Netherlandish, Flemish and French artists that were circulating in Florence at the time. Piero's subtle experimentation makes this portrait an arresting encounter with its youthful sitter.

Recently reattributed to Piero and dated to the late 1460s or early 1470s by Alison Wright, it is a significant addition to Piero's oeuvre, as one of only two surviving portraits of young men attributed to the artist.

2. Detailed explanation of the outstanding significance of the item(s).

The third quarter of the fifteenth century was an important moment in the development of Florentine portraiture, which has in turn shaped the development of art and artistic traditions across Europe and beyond. Florentine portraits of this date are concerned with representation, naturalism, animation and the emulation of artistic practices associated with antiquity.

Born some ten years after his elder brother Antonio, a painter, sculptor, goldsmith and engraver, Piero del Pollaiuolo specialised as a painter. Together, the brothers responded to and drove demand for painted and sculpted portraits of the Florentine elite. But while the reputation of Antonio has endured, Piero's fame waned after his death. Alison Wright's

weighty monograph on the brothers goes some way to restoring Piero's reputation, which was considerable during his lifetime.

We can gain a clear impression of Piero's talents and prestige from his most important surviving works: the Virtues he painted for the *Mercanzia* (Uffizi), which have aided the identification of his hand in collaborations with his brother Antonio. Piero's reputation as a portrait painter is attested by his surviving work in this area, which includes his *Portrait of Galeazzo Maria Sforza* (Uffizi) and several elegant profile portraits of young women from the upper echelons of Florentine society. These works share the sweetness, naturalism and exquisite handling of painted textiles that are found in *Portrait of a Young Man*.

Portrait of a Young Man illustrates many of the concerns preoccupying the leading portrait painters of Florence circa 1470. This generation of artists - Andrea del Castagno, Biagio d'Antonio, Sandro Botticelli and the Pollaiuolo brothers - responded to Northern paintings, and the taste for Northern paintings, at the same time as Antonello da Messina and Giovanni Bellini wrought innovations elsewhere in Italy. The portrait demonstrates an increasing, and innovative, interest in the relationship between two-dimensional and three-dimensional practice.

The exquisite handling of the dark quilted velvet attests to Piero's skills replicating rich fabrics using tempera and oil. The sitter's fine brocade sleeves are closely related to those worn by the elegant young women in contemporary profile portraits by the Pollaiuolo brothers and Alesso Baldovinetti, with whom Piero and Antonio were in close contact in the 1460s. Yet in its chest-length composition, proportions, dress and turn of head, *Portrait of a Young Man* also plays on the format of sculpted portrait busts, like Mino da Fiesole's marble bust of *Piero de' Medici* (Bargello). This portrait sits beside other portraits of the young men who competed in the Medici jousts or *giostre* of 1469 and 1475, such as Antonio del Pollaiuolo's terracotta bust of a *Young Man in Pageant Armour* (Bargello). Portraits of these gilded youths served a double purpose: to stimulate memory of the sitter, and to preserve their likeness against the changes wrought by time.

Piero del Pollaiuolo is poorly represented in public collections in this country. There are two paintings in the National Gallery that are associated with Piero's hand. The Gallery ascribes *Apollo and Daphne* (NG928) to Piero working alone, though others hold that this painting is the work of Antonio. Either way, this small-scale mythological painting represents a very different part of their output. *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* (NG292) is an important collaboration between Piero and his brother Antonio. Piero's hand is discernible in the sweet face of the martyred Sebastian, but much of the work on this monumental altarpiece is attributed to the hand of Antonio.

Works by Piero anywhere are rare. The significance of this object lies, however, in the fact that it is the earliest painting in a British collection to illustrate a moment of change in Florentine portraiture – the movement from profile to full-frontal depictions of sitters. At this time, painting in Florence was among the most innovative and influential in Europe. The National Gallery's fine profile *Portrait of a Woman* (NG758) by the Pollaiuolo brothers' contemporary Baldovinetti, demonstrates the continuing taste for the older profile portrait type, instead of the innovations of three-quarter and full face portraiture. Works by Domenico Ghirlandaio and his workshop – the Ashmolean Museum's *Portrait of a Young Man*, the National Gallery's *Portrait of a young man* (NG2489) and *Portrait of a girl* (NG1230) – or

indeed Botticelli's aforementioned *Portrait of a Young Man*, date from the 1480s and 1490s, after the novelties of the 1460s and 1470s had become established.

In conclusion, Piero del Pollaiuolo's *Portrait of a Young Man* is a rare surviving work that exemplifies an important but often overlooked moment in the development of Florentine portraiture, painted by one of the leading artists of this generation. This painting pre-empted the advances of artists working slightly later in the century, particularly Botticelli and the Ghirlandaio brothers. There are few pictures of this kind and of this moment in British collections. The export of this work would be lamentable for the full representation of Florentine 15th-century portraits, at a critical moment for the history of European portraiture.