MUSEUM ARMOR AND A VAN DYCK PORTRAIT FROM VIENNA

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In the study of paintings a knowledge of armor often aids in dating and in identifying the people portrayed. Many of the old masters, Rubens, Titian, Velazquez, Van Dyck, for instance, painted armor in such careful detail that it has been possible to recognize in their portraits numerous examples of armor that still exist today. And the history of a suit of armor is often known from documents and records when the history of a painting is not.

Recently, in the Museum of the Hispanic Society, I saw, according to the label, “a supposed portrait of the Duke of Alba” by Antonio Moro. To anyone familiar with the Alba armor, now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, the portrait obviously is that of the Duke of Alba. This is corroborated by an illustration in Schrenck von Notzing’s Armamentarium heroicum . . . , published in 1601, showing Alba wearing this armor.

The exhibition of Art Treasures from Vienna presents a timely opportunity to record a comparison of armor in a portrait with armor in this Museum. Van Dyck’s portrait of a young knight on the opposite page is considered by the Vienna authorities to be “perhaps a portrait of Ferdinando I of Mantua, son of Vincenzo Gonzaga, painted about 1624 in Italy.” The attribution is apparently based on some likeness of feature between the knight and some of the younger Gonzagas in Rubens’ drawings of the family now in Stockholm and on a mention of such a portrait in a manuscript biography of Ferdinando in the Louvre. Coins of Ferdinando also exist, one of which is reproduced here. But nothing is conclusive. The interest of this identification to the Museum is that the cuirass which the knight wears is similar in form and decoration to the Italian cuirass on page 273 and in decoration to the close helmet on page 272.

The Italian origin of our elements does not indicate in any way that the personage portrayed is necessarily Italian, but the greater part of the armor of the Gonzaga princes was made in Italy from the fourteenth century on. There are three extensive inventories of the Gonzaga armory (1407, 1542, and 1604). The last would apply to our elements, which date about the middle of the sixteenth century, but the descriptions are not detailed. Only one entry refers specifically to Ferdinando’s armor,—but it is armor he wore as a boy.

The duke, if it is he, apparently selected a handsome armor in which to be portrayed. He may not have had a fine armor of his own available at the time his portrait was painted, for he was not a distinguished soldier. In 1607, when he was only twenty, he was made a cardinal, but, after the death of his father and older brother in 1612, he renounced his cardinalate and became Duke of Mantua and Monferrato in 1616. The ten years of his rule were filled with personal and state misfortunes. But in the midst of his struggles to keep the power and prestige of the declining duchy, he maintained his cultivated interests. He built the Favorita Palace and founded the University of Mantua. He was a patron of letters, published ascetic books, and wrote poetry in a vein far removed from the angry dissensions of his day. He was also a patron of artists, among them the young Van

1 Gustav Glück, Van Dyck (Klassiker der Kunst), 1931, p. 539. S. 178.
Portrait of a knight in gilded armor, probably Ferdinando Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua and Monferrato (1587-1626), by Van Dyck. Painted in 1624. The armor is apparently en suite with a cuirass and helmet in the Museum. In the exhibition of Art Treasures from the Vienna Collections

Dyck, who was in Italy from about 1622 to 1628.

The disposition of the design of our breastplate varies slightly from that on the breastplate in the portrait, but in the sixteenth century a harness often had numerous exchange pieces, and the two could have belonged to the same suit. The Museum’s breastplate has perforations for the lance rest; it was, therefore, used in the military sport of jousting, while the breastplate in the portrait is a dress piece. When the portrait was painted, alternate areas of the armor were highly polished, as may be seen from the colored reflections of the red hanging.

Our elements are etched and gilded. Their
broad bands enclose foliation, are outlined by narrow bands simulating braided strapwork, and are edged with a broad bisected egg-and-dart molding, like a scallop edge. A variation of this edging appears on other elements of armor and in contemporary drawings—for instance, in the Album of the Augsburg etcher Jörg Sorg (pl. 40)—but the similarity of the borders ends the comparison, for our elements are Italian in workmanship. This is determined by the character of the etching, there being a distinct difference between the common German and Italian methods. In the German method the design was drawn with a brush and acid-proof varnish and the background similarly applied, these painted areas appearing in relief after the unvarnished areas were etched. In contrast to the German, the Italian etcher covered the entire surface of the armor with acid-proof varnish and scratched away with a needle the area to be etched, the seeded background being formed by a series of needle loops. After the design and background were etched, the varnish was removed from the dots, and dots and background were etched a second time. This seeded back-

ground of close-set dots is lower than the other surface, making the principal design prominent. Although much detail is of course omitted, the armor in the portrait was obviously etched by the needle rather than the brush method.

The artists who painted armor naturally made a study of it in order to represent it correctly and the men wearing it in the many different positions they might assume. An example of Van Dyck’s care in preparing such details for a painting are his drawings of a three-quarter harness, two views of which are in the Fogg Art Museum. His portrait of a nobleman in armor in the Dulwich Gallery, London, painted about the same time as the portrait here, was identified as Emmanuel Philibert of Savoy, Prince of Oneglia, from the devices etched on his rich suit of armor. Van Dyck’s portraits of Englishmen wearing armor with Greenwich characteristics are easily distinguished from his portraits of Italians.

The Van Dyck portrait is included in the pictorial inventory by Storffer showing the arrangement of the picture gallery in the Stallburg in Vienna in 1720. I believe that its previous history is unknown. However, it is easy to see how a Gonzaga portrait could have found its way into the Hapsburg collections, for the Hapsburg and Gonzaga families had numerous connections. Archduke Ferdinand of Austria, Regent of the Tyrol, had married Ferdinando’s aunt, Anna Caterina. It was he who assembled the Ambras collection, the principal features of which were the armor and portraits of princes and commanders; many of the portraits show the knights wearing the actual armor in the Ambras collection. (Incidentally, there are three harnesses and a princely sword originally from Ambras in the current exhibition from Vienna, as well as the Archduke’s portrait by Jakob Seisenegger.) The Archduke’s correspondence shows how he acquired armor directly from famous soldiers or from their heirs. His marriage to a Gonzaga probably facilitated the acquisition of the harnesses of three Gonzagas (Carlo, Ferrante I, and Vespasiano) and their portraits wearing these harnesses, all of which are in the Ambras collection in Vienna today.

The portrait could easily have come into the
possession of Ferdinand II, Emperor of Austria, who married Eleonora Gonzaga, Ferdinando’s sister, in 1622. It was, in fact, their younger son, Archduke Leopold Wilhelm, who is regarded as the founder of the Vienna Picture Gallery and who is shown with part of his collection in the painting by Teniers in the Vienna exhibition. From his collection came Titian’s portrait of Isabella D’Este, Marchioness of Mantua, which is also in the current exhibition.

*The armor and portraits in armor of the Gonzagas have been studied by Sir James Mann, Master of the Armouries of the Tower of London, in “The Lost Armoury of the Gonzagas,” Archaeological Journal, 1939, 1945.*