



Agnes Etherington Art Centre

Singular Figures:
Portraits and Character Studies
in The Bader Collection

The Bader Collection at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre is rich in both formal portraits and figure studies by European artists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially artists active in Holland and Flanders. The humanist-oriented philosophy of René Descartes (1596-1650), epitomized in his dictum “I think, therefore I am,” illustrates the new emphasis on the individual in this era, when the market for such paintings grew quickly among members of the expanding upper middle class. Burghers eager to promote their status and wealth sought out the vehicle of portraiture, and, precisely at this time, Rembrandt van Rijn and Jan Lievensz. developed signature character studies, which were disseminated by their students and followers. The Bader Collection reflects this fascination with the human face: portraits and character studies comprise nearly twenty percent of the collection.

While commissioned portraits aimed foremost to preserve the memory of individuals by securing a physiognomic likeness, artists and sitters alike opted for ennobling poses, clear illumination and representative clothing to communicate status and cultural norms. The stateliness with which Pieter Nason presents Descartes (Fig. 1)—his confident gaze directed toward the viewer, his gloved hand reaching across the painted picture frame as a suggestion of his equanimity and intellectual liveliness, which philosophers called the “motions of the mind” or interior life of a sitter—embodies the dignity of man in this age. The roughly life-size dimensions, the presentation of the face at a highly descriptive three-quarter angle, and the unadorned background also typify this impulse. Other artists, however, varied elements of this highly constructed formula. Abraham van Dijck’s spare, frontally posed *Portrait of a Fifty-year-old Woman* (Fig. 2) concentrates attention upon her faint smile, lively eyes and prominently placed hands. Having removed one of her gloves, she reveals her marital status through the double wedding ring on her right index finger, the customary ring finger at the time. Her somber clothing, typical of Dutch Protestant society, allows Van Dijck to demonstrate his painterly prowess in the subtle rendering of the shadows along her wrists and across her face. The portrait titled *A Man Rising from His Desk* (Fig. 3), ascribed to Wallerant Vaillant, marshals a range of attributes

to convey the art-loving character of the sitter. The songbook, bust of Seneca and print album attest to his appreciation of the arts and philosophy. His vivacity is further implied through his actively positioned body: his parted lips, fingers that caress the table edge, and rising motion all animate this figure, bridging the temporal and physical space between him and the viewer by suggesting an encounter between the two. Capturing the elegance with which the lauded painter Anthony van Dyck endowed his courtly sitters, this portrait brims with rhetorical vigour.

Two small studies by Rembrandt form the double centrepiece of The Bader Collection (Figs. 4, 5). Although each panel depicts an elderly figure astutely observed from life, capturing their individual personalities as historical people was not the painter's intention. Rather, through the use of dramatic lighting and evocative clothing, the artist sought to create compelling depictions of aged, pensive men as visual expressions of sagacity, humility and virtue. These are *tronies* rather than formal portraits, and though *tronies* originated in the mid-sixteenth century as preparatory studies for larger narrative paintings, they had shed their identifications as biblical patriarchs and mythological gods by the seventeenth century. Lievensz.'s *Portrait Head of an Old Woman* ("Rembrandt's Mother") (Fig. 6), for example, likely evolved from the type of the Old Testament prophetess Anna, but the only remaining evidence of that association—amidst the diaphanous headdress and the skin slackened with age—is her spiritual vision expressed through the introspective gaze. Under the innovative and gifted hands of Rembrandt and Lievensz., such painted studies assumed an important place on the market as emotionally complex figures that were independent of the constrictive weight of narrative.

Rembrandt's and Lievensz.'s fascination with the extremes of old age and youth are revealed in these character studies of around 1630. Jacob van Oost the Elder, an artist working in Bruges in the mid-seventeenth century, studied the subtleties of age in many of his paintings. His *Portrait of Jacob van Oost the Younger (1639-1713) in a Gorget and a Fur Hat* (Fig. 7) depicts the artist's younger brother but embraces the distinctive accoutrements associated with the work

of the two Dutch painters: the military gorget and the Eastern European fur-trimmed hat. Van Oost captures the youth's energy in his smooth skin and alert eyes. This striking image hovers between *tronie* and portrait, demonstrating the porous nature of these categories of representation.

A special subset of portraiture is the self-portrait, which has tremendous authority as an exploration of the self. When the artist uses himself or herself as a model, the visual possibilities for daring identity fashioning increase. Michael Sweerts's self-portrait (Fig. 8) not only exhibits his audacity with the bold foreshortening of the finger inserted into the skull, but it also demonstrates his understanding of composition in the dramatic turn of the subject's gaze over the shoulder, a pose often employed in self-portraits to signify the creativity of the artist. Above all, the portrait expresses fascination with and awareness of mortality (*vanitas*), a fitting conceit for a young professional whose creations will long outlive him.

Sweerts's exploration of the transience of life brings to mind the famous Latin phrase "*Ars longa, vita brevis*" (Art is long, life is short), which encapsulates the capacity of portraiture to extend memory, illustrate the figures of the distant past, and honour the act of creation. The depiction of the human face reflects the fundamental human drive to know one another and to know ourselves, to find a touchstone in the complex world of any century. The portraits and character studies in The Bader Collection, only a few of which are highlighted here, offer a veritable compendium of the human experience to the curious viewer.

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FIGURE 1

Pieter Nason

Portrait of René Descartes

1647

oil on canvas

Gift of Alfred and Isabel Bader, 2013

(56-003.24)

FIGURE 2

Abraham van Dijck

Portrait of a Fifty-year-old Woman

1655

oil on panel

Gift of Alfred and Isabel Bader, 2013

(56-003.10)

FIGURE 3

Attributed to Wallerant Vaillant

A Man Rising from His Desk

around 1667

oil on canvas

Gift of Alfred and Isabel Bader, 2014

(57-001.28)

FIGURE 4

Rembrandt van Rijn

Head of an Old Man in a Cap

around 1630

oil on panel

Gift of Alfred and Isabel Bader, 2003

(46-031)

FIGURE 5

Rembrandt van Rijn

Head of an Old Man in a Turban (Study for a Rabbi?)

around 1661

oil on panel

Gift of Alfred and Isabel Bader, 2007

(50-001)

FIGURE 6

Jan Lievensz.

Profile Head of an Old Woman

(“Rembrandt’s Mother”)

around 1630

oil on panel

Gift of Alfred and Isabel Bader, 2005

(48-001)

FIGURE 7

Jacob van Oost the Elder

Portrait of Jacob van Oost the Younger (1639-1713)

in a Gorget and a Fur Hat

around 1655

oil on canvas

Gift of Alfred and Isabel Bader, 2013

(56-003.34)

FIGURE 8

Michael Sweerts

Self-Portrait with Skull

around 1661

oil on canvas

Gift of Alfred and Isabel Bader, 2004

(47-001)



FIG. 1



FIG. 2



FIG. 3



FIG. 4



FIG. 5



FIG. 7



FIG. 6



FIG. 8

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FIGURE 1: Photo Bernard Clark

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Cover image: Attributed to Wallerant Vaillant, *A Man Rising from His Desk* (detail), around 1667, oil on canvas. Gift of Alfred and Isabel Bader, 2014 (57-001.28)

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The
BADER
COLLECTION



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