Reflections on *Portrait of a Gentleman*

The man in the painting gazes off to the right with a certain hauteur, a slight, yet somehow imposing figure. Who is he? The label on the wall tells me the title of the oil painting is *Portrait of a Gentleman*. The artist is Gonzales Coques, who lived in Flanders from 1614-1684. The label does not tell me much. I could learn more upon meeting someone at a party or social gathering. I could ask polite questions. What is your place of employment? Do you have children? I could watch gestures, mannerisms.

Here I am facing a different sort of challenge. I must ask not only 'Who is the man in the painting?' but 'What sort of person painted this?' I am fortunate, for, unlike a person I might meet socially, I may sit and stare and ponder the riddle as long as I like without fear of rudeness. Both the subject and the artist have obligingly left clues for me. It is for me to ask myself, 'What can I discern about this gentleman? What has the artist attempted to display or cover? What did the artist want the viewer to know about his subject, and what does he tell me about himself?'

It is obvious the artist wanted to focus the attention of the viewer on the face of the subject. The eye is immediately drawn to the softly modeled features that glow in light tints. The face is centered in the upper half of the canvas. It is the much-favored three-quarter view.

The body forms a stable triangle in dark muted colors occupying the lower three quarters of the canvas. The gently illuminated hand and face make two bright, warm spots of color in an otherwise muted painting. Accenting these two bright spots are the grey collar and cuffs worn by the subject.

The gentleman’s pose is formal, almost arrogant, although his face is gentle. His body facing left, away from the viewer, he turns his head to the right, his eyes staring away so that one cannot catch his glance. He is like an individual noticed at a slight distance, an enigmatic figure seen at a gathering, clothed in dignified dark garments. The very ordinariness of his aspect attracts attention.

Yet he is not at a social gathering. Behind him are varying shades of umber. A column further directs the eye to the face of the subject.

I look again at the face, wondering about the young man who turns his gaze away so firmly, with such finality. How intriguing his glance is. I can almost imagine how this person looks at the world—yet he will not turn and look! His eyes are dark arresting spots in the face. The full nose, softly modeled, is modified by the wispy moustache and the thin lips.

Viewed from a distance of five feet the subject appears life size. Intrigued by the glowing face and hand I do some studies in pen and ink. One study attempts to capture the sense of the arrangement of the two glowing spots on a dark field (See illustration no. 1) In the second study I attempt to understand the composition of the figure. (See illustration no. 2) These studies let me see how mere lines describe the painting.

I look at the hand in the painting. Is it too large? It seems oversize. Why would the artist do this? The hand is relaxed. Draperies are thrown over the arm, perhaps a cloak.
The hand gently enfolds the lower portion of the fabric and rests lightly at the level of the waist. Does the impression of gentleness and capability I sense in the subject stem from the placement and posture of the hand? The hand, outstretched and open, conveys friendship and good will. Clenched, the hand conveys anger and determination. I have noticed such hands as this gentleman has in other paintings, notably those of the Virgin Mary of Jesus, gentle hands, lightly held, softly modeled. So, I surmise, the artist has placed this hand with an eye to conveying a feeling of quiet as opposed to strength and power.

The other hand is barely visible, but the arm contributes to the arrogance detected in the pose. From the dark slant of the arm and a glimpse of gray cuff one sees that the hand is fisted and resting on the hip. I step back and assume this pose; head turned away from the body, one hand on stomach, the other resting on the hip. Yes, I feel the tension and relaxation of contraposto, yet this is a firm and determined stance, placing the body in interesting curves.

Doubtless this painting hung for years in some family’s fine home, telling everyone that a scion of this house was the quiet, well-bred young man of unassuming good looks that I see rendered here. Yet, the artist saw this person, his social class, his family. I notice the solitariness of the figure, the lack of books or flowers or props of any kind. He stands alone and must speak of and for himself. The artist knew he was capable of doing so.

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