

THE LIMNER COMPANY



DUTCH SCHOOL (17th Century)

Two portraits of Gentlemen; one wearing black doublet with white lawn collar and tassels; the other also in black doublet with buff-coloured cloak, his collar edged with lace

Circa: Circa 1650

Oil on copper (the portraits painted on both sides)

Later Regency ormolu frame with device so that portraits can swivel and be turned around

Ovals, 3 in (78mm) high

This pair of portraits, likely painted by an artist who trained in the Netherlands, are painted on either side of a copper sheet. As we have no early provenance, it has not been possible to determine the relationship between the sitters, who would appear to be of similar age and status. As the sitters have distinctively different colouring (one with dark hair and the other auburn) it seems unlikely that they are related.

There are a number of reasons why there was a proliferation of painting on the support of copper in oil during the 17th century in Europe. Some of these factors were based on the readiness of the availability of copper sheets or plates, which were also used for printing and etching. Prices for copper plates were roughly similar to those for oak panels of comparable size, but the material was also prized as a 'new' invention for oil painting. The creation of cabinets of curiosities in the wealthiest homes led to the proliferation of different supports for painting, such as 'alabaster, amethyst, lapis lazuli, marble, quartz, slate...' and, of course, metals.

Copper sheets were also portable and therefore perfect for portraits when the artist may have been required to move location with his tools. Researchers have found a priming layer on most oil paintings on copper, which contained lead white, white ash, black carbon, umber, yellow and red ocher, and vermilion ground in oil. Historical sources mentioned that the grounds were to be applied by the palm of the hand, with the fingertips, or by brushing, the first being the most frequently referred to in the sources.

Some of the great artists of the Dutch Golden Age worked on metal, including Rembrandt^[1], Joachim Wtewael and Frans Hals. Although the name of the artist of this pair is currently unknown, they show high levels of skill in the handling of the sitter's faces and detail in the costume, which would have been particularly important in showing the wealth of their patrons.

[1] In 2013, the J. P. Getty Museum in Los Angeles purchased a self portrait of Rembrandt. Painted on copper, this small oil (8 3/4 x 6 5/8 inches) bears the artist's monogram, "RHL," which combines his name with Leiden, the city in which he was born and worked at the time.