THE LIMNER COMPANY



FRANS POURBUS THE ELDER (1545/6 - 1581)

Portrait of a Lady, wearing a black gown with gold fasteners, a white ruff and cap, and a gold headed 'zibellino'

Circa: 1570

1570

Oil on copper

Circular, 42 mm. (1.65 in.) diam.

Signed with the artist's initials centre right: 'FP', dated centre left: '1570'

17th century silver-gilt frame, the reverse with filigree designs

Painted just over a decade before the artist’s death, this small oil on metal portrait is one of a handful extant in this format by Pourbus.[1] During the later 1560s and through the 1570s he seems to have focused on secular portraiture (as opposed to religious works) in the light of his Calvinist beliefs.

The son of the painter Pieter Pourbus (1523/4-1584), he trained with his father in Bruges before moving to Antwerp, where he worked with Frans Floris (1519-1570). Floris played an important role in the movement in Northern Renaissance painting referred to as Romanism.[2]

The present small oil is dated 1570, the year after Frans and his new wife Suzanna Floris (the niece of his master Frans Floris) had their first child, a son named after his father. In the same year, Pourbus was registered as a master of the Guild of Saint Luke in Bruges as well as the Guild of Saint Luke in Antwerp – the present portrait being painted around this time. In 1572, Pourbus’s fame was such that he was contacted by the prominent portrait painter Anthonis Mor (1516/21-1576/77), largely for assistance in finding apprentices in Antwerp. This may have resulted in closer contacts between the artists and an opportunity for Pourbus to become familiar with the work of Mor, then the leading portrait painter in the Low Countries. Although this portrait predates his connection with Mor, its sensitivity shows a debt to

his growing influence on his fellow artists.

Most of the sitters for Pourbus' portraits were from the rising middle class, and this example may be no exception. The sitter wears, most notably, a *zibellino*, made from the pelts of animals belonging to the weasel family. *Zibellini* had decorative heads and paws made of gold, or in some cases, even precious jewels and crystal. In the example worn by the lady here, these body parts have been replaced with gold set with what appears to be a ruby. There are multiple theories about the purpose and function of these accessories. One possibility gives rise to their alternate name, 'Flea Furs'- that they were worn to attract fleas, which could then be shaken out of the pelt, meaning that the wearer did not become infested with the vermin. Another suggestion is that they were simply meant to reflect the wealth of the wearer. A third suggestion is that *zibellini* were used as pregnancy amulets.[3] The myth of Galanthis[4] connects weasels to childbirth, and to the myth that they conceive through their ears and give birth through their mouth.

Whatever the purpose of this accessory was, it indicates that the lady sitting for this portrait was both fashionable and wealthy, given that she could afford the precious materials used to create the decorative features. These were items owned by monarchs across Europe- a drawing by Hans Mielich (1516-1573) in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum shows a *zibbelino* worn by Duchess Anna of Bavaria, not unlike the example worn in the present work. An inventory of items owned by Henry VIII taken in 1547 also lists a 'sable skinne with a hedde of gold conteineng in it a Clocke with a Coller of gold enamelled blacke set with foure Diamoundes and foure Rubies and with two perles hanging at the Eares and two Rubies in the eyes the same skinne also hauing feete of golde the Clawes thereof being Saphires.'[5]

The previous owner of this oil on copper, Gavin Astor, 2nd Baron Astor of Hever, owned another important portrait by the Dutch master Gerrit Dou (1613-75), of an 'Astronomer by Candlelight'. This painting was offered by Sotheby's, London, July 6, 1983, lot 80 and sold to the art dealer Johnny Van Haeften who subsequently sold it to the J. Paul Getty Museum in 1986 where it remains to this day. The ownership of this oil by Pourbus demonstrates his interest in Northern Renaissance oils and works of the Dutch Masters.

[1] Professor Koenraad Jonckheere confirmed this work as by Pourbus for Sotheby's in 2019.

[2] 'Romanists' assimilated Italian influences into the Northern painting tradition.

[3] For a lengthier and more critical discussion of this suggestion, see N. Menell, *Zibellini as Animal-Made-Objects*, blog on Society for Renaissance Studies, published March 8, 2017, accessed 27 November 2025, https://www.rensoc.org.uk/2128-2/.

[4] In this myth, Alcemna has fallen pregant with the child of Jupiter. Juno, Jupiter's wife, sends Lucina to prevent the birth. When Galanthis, the maidservant of Alcemna, annocunes the pregnancy, Lucina becomes enraged, and turns Galanthis into a weasel, and puts a curse on her so that she can only give birth through her mouth.

[5] David Starkey (ed.), The Inventory of King Henry VIII: Society of Antiquaries ms 129 and British Library MS Harley 1419 (London: Harvey Miller, 1998), p. 430.