THE LIMNER COMPANY



DUTCH SCHOOL (17th Century)

Portrait of a Lady wearing a 'rebato' collar with needle lace edging, a black gown, coral and pearl necklaces, and her hair tied back in a turban roll with floral decoration

Circa: circa 1615

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Oil on copper

Oval, 60 mm. (2 3/8 in.) high

Later pendant frame

The dress of the present sitter is what enable us to date and locate the painting of this portrait to the early 17th-century northern Netherlands. Although the region did not officially achieve independence from Spain until 1648, a Dutch Republic had declared itself decades prior, and portraiture of the period illustrates the emergence of a national identity.

In the early 17th century, aspects of dress in the self-declared Republic gradually crystalised into recognisably Dutch fashion, as shown by this lady. The most striking was the preference for black clothing, which almost becomes uniform for the burgeoning and vastly wealthy merchant class at this time. While to the 21st-century viewer it might appear plain, the black garments of the wealthy individuals portrayed would have been of very rich materials. The finest fabrics were textured and patterned black on black,[1] which can be difficult to discern depending on the scale (as here) and condition of a portrait. Such fabrics- damask, braid on silk taffeta, embroidery on satin - were usually manufactured with silk from the far East and subjected to an expensive dying process. Therefore, although the blackness of clothing has sometimes been linked to Puritanism or Calvinisim, it was nevertheless often made from luxury materials.[2] Perhaps ironically, the fashion for rich black clothing was also inherited from their recently departed Spanish overlords, by whom it was esteemed for its courtliness, high cost and sobriety.

Black outer garments acted as a foil for the splendid linen for which the Dutch were also known. Masters of bleaching and sun-drying, the whiteness of their linen was famed, as was the Dutch mangle board for laundering it.[3] Throughout the 17th century the Dutch habit was for increasingly large linen collars or ruffs, even when the ruff had long since fallen out of fashion elsewhere in Europe. Here the sitter wears a *rebato* (collar), which was in-keeping with wider European fashion at the time; the expensive needle lace edging and the large area of immaculate white linen, signifying the wealth and gentile lifestyle of the wearer.

The jewels the lady wears both about her neck and in her hair – another of the many luxury goods traded by the Dutch – further signify her wealth. Her jewellery may have a greater significance however as gems were thought to have talismanic properties. Coral, in particular, had been revered since ancient times for

its protective qualities, especially when worn in direct contact with the skin, as here.[4] Red gems were

thought to aid bleeding and remedy inflammatory diseases as well as have a calming influence on the wearer.[5] A particularly 'ominous character' and 'vital force' were attributed to red coral, which it was believed would pale if the wearer became ill or were threatened with severe illness.[6] Such attributes were particularly suitable for the vulnerabilities (both perceived and real) of women and children, especially women in childbirth. This may suggest that the present sitter is of marriageable and child-bearing age, especially as the exchange of a portrait with a husband or husband-to-be, would be a likely reason for the commission.

The rope of large pearls is more easily interpreted as a symbol of modesty and purity, which were also desired virtues for a bride. But both coral and pearl also had associations with the moon as well as the planet of Venus, and therefore presumably the Roman goddess of love, beauty and fertility.[7] Interestingly, these planetary associations with gems have a Spanish heritage (as of course did the recent history of the Netherlands) dating back to the Lapidario of Alfonso X of Castile (1221-1284).[8]

The founding of the Dutch East India Company in 1602 quickly lead the Republic to become the axis of global trade for luxury goods worn by this sitter. As a result, the merchant class flourished, the most successful of them coming to occupy the vacuum left by the Spanish state and aristocracy as a 'burgher oligarchy'. The sitter would likely have belonged to this group, for whom portraiture presented the opportunity for them both to spend and promote their newfound wealth and position.

[1] Ribeiro, A., *Clothing Art: The Visual Culture of Fashion, 1600-1914*, 2016 (Yale University Press), p.115

[2] Ibid, p.115

[3] McNeil, P., 'Ruff Stuff' online article for 'Rembrandt and the Dutch golden age masterpieces from the Rijksmuseum', exhibition at Art Gallery of New South Wales, 11 Nov 2017 – 18 Feb 2018 https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/artboards/rembrandt/ruffs-and-stuff/ - accessed 26 February 2026

[4] Kunz, G. F., *The Curious Lore of Precious Stones*, 1938 (Halcyon House), p.160

[5] Ibid, p.370

[6] Ibid, pp. 69,160

[7] Ibid, p.348

[8] Ibid.