THE LIMNER COMPANY



Circle of FRANCESCO ALBANI (1578 - 1660)

Portrait of a Prelate in dark robes

Circa: circa 1625

circa 1625

Oil on copper

Oval, 94 mm (3 ⅝ in) high

Shaped and gilded wood frame

Albani was a prominent Italian Baroque painter and a leading figure of the Emilian School of painting. Based primarily in his native Bologna and Rome, Albani trained under the Carracci family of artists in Bologna in Italy, and later moved to Rome with fellow artist Guido Reni (1575-1642).

He frequently used copper as a painting surface for his smaller ‘cabinet’ portraits. Painting on metal provided a smooth, reflective ground that enhanced the luminosity, gem-like colours, and incredible detail of his work (see, for example, his Virgin and Child Adored by Saint Francis, circa 1606, Art Institute of Chicago [1962.823]).

The tradition of painting small portraits in oil on copper was popular amongst Italian artists in this period, including Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614) and Ottavio Leoni (1578-1630, see no. 28). At a time when ivory had not yet been developed as a widely used medium, copper provided a robust alternative to vellum. Oil was perhaps more familiar to artists used to working on a much larger scale with this paint, in comparison to watercolour.

The sitter, a prelate, is shown bust length against a luminous blue ground, wearing a sober black garment with a small white collar, his youthful features animated by a questioning and engaging gaze.

Lavinia Fontana's 'Portrait of a Prelate' from circa 1580 (Metropolitan Museum, New York, 62.122.141) provides a useful comparison, although the present work is fully focussed solely on the sitter. While portraits of prelates or friars are rare they do appear from time to time in royal or noble collections, where the patron wishes to remember an encounter with someone from a religious order. This is indeed the case with Claudio Coello's portrait of *Father Cabanillas* (circa 1689-1693), where it is likely that Queen Anna Maria of Neuberg commissioned this portrait of the friar during her stay in Madrid. As the online catalogue notes at the Prado, where the portrait is housed, Father Cabanillas was likely 'a figure of some spiritual importance to the queen, and she took the likeness of him painted by Charles II's chamber painter with her when she went into exile'.