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Attributed to ALONSO SÁNCHEZ COELLO
(Benifairó c. 1531 - 1588 Madrid)

PORTRAIT OF A SPANISH GENTLEMAN

Oil on canvas
136 x 96 cm.; 54 x 37¾ in.

Inscribed in the upper left corner:
"AETATIS SVAE . A. XXVII .
M . VII. NATO. MDXXX
XVII . ET . M . VII
NATO"

Provenance

Florence, Pratesi collection by 1998;

Literature

M. Kusche, *Retratos y Retratores*, Madrid 2003, pp. 157–59, fig. 129, reproduced in colour (as Jooris van der Straaten, known in Spanish as Jorge de la Rúa).

M. Scalini in *A bon droyt. Spade di uomini liberi, cavalieri e santi*, M. Scalini (ed.), exh. cat., Aosta 2007, pp. 77–80 and 250–51, no. 66, reproduced in colour (as Anthonis Mor, *Portrait of Alessandro Farnese*).

Exhibitions

Aosta, Museo Archeologico Regionale, *A bon droyt. Spade di uomini liberi, cavalieri e santi*, 29 June – 4 November 2007, no. 66 (as Anthonis Mor, *Portrait of Alessandro Farnese*).

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In its composition and pose, the present *Portrait of a Spanish Gentleman* follows the conventions established by Titian and Mor for regal and aristocratic portraiture, which Alonso Sánchez Coello (c. 1531 - 1588) adopted for the Spanish court. The gentleman is depicted at life-size, standing three-quarter length and turned subtly toward the viewer. His left hand rests assertively on the pommel of his sword, with his right leaning on a table draped in dark green velvet with golden tassels. This specific pose is notably reminiscent of that adopted by Philip II in Anthonis Mor's 1557 state portrait of the king, which Coello reproduced in 1566 (Fig. 1) - also wearing identical sword and dagger. Such a deliberate echo of the royal portrait underscores the sitter's aspiration to princely bearing and links the image to the visual rhetoric of Habsburg court power. The neutral dark background throws all attention on the figure, a device frequently used by Mor and Coello to lend the subject an austere grandeur free of distraction, see for example Coello's *Portrait of Rudolf II, Emperor of Austria*, 1567 (Fig. 2) and his *Portrait of Doña Juana de Austria, Princess of Portugal*, 1557 (Fig. 3). Another close comparable work is Coello's *Portrait of Prince Don Carlos*, now at the Prado (Fig. 4). It has been noticed that the table on the left, trimmed with gold braid and tasselled toggles, was an accessory also seen in Mor's 1560 *Portrait of Elisabeth of Valois (Queen of Spain)* and Coello's later versions of that composition (Fig. 5). The inclusion of this draped table balances the composition and alludes to the ceremonial and domestic setting of the court.

The attire of the sitter is rendered in exquisite detail. He wears a black Spanish doublet, meticulously slashed on the sleeves and chest thus revealing an underlayer of vivid crimson silk, embroidered with gold thread. The sitter's black trunk hose and stockings complete the ensemble, creating a visually continuous silhouette that focuses the eye on the contrast between the black fabric and the glints of the crimson-and-gold beneath. Contemporary accounts of court dress note that such slashed garments, which originated in earlier 16th-century landsknecht styles, had been adopted by Spanish nobles to add controlled flashes of colour to their otherwise somber attire. The accessories further communicate the sitter's noble status and chivalric persona. At his waist, he wears an ornate sword belt from which hangs a sword with a decoratively wrought hilt, as well as an elaborate dagger on the opposite side. Both weapons are embellished with gilded details. The dagger, customarily held in the left hand in duelling, is of a type fashionable among courtiers in the mid-16th century. Its presence, paired with the sword, signifies that the subject is a gentleman entitled to bear arms - likely a "caballero" (knight). The sitter's pale facial traits and the contrast between the pure white of the ruff and the black of the garment's collar can similarly be observed in Coello's 1570 *Self Portrait (?)* and his and Mor's *Portrait of Alessandro Farnese in Armor* (Figs. 6-7).

In "Retratos y Retratores" (2003), María Kusche argued that the portrait may instead be the work of the Flemish painter Jooris van der Straeten, known in Spain as Jorge de la Rúa.¹ Van der Straeten was a contemporary of Coello and Mor, active at the Spanish court, but his oeuvre remains elusive - his only signed *Portrait is of Elisabeth of Austria (Queen of France)*,

¹ M. Kusche, *Retratos y Retratores*, Madrid 2003, pp. 157-59.

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dated 1573, now at the Convent of Las Descalzas Reales, Madrid. In 2007 it was catalogued as “Anthonis Mor, Portrait of Alessandro Farnese,” indicating belief in Mor’s hand at the time.² Recent assessments, however, tend to reaffirm Sánchez Coello’s authorship (or at least that of his immediate circle), acknowledging Mor’s pervasive influence on the portrait’s style while keeping Kusche’s suggestion in mind as an intriguing alternative.

The newly discovered inscription on the canvas provides a key to the portrait’s date (Fig. 8). It records the sitter’s age as 27 years (and a number of months) and indicates his birth in July 1530. In Latin such inscriptions typically read along the lines of “Aetatis suae 27, [mensibus] 7, natus [month] 1530”, meaning the likeness was painted when the subject was 27 years and some months old, having been born in 1530. This would place the execution of the portrait in late 1557 or early 1558, when the sitter was around 27 or 28. That dating is consistent with the painting’s style and costume. The late 1550s were a transitional moment at the Spanish court: Mor had recently painted his great 1557 portrait of Philip II, and the young Sánchez Coello was solidifying his role as the King’s portraitist. The sober yet sumptuous manner of this work fits comfortably in the artistic context of c.1557–1558, reflecting the influence of Mor’s portraits of the mid-1550s and foreshadowing Coello’s mature court style.

Identifying the sitter has proven challenging. An earlier attribution held that this was a portrait of Alessandro Farnese (1545–1592), the young Duke of Parma and Piacenza. However, Farnese’s birthdate (1545) and age make that impossible – he would have been only twelve in 1557. The 2007 exhibition catalogue’s entry by Scalini proposes the Farnese identification: Mor had depicted Philip II after the victory at Saint-Quentin (1557) with a comparable sword-and-dagger ensemble.³ Scalini draws a parallel, suggesting that the sitter here belongs to the same exalted, martial circle – where Alessandro Farnese (1545–1592), grandson of Emperor Charles V and a noted military figure later in his career, would be a plausible candidate.⁴ Instead, the weight of evidence suggests the painting represents a yet unidentified Spanish nobleman of high rank. The inscription (born 1530) would correspond to a man in his late twenties in 1558 – perhaps a member of Philip II’s court or a nobleman attached to the Habsburg household. Kusche tentatively proposed that the sitter might be the “Príncipe de la Roche, primo de la Reina Isabel”.⁵ To date, no consensus has emerged on a specific identity: as with many mid-16th-century portraits of courtiers, a definitive identification remains elusive. What can be said is that the sitter was likely a Spanish knight or nobleman close to the court, a person of significant social standing.

² M. Scalini in *A bon droyt. Spade di uomini liberi, cavalieri e santi*, M. Scalini (ed.), exh. cat., Aosta 2007, pp. 77–80 and 250–51, no. 66.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Kusche, 2003, pp. 157–59.

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Fig. 1. Alonso Sánchez Coello, *Portrait of King Philip II of Spain* (1566), oil on canvas. 204 x 104 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

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Fig. 2. Alonso Sánchez Coello, *Portrait of Rudolf II, Emperor of Austria* (1567), oil on canvas, 98.2 x 80.4 cm, Windsor, Royal Collection.

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Fig. 3. Alonso Sánchez Coello, *Portrait of Doña Juana de Austria, Princess of Portugal* (1557), oil on canvas, 116 x 93 cm, Bilbao Fine Art Museum.

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Fig. 4. Alonso Sánchez Coello, *Portrait of Prince Don Carlos (1555 - 1559)*, oil on canvas, 109 x 95 cm, Madrid, Prado Museum.

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Fig. 5. Alonso Sánchez Coello, *Portrait of Elizabeth of Valois*, c. 1560, oil on canvas, 113 x 94,5 cm, Madrid Várez Fisa Collection.

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Fig. 6. Alonso Sánchez Coello, *Self Portrait* (?) (1570), oil on canvas. 41 x 32.5 cm, Madrid, Prado Museum

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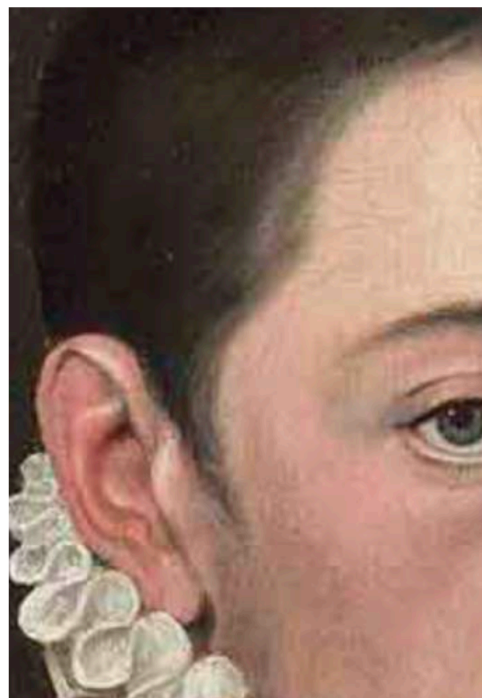


Fig. 7. Anthonis Mor and Alonso Sánchez Coello, *Alessandro Farnese in Armor*, oil on canvas, 175 x 100 cm, Christie's New York, 19 April 2018 (Lot 28).

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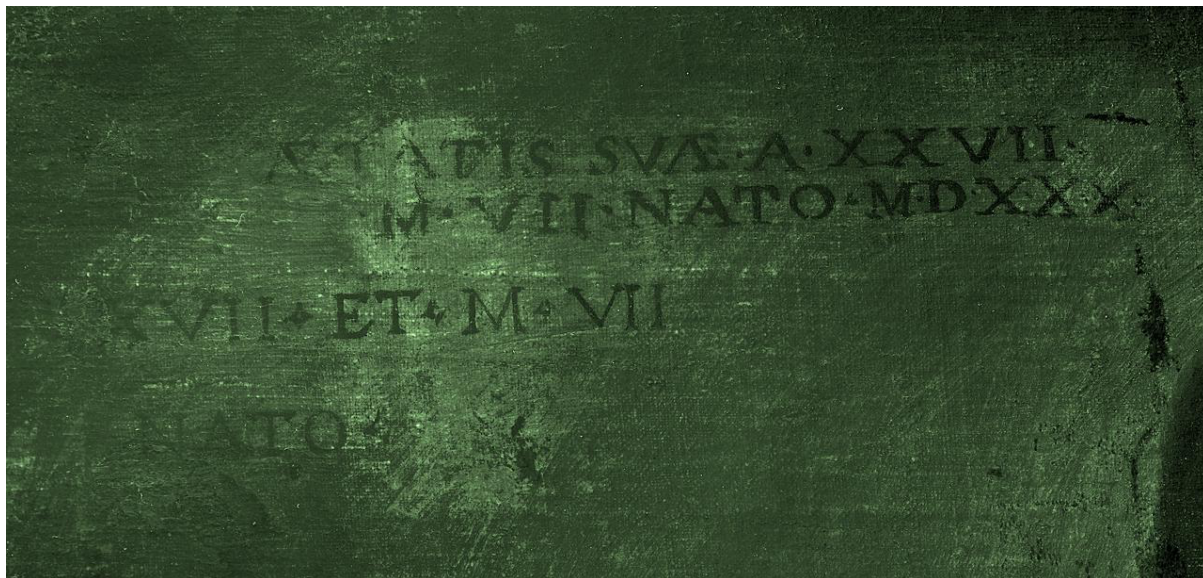


Fig. 8. Partially faded inscription in the upper left corner of the present painting.