

# ELLIOTT FINE ART

*Nineteenth Century to Early Modern*

Henri van der Haert  
(Leuven 1790 – 1846 Ghent)

*Head study of a man in profile*

Inscribed on the reverse of the original frame: *D'après nature / Vander Haeght Louvain /  
Directeur de l'académie / à Gand*

Oil on panel

31 x 30 cm. (12 ¼ x 11 ¾ in.)

Provenance:

Private Collection, Stockholm, until 2025.



This recently rediscovered head study of a Black man in profile is a significant addition to Henri van der Haert's small oeuvre and is a remarkable work within the context of mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Belgian art. Not only is it a rare painted work by one of Belgium's foremost artists of the period, but it also stands among the very few known depictions of a Black sitter painted from life in Belgium at the time. While such representations were more common in France or Britain, they remain largely undocumented in Belgian academic art, making this study an invaluable contribution to our knowledge of the use of Black models in Belgium during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Van der Haert's rendering is remarkably sensitive and characterful, and though an academic study, verges on portraiture in terms of the individuality and physiognomic accuracy. The sitter's expression, with the trace of a half-smile and a subtly lit eye, lends the portrait a striking psychological depth rarely afforded to Black figures in European academic studies of the period, and is akin to Géricault's celebrated depiction of Joseph (fig. 1). The circular format is unusual and intimate, intensifying the focus on the sitter's features. Van der Haert appears to have used a cast-off panel, with its join just off-centre, reinforcing the notion that this was intended as a focused academic head study for the artist's own use, and that of his students, rather than anything for public display.

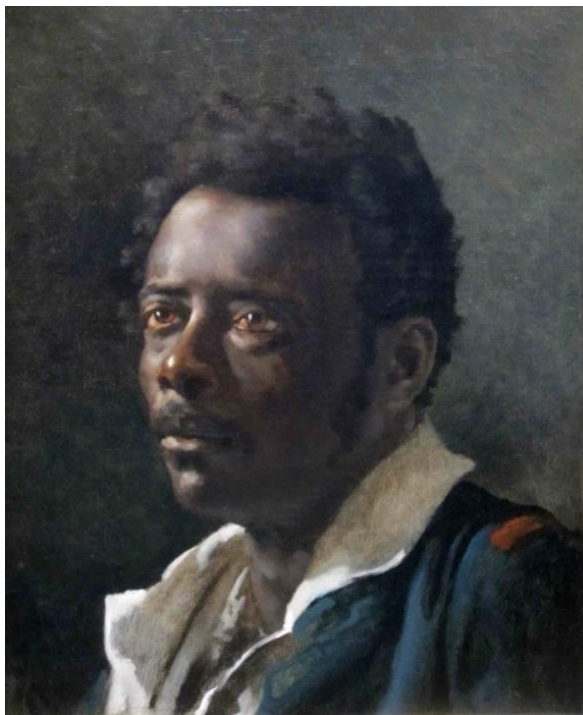


Fig. 1, Théodore Géricault, *Portrait Study of Joseph*, circa 1818-1819, oil on canvas, 47 x 39 cm., The J. Paul Getty Museum

Although the sitter's identity remains unknown, he appears in two further studies by van der Haert, now housed in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels (figs 2 and 3). These were later engraved by William Toovey in 1866.<sup>1</sup> The painted version closely resembles one of the chalk drawings, also in profile, yet distinguishes itself through its vivid immediacy and expressive detail. Unlike those drawings, which depict the model bare-chested, the painting includes a loosely suggested collar, rendered with just a few confident strokes.

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<sup>1</sup> British Museum, 1888,0612.1830

In the drawings, the sitter is beardless, suggesting they were executed at a different time to the painting. This implies that the sitter may have worked regularly as a model, perhaps associated with the Royal Academy in Brussels. Further evidence of the sitter's presence in the Belgian artistic milieu of the 1830s emerges in the work of the Bristol painter William James Müller, who portrayed the man in two canvases (figs. 4 and 5). In one, in the Yale Centre for British Art, he is portrayed as an enslaved date harvester—a figure Müller might have observed during his 1838–39 journey to Egypt. The second work features the sitter as the basis for five distinct orientalist figures. Although these paintings likely postdate Müller's Egyptian travels, his initial encounter with the model occurred during a visit to Belgium four years earlier, when he spent a day in Brussels in July 1834 before heading to Liège.<sup>2</sup>



Figs. 2 and 3, Henri van der Haert, *Two head studies of a man, full-face and in profile*, circa 1835, black and red chalk on paper, 62.3 x 53 and 62.3 x 47.9 cm. respectively, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium

In Müller's paintings, the model sports the same beard seen in van der Haert's oil study, indicating they were created around the same time. Though van der Haert was originally from Louvain, he resided in Brussels from 1818 until 1841, at which point he was appointed Director of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent. Intriguingly, Müller's profile view in the Yale painting mirrors the orientation of van der Haert's own study, while the five heads in the second Müller canvas may also derive from the same original sketch, since they are less detailed and are all depicted from the left. The upturned eye, visible in both Müller's Yale picture and in all three of van der Haert's works, further supports this connection. Müller's very short stay in Brussels may not have given him the opportunity to paint the model from life. Instead, he may have been gifted a study by van der Haert, which later served as the

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<sup>2</sup> N.N. Solly, *Memoir of the life of William James Müller: a native of Bristol, landscape and figure painter: with original letters and an account of his travels and of his principal works*, London, 1875, p. 33.

basis for the two paintings Orientalist paintings inspired by his Egyptian trip. Indeed, Müller, was known to be extremely supportive of young artists, always quick to help them.<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 4, William James Müller, *An Enslaved Africa*, oil on paper, 33.7 x 25.4 cm., Yale Centre for British Art

Fig. 5, William James Müller, *Five head studies of an African man*, oil on canvas, 50 x 69 cm., formerly with Karen Taylor Fine Art

The model resurfaces in another painting—formerly associated with Géricault though surely instead by a Belgian artist—in two poses: full-face and right profile (fig. 6). These are very close in conception to van der Haert’s drawn studies, and given the physiognomic similarities, without the full beard, were likely done at the same time. Though the painting is not by van der Haert, given its inferior quality, it reinforces the model’s presence in artistic circles of the period.

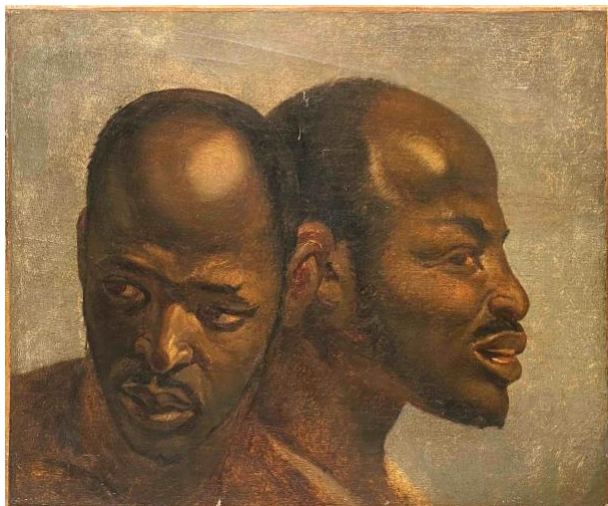


Fig. 6, Belgian Artist, circa 1835, *A head study in two positions*, oil on canvas, 41 x 52 cm., Private Collection

Further depictions of this sitter will hopefully come to light, given his evident role as a model in 1830s Brussels. He was almost certainly the inspiration behind Albrecht De

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<sup>3</sup> *La Renaissance, chronique des arts et de la littérature*, Brussels, 1839-40, vol. 1, p. 28.

Vriendt's *Othello* (fig. 7), likely mediated via one of van der Haert's studies left at the Royal Academy of Ghent, where the latter was director until 1846 and the former a student during the 1860s.



Fig. 7, Albrecht de Vriendt, *Othello and Desdemona* (detail), oil on canvas, 140 x 100 cm., Private Collection



Fig. 8, Peter Paul Rubens, *Four head studies of an African man*, c. 1614-16, oil on canvas, 66 x 51 cm, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium

The reuse of van der Haert's study some three decades later underscores both the rarity and significance of these works, as well as the exceptional presence of this Black model in Belgium. Unlike France, which had long-standing colonial ties to the Caribbean and a legacy of involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, Belgium did not begin its exploitation of Africa until the later part of the century, with the establishment of the Congo Free State in 1885. As such, the Black population in Belgium was markedly smaller at the mid-century point than that in France, which is why the appearance of a Black model in Brussels in the 1830s is so unusual. This, in turn, raises the unanswerable question of how this man came to be in Brussels at that time. He may have arrived via France or perhaps disembarked directly at a Belgian port such as Antwerp or Ostend, aboard a merchant or naval vessel.

Despite the rarity of such a model in Belgian art of the period, there is a noticeable precedent in Flemish painting: Ruben's head study of a Black man seen from four positions (fig. 8). This study was recorded as having been in French private collections throughout the nineteenth century, appearing at auction in Paris in 1883, before being acquired by the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in 1890. It is therefore uncertain whether van der Haert would have known the painting, though he may have encountered a workshop variation or copy. Beyond their shared painterly virtuosity, what connects the two artist's studies is a comparable emotional immediacy and a depth of character – qualities that raise them well above the level of conventional academic studies.

Henri van der Haert was born in Louvain and began his artistic training at the city's academy under Josse-Pieter Geedts and the portraitist François Xavier Joseph Jacquelin. After a formative journey to Paris, he settled in Brussels in 1818, where he studied under Jacques-

Louis David and worked in the studio of the sculptor François Rude. In 1824, he married Victorine Frémiet—sister of the painter Sophie Rude—becoming Rude’s brother-in-law.

In 1836, Van der Haert was appointed professor at the newly founded Royal School of Engraving in Brussels. Five years later, he became director of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent, where he played a central role in revitalising the institution. Among his most distinguished students was Jules Breton, who would later deliver the funeral oration for his mentor.<sup>4</sup> Van der Haert was also a chevalier of the Order of Leopold, a member of the Royal Academy of Brussels, and of the Royal Society for Fine Arts and Literature in Ghent.

Though celebrated in his lifetime as one of Belgium’s foremost artists and most gifted teachers—particularly admired for his portraiture—Van der Haert is little known today, and his works are rarely seen. His focus on graphic work, alongside his modesty in exhibiting publicly and his devotion to teaching, resulted in a limited output of paintings, ensuring that his work is difficult to see today, even in Belgian museums.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A. Bourrut Lacouture, *Jules Breton, Painter of Peasant Life*, New Haven, 2002, p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> For his excellent contemporary reputation, his modesty and his role as a teacher, see *La Renaissance, op. cit.*, p. 28 and *Messenger des Sciences Historiques et Archives des Arts de Belgique*, Brussels, 1846, p. 521.