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Rodrigo de Villandrando

(Madrid (?) c. 1588 – 1622 Madrid)

*Portrait of a Noblewoman,
full length, wearing an elaborately
embroidered dress, standing in
an interior before a background
of red drapery*

c. 1620

oil on canvas

207.5 x 117.5 cm.;

81 3/4 x 46 1/4 in.

Provenance

With Galleria Zabert, Turin (with an attribution to Scipione Pulzone or Rodrigo de Villandrando);

Acquired by the present owners in 2021.

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The artistic personality and biographical details of the painter Rodrigo de Villandrando, whose promising career as a court portraitist was cut short by his premature death aged around 34, has been a focus of interest in recent years following the discovery and study of new documentation. It has also been possible to establish a catalogue raisonné of works newly convincingly attributed to the Madrid based artist, based on comparison with his signed or documented paintings. The standard art-historical texts (Francisco Pacheco, Vicente Carducho, Antonio Palomino and Ceán Bermúdez) did not include Villandrando's highly appreciated output and the first concrete reference only appears courtesy of the Count of Viñaza in his *Adiciones al diccionario histórico de los más ilustres profesores de las Bellas Artes en España de Don Juan Agustín Ceán Bermúdez* of 1894, which states that the artist was active in the 1630s and mentions works by him in the Royal Monastery of El Escorial.

On 21 July 1621 Villandrando obtained the position of *Ujier de Cámara*, a traditional post dating back to the Burgundian court that was generally awarded to painters, and which passed on his death in November 1622 to Diego Velázquez. The connections between this portraitist and painter of religious compositions and the court of Philip III can be partly explained by the fact that his father Antonio de Villandrando, who was married to Catalina de la Serna, held the post of court musician.

The young Villandrando acquired the rudiments of his profession in the important Madrid studio of Juan Pantoja de la Cruz (Valladolid c. 1553 – 1608 Madrid), a master and court painter to Philip II from 1596 and subsequently to his son Philip III. Villandrando entered the studio as an apprentice and assimilated the finest tradition of Spanish court portraiture, given that Pantoja de la Cruz had trained in this genre in the studio of Alonso Sánchez Coello (Benifairó de les Valls c. 1531 – 1588 Madrid), who had in turn trained with the Flemish painter Anthonis Mor (Utrecht c. 1516/1521 – 1576 Antwerp).

The painter Bartolomé González from Valladolid (c. 1564 – c. 1628), who obtained the position of senior court painter in 1617, worked with Pantoja de la Cruz, and on the latter's death in 1608 he continued with the project for the iconographic gallery of portraits of the

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Habsburg dynasty for the royal palace of El Pardo. Villandrando must have enjoyed a good relationship with his master Pantoja de la Cruz as he witnessed his will, dated 7 October 1608, and also signed a document on Pantoja's behalf a day before his death acknowledging the receipt of 200 *reales* from Friar Jerónimo de Bustamante, a provincial of the Mercedarian Order in Madrid. Following the death of his master, Villandrando must have strengthened the ties of friendship and artistic relations with Bartolomé González, who produced numerous portraits of the royal family. This connection is evident in a document of 20th March 1613 in which Villandrando acts as witness to the sale of a property ground rent by González and his brothers.

Villandrando's will, in which he made his brother Domingo his sole heir, reveals that he enjoyed a comfortable financial position and that he mixed socially with members of the court such as García Gallo de Escalada, the King's secretary and a knight of the Order of Santiago, and Francisco Mazuercas, a fellow *Ujier de Cámara*.

Any study or argued attribution to Rodrigo de Villandrando must start from a comparison with signed or documented works by his hand. These include *Prince Philip and the Dwarf, Miguel Soplillo* (fig. 1, Madrid, Museo del Prado); *Isabel de Borbón, Wife of Philip IV* (fig. 2, Madrid, Museo del Prado); *The Infanta Maria Anna of Austria, future Queen of Hungary* (fig. 3, Madrid, Museo del Prado); *General Don Pedro González de Mendoza, Knight of Malta* (Valladolid, Museo Nacional de Escultura); *Sebastián de Contreras* (Count of Bornos Collection), and *Doña María Pacheco y Aragón* (Cueva, Toledo, Carmelite church, chapel of the Counts of Arcos), among others.

The present, hitherto unpublished work reveals the stylistic traits characteristic of Rodrigo de Villandrando; its exceptional aesthetic merit makes it an outstanding example of Habsburg court portraiture. The identity of the sitter remains unknown. She wears sumptuous clothing and exquisite jewels (a tiara, necklaces with inset stones, ropes of pearls, bejewelled pendants, brooches, chains, bracelets and rings). In compositional terms, the work adheres to the format devised by Villandrando for his signed portrait of the daughter of Philip III and Philip IV's sister, *The Infanta Maria Anna of Austria, future Queen of Hungary* (fig. 3). This

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was one of a group of six full-length portraits by the artist of members of the family of Philip III (even though he was never appointed a court painter) and was mentioned in 1636 as being in the Galería de Mediodía in the Alcázar in Madrid. In that work and the present image, the sitter delicately rests her right hand on a side table while in her left she holds a fan: a distinguishing motif for a woman of the highest ranks of nobility.

The sitter's face is presented in three-quarter view, her features framed by the elaborate imported white lace ruff. Villandrando's depiction, clearly painted from life, reveals a sensitive modelling of light and shadow typical of the artist. Her hair elaborately styled with curls and ringlets, her cheeks rouged and her lips painted, this young woman with her porcelain skin has the distinctive feature of a slight squint. Her demeanour and the long, narrow shape of the clothing create a tall, pointed form which is further increased in the present image by the tiara.

The sitter wears a type of dress appropriate for formal occasions, made of red velvet embroidered with silver thread to create an elegant decoration and with the rounded, 'hanging' sleeves that convey both the splendour of Spanish clothing during the reign of Philip III and the importance of luxury textiles as a social indicator. Female clothing during this period imprisoned women's bodies, leaving them little room to move and concealing their natural form. We are grateful to Dr. Amanda Wunder, (City University of New York, Lehman College Department of History) for noting that the collar frames the face here in an interesting way that differs from the more usual openings created by the ruff-setters, which are often more pronounced, and for noting that the dress here is a formal gown with a train that was called a *saya entera*. It was made of two main elements, a skirt (*basquiña*) worn over a conical farthingale (*verdugado*) and bodice called a *cuera* that has tabbed shoulder wings (*brahones*) and round hanging sleeves, worn over a pair of fitted sleeves. A notable feature is the gilded or 'hip' belt, worn low around the waist in a v-shape and in this case with an ornate decoration of festoons of fruit, flowers and putti, again indicating the sitter's elevated social status. Villandrando's detailed, meticulous rendering of the clothing and jewels largely reflects his years of study with his master Pantoja de la Cruz.

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The pair of theatrical and Baroque red curtains with their gold trim - here symmetrically draped to emphasise the sense of space and masterfully framing the figure of the sitter outlined against a black background - was an element commonly employed in formal portraits of the Spanish Habsburg court of this type. The distinctive folds in the curtains, with their pronounced contrasts of light and shade, are to be seen in other works by Villandrando, including *Prince Philip and the Dwarf, Miguel Soplillo* (fig. 1), and *Portrait of an unknown woman, known as Margarita Aldobrandini, Duchess of Parma* (fig. 4, Saint Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum).

The light, which enters from high up on one side, creates the pronounced shadow of the inverted funnel-shaped skirt on the plain floor, a device also seen in *Lady with an inscribed Medallion* in the Worcester Art Museum (Massachusetts) and in other works by Villandrando.

In the present painting Villandrando continued the Spanish portrait tradition practiced by Alonso Sánchez Coello, Pantoja de la Cruz and Bartolomé González. Other stylistic comparisons between this work and portraits attributed to the artist can be established, including the depictions of *A Spanish Noblewoman, traditionally identified as Doña Juana de Salinas* (fig. 5, Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland), *Juana Ramírez de Arellano y Contreras* (fig. 6, Madrid, Count of Bornos Collection), *Portrait of a Lady at a balustrade* (fig. 7, Barcelona, private collection), and the *Portrait of a Noblewoman, traditionally identified as Isabel de Borbón* owned by the Museo del Prado, currently on loan to the Museo del Traje, Madrid (fig. 8).

José Gómez Frechina

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Figure 1.
Villandrando,
and the Dwarf,

Rodrigo de
Prince Philip
Miguel Soplillo,

c. 1620.
Museo del Prado, Madrid

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Figure 2. Rodrigo de Villandrando, *Isabel de Borbón, Wife of Philip IV*, c. 1620.
Museo del Prado, Madrid

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Figure 3. Rodrigo de Villandrando, *The Infanta Maria Anna of Austria, future Queen of Hungary*, c. 1622. Museo del Prado, Madrid

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Figure 4. Rodrigo de Villandrando, *Portrait of an unknown woman, known as Margarita Aldobrandini, Duchess of Parma*. Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg

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Figure 5. Rodrigo de Villandrando, *Portrait of a Spanish Noblewoman* (traditionally identified as Doña Juana de Salinas but now thought more likely to depict Doña Castilda de Velasco, Countess of Revilla), c. 1620. National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin

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Figure 6. Rodrigo de Villandrando, *Juana Ramírez de Arellano y Contreras*.
Count of Bornos Collection, Madrid

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Figure 7. Rodrigo de Villandrando, *Portrait of a Lady at a balustrade*.
Private collection, Barcelona

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Figure 8. Rodrigo de Villandrando, *Portrait of a Spanish Noblewoman*, traditionally identified as *Isabel de Borbón*. Prado Museum, Madrid, currently on loan to the Museo del Traje, Madrid

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