

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM
FINE ARTS

EUSTACHE LE SUEUR

Paris 1616 – id. 1655

French School

BUST LENGTH PORTRAIT OF A MAN

Oil on canvas
H. 0,55 m; W. 0,45 m

DATE: 1640-1645

PROVENANCE: Private collection

Only four portraits by Le Sueur are known including a group portrait, the famous *Gathering of Friends at the Louvre*. The work presented here has all the qualities of Parisian classicism of the 1640s.

In France, although portraiture flourished in the mid-16th century with François Clouet and Corneille de Lyon, it was in the 17th century that this genre developed widely.¹ A huge quantity of portraits painted during the 17th century are documented in inventories,² but only a small number, few of which are signed, have survived.³

According to a scale of values confirmed in the 17th century by the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture,⁴ portraiture was considered to have less intellectual and technical merit than history painting.⁵

Certain prominent artists' work in portraiture is still little known. Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) and Charles Le Brun (1619-1690) both made portraits, especially in their early years. These versatile artists were probably monopolized by the creation of history paintings and large decorative schemes. In addition, the style of a history painter can be significantly different, more realist, when painting a portrait.

The Portrait, between Truth and Beauty

A portrait painter was invited then to seek a subtle balance between reality and ideal, truth and beauty.⁶ (The notion of "resemblance" will arise later in the century.) If a successful portrait

¹ Thierry Bajou, "L'image de l'homme au temps de Descartes ou le portrait au XVII^e siècle en Europe", *Portrait. Le portrait dans les collections des musées Rhône-Alpes*, Bourg-en-Bresse, Chambéry, Valence, 2001, p. 107-118.

² For example, the painted oeuvre of Claude Lefebvre (1632-1675) is estimated to be 800 portraits. Emmanuel Coquery, "Les derniers jours de Claude Lefebvre", *Curiosité. Études d'histoire de l'art en l'honneur d'Antoine Schnapper*, Paris, 1998, p. 87.

³ Jacques Thuillier, "Le portrait", *La Peinture française. De Le Nain à Fragonard*, Geneva, 1964, p. 27-28.

⁴ The hierarchy of genres was theorised by André Félibien in his preface to the lectures given at the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture during the year 1667, Paris, 1669.

⁵ This last one represents the actions of people in settings and requires important general knowledge in the areas of history, mythology, allegory and religion.

⁶ Edouard Pommier, *Théories du portrait. De la Renaissance aux Lumières*, Paris, 1998, p. 146.

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remains primarily a skilful combination of each of these opposites, it is also possible to divide the portrait painters of the 17th century into two groups on the basis of what survives.⁷

One group prefers the ideal of beauty, according to the criteria of the time, and concentrates on what was called the sitter's "grace": the pose and different elements of the costume. A primary role is therefore given to the costumes, especially to the material (silks, velvets). In these portraits, life circulates in the folds and creases of the fabrics and the shimmering they provoke. The desire for pageantry clearly takes priority over psychology.⁸

The other movement concentrates more on perceiving the sitter's inner life, while aiming for conscientious resemblance of the face in which the intensity of the gaze doubtless plays a key role. These are simpler compositions, often against a neutral background. Among the artists of this movement are the Le Nain brothers, Philippe de Champaigne, Charles Le Brun, Simon Vouet as well as the artist to whom this painting is attributed, Eustache Le Sueur.

Who was Eustache Le Sueur?

Eustache Le Sueur was a pupil and assistant of Simon Vouet (1590-1649), the most fashionable painter of the second quarter of the 17th century. After spending fifteen years in Rome where he had a brilliant career, Vouet had been called back to Paris by Louis XIII in 1627 and Le Sueur worked in his workshop for a dozen years, between 1632 and 1643/44,⁹ perfectly adapting the baroque lyricism of his master.

One of the few French painters of the time not to have travelled to Italy,¹⁰ he was influenced by Raphael whose work he knew from the royal collections and from prints, and by Nicolas Poussin who made a trip to Paris in 1640-1642. Le Sueur evolved over time towards a style that was more and more pared down, serious and serene. With Laurent de La Hyre (1606-1656), Sébastien Bourdon and Jacques Stella (1596-1657), he was one of the representatives of a new style of painting under Mazarin's, defined as "Parisian Atticism" by Jacques Thuillier,¹¹ it is characterized by a search for balance and clarity.¹²

⁷ Emmanuel Coquery, "Le portrait français de 1660 à 1715", exh. cat. *Visages du Grand Siècle. Le portrait français sous le règne de Louis XIV 1660-1715*, Nantes, Musée des Beaux-Arts; Toulouse, Musée des Augustins, 1997, p. 50.

⁸ The protagonists of this movement were: Jean Nocret (1615-1672), the Elle dynasty called 'Ferdinand', Juste d'Egmont (1601-1674), Henri Beaubrun (1603-1677) and his cousin Charles Beaubrun (1604-1692), Gilbert de Sève (1618-1698).

⁹ The date he entered the workshop is still uncertain. Le Sueur was a witness at his master's wedding in 1640 and a document of 1642, indicating that he was living in the Louvre galleries, suggests that was Vouet lodging him at the time. Le Sueur's marriage contract, in July 1644, shows that he was no longer living with Vouet and that the master was not present at the ceremony. Vouet was not a godfather to any of his children. Barbara Brejon de Lavergnée, "Simon Vouet et son atelier", exh. cat. *Eustache le Sueur*, Musée de Grenoble, 19 March – 2 July 2000, Paris, 2000, p. 57.

¹⁰ The fact that a certain number of artists, including Laurent de La Hyre (1606-1656), Philippe de Champaigne (1602-1674), Pierre Patel (1604-1676), Charles Poerson (1609-1667) and Michel Corneille the Elder (about 1601-1664) – did not feel the need to travel to Italy was interpreted by their contemporaries as a sign of the maturity of the French school of painting. Sylvain Laveissière, exh. cat. *Le Classicisme Français. Masterpieces of Seventeenth Century Painting*, The National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, 1985, p. XXXVIII.

¹¹ Jacques Thuillier, "Au temps de Mazarin. L'atticisme parisien", *La Peinture française. De Le Nain à Fragonard*, Geneva, 1964, p. 65-69; the term "atticisme" comes from Bernard Dorival, *La Peinture française*, Paris, 1942, t. I, p. 6.

¹² Alain Mérot, *Éloge de la clarté. Un courant artistique au temps de Mazarin, 1640-1660*, exh. cat. Dijon, Musée Magnin, Le Mans, Musée de Tessé, 1998.

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Le Sueur's painted work includes several decorations for Parisian *hôtels particuliers*, including the Hôtel Lambert on the Île Saint-Louis (partly conserved at the Louvre), and many religious paintings, including his famous series on the *Life of St Bruno*¹³ for the Charterhouse of Paris. In 1648, Le Sueur was asked to be among the founding members of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. His death at the age of thirty-eight, a year before Laurent de La Hyre (1606-1656) and two before Jacques Stella (1596-1657), allowed Charles Le Brun (1619-1690) to succeed Simon Vouet as "First Painter to the King".¹⁴ The mood of contemplation inspired by his paintings, their simplicity and nobility, earned Le Sueur the name "the French Raphael", proof of the unreserved admiration of connoisseurs in the 18th century,¹⁵ and for part of the 19th century, he personified the French school, alongside Poussin and Le Brun.¹⁶

Vouet's Influence on Le Sueur's Portraits

Simon Vouet was probably one of the most important portrait artists of the first half of the 17th century,¹⁷ especially in pastel,¹⁸ a technique he discovered when he lived in Italy. He abandoned the 16th century formula of *trois crayons* and the strict frontal pose of the figure to present his sitter bust length, turned three-quarters, the gaze directed towards the viewer. The facial expression seems to be directly captured from life. Between 1632 and 1635, Vouet made a large number of portraits of gentlemen and officers of the Court of Louis XIII.¹⁹

Rediscovered partly by Jean-Pierre Cuzin and Barbara Brejon de Lavergnée,²⁰ these portraits by Simon Vouet seem to have had a major influence on Le Sueur who in fact assimilated his style of portrait perfectly, adding his own great skill in capturing and then in communicating the sitter's character.²¹

Le Sueur's Portraits

In a pioneering article of 1965,²² Charles Sterling summarized what was known about Le Sueur's portraits. After analysing the *Gathering of Friends*²³ and the *Portrait of Guillaume Albert*,²⁴ he

¹³ *Vie de Saint Bruno*, a series of 22 oil paintings on canvas, transposed from wood, each H. 1,93 m; W. 1,30 m, painted by Le Sueur between 1645 and 1648, Paris, Musée du Louvre (inv. 8024 to 8046).

¹⁴ Pierre Rosenberg, exh. cat. *Poussin, Watteau, Chardin, David... Peintures françaises dans les collections allemandes XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles*, Grand Palais, 18 April – 31 July 2005, p. 381.

¹⁵ Alain Mérot, *Eustache Le Sueur (1616-1655)*, Paris, 1987, p. 133-139.

¹⁶ Alain Mérot 1987, p. 105.

¹⁷ Arnauld Brejon de Lavergnée, "Notes parisiennes: Philippe de Champaigne et non Le Sueur, Le Sueur et non Vouet", *Curiosité. Études d'histoire de l'art en l'honneur d'Antoine Schnapper*, Paris, 1998, p. 48.

¹⁸ Sylvain Laveissière, exh. cat. *Le Classicisme Français. Masterpieces of Seventeenth Century Painting*, The National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, 1985, p. 76.

¹⁹ Barbara Brejon de Lavergnée, "Simon Vouet et le dessin", exh. cat. *Vouet*, Paris, Grand Palais, 1990-1991, p. 359-360 and p. 386-389.

²⁰ Two pastels are in the Uffizi in Florence (inv. 2463F and inv. 1042 E). the Louvre owns a portrait of a man (Jean-Pierre Cuzin, "Jeunes gens par Simon Vouet et quelques autres", *Revue du Louvre*, 1979, I. p. 20, fig. 12). An important group of pastels by Vouet is in private hands. Barbara Brejon de Lavergnée, "Some new pastels by Simon Vouet: portraits of the court of Louis XIII", *The Burlington Magazine*, novembre 1982, vol. CXXIV, no. 956, p. 689-693.

²¹ Christopher Wright, *The French Painters of the Seventeenth Century*, London, 1985, p. 102.

²² Charles Sterling, "Eustache Le Sueur peintre de portraits", *Walter Friedlaender zum 90. Geburtstag. Eine Festgabe seiner europäischen Schüler, Freunde und Verehrer*, Berlin, 1965, p. 181-184.

²³ Eustache Le Sueur, *Gathering of Friends*, about 1640, oil on canvas, H. 1,36 m; W. 1,95 m, Paris, Musée du Louvre (inv. 8063).

²⁴ Eustache Le Sueur, *Portrait of Guillaume Albert*, 1641, oil on canvas, H. 1,12 m; W. 0,97 m,

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attributed three other male portraits: a *Portrait of a Man* now kept in the Musée du Louvre,²⁵ and another *Portrait of a Man*, then in private hands and recently presented by the Galerie Éric Coatalem,²⁶ both of which are in the catalogue raisonné by Alain Mérot. However, the *Portrait of a Young Man Leaning on a Sword*,²⁷ mentioned by Sterling was rejected by Mérot. By stylistic comparison with the *Portrait of Guillaume Albert*, dated January 1641, all the known portraits by Le Sueur can be dated to the years 1640-1645, just after he left Vouet's workshop, and before he had reached the age of 30. According to Charles Sterling, the stylistic elements that connect these male portraits to the two confirmed works by Le Sueur are, in addition to the lighting, the treatment of the lips, the nostrils, the accent of light on the nose and in the eye that are also evident in our portrait.



Pieter Van Schuppen, 1696, print after the *Self portrait* of Eustache Le Sueur, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale.



Eustache le Sueur, *Gathering of Friends*, about 1640, oil on canvas, H. 1,36 m; W. 1,95 m, Paris, Musée du Louvre (inv. 8063).

Bases for an Attribution to Le Sueur

Alain Mérot²⁸ has said that it could in fact be possible to connect our portrait to the rare effigies attributed to Le Sueur.

Guéret, Musée d'Art et d'Archéologie, inv 2008.0.198. Alain Mérot, *Eustache Le Sueur (1616-1655)*, Paris, 1987, no. 22, p. 175, fig. 20. An inscription on the back of the canvas identifies the sitter and dates the portrait to January 1641.

²⁵ Eustache Le Sueur, *Portrait of a Man*, about 1642, oil on canvas, H. 0,81 m; W. 0,65 m, Paris, Musée du Louvre (bought in 1999). Alain Mérot, *Eustache Le Sueur (1616-1655)*, Paris, 1987, no. 24, p. 175, fig. 23.

²⁶ Eustache Le Sueur, *Portrait of a Man*, oil on canvas, H. 0,79 m; W. 0,66 m, Galerie Éric Coatalem, Paris, afterwards private collection. Alain Mérot, *Eustache Le Sueur (1616-1655)*, Paris, 1987, no. 23, p. 175, fig. 22.

²⁷ *Portrait of a Young Man Leaning on a Sword*, oil on canvas, H. 0,64 m; W. 0,52 m, Hartford (Connecticut), The Wadsworth Atheneum (inv. 1966.11). Alain Mérot 1987, R. 93.

²⁸ Written communication of 11 March 2021. Our painting could be compared to the rare portraits that are attributed to Le Sueur, about 1640-1645. From a photo, the handling appears to him however to be slightly less confident, a little drier than the *Portrait of Guillaume Albert*, or the *Portrait of a Man* in the Louvre and the one formerly with Éric Coatalem, in Paris. M. Mérot cannot give an opinion based on the comparison of photos

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In addition, a real physical resemblance is apparent between the sitter of our portrait and the officer in the right foreground of the *Gathering of Friends*. This would not be the first individual portrait related to this group portrait. Charles Sterling compares the *Portrait of Guillaume Albert* with the figure on the left dressed in the antique style, while the Louvre's *Portrait of a Man*, with his round face and red goatee, seems in our view to be close to the one holding a compass in the centre of the composition.

Unlike other the portraits mentioned, all half-length, ours is shorter, formally very close to a *Self-Portrait*²⁹ by Le Sueur known from a print by Pieter Van Schuppen (1627-1702).

In addition, the lace collar, formed by touches of opaline showing a subtle play of light, is treated in a manner similar to the other portraits.



Eustache Le Sueur, *Portrait of a man*, about 1642, oil on canvas, H. 0,81 m; W. 0,65 m, Paris, Musée du Louvre (bought in 1999).



Eustache Le Sueur, *Portrait of a Man*, oil on canvas, H. 0,79 m; W. 0,66 m, Galerie Éric Coatalem, Paris, afterwards private collection.



Eustache Le Sueur, *Portrait of Guillaume Albert*, 1641, oil on canvas, H. 1,12 m; W. 0,97 m, Guéret, Musée d'Art et d'Archéologie, inv 2008.0.198.

An Expression of Honour

Our sitter's face on which the artist has concentrated stands out against a charred background revealing brush strokes painted with a restrained realism. His gaze gives him an undeniable presence and seems to be seeking the viewer's gaze, towards whom he turns. Defying him to be himself, he calmly defies in turn. For Marc Fumaroli³⁰, French portraits of the 17th century show a gaze of honour that requires the viewer to witness the sitter as appropriately represented for his age and rank. He is thus shown with dignity and, from the rank he occupies and the

given the large number of good portrait artists active in Paris during the 17th century and the few studies published on them.

²⁹ Alain Mérot, 1987, M. 227 (painting known from a print by P. Van Schuppen, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Estampes.)

³⁰ Marc Fumaroli, "Les leurres qui persuadent les yeux" in exh. cat. *La peinture française du XVII^e siècle dans les collections américaines*, Paris, New York and Chicago, 1982, p. 12.

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