A PORTRAIT OF A KNIGHT OF MALTA

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The striking portrait of a Knight of Malta that the Museum is showing currently among the choicest pieces from the Blumenthal collection has never before been exhibited as an Italian painting. It came to the collection of Mr. Blumenthal some time before 1914 and always figured among his pictures as an early work of El Greco's, done in his Italian period. In 1940 it appeared with this attribution at the New York World's Fair.

Our portrait bears a Latin inscription at the lower right, informing posterity that it was painted in 1566, when the sitter was twenty-nine years old. El Greco at this time was presumably still at work in Venice. We do not know when he transferred to Rome, but from a contemporary letter we infer that it was shortly before 1570. Fortunately there are several portraits generally accepted as works made around 1570 that give us a perfectly clear idea of El Greco's pre-Spanish portrait style. First, there is the keen, arresting half-length in Naples of the miniaturist Julio Clovio, who was probably painted by El Greco in Rome in 1569. Then, also of this time, there is the full-length portrait in the Frick Collection of another Knight of Malta, Vincentio Anastagi. Finally, and perhaps most pertinent for our estimate of El Greco's early style, there are the four portrait heads in the Minneapolis version of Christ Driving the Moneychangers from the Temple. These portraits, with their Venetian manner and color, derived pretty directly from Jacopo Bassano, show even at this early date much of the high-strung complexity of style and technique that characterizes the typical Spanish works of El Greco, and thus we are forced to recognize that our portrait of a Knight of Malta, with its simplicity of statement and cleanness of line, has nothing in common with El Greco's early style. The Spanish scholar Aureliano de Beruete once rejected another work often ascribed to El Greco in words which might be applied to our picture: "The coloring is very different from that peculiar to El Greco even in these early years, and above all that touch, peculiarly his, that restless brush stroke, nervous, vacillating, incorrect if you wish, but very expressive and very peculiar, does not appear here anywhere."

After one has decided that the handsome young man is not by El Greco, his large dark eyes, his silky moustache and short beard, and above all his somber dress and sheer white collar, automatically remind one of portraits by the Brescian painter Giovanni Battista Moroni. But the resemblance is only a general one of geography and period, for Moroni's portraits actually exhibit greater elegance and richness of effect, and the linear handling of our knight is not his.

Further search among the Italians reveals strong similarities between our painting and a number of signed and dated pictures by Scipione Pulzone, and these strongly painted, able portraits of Pulzone's have led to the present tentative attribution to Pulzone's master, Jacopino del Conte (1510-1598). Pulzone himself was only admitted to the guild of Saint Luke in Rome in 1567, the year after our picture was painted, whereas Jacopino, reputedly a pupil of Andrea del Sarto, had some time before transferred to Rome and had already completed his frescoes in San Giovanni Decollato. Vasari describes him as a notable portraitist who did all the popes from Paul III on, as well as numerous other important personages, and signals him as one of the two painters who made likenesses of Michelangelo. The frescoes show in the background a number of what are surely portrait heads, some of them bearing the most striking resemblance to
our knight in the modeling of bony structure and in the light and shadow. Furthermore, there are in these frescoes hands that show the same lumpy joints as those of the man in our portrait, with strong, bright lights on the raised knuckles.

In contrast with the popularity he enjoyed in his own day, Jacopino is now a painter of very little reputation, but surely many pictures by him are still to be found, and if our Knight of Malta is one of them, it is obvious that the painter deserves much greater appreciation.