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EST. 1817

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Lavinia Fontana(Bologna 1552-
1614 Rome)

*Portrait of a Gentleman half-length, wearing
a medal*

Oil on canvas

28 1/2 x 21 4/5 in. (72.5 x 55.5 cm.)

Datable to c.1590



Provenance

Palazzo Marefoschi, Macerata, Italy; Private collection, Brussels, Belgium.

In the late 1590s, painter and portraitist Lavinia Fontana successfully blended the artistic teachings of her father, Prospero Fontana (Bologna 1512-1597), Bartolomeo Passerotti (Bologna 1529-1592), and the Carracci's naturalism, while also incorporating the life-like illusionism of the *ex cera effigies* (portraits made of wax) that were popular in Bologna at the time. These effigies gained popularity partly due to the naturalist Ulisse Aldovrandi, who was closely connected with the Fontana family. This period marked the height of Lavinia's career as a portrait artist, a time when her work evolved from the late 16th-century *maniera* to a style that embraced the innovations of the new century. Her mature style is evident in the more focused perspective, the deeper psychological exploration of the sitter, and a handling of light and colour that demonstrates her direct knowledge of Venetian painting, in contrast to her earlier works, which were primarily influenced by the Carracci.

This hitherto unknown *Portrait of a Gentleman* can be added to the small corpus of known autograph portraits by Lavinia. Although unsigned, her authorship is clear both in the composition and stylistically. The close perspective and tight framing, with a vague dark background, bring the gentleman almost into the viewer's space, highlighting his sober, solemn, and elegant attire.

The luminous white ruff and cuffs, along with the long gold medal necklace, are particularly striking. The necklace can be closely compared to the one worn by the gentleman in the *Portrait of a Collector* by Bartolomeo Passerotti (fig. 1, c.1579-80, London, Italian Embassy). The medal depicts William V, Count Palatine of the Rhine and Duke of Bavaria. The Latin inscription, which is illegible in Passerotti's version but readable in Lavinia's medal (fig. 2), reads: 'GVLIELMVS COM PAI RHENI BAVA DVX.' The medal thus symbolizes the sitter's loyalty to the Houses of Bavaria and the Electoral Palatinate of the Rhine. The

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ring on the sitter's hand features the letter 'V', referencing the inscription on the medal. His hand, prominent in the foreground, holds a folded piece of paper, perhaps a letter, prompting the viewer to ponder the meaning behind the gentleman's gaze.

The naturalistic rendering of the sitter's skin shows the technique that Lavinia employed in the final years of the 16th century: heavy use of lead white, applied with broad brushstrokes. The deep introspection of the sitter's expression comes across spontaneously due to his slight tilt to the left, which enhances the contrast between light and shadow against the dark background. The playful *chiaroscuro* across the sitter's face is characteristic of Lavinia Fontana's late-16th-century style. Shadows cross the lower part of the cheek, contrasting with the lighter upper part, which contrasts with the dark eyes and hair. Other stylistic features of this period further include meticulous attention to detail (such as the ruff, cuffs, and medal), elongated ears, a distinctive shading around the eyes, and a focus on the pupils, all of which intensify the gaze's emotional expression. During this time, Fontana was influenced by the Carracci, especially their emphasis on painting from life and the present portrait can be compared with Lavinia's depiction of the elderly gentleman in her *Family Portrait* (fig. 3, Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera, c.1595-1604). The sombre atmosphere and the naturalism influenced by the Carracci that define this work can also be found in the *Portrait of a Twelve-Year-Old Boy* (fig. 4, oil on canvas, Oblyon Group), which Carolyn Murphy attributed to Lavinia Fontana and supported by Vera Fortunati. It was first presented in the recent exhibition, *Lavinia Fontana: Trailblazer, Rule Breaker*, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, 6 May-27 August 2023.

The sitter in the present painting is most likely Andrea Fachinei (1549-1609), a jurist from Forlì. The artist had previously painted another notable figure from Forlì, Fachinei's father-in-law, the scientist Girolamo Mercuriale (1530-1606), in a portrait now in the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore (Fig. 5), which can be dated to 1588-89. The correspondence between Mercuriale and Fontana is documented in two letters dated April 10 and June 18, 1588 (Romeo Galli, 1939, pp. 117-118, documents no. 7, 8, reprinted by Cantaro, 1989, pp. 308-309, nos. 5a.12, 5a.13), sent from Bologna to the Duke of Urbino. In these letters, the scientist reaffirms his efforts to procure three portraits by Lavinia and mentions that he has already sent other works by the artist to Bavaria, where they were enthusiastically received. More recently, Giovanni Agosti, in the catalogue for the Fede Galizia exhibition (Trento 2021, p. 6), published a small altarpiece by Lavinia (Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera, on loan to Erba, Church of Santa Maria Nascente, signed and dated 1595), originally painted for the Church of Corpus Domini in Forlì.

Professor Vera Fortunati

Based on a photograph, Aoife Brady also believes that this portrait is by Lavinia Fontana, both from a compositional point of view and characteristics of the brushwork, particularly the treatment of the sitter's lace collar, which is painted with distinct thin, three-dimensional threads of lead white pigment. She tentatively places it sometime in the later 1580s, noting that the composition shares similarities with both Fontana's *Portrait of Isabella Ruini* (Uffizi, Florence, 1593) and the famous *Gozzadini family portrait* (Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna, 1584), the latter of which was also exhibited at the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin in 2023 (*op.cit.*). She believes that this painting may date to somewhere between the two.

Brady also draws comparisons with Fontana's *Portrait of Fr. Francesco Panigarola* (Uffizi, Florence) and her *Portrait of Carlo Sigonio* (Museo Civico di Modena), which although both likely a little earlier in date, share some similar elements, including the small, folded note

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2

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Fig. 3



Fig. 4

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Fig. 5