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A N T H O N Y V A N D Y C K

Head of a Man: Study for the Vertumnus and Pomona in Genoa

Van Dyck left for Italy in 1621, initially settling in Genoa. The city was a major center for art and trade at the time, and Van Dyck gained access to the works of famous Italian artists. Genoa was known for its wealthy aristocracy, who commissioned large numbers of portraits from European artists. This gave Van Dyck the opportunity to further develop and experiment with his style. Van Dyck also briefly stayed in Venice, where he studied the work of Titian. He was strongly influenced by Titian's use of color and his portraits, which emphasized the emotions of the subjects. This had a lasting impact on Van Dyck's own approach to portraiture.

One of the most significant phases of Van Dyck's time in Italy was his stay in Sicily, around 1623-1625. Sicily was a Spanish province at the time, and Van Dyck spent a short period in Palermo. During his stay in Sicily, Van Dyck mainly painted portraits of wealthy aristocrats, which further solidified his reputation as a portraitist.

After his time in Italy, Van Dyck returned to Antwerp in 1627. It was here that he made the transition to the English court, where he was appointed court painter to King Charles I of England. Van Dyck would spend the majority of his later career in England, where he became famous for his elegant and refined portraits of the English aristocracy.

However, the influence of Italy, especially Sicily, remained clear in Van Dyck's later work. His portraits showed the drama and emotional intensity he had developed during his time in Italy. His ability to capture the character of his subjects, combined with his masterful use of light and color, made Van Dyck one of the greatest artists of the Baroque period.

This evocative oil study by Anthony van Dyck (Antwerp 1599 – London 1641) captures the expressive head of an elderly man, rendered with remarkable immediacy and psychological depth. Executed circa 1620, the work served as a preparatory study for Van Dyck's monumental painting *Vertumnus and Pomona*, commissioned for the Palazzo Balbi in Genoa.

Painted on panel, the study exemplifies Van Dyck's mastery in capturing character through swift, confident brushwork. The sitter's bald head, furrowed brow, and contemplative gaze suggest a figure drawn from life, possibly a studio model or member of Van Dyck's Genoese circle.

This head study is not merely a technical exercise—it stands as an autonomous work of art, revealing Van Dyck's evolving style during his Italian period. The loose handling of paint, subtle modulation of light, and atmospheric background reflect the influence of Titian and Rubens, while asserting Van Dyck's own artistic voice.

Such studies were essential to Van Dyck's creative process, allowing him to explore physiognomy and emotion before

integrating figures into complex narrative compositions. Today, they are prized for their intimacy and insight into the artist's working method.

We are grateful to Christopher Brown for confirming the attribution of the present painting to Anthony van Dyck after first-hand inspection.

Oil on panel, 46 x 37cm



Literature

A. Morassi, 'Alcune opere del Rubens a Genova', *Emporium*, no. 105, 1947, pp. 187-195, pl. 11 (as Peter Paul Rubens)