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A Rare Jacobean Portrait Of Lady Elizabeth Wheeler Née Cole, 1623, Oil On Panel Painting



19 150 EUR

Signature : Attribué à Cornelius Johnson (1593-1661)

Period : 17th century

Condition : Très bon état

Material : Oil painting on wood

Width : 77.5

Height : 95.5

Depth : 7

Description

A Rare Jacobean Portrait of Lady Elizabeth Wheeler (née Cole), 1623. Attributed to Cornelius Johnson (1593-1661). This remarkably rare early oil on panel has emerged as far more than an anonymous "Portrait of a Lady." Preserved in outstanding condition--its surface retaining exceptional clarity in the lace and textiles--it has only recently been reunited with the identity of its sitter: Elizabeth Cole (1607-1670), later Lady Elizabeth Wheeler, a Westminster gentlewoman whose later life brought her into intimate royal service as laundress for His Majesty's person. That combination--high quality, uncommon survival, a newly identified sitter, and a life that intersects directly with the last acts of Charles I--places this portrait in a category of genuine rarity. It is not simply a beautiful Jacobean

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likeness; it is a rediscovered historical document - legible and compelling. The sitter is presented half-length against a dark ground, enclosed within a painted sculpted oval surround that functions like an architectural frame. This device, fashionable in the 1620s, concentrates the viewer's attention and heightens the sense of social presentation: the sitter appears both physically and symbolically "set apart," as if viewed through a refined aperture. The portrait's immediate power, however, lies in the costume--an ensemble of striking modernity for c. 1623 and rendered with a precision that survives with remarkable crispness. She wears a deep green gown--a fitted overgown with open sleeves--over a finely embroidered linen jacket (a stiffened bodice/waistcoat garment). The sleeves form pronounced "wings" at the shoulder, a structurally assertive fashion detail of the early 1620s that enlarges the silhouette and signals sophistication. Beneath the green overlayer, the white linen jacket is richly ornamented in gilt embroidery. The goldwork is arranged as scrolling foliate forms--looping, curling tendrils punctuated by seed-like stippling--organised into balanced compartments across the bodice and sleeves. The motifs read as stylised botanical forms with rounded fruit-like terminals and leaf elements: not literal naturalism, but controlled abundance. The technique is described with extraordinary intelligence, mimicking couched metallic thread through patterned, "stitched" marks, while tiny dots and short dashes create a lively tactile shimmer. This embroidered jacket sits above a newly fashionable high-waisted, sheer apron or overskirt. The translucent fabric falls in soft vertical folds and is articulated with narrow lace-edged bands, giving the skirt a crisp rhythm of alternating sheer and patterned strips. At the neck, a fine ruff frames the face: a disciplined structure of pleated linen finished with delicate lace. Draped diagonally across the torso are long gold chains, painted to suggest weight and metallic gleam; they function both as ornament

and as a further signifier of status. The cumulative effect is controlled luxury: she is not overloaded with jewels, but clothed in textiles whose cost and craftsmanship speak unmistakably. The recent sitter's identification rests on heraldic and genealogical analysis: the arms shown on the painting correspond to those recorded for several families in armorial sources, but when the lines of descent are tested against survival and chronology, the viable bearer by 1623 resolves to Cole, and--crucially--to the London branch. That resolution matters because it anchors the portrait to a very specific social world: London/Westminster civic gentry and Crown administration, the milieu in which portraiture served as both self-fashioning and social instrument. The recent identification of the sitter (the London Cole branch of the family) is not merely genealogical; it has direct implications for authorship. A London-based mercantile or civic-gentry family would have ready access to leading immigrant artists, familiarity with heraldic display conventions, and the means to commission oil on panel, still standard among Netherlandish-trained painters. In that context, the portrait's age inscription and date become especially revealing. The painting states the sitter to be nineteen years of age. Yet Elizabeth Cole's birth in 1607 suggests she would be younger if the portrait is dated as early as 1623. The key insight is that the "incorrect" age is best understood not as a mistake but as a deliberate social adjustment, a performative statement rather than a documentary one. The most persuasive explanation is strategic. Portraits of high-status unmarried women were frequently made in connection with marriage negotiations. In the early 1620s, Elizabeth's future husband, William Wheeler, was resident abroad at Middelburg in Zeeland in the Dutch Republic. If a portrait was intended to support or facilitate a match with an educated, ambitious man--"a man of learning and letters," --then presenting a seventeen-year-old as nineteen would subtly reposition her as more

mature and more nearly a peer in age, Wheeler being around twenty-two. The portrait thus becomes an instrument of alliance, not merely a likeness: an image designed to persuade, reassure, and elevate. This reading aligns perfectly with the period's wider conditions. The early 1620s in England were charged with anxiety and expectation: James I's later reign was marked by court faction, diplomatic tension, and the pressures of European conflict. The so-called "art market" was inseparable from these dynamics. Portraiture flourished because it served multiple functions: it fixed lineage, advertised alliance, signalled readiness for marriage, and projected the stability of elite households in an uncertain world. For Westminster families whose power came through office, portraiture was also a declaration of belonging--proof that administrative elites possessed the cultural polish traditionally associated with older aristocratic rank. Elizabeth's later life vindicates the portrait's impression of steadiness. Although no record survives of her marriage ceremony to William Wheeler, wills suggest she had married him by the mid-1630s, and there are strong grounds--consistent with the portrait's implications--for a union already in place by the early 1630s, possibly earlier. Wheeler himself rose rapidly. By 1639 he held a manor at Westbury Leigh in Wiltshire and sought letters of denization due to overseas birth, enabling him to stand as Member of Parliament for Westbury. He leased the principal manor of Westbury the following year, coinciding with his election. In government service he became Remembrancer of the Exchequer and held office across regime change, a testament to administrative skill and political pragmatism. It is Elizabeth, however, who makes this portrait exceptional. She became laundress for His Majesty's person, responsible for the washing and oversight of the King's personal linen--an office that, despite its domestic description, required unusual trust, discretion, and access. Her role becomes visible in 1643 when

she was granted a warrant signed by the Speaker of the House of Commons to follow the King to Oxford with her servant after the outbreak of the Civil War. She continued to serve during the King's captivity after 1646, and at Carisbrooke Castle in 1647 she and her maid were implicated in smuggling secret correspondence to and from Charles I, in service of escape plans. After the King's failed attempt to escape in March 1648, she was removed--yet the King's trust persisted: he was permitted to send her remaining jewels in an ivory casket. Later, at Hurst Castle, he requested her attendance again, and she remained part of the small circle around him in his final months. On the eve of his execution, the intimacy of that trust reaches its most poignant point. The King sent a messenger to Elizabeth's home in Cannon Row bearing a ring; she in turn delivered the sealed cabinet she had safeguarded, containing jewels and broken Garter insignia. Charles opened the box and distributed jewels to his two youngest children. Few women outside the royal family can be shown to have stood so close to these last acts of Stuart tragedy, and fewer still are preserved in portraiture with this level of quality and immediacy. Her later years confirm her prominence. Wheeler was barred during Pride's Purge and briefly imprisoned, yet later retained office; in 1657 he received a knighthood from Cromwell, making Elizabeth officially "Lady." After the Restoration, her earlier loyalty was recognised: she was replaced as laundress in 1661 and promoted to become a Lady of the Privy Chamber in extraordinary to Queen Catherine. She outlived her husband by four years, making her will in 1670 as Lady Elizabeth Wheeler of Westminster. The question of authorship is illuminated by the same matrix of evidence that enabled the sitter's identification: date, format, technique, and clientele. The portrait's most persuasive attribution is to Cornelius Johnson (Cornelis Janssens van Ceulen I), the leading London-based portraitist of the period for precisely this class of

sitter--metropolitan gentry and Crown-connected families who wanted portraits that look expensive, modern, and morally composed without tipping into aristocratic theatricality. Several features align closely with Johnson's practice in the early 1620s. First, the support and presentation: oil on panel, combined with the painted oval surround, is strongly characteristic of Johnson's output in this decade. While other painters sometimes used feigned ovals, Johnson employed them with particular regularity and sophistication, often pairing them with panel supports that reward fine, linear finish. Our portrait's oval is not a casual vignette; it is a consciously "sculpted" architectural device, tonally modelled to suggest depth and substance. That sense of controlled, designed presentation--neither purely decorative nor purely illusionistic--sits extremely comfortably within Johnson's London manner. Second, the handling of flesh: Johnson's portraits are repeatedly distinguished by a cool, porcelain-like modelling in the face, with minimal visible brushwork and an emphasis on smooth, continuous transitions rather than strongly sculpted planes. In this portrait the sitter's skin is built by subtle tonal shifts--especially around the jaw, mouth, and lower cheek--producing an effect of youthful softness without sentimentality. The features are quiet but alert; the mouth is small and reserved; the eyes are carefully placed and evenly lit. This is a psychological register that Johnson consistently favours: a calm, inward self-possession, ideally suited to a marriageable young woman presented as refined, steady, and socially fluent. Third, the textile intelligence: Johnson is among the most exacting painters of costume of his generation. Here, the lace ruff is constructed with disciplined repetition and crisp edge-definition; the gold chain is described through controlled highlights and thick impasto; and, most strikingly, the embroidery is rendered not as vague golden decoration but as a readable system--scrolls, seeded stitches, and motifs

arranged with symmetry and rhythm. This is important: the painter does not merely "suggest" luxury; he demonstrates an understanding of how luxury textiles are made and how they catch the light. That kind of descriptive authority is one of Johnson's core strengths and one reason he appealed so strongly to London patrons who wanted their expensive fabrics recorded with fidelity. Fourth, the social logic: Johnson's clientele maps onto the world now revealed by the heraldry and biography. A London/Westminster Crown-connected family commissioning a polished marriage-market portrait of a daughter in the early 1620s is exactly the kind of patronage situation that repeatedly produced Johnson's finest works. In that sense, attribution is not only a question of "style," but of fit: the painting looks like what Johnson's patrons asked for, and it behaves like what his studio reliably produced--refined, modern, and socially calibrated. It is understandable that the picture was once thought to be from the circle of Gilbert Jackson, because Jackson operates in a similar visual territory of sober backgrounds and fashionable costume, and cataloguer's attributions often choose the nearest familiar name. But the closer the painting is studied--especially with macro photographs--the less that designation satisfies. Jackson's portraits more often present heavier, more emphatic modelling in the face and a less integrated handling of detail, with lace and ornament tending to read as softer, more generalised passages rather than the crisp, methodical construction seen here. There is also typically a slightly different psychological temperature: Jackson's sitters can appear more fixed or declarative, whereas this sitter's presence is controlled but quietly responsive in a manner more characteristic of Johnson. In short, Jackson remains a reasonable "field" comparison, but he does not explain the combination of panel + feigned oval + refined flesh finish + textile precision + London patronage logic as coherently as Johnson does. Cornelius Johnson's own career

explains why such a portrait could be produced at this level. Born in London to a family of Netherlandish origin, he brought to English portraiture a disciplined, immigrant-trained approach to finish and description. He became one of the most sought-after painters for the gentry and professional elite, and later worked for high-ranking patrons as well. His particular gift was to give sitters an air of dignity and permanence without resorting to bravura: his portraits are controlled, legible, and socially persuasive--exactly the qualities a father commissioning a marriage portrait would have valued. Taken together, these elements explain why this painting stands apart. It offers the rare conjunction of secure dating, exceptional preservation, conspicuous fashion documentation, and a sitter whose later biography is historically extraordinary--a woman who moved from Westminster family strategy and marriage negotiation into the innermost domestic service of a king, and who remained close enough to the royal person to be entrusted with jewels and secrets at the very end. For collectors and institutions alike, it is precisely this layered richness--visual, social, and historical--combined with the portrait's sheer quality, that makes it not only desirable but genuinely important. Measurements: Height 95.5cm, Width 77.5cm framed (Height 37.75", Width 30.5" framed)