



Portrait Of A Gentleman, James Douglas, Lord Aberdour, With Books, Fine Carved Frame C.1730-35



10 250 EUR

Signature : Attribué à Jeremiah Davison (vers 1695-1745)

Period : 18th century

Condition : Très bon état

Material : Oil painting

Length : 9

Width : 124

Height : 148

Description

This exceptionally handsome and imposing portrait is a particularly accomplished example of British grand-manner portraiture of the early Georgian period. Preserved in excellent overall condition and retaining a remarkable degree of visual richness, the painting combines a penetratingly characterised likeness with sumptuous costume, dramatic colour and an unusually eloquent intellectual setting. At more than four feet high before framing, its scale is immediately impressive: the sitter occupies the composition with the assurance expected of a man of elevated position, yet the inclusion of books and his animated pointing gesture distinguishes the portrait from the more formulaic aristocratic likenesses of the period. The picture was almost certainly conceived as the male half

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of a pendant pair with the closely corresponding portrait of a young woman beside an orange tree, and the two works share the same dimensions, pictorial ambition and early history. The picture is in excellent overall condition, its principal passages remaining notably legible and visually effective. It is presented in a substantial carved and gilded frame of George II/Rococo character, richly ornamented with pierced scrolling acanthus, flowerheads and bold foliate corner and centre motifs around a gadrooned inner edge. The frame gives the portrait an architectural presence appropriate to its scale without overwhelming the sitter. The gentleman is shown three-quarter-length before a monumental sweep of deep green drapery. His body turns across the picture while his pale, carefully modelled face meets the viewer more directly. A long, narrow nose, level mouth and intelligent, slightly reserved expression give the head an individuality quite separate from the rhetoric of the pose. The books are conspicuous enough to be more than incidental studio furniture. They proclaim learning, cultivated thought and intellectual accomplishment, while the extended hand transforms the sitter from a passive object of scrutiny into an active participant in the scene. If the identification with James Douglas is correct, this aspect of the portrait acquires particular resonance. The costume strongly supports a date in the first half of the 1730s. The full-skirted coat, deeply turned cuffs and lavish use of gold embroidery belong to the luxurious male dress of the early Georgian elite before male tailoring gradually became more restrained later in the century. A British coat and waistcoat of circa 1730 in the Metropolitan Museum, for example, similarly employs extensive gilt embroidery, while another British coat there is dated circa 1735. The substantial curled wig, white neckcloth and lace or linen wrist ruffles are equally consistent with this period. The dating is therefore derived not from the proposed sitter alone but from the internal evidence of dress,

hairstyle and pictorial idiom. The portrait is said to represent James Douglas (1702-1768), then styled Lord Aberdour and later 14th Earl of Morton. Born in Edinburgh, Douglas was the eldest son of George Douglas, 13th Earl of Morton, and his second wife Frances, daughter of William Adderley of Kent. He was educated at King's College, Cambridge, taking his MA in 1722, and subsequently travelled on the Continent, where he pursued an interest in physics and natural philosophy. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society on 19 April 1733, eventually becoming its President from 1764 until his death. He was also one of the first Trustees of the British Museum and developed a particular reputation for astronomy. For such a sitter, the prominent open book would have been an exceptionally appropriate attribute: a conjunction of portrait iconography and biography. Douglas married Agatha Halyburton, daughter and heiress of James Halyburton of Pitcur in Angus, before 1731. Their early family life had strong associations with Aberdour in Fife and Edinburgh: their son Sholto Charles, who would eventually succeed his father as 15th Earl of Morton, is recorded as born at Aberdour and baptised in Edinburgh in 1731. Agatha brought into the marriage the ancient Halyburton connection with Pitcur, while the Douglas family was established at Aberdour during precisely these years. Their children included Sholto, Lady Frances, Lady Mary, James and George, several of whom appear with their parents in Davison's later family portrait. Lady Mary would eventually marry Charles Gordon, 4th Earl of Aboyne. The proposed identity is strengthened by a direct and unusually important connection with Jeremiah Davison. In 1740 Davison painted James Douglas and Agatha Halyburton together with their children in the monumental family portrait now in the National Galleries of Scotland. James is therefore not simply a Scottish nobleman who might conceivably have employed Davison: he is a documented patron and sitter of the artist.

Comparison with the 1740 likeness reveals compatible characteristics in the gentleman shown here--the long oval facial structure, elongated nose, narrow lower face and restrained mouth--while this portrait gives the entirely plausible impression of the same man at a younger age. Facial resemblance cannot establish identity on its own, but here it works in conjunction with chronology and known patronage rather than in isolation. There is also a useful chronological detail. Douglas succeeded his father as Earl of Morton in January 1738 and was appointed a Knight of the Thistle in the same year. The sitter in the present portrait displays no Thistle star, sash or other insignia. Such an omission could occur for many reasons and cannot independently date the picture, but it accords neatly with a portrait painted before 1738, when Douglas was still Lord Aberdour. A commission around 1730-35 would also coincide with his marriage and establishment of a young household, and, at the later end of that interval, with his election to the Royal Society in 1733. Either circumstance could readily have occasioned a substantial pair of formal portraits. The portrait belongs to a period in which British portraiture was enjoying a vigorous and highly competitive aristocratic market. George II had succeeded to the throne in 1727 and political life was dominated by Sir Robert Walpole's long administration. Wealth, lineage and cultural sophistication were increasingly expressed through houses, collections and commissioned portraits. Houghton Hall, constructed for Walpole between 1722 and 1735, became one of the great embodiments of this culture, housing a celebrated collection that included Van Dyck, Rubens and other continental masters. In London the artistic profession itself was becoming increasingly organised: in 1735 William Hogarth established the second St Martin's Lane Academy. It was within this sophisticated but still predominantly private system of patronage--decades before the foundation of the Royal Academy--that Davison

built his reputation. Jeremiah Davison occupies an interesting position in this generation of British portraitists. Born in London in about 1695 to Scottish parents, he worked in London until the mid-1730s before the Duke of Atholl encouraged him to establish himself in Edinburgh, where introductions through the Atholl family brought important commissions from the Scottish aristocracy. He later returned to London and died there in 1745. His artistic formation remains imperfectly documented, but George Vertue recorded his careful study and copying of portraits by Sir Peter Lely, and Davison is also known to have copied Van Dyck in the Royal Collection. These models help explain the combination found here of direct likeness, stately pose and sweeping theatrical drapery. Significantly, Davison was among the fashionable portraitists who employed the celebrated Flemish specialist Joseph van Aken (c.1699-1749) for the painting of draperies and costume. Van Aken also worked for Thomas Hudson, Allan Ramsay and John Vanderbank, illustrating the increasingly specialised organisation of the Georgian portrait studio. Davison's documented use of such a specialist provides important context for the accomplished rendering of the embroidered coat, linen and crimson drapery. The attribution to Davison is further supported by format. His documented Portrait of John Campbell, 3rd Earl of Breadalbane, dated 1730 and now in the National Galleries of Scotland, measures 127×101.6 cm almost precisely the 126.5×102 cm canvas dimensions of the present picture. The 50-by-40-inch format was of course widely used in British portraiture and is not in itself proof of authorship, but the correspondence demonstrates that this was exactly the scale at which Davison was producing ambitious aristocratic portraits at the proposed date. The attribution has additionally been suggested by the distinguished portrait scholar Dr Brian Allen, on the basis of digital photographs. In the absence of a signature

or documentary provenance and without a first-hand examination by Allen, the appropriately responsible formulation remains "Attributed to Jeremiah Davison." James Douglas subsequently developed into one of the more remarkable scientific aristocrats of eighteenth-century Britain. As President of the Royal Society he participated in preparations for the observation of the 1769 Transit of Venus and supplied Captain James Cook with instructions for the Endeavour expedition. The National Museum of Australia records that Cook later named Moreton Bay in his honour; the familiar spelling "Moreton" arose subsequently from the original Morton name. If the identification proposed here can ultimately be substantiated, this portrait would therefore represent the future Royal Society president approximately four decades before Cook's voyage, at the beginning of the intellectual career so aptly suggested by the open volume beneath his hand. The painting has considerable merit - the imposing 50 × 40-inch grand-manner format, excellent condition, exceptionally rich embroidered costume, books and unusually animated gesture with a serious attribution to a distinctive early Georgian portraitist, while the exceptionally handsome carved and gilded frame gives the whole ensemble a presence approaching one and a half metres in height. Although evidently conceived as one member of a pendant pair, the composition is entirely self-contained and particularly successful as an independent male portrait. For a collection or interior it offers both the decorative authority expected of a major eighteenth-century portrait and the additional intellectual interest of a credible association with one of the most fascinating figures in Georgian scientific and aristocratic life.