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Portrait Of Agatha Halyburton, With An Orange Tree, Exquisite Carved Frame, C.1730-1735



11 850 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 magnificent and exceptionally decorative portrait of a young woman is one of those early Georgian images in which likeness, sumptuous colour and symbolic meaning combine to unusually compelling effect. Preserved in excellent overall condition, the picture has an immediate visual richness: brilliant blue silk, rose-pink drapery and a great ochre-gold curtain emerge from a deep atmospheric background, while the sitter herself is placed beside a flowering orange tree and delicately raises a sprig of its blossom towards her breast. Monumental in scale yet graceful in conception, the painting almost certainly originated as one half of a pair with a corresponding portrait of a gentleman with books. Its combination of pendant format and conspicuous orange blossom strongly raises the

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possibility that the two works were commissioned to celebrate a marriage or the establishment of a new household. The painting presents in excellent condition, with the principal passages of the face, hands, costume, drapery and botanical detail retaining exceptional decorative clarity. The portrait is housed in a substantial carved and gilded frame of George II/Rococo character, with pierced acanthus scrolls, flowerheads, enriched corner and centre ornaments and a narrow gadrooned sight edge. Its warm gilding responds particularly successfully to the gold curtain and the saturated blue and pink of the costume. The sitter is represented three-quarter-length, her figure turned gently across the canvas while her face is brought into calm communication with the viewer. Her gown is a tour de force of painted texture. Brilliant blue silk catches the light across the bodice and ample skirt in folds that range from intense turquoise to silvery blue, while white linen emerges in loosely gathered ruffles at the elbows. A rose-pink mantle winds around her shoulders and falls in broad, animated folds behind and around the body, providing a warm counterpoint to the blue. Above, a vast golden-brown curtain is gathered and swept across the upper corner, giving the setting the theatrical magnificence associated with the grand manner of court and aristocratic portraiture. Her costume is better understood as formal portrait dress than as a literal record of a complete fashionable gown. British portrait painters continued to combine contemporary elements with deliberately timeless draperies derived from the traditions of Van Dyck and Lely. Nevertheless, the low décolletage, elbow-length sleeves with white ruffles, restrained arrangement of the hair and liberal employment of silk and pearls are entirely consonant with the first half of the 1730s. The compact coiffure is particularly removed from the much taller, more elaborate arrangements of later eighteenth-century fashion. In conjunction with the male companion's more chronologically diagnostic broad-cuffed,

gold-embroidered coat (also with Titan Fine Art at the time of writing), the costume supports a date of approximately 1730-35. The most distinctive element of the portrait is botanical. At the left grows a potted orange tree, bearing glossy leaves and clusters of small white flowers. The sitter reaches towards the living plant with one hand while holding a detached flowering sprig close to her bodice with the other. The motif is therefore emphatic and intentional rather than incidental landscape decoration. Its meaning would have been readily intelligible to a cultivated eighteenth-century audience. Orange blossom possessed a long iconographic association with chastity, marriage and fertility. In Britain the symbolism continued into aristocratic portraiture: orange trees and blossom were repeatedly employed in portraits associated with betrothal or marriage. The living potted tree adds another layer of meaning. Citrus trees were tender exotics in Britain, traditionally grown in movable tubs and protected during winter in purpose-built orangeries, which by this period had become established features of important country houses. The plant therefore conveys cultivation and prosperity at the same time as the blossom alludes to matrimony. These details are particularly suggestive in relation to the identification of the sitter, said to be Agatha Halyburton, first wife of James Douglas, later 14th Earl of Morton. Agatha was the daughter--and according to historical genealogical accounts the heiress--of James Halyburton of Pitcur in Angus, representative of an old Scottish landed family. She was baptised at Kettins on 1 June 1711 and married James Douglas before 1731. She became Countess of Morton when her husband succeeded to the earldom in January 1738, and died in Edinburgh on 12 December 1748, aged only thirty-seven. A portrait made circa 1730-35 would thus show her between approximately nineteen and twenty-four years old, remarkably consistent with the apparent youth of the woman represented

here. Her husband, James Douglas, was the eldest son of George Douglas, 13th Earl of Morton, and Frances Adderley. Before succeeding to the peerage he was styled Lord Aberdour. The couple's early family associations lay around Aberdour in Fife and Edinburgh, while Agatha brought the important Halyburton inheritance of Pitcur in Angus into the family. Their son Sholto Charles, who eventually became 15th Earl of Morton, is recorded as born at Aberdour in 1731 and baptised in Edinburgh; their children also included Lady Frances, James, Lady Mary and George. Lady Mary subsequently married Charles Gordon, 4th Earl of Aboyne, and through later generations the Halyburton inheritance continued to have a distinct dynastic identity. The possibility that this was an early marriage portrait of Agatha is therefore attractive. A commission around 1730-31 would show her at about nineteen or twenty, newly married and entering one of Scotland's great aristocratic families, while the prominently displayed orange blossom provides precisely the iconography one might expect in a commemorative portrait of a young bride. A somewhat later date, circa 1733-35, remains equally possible on stylistic grounds and would still show a young wife in the first years of marriage. The surviving male companion, with his open book and scholarly presentation, is plausibly identifiable as her husband James. The two compositions complement each other rather than merely matching in size: the gentleman is associated with learning and intellectual accomplishment, the woman with marriage, fertility, lineage and the cultivated natural world. Most importantly, there is a documented artistic connection between Davison and the proposed sitters themselves. In 1740 Jeremiah Davison painted the enormous family portrait of James Douglas, by then 14th Earl of Morton, together with Agatha and their children, today in the National Galleries of Scotland. Agatha appears beside her husband with the younger members of the family; Sholto, James, Frances,

Mary and George are identified by the Gallery. Thus the suggested identification does not depend upon finding a random aristocratic couple whose dates happen to fit. James and Agatha are independently documented as patrons of the artist within the following decade. Comparison of the present sitter with Agatha in the 1740 group is necessarily more difficult than the comparison between the two male likenesses. The later family portrait shows Agatha at approximately twenty-nine, in a different costume, pose and scale, and the depiction itself is subordinate to the large group arrangement. Nevertheless, the general facial type--the elongated oval, relatively long nose, small mouth and composed expression--is compatible. It would be unwise to elevate resemblance into proof; the stronger argument is cumulative, combining appropriate age, marriage chronology, the pendant relationship, orange-blossom iconography and the incontrovertible fact that Davison subsequently painted Agatha and James together. The attribution to Jeremiah Davison is itself persuasive while remaining properly qualified. Davison was born in London about 1695 to Scottish parents and established a successful London portrait practice before being encouraged by James Murray, 2nd Duke of Atholl, to work in Scotland in the later 1730s. Through the Atholl connection he gained access to a substantial network of Scottish aristocratic patrons and subsequently returned to London, where he died in 1745. George Vertue recorded that Davison studied and copied Lely closely, while works by Van Dyck in the Royal Collection also formed part of his visual education. The stately curtain, elegant hands, saturated fabrics and union of contemporary likeness with grand-manner rhetoric in the present work sit naturally within that tradition. Davison's studio practice also deserves attention in relation to the dazzling textiles seen here. He shared the services of the Flemish-born Joseph van Aken, the outstanding specialist drapery painter of Georgian London,

with portraitists including Thomas Hudson, Allan Ramsay and John Vanderbank. Van Aken's career is an important reminder that an eighteenth-century portrait could be a sophisticated studio production in which the principal painter concentrated upon likeness and conception while a specialist contributed passages of costume. The extraordinary blue, pink and golden fabrics in this particular painting should be understood within precisely this professional context. The dimensions offer an additional point in favour of the proposed artist. Davison's documented 1730 portrait of John Campbell, 3rd Earl of Breadalbane, now in the National Galleries of Scotland, measures 127×101.6 cm. The present picture measures 126.5×102 cm: virtually the same prestigious 50-by-40-inch format. Such canvases were by no means unique to Davison, but the comparison confirms that the scale, proportion and intended architectural presence of this portrait correspond exactly to his documented practice around 1730. The attribution has also been suggested by Dr Brian Allen, one of the leading scholars of eighteenth-century British portraiture, following consideration of digital images. Because that opinion was not based upon physical inspection, and because no signature or early documentary identification has yet emerged, "Attributed to Jeremiah Davison" remains the correct and defensible formulation. The wider cultural setting was one of conspicuous artistic ambition. Britain was in the reign of George II, while Sir Robert Walpole dominated political life through the 1720s and 1730s. Among the elite, portraiture operated alongside architecture, collecting and landscape improvement as a language of status and dynastic continuity. Walpole's Houghton Hall, built between 1722 and 1735 and filled with one of Britain's greatest collections of Old Masters, provides the most spectacular contemporary expression of this culture. At the same moment London possessed a vigorous professional community of native and immigrant painters: Hogarth established the

second St Martin's Lane Academy in 1735, and portrait studios competed for the patronage of a mobile British aristocracy whose social lives increasingly linked London and Edinburgh. The present portrait, with its continental grand-manner inheritance and emphatically British dynastic purpose, belongs closely to this world. As an independent work, the portrait possesses exceptional decorative appeal and at nearly a metre and a half high in its frame it has the architectural presence of a major country-house portrait. Its excellent condition and impressive carved and gilded frame allow it to be displayed immediately, while the serious Davison attribution and plausible identification with Agatha Halyburton provide substantial historical interest. It offers the collector the combination most desirable in an eighteenth-century portrait: visual beauty, scale, fine preservation, and an aristocratic context.