

Cornelis VISSCHER (Haarlem 1628 - Amsterdam 1658)

Portrait of a Young Man, Probably a Self-Portrait

Black chalk. Laid down.

Faintly signed CVisscher / fecit(?) at the upper right.

Indistinctly inscribed and dated(?) Cornelis Visscher del. / [?] / 16[?] on the backing sheet.

210 x 176 mm. (8 1/4 x 6 7/8 in.)

ACQUIRED BY THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK.

The early 18th century Dutch biographer Arnold Houbraken, in his De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen, praised Cornelis Visscher's particular skill as a portrait draughtsman in charcoal and black chalk. As Carlos van Hasselt has written, 'Most of Cornelis Visscher's portrait drawings were made between 1652 and 1658. The fact that so many have survived bears witness to the growing demand of an increasingly well-to-do bourgeoisie for a convenient yet impressive form of portraiture. In many cases the names of the subjects are unknown, which suggests that merchants and others who did not belong to the hereditary magistrature nevertheless had themselves depicted in a pose traditionally reserved for the privileged classes. Besides the influence of Van Dyck and his followers, that of the classical French portrait with its cool contrasting colors can also be felt in a style which, so to speak, anticipates the type of portrait in black chalk that became so popular about a decade later. In his many portraits Visscher avoided stiffness by emulating Frans Hals's healthy realism and his broad, almost pictorial treatment of textiles.'

Visscher was highly regarded in his lifetime, and his portrait drawings in particular continued to be

sought-after by collectors in the 18th and 19th centuries. Houbraken noted, for example, that several of Visscher's works were in the collection of the noted connoisseur of drawings Jeronimus Tonneman, a director of the Dutch East India Company, in Amsterdam.

Although it is indistinctly dated, the present sheet would appear to be a relatively early drawing by Visscher. John Hawley has suggested that this drawing may plausibly be regarded as a self-portrait. Visscher produced a significant number of self-portrait drawings, and the features of the youth in this sheet are very close to the artist's own appearance, as recorded in such self-portraits as a drawing dated 1649 in the British Museum, which was engraved in reverse by the artist, as well as a later engraving of 1651 and two self-portrait drawings, one dated 1652 and the other 1653, both today in the Rijksprentenkabinet in Amsterdam. Hawley has further noted that a particularly close stylistic comparison may be made with a drawing by Visscher of an unknown woman, in the British Museum.

An early copy or replica of the present sheet was on the art market in 2008 with an attribution to the Augsburg-born printmaker Jonas Umbach (c.1624-1693), and is today in the collection of the Museum Kunst Palast in Düsseldorf. It has previously been suggested that the Düsseldorf drawing, which is faintly inscribed 'Visscher', may have been a self-portrait by Umbach, which would mean that the present sheet is Visscher's portrait of the printmaker as a young man. Umbach was four years older than Visscher, and while it is possible that the two artists may have met each other, such an encounter seems unlikely. Visscher worked almost exclusively in Haarlem and Amsterdam, and although little is known of Umbach's life, he was based in Augsburg for most of his career, apart from a period in Italy between 1645 and 1652. The only known lifetime portrait of Jonas Umbach is an engraving by Matthäus Küsel, dated 1652 and showing the artist at the age of twenty-eight, in which the features of the sitter bears little resemblance to the youth in our drawing.

On balance, therefore, it seems more likely that the present sheet is a youthful self-portrait by Cornelis Visscher, by whom more self-portraits are known than by almost any other Dutch artist of the period, apart from Rembrandt.

Artist description:

Cornelis Visscher enjoyed a brief career of about a decade, but during this period produced some two hundred prints alongside a several dozen drawings. He was probably a pupil of the Haarlem painter and printmaker Pieter Claesz. Soutman, and entered the painter's guild in Haarlem in 1653. A few years later, however, he moved to Amsterdam. Active as a prolific printmaker from around 1649 onwards, Visscher was also, from 1652, a celebrated portrait draughtsman. (Only three early portraits dating from between 1649 and 1651 are known.) As the scholar William Robinson has noted, 'The fine, polished manner of Visscher's drawings simulates the cool, hard light, meticulous finish, and astonishing effects of detail and texture captured in his prints.' Visscher produced portrait drawings and prints of both a formal and an informal nature, and his signed and dated portrait drawings, often executed in black chalk on vellum and highly finished, were likely commissioned by clients and intended as autonomous works of art. Although best known for his portraits, Visscher also produced a handful of allegorical and historical scenes, genre subjects, landscapes and animal studies, both of his own invention and based on the work of other artists. He died in January 1658 at the age of twenty-nine, survived by his brothers Jan de Visscher and Lambert Visscher, who were also artists.