

PROVIDENCE ATHENAEUM – Wheaton College student essay, 2016.

Circle of Pieter Nason, *Cavalier at the time of Charles I (Before 1690)*. Oil on canvas, H.39in (99cm) x W.21.5in (54.5cm). Gift of Ethelbert R. Billings, 1863.

This distinguished seventeenth-century portrait, *Cavalier at the Time of Charles I*, is attributed to the circle of painter Pieter Nason [Dutch, 1612-1688/1690], a portrait and still life painter from The Hague.[1] Nason is often compared to his Amsterdam contemporary, Bortholomeus van der Helst [Dutch, 1613-1670], both known for their elegant, polished portraits of elite patrons.[2] We know that Nason trained under Jan van Ravesteyn [Dutch, 1572-1657],[3] a portrait painter to the Dutch court, and it is certain he would have been familiar with the work of the famed English court painter, Anthony van Dyck [Flemish, 1599-1641].[4] Originally attributed to Van Dyck, in fact (Christie's reattributed the Athenaeum portrait in 1995), the painting clearly bears many of the hallmarks of Van Dyck's work.[5]

Donated in 1863 by Ethelbert R. Billings, from the estate of his brother Alpheus Billings, this painting came to the library with four other valuable works, including a marble bust of William Shakespeare, another seventeenth-century oil portrait, another painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds, and a malachite table formerly owned by Prince Demidoff of Russia.[6] Alpheus Billings and his business partner, known to us only as "Mr. Cadman," were celebrated for their notable art collection. As a contemporary described:

The home of these bachelor friends, jointly occupied by them for more than twenty years, became a sort of temple, wherein were gathered costly and exquisite productions of genius and skill.[7]

Although the identity of the sitter is unknown, he must have been a prominent figure to have commissioned such a grand portrait. The work's title alludes to the English Civil War, which lasted from 1642-1646; during this conflict the Royalists, who supported King Charles I, opposed the Parliamentarians, who supported Parliament.[8] Both sides used deprecating nicknames for their opponents, the Royalists known as "Cavaliers" (derived from the Spanish word "Caballeros," for armed troopers/horsemen), and Parliamentarians called "Roundheads" (in reference to the shaved heads of the London apprentices who filled their ranks).[9] Thus, Royalists were stereotyped as licentious and violent – qualities popularly associated with the Spanish Cavaliers – while Parliamentarians were considered uneducated and unrefined.[10]

The portrait of this unknown cavalier depicts him turned toward the viewer in three-quarter pose, dressed in a light brown doublet and jerkin with an unstarched white collar around his neck. Covering his torso is a shiny, metal breastplate and at his side he holds a sword hilt in his left hand, indicative of his military status. During the Civil War, regiments wore uniforms chosen by their colonels; because both sides were often found in similar colors, cavalrymen would have

indicated their allegiance by colored sashes, such as the light blue one seen here.[11] In the Battle of Edgehill, the Parliamentarians wore orange sashes while Royalists wore red, however this generally unorganized system of sashes led to many casualties and confusion.[12]

This portrait is exemplary of the Grand Manner style, which used visual symbolism to portray the status of the figure and looked back to famed court painters Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck.[13] Van Dyck often portrayed his subjects slightly from below in order to give them an enhanced stature and presence.[14] The elegant portrayal, three-quarter pose, imperceptible brushstroke, and symbolic accessories demonstrate how this portrait could have originally been mistaken for a Van Dyck painting.

It is a great irony that this portrait currently hangs alongside the Athenaeum's portrait of John Hampden, a prominent Parliamentarian who opposed the taxes enforced by King Charles I (this work, too, formed part of the Billings gift). Although the depictions may appear similar in their visual refinement, the two men they portray could not have been more dissimilar in their values; indeed, Hampden was killed during a skirmish with Royalists in 1643, likely at the hands of a Cavalier. The juxtaposition of *Cavalier at the Time of Charles I* and the *Portrait of John Hampden* show that, despite having served on different sides of the Civil War, both were concerned with elegant self-fashioning (as, no doubt, were the painting's collectors Alpheus Billings and Mr. Cadman). MDP

Notes:

[1] "Pieter Nason", *National Galleries Scotland*, nationalgalleries.org.

[2] *Id.*

[3] *Id.*

[4] Jane Lancaster, *Inquire Within: A Social History of the Providence Athenaeum Since 1753* (Oak Knoll Press, 2003), p. 89.

[5] *Christie's Appraisal* [Providence Athenaeum Archives].

[6] Lancaster, *Inquire Within*, p. 89.

[7] *Id.*

[8] Dr. Mike Stoye, "Choosing Sides in the English Civil War", *BBC*, bbc.co.uk.

[9] *Id.*

[10] *Id.*

[11] Johnny Wilkes, "Did Roundheads and Cavaliers Really Dress so Differently?", *History Extra*, historyextra.com.

[12] Eric Niderost, "English Civil War: Battle of Edgehill", *History Net*, historynet.com.

[13] "British and American Grand Manner Portraits of the 1700s", *National Gallery of Art*, nga.gov.

[14] "Tour: Sir Anthony Van Dyck", *National Gallery of Art*, nga.gov.