

The Shannon Portrait Of The Hon. Robert Boyle

by James Mulraine

An important portrait of Robert Boyle by Johann Kerseboom has recently emerged on the art market from an Irish private collection. It is of the pattern familiar from the Kerseboom portrait in the collection of the Royal Society and, in the opinion of Tabitha Barber, 17th-century Curator at the Tate Gallery, is unquestionably an autograph work by Johann Kerseboom (*fl.1683-1708*). It is currently on display at Historical Portraits in Dover Street, London.

The painting measures fifty by forty inches and depicts Boyle in a wig and India gown seated at a damasked chair and table. A curtain separates this space from a background wall of relief wreaths set between pilasters. There is no direct reference to natural philosophy, although a large book which the sitter has been interrupted in the act of reading alludes to the intellect. The pained and drawn characterisation and the bold, slightly stiff treatment of the draperies distinguish the autograph versions from copies by other hands, such as that in the National Portrait Gallery (NPG 3930) where the features have been made younger and the draperies have been softened.

The painting belongs to the group of portraits described by R.E.W. Maddison ('The Portraiture of the Honourable Robert Boyle', *Annals of Science*, 15 (1959), 141-214, on pp. 159ff.) which derive from a sitting to Kerseboom in 1689. The current portrait is a version which was unknown to Maddison. Boyle notoriously disliked sitting for his portrait, which explains both the paucity of portrait types and, to satisfy the demand for images, the duplication by Kerseboom and others of this particular composition. The best of these versions - including the Royal Society portrait, the painting at Kensington Palace (Maddison, p. 169) and this example - display the same concern with an acute characterisation, and a skilful attention to the texture and detail of background and draperies. They also share a close association with the immediate family and friends who were Boyle's executors in 1692. Since that date this example has been in the possession of the family of the Earls of Shannon - direct descendants of Robert Boyle's nephew, the Hon. Henry Boyle - and until now has remained unknown to Boyle scholars.

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