




Michaelina  
Woutiers/  
Wautier

A Boy with Tobacco

Katlijne Van der Stighelen



MICHAELINA WOUTIERS/ WAUTIER

Mons(?), 1617/1618 – Brussels, 1689

***A Boy with Tobacco***

Oil on panel, 24,7 x 18,7 cm

On the back of the panel appears part of a piece of paper (wrongly) referring to ‘Cornelis Bega [...] stude (probably to be read as ‘Cornelis Bega leerling van Adriaen van Ostade’). Beneath the inscription an etiquette with the old lotnumber ‘245’

PROVENANCE

Anonymous sale, London, Sotheby's, 3 June 1981, lot 87 (as "Sweerts");

With Sir Humphrey Wakefield & Partners, Ltd., London, 1981 (as “by Sweerts”);

It is no exaggeration to say that Michaelina Woutiers was the only woman in the Early Modern Period in Europe who not only practiced all genres in the art of painting at the same time (portrait, history, still life, and genre painting), but who also excelled in them pictorially. Her unusually rich iconography is also worthy of note. She experimented and innovated with new iconographic themes. Without doubt, the aristocratic milieu into which Michaelina Woutiers was born offered her the opportunity for strong intellectual development. The male nude plays a conspicuous role in her historical paintings. The nudes were painted after antique sculptures and from life. To make this possible, she undoubtedly made use of her older brother Charles' studio. Michaelina Woutiers is not mentioned in any literary source dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The most important source of information about her works is the inventory of the collection of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm, drawn up in Vienna in 1659. With a total of four paintings by Woutiers (all preserved now in the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* in Vienna) this collector owned an important part of her still known oeuvre. Besides that, she is the only woman painter represented in his outstanding collection. The collector must have had an outspoken preference for her work and at any rate it is clear that, although she was completely neglected by contemporary writers on art, she must have been a respected artist in the context of the Brussels's court and aristocracy around 1650.

In order to determine the position of Michaelina Woutiers, it is first of all important to situate her within the context of the Southern Netherlands. She was probably born in Mons, approximately sixty kilometers southwest of Brussels. Her father was for a long time engaged as secretary to the Viceroy of Naples, but died just before or a short time after Michaelina's birth. To date, therefore, there is no proof that she lived anywhere other than Mons in her early years. If she developed ambitions to become a painter, this will have been stimulated by the presence of her afore mentioned older brother Charles. Brussels is the most important point of reference because in all probability Michaelina Woutiers took up residence there from 1643 onward together with her brother Charles Woutiers or Wautier.

There were also contacts with Antwerp. She had a brother who lived there and she must have been in contact with Paulus Pontius. Woutiers's earliest work dates of 1643 (or slightly earlier). It is a portrait of the Italian general Andreas Cantelmo, which has not been preserved but is recorded in an engraving by the Antwerp artist Paulus Pontius. Moreover, at least in one instance she used a panel with the brand mark of the Antwerp panel makers.

Nothing is known specifically about who Michaelina Woutiers' teachers were. In the first place, it seems obvious that she would have received instruction from her brother Charles (Mons, 1609- Brussels, 1703), who was some nine years older. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize the fact that Michaelina's dated works are situated between 1643 and 1659. Her brother's dated works were produced considerably later, namely between 1652 and 1668. It is notable that her style shows little evidence of the influence of the contemporary masters of the 'Flemish Baroque'. The French influence, specifically of Simon Vouet (Paris, 1590-1649), is conspicuously present in her genre scenes, historical paintings and portraits. It is possible that there were contacts with both Simon Vouet and Philippe de Champaigne (Brussels, 1602 - Paris, 1674)<sup>i</sup>. The points of contact with the style of Theodoor van Loon (Brussels (?), 1585 - Brussels (?), before 1660) will also need to be further clarified. Van Loon belonged to an older generation of masters who were active in Brussels and enjoyed the absolute preference of Archduke Albrecht and Archduchess Isabella. He worked in Rome during several periods and painted an impressive cycle of scenes from the life of Mary for the basilica in Scherpenheuvel (Aiguesmortes) in the period 1622-1628<sup>ii</sup>. He also worked in Brussels for the Carmelite convent and for Saint Gorik Church. He often collaborated with the court architect, Wenzel Coebergher (Antwerp, 1557 (?) – Brussels, 1634), who was married to Susanna Franco, the daughter of a Neapolitan artist. The relationship to Michael Sweerts also needs to be further investigated. Sweerts (Brussels, 1618 – Goa, 1664) was a contemporary of Michaelina. In 1646 he was in Italy, and ten years later he submitted a petition to the Brussels authorities to be exempted from taxes because he had previously invested in the establishment of an '*accademie van die teeckeninge naer het leven*' (life drawing academy)<sup>iii</sup>. In 1656 the academy had already been in operation for a '*langen tijd*' (long time). Was it in this context that Michaelina Woutiers learned to make life nude drawings? It is undeniable that the style of her figures, often pictured in diffuse light and clothed in garments hanging in broad folds about them, is closely related to the lyrical typology of Michael Sweerts. Michaelina's style can be termed eclectic or 'European'. She had a remarkably skilled hand as well as a distinct way of mixing French, Italian and Flemish elements with one another. It is due to her technical excellence and her international orientation that her paintings established themselves as exceptional achievements of the European Baroque.

Woutiers's oeuvre consists out of at least 28 paintings and one drawing and there is documentary evidence in relation to seven other paintings. Within this oeuvre it is apparent that she favored the representation of half-length images of youths or young men. The painting under discussion is not a real portrait, although it is undoubtedly painted from life. The background is greenish brown and the model is closely cropped to enhance its immediacy. Looking at the boy who holds a rolled tobacco leaf in his right hand one wonders if also this little panel once formed a part of a cycle of the Five Senses. That Michaelina was

interested in depicting the Five Senses is corroborated by the fact that respectively in 1883 and in 1898 a cycle of five rather large canvases (all of the same dimensions, 68 x 58 cm), representing the *Five Senses*, fully signed and dated 'Michaelina Wautier, 1650', has been auctioned in Valenciennes. In this series the boy referring to the sense of Smell was portrayed while holding a stinking egg<sup>iv</sup>. In the context of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Flemish painting the size of such an allegorical series could vary considerably. Also Gonzales Coques painted the 'Five Senses' using half-length figures on panels of a small scale (18 x 15cm) (Antwerp, Royal Museum). Another point of comparison is offered by Michaelina Woutiers' fully signed and 165[6] dated painting of a 'Young Man with a Pipe' (canvas, 69 x 59 cm; Dutch Private Collection), portraying a man while smoking a pipe. Also this last painting might have been part of a series of the Five Senses. It had become part of the Flemish tradition to depict single genre figures after the return to Antwerp of Adriaen Brouwer (1605/06-1638) in the early thirties. Also Michael Sweerts was fascinated by the rendering of young boys or men concentrating on every day activities.<sup>v</sup>

Her astonishing talent is recognizable in this fluidly painted genre portrait. The brushwork varies from very subtle touches to more vigorous strokes in the background. The boy enjoying the smell of tobacco sits behind a small table on which a knife, a clay pipe and a little bench with some tobacco are exposed. The sensitive approach of the young boy who seems to be lost in thought while smelling proves Woutiers's talent to visualize daily life. She always stands out because of her ability in the rendering of different textures such as skin, textiles and everyday objects. The refined rendering of the white collar, the brown doublet with the buttons and the hardly detectable buttonholes, the sleeves with the slips and the slashes is astonishing. The painting bears no signature. This is not too surprising since only about half of her paintings are signed. As argued above, the stylistic characteristics convincingly refer to her hand. It is hard to exactly date the little panel but because the series of the Senses, auctioned at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Valenciennes (see above), was dated 1650 and because the already mentioned representation of a 'Young man with a Pipe' (Dutch Private Collection) bears, aside of her signature, the date 155[6], it is very plausible that also this genre piece was painted c. 1650-1655. Besides that, the posture of the boy looking down on this small panel comes very close to the attitude of one of the two 'Bubbling Boys' (canvas, 90,2 x 120,6 cm) in the Art Museum in Seattle, datable c. 1655. Moreover, such a date perfectly corresponds with the results of the dendrochronological analysis carried out by Prof. Dr. Peter Klein of Hamburg University. His research led to the conclusion that the panel of 'A Boy with Tobacco' consists out of one oak originating from the Baltic/ Polish regions. The earliest creation of the painting is possible from 1637 upwards or more realistically from 1643 upwards (see Appendix).

Although Michaelina Woutiers mastered almost any genre, her genre scenes and portraits display a freshness and accuracy of observation that reminds us of the most outstanding Baroque painters such as Johannes Vermeer and Michaël Sweerts. Her unrestrained ambition to capture human emotions, to render flattering textures and investigate the literary tradition makes out of her a baroque phenomenon that is even more astonishing than Artemisia Gentileschi.

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*Over het genot van de zintuigen in de schilderkunst(16<sup>e</sup>-20<sup>e</sup> eeuw)*, exhibition catalogue, Sint-Niklaas, Tentoonstellingszaal Zwijgershoek, 2012, p. 48.

Jahel Sanzsalazar, 'Michaelina Wautier y la boda de su hermano: Historia de un retrato identificado', in *Tendencias del Mercado del arte*, January 2014, pp. 30-34.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Katlijne Van der Stighelen, *Hoofd-en bijzaak. Portretkunst in Vlaanderen van 1420 tot nu*, ('Major and minor issues: Portrait Art in Flanders from 1420 to the Present, published in Dutch'), Leuven-Zwolle, 2008, pp. 174-175.

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<sup>ii</sup> See in this context: Luc Duerloo and Marc Wingens, Scherpenheuvel. Het Jeruzalem van de Lage Landen, ('Scherpenheuvel. The Jerusalem of the Low Countries', published in Dutch).

<sup>iii</sup> Jonathan Bikker, 'Sweerts's Life and Career – A Documentary View', in Guido Jansen and Peter C. Sutton, *Michael Sweerts (1618-1664)*, exhibition catalogue, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum a.o., Zwolle, 2002, pp. 25-36.

<sup>iv</sup> See: *Catalogue d'une très belle collection de tableaux des écoles flamande, hollandaise, française, allemande et italienne, la plupart du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle et de dessins anciens et livres d'art dont la vente aura lieu par suite du décès de feu M. de Malberbe*, Valenciennes, 17-18 October 1883, Nrs<sup>o</sup>. 86-90; *Catalogue d'une très belle collection de tableaux anciens, incunables typographiques, gravures, livres d'art et illustrés, délaissés par feu M. Jean-Baptiste Foucart*, Valenciennes, 12-14 October 1898, Nrs<sup>o</sup>. 151-155; L. Huet and J. Grieten, *Oude meesteressen. Vrouwelijke kunstenaars in de Nederlanden*, Louvain 1998, pp. 155-156, 216.

<sup>v</sup> Guido Jansen and Peter C. Sutton, *Michael Sweerts (1618-1664)*, exhibition catalogue, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum a.o., Zwolle, 2002, p. 68; 152-153.