




# Michaelina Woutiers/ Wautier

Portrait of a Young Man with  
a Pipe

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MICHAELINA WOUTIERS/ WAUTIER

Mons(?), 1617/1618 – Brussels, 1689

Portrait of a Young Man with a Pipe

Oil on canvas, 68.5 x 58.5 cm

Signed and dated upper left: *Michaelina Wautiers fecit 16(5)6*

PROVENANCE

Private collection

EXHIBITION:

Sint-Niklaas, *Over het genot van de zintuigen in de schilderkunst*, exhibition catalogue, p. 48 ('as by Michaelina Woutiers, De pijproker, 1656')

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.

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 tijt*' (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 26 paintings and one drawing and there is documentary evidence in relation to five other paintings. Within this oeuvre it is apparent that she favored the representation of half-length images of youths or young men. Her astonishing talent is recognizable in this ravishing painted genre portrait. Her brushwork varies from very subtle touches to broad, vigorous strokes.

The painting under discussion is not a real portrait, although it is painted from life. The background is dark brown and the model is closely cropped to enhance its immediacy. 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<sup>iv</sup>. Many artists painted low life characters as such or created images of visitors of an inn posing with jugs and pipes whether to personify taste or smell in a series of the Senses or to characterize the sin of gluttony in a series of the Seven Sins. Looking at the young man with his pipe, one wonders if also this canvas once formed a part of a cycle of the Five Senses. This supposition is at first sight corroborated by the fact that respectively in 1883 and in 1898 a cycle of five canvases (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 1883 the paintings were described as coming from the collection of 'M. de Malherbe'. In 1898 they were left by 'feu Mr. Jean-Baptiste Foucart'. Since then the paintings disappeared<sup>v</sup> although they received a short laudable mentioning in 1899 in the *Zeitschrift für Bildende Kunst* (volume 10): *Die fünf Sinne von Michaelina Wautier, 1650. bez., sehr gut in Zeichnung und Ausdruck, etwas unangenehm braun in der Farbe, aber amüsante Bilder*. Thanks to the preserved auction catalogues (Library of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels) it becomes clear that the painting of the youth with a pipe did not partake of the same cycle because not one of the youngsters has been described as holding a pipe. The boy referring to the sense of Smell was portrayed while holding a stinking egg and the youth, said to be an allegory of Taste, was just eating a slice of bread<sup>vi</sup>. The fact that the painting discussed here has approximately the same dimensions as the five canvases of the Senses is neither an argument because Michaelina Woutiers used more regularly bearers of a comparable format<sup>vii</sup>.

Because of the delicacy of the representation and the balanced proportions it could also be argued that Woutiers had the intention to paint the image of this youth as a composition on its own. In the 'Portrait of a young man' in the *Royal Museum* of Antwerp (canvas, 69 x 58 cm, signed and dated in the upper right part 'Michaelina Wautier 1655') a comparable composition has been used by her for a half-length image. Both sitters do not face the spectator and are concentrating on something that happens outside the frame of the painting. They are both lost deep in thought and for that reason raise a feeling of melancholy. While the youngster on the Antwerp canvas is clothed in a sober cloak, the artist has given much more attention to the outfit of the young man on our painting. His cap consists out of wool or fur and is adorned with a decorative feather. The form of his headdress appears to be rather unconventional in the context of mid seventeenth-century fashion. The cylindrical form reminds more of late 16<sup>th</sup>-century Bohemian hats mostly worn by rich civilians and soldiers. This ahistorical element may confirm the allegorical meaning of the painting and proves that Woutiers was very much in touch with her time. Many famous contemporary masters such as Rembrandt and Peter Paul Rubens loved to integrate exotic costumes into their historical and allegorical scenes. While his hat may refer to past times, his doublet with set-in wide silk sleeves with ribbons and gilded buttons look extremely fashionable. In the opening of the 'manchettes' some touches of red underdressing are visible as is the case beneath the slashes of the sleeves. Her passion for the rendering of beautiful young boys may imply that she was influenced by prototypes of Caravaggio. Similar is also her sensual application of diffuse yellow light. Although the figure remains partly in the shadow thanks to some highlights on the forehead, the cheeks and the fingers, she succeeds to enhance the liveliness of the young

model. The face of the youngster has been executed with a free brush while the contours of the eyes and the eyelashes seems to be worked up with some black lines. Woutiers always stands out because of her ability in the rendering of textiles. The suppleness of the broad collar, the chemise and the sleeves is astonishing. As suggested above, the painting may just represent a beautiful youngster but at the same time there are enough arguments to suggest that the figure may also possess an allegorical meaning. Because of the attribute of the pipe in fragile white clay, the plume of smoke leaving his mouth and the brightening of the tobacco, the scene contains undoubtedly a reference to vanity and transience. As the smoke will disappear and the light in the long stemmed clay pipe will turn out, so will his youth and his fancy outfit pass away. In this context it is relevant to refer to a small painting of a Young boy with a pipe (canvas, 42 x 33 cm) that appeared at auction in 2006. According to the website the painting was fully signed 'Charles Wautier' and was dated '166[?]'. On the basis of a bad reproduction the attribution may have been correct. All the ingredients of Michaelina's version are also to be detected in this canvas. However, the boy looks much younger and is looking up to the right. A plume of smoke escapes from his mouth and he too is wearing a cylindrical hat resembling the one we can see on the painting by Michaelina Woutiers<sup>viii</sup>.

The painting bears a signature that is easy to decipher with the help of other signatures on paintings by Woutiers. More than half of her paintings are fully signed. Because of the date of this painting (16(5)6) it seems evident to compare with the signature on two other paintings apparently dating from the same decade. On a canvas with the representation of *St. John* (Italian Private Collection, canvas, 69 x 60,5 cm) the name of 'Michaelina Wautier' is easily readable. The same signature in italics appears on the majestic painting of the *Annunciation* (Louveciennes, Musée Promenade de Marly-le-Roy, canvas, 200 x 134 cm), close to the date '1659'. From a stylistic point of view the painting of the Young man with a Pipe has indeed to be situated c. 1655.

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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<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.

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

<sup>v</sup> It is plausible that the painting 'The Recorder Player' (canvas, 70 x 61 cm), sold as being by M. Wautier and signed '1650' in Paris by Drouot (sale 6), May 28, 1975 and described as 'One of a series of five canvases depicting young boys' originally formed a part of the cycle described above.

<sup>vi</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.

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vii Compare to: The Portrait of a Young Man in Antwerp (Royal Museum): canvas, 69 x 58 cm; St. John (Italian Private Collection): canvas, 69 x 60,5 cm; Portrait of a man (presumably Johannes Hus) (Whereabouts unknown: canvas, 69 x 58,5 cm.

viii The only reference I came accross in 2006 could be find on <http://www.banghaus.com> (as by Charles Wautier, signed and dated 166[?], lot Nr°. 14542).