

SALOMON LILIAN

DUTCH OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

Pieter Verelst

Dordrecht 1618 – 1668 London

Self Portrait with a Black Beret

Oil on panel

25 x 20.8 cm.

A red wax seal on the reverse of the panel with Pieter Verelst's monogram PVE (in ligature)

Provenance:

Probably The Hague, private collection Pieter Verelst, before 1668

France, private collection, until 2026

Literature:

Unpublished

Pieter Hermansz Verelst

Pieter Hermansz Verelst was baptised in Dordrecht in November 1618, the son of Herman Jansz Verelst and his second wife Marieke Backx, the daughter of a cloth merchant.¹ Given that their house in Voorstraat, close to Vismarkt, was taxed for 4400 guilders in 1626, the Verelst family seems to have been relatively well off. While an apprenticeship for Pieter is not documented, he might well have studied with the foremost Dordrecht painter of these days, Jacob Gerritsz Cuyp (1594-1652). If so, Pieter no doubt met there with his peers and fellow townsmen, the painters Ferdinand Bol (1616-1680) and Cuyp's son Aelbert Cuyp (1620-1691), who were likewise taught in Cuyp's workshop. On 11 June 1638 Pieter became engaged to Adriana van Gesel, from Dordrecht. The next day he registered with the Dordrecht

SALOMON LILIAN

DUTCH OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

Guild of St Luke, and that same year he took on an unnamed pupil. The couple's daughter Maria was born in May 1639. Although officially registered in Dordrecht until 1644, Verelst and his wife stayed in Rotterdam for a while, where Adriana gave birth to Herman Verelst (1641-1702). A daughter Helena Verelst was born back in Dordrecht in 1643, while the couple's son Simon Verelst (1644-c. 1717) was born in The Hague, where Pieter became a citizen in 1644, a militia member in 1645. In The Hague Verelst built up a career as a painter of genre, portraits, and occasional histories, in a style often adherent to that of Rembrandt (1606-1669) and his school yet also echoing his awareness of Gerard Dou (1613-1675) and Adriaen van Ostade (1610-1685). While clearly talented, documents show him to have been in debt at various moments. Still, he was, in 1656, among the founders of the Hague painters' confraternity *Pictura*, of which he was elected its dean in 1659 and 1660. Pieter and Adriana had nine children, the youngest of them baptised in June 1651. After that nothing is heard of Adriana until 30 September 1657, when Verelst married, as a widower, Elisabeth Schölts from The Hague, with whom he had two more daughters, Hanna and Magdalena, born in 1658 and 1659, respectively. On 18 December 1659 Elisabeth 'housewife of Mr. Pieter Verelst, artful painter living in The Hague' made her testament. Her only beneficiary was 'haar lieve man' (her dear man), provided he'd take care of their daughter Magdalena, suggesting that Hanna had died by then.

Sorrow followed Verelst, now twice a widower. During the 1660s it proved increasingly difficult for him to keep his head above water financially. As already noted by Veth in 1896, Verelst's goods were sold in The Hague on 6 November 1668, as an abandoned estate. While until recently Verelst was tentatively identified with a brewer of the same name active in Hulst in 1671 – suggesting a relocation to Brabant and a career switch – new archival research by Peter Hancox has revealed that Verelst with several of his children had moved to England by 1668, no doubt to escape creditors in the Netherlands and make a new start as a painter in London.² Moreover, in a statement of 1672 one of Pieter's sons, Johannes (John, as he was known in England, 1648-1679), described his father as "being reduced to greate strait &

SALOMON LILIAN

DUTCH OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

want of monys” before leaving for London and that “in or about the month of November in the yeare one thousand six hundred sixty eight your Orators [John] said father dyed in England”.³

While Pieter as the *pater familias* died around November 1668, before having had the chance to set up shop, his family – some through individual detours via Italy and the Austrian Empire (Herman) and France (John I) –eventually built up their lives in England, where many of Pieter’s offspring became involved in the art business in one form or another.⁴ In addition to the well-known flower- and portrait painters Herman and Simon, their brothers Johannes (John I) and Willem (William I, 1651-1702) became painters as well, as did Herman’s children Lodvick (1668-1704), Michael (c. 1675-1752) and Adriana (c. 1683-1769). Herman’s son John II Verelst (c. 1670-1734) was a portraitist and art dealer, his son John II Verelst (1704-1752) following in his father’s footsteps.

A new discovery

Until its surfacing in France in 2026, the present portrait was completely unknown to art history. Painted on a small panel, the work had not been touched since at least the nineteenth century, causing its appearance to be severely obscured by a film of opaque yellow varnish and dirt (fig. 1). A recent cleaning removed both these layers, as well as a crude black retouching above the sitter’s black velvet beret, apparently added to make the beret appear like a flat crown hat (fig. 2). What emerged is a mint condition portrait of a young man, seen to the right against a warm brown background, who looks at the beholder with a self-aware expression. His simple black jacket and plain white collar cause no distraction from his face and his long, chestnut coloured curly hair, which is painted with amazing ease in browns and black, to an almost lumpy effect. The face itself is likewise executed without any intention to smoothen out the incarnate. On the contrary, the brushstrokes, in a variety of colours ranging from grey and yellow to pink and red, are visible in all areas, deliberately moulding the structure of the sitter’s features – his slightly bulbous nose, his firm chin, and before all the

SALOMON LILIAN

DUTCH OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

well-shaped mouth and lips, showing a hint of a moustache. The daring black outline on the receding left side of the sitter's face (to our right) accentuates his profile brilliantly. Taking into consideration the flat velvet hat and the simple white collar, the portrait likely dates from the 1640s.

Verelst's monogram

Although the present painting is not signed in the usual sense, a red wax seal on the panel's reverse remarkably shows what cannot be anything other than Verelst's ligatured monogram: PVE (fig. 3). Although highly unusual – possibly even unique – this waxed monogram is so strikingly identical to the monogram that Verelst often used to sign his paintings, that one can only conclude that the seal was his (figs. 4, 5).⁵ This, in turn, suggests that the painting remained in Verelst's own personal possession, presumably until the moment that his financial situation got dire to the point that, as remarked, he had to sell of his belongings and relocate to London.

A group of self portraits

Stylistically, the portrait aligns seamlessly with other works by Verelst, such as the signed *Portrait of a Man, Bust-Length, in a Brown Coat and Hat*, formerly with the Salomon Lilian gallery (fig. 6).⁶ In this even smaller portrait of a similarly positioned sitter, Verelst rendered the brown curly hair in precisely the same loose, cascading manner. The shape of the moustache area and the lips is similar, and an identical stroke of pink was applied to highlight the chin. The overall impression of the two paintings is notably akin, so much that one suspects the same model sat for both, a model that might well be Verelst himself. Tellingly, the same sitter of our portrait again appears in Verelst's *Portrait of a Man Wearing a Beret*, signed and dated 1646 (fig. 7). A larger painting, depicting the sitter from a slightly different angle, the man's features are nonetheless highly analogous. Overseeing other such portraits by Verelst, a pattern of corresponding traits emerges. Particularly related to our painting is the

SALOMON LILIAN

DUTCH OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

Portrait of a Man (Possibly a Self Portrait) in the Leiden Collection, New York (fig. 8).⁷ This portrait depicts the same sitter in a virtually identical pose, wearing the same black beret and looking identically towards the viewer. The work has been tentatively identified as a self-portrait by Henriette Rahusen based on the sitter's pose and direct gaze towards the viewer, and the evident parallels to Rembrandt's self-portraits of the period.⁸ Executed in a smoother manner and including the addition of a column in the background, the Leiden Collection work – which has been dated after 1645 on the basis of stylistic analysis, clothing style and dendrochronology – seems a worked out variant of our somewhat smaller and more freely executed portrait. Embedding the Leiden collection painting, Rahusen rightly pointed to another closely related work again depicting the same man with his brown curly hair that, as she convincingly argued, likewise seems to depict Verelst himself. This *Portrait of a Man Wearing a Beret with a Feather*, formerly attributed to Govert Flinck (1615-1660) but correctly given to Verelst in 1983 by Werner Sumowski, is likewise datable to the 1640s (fig. 9).⁹ To this group can be added two more works, the *Portrait of a Man Wearing a Feathered Beret* once in a private collection in Paris, and the *Portrait of a Young Man* in the Łazienki Palace, Warsaw, variously attributed to Flinck, Ferdinand Bol and Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678), before being correctly given to Verelst (figs. 10, 11).

Following the fact that all these works, painted by one artist – Pieter Verelst – and presumably all dating to the mid- to late 1640s, show a man in his thirties with consistently similar facial features and long brown curled hair, some unmistakably the same person, others perhaps more genre-fied; and knowing that for several of these works the identification of the sitter as Verelst has been previously proposed, it seems sensible to understand the whole group as depicting Verelst, some – the present work among those – to be understood as true self-portraits, others more leaning towards the *tronie*, depictions of a type for which Verelst used his own countenance as the model. With this specific production, Verelst indeed followed into the footsteps of Rembrandt, and painters in his slipstream such as Jacob Backer (1608-1651)

SALOMON LILIAN

DUTCH OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

and Govert Flinck, who likewise alternated in their self-portraits between depicting themselves and depictions of a type.¹⁰

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¹ For biographical references, see G.H. Veth, 'Aanteekeningen omtrent eenige Dordrechtsche schilders : XXXIX. Pieter Hermansz. Verelst en zijne zonen', in: *Oud Holland* 14 (1896), pp. 99-112; P. Bakker, 'Pieter Verelst' (2017), in: A.K. Wheelock Jr., E. Nogrady, C. van Cauwenberge (eds.), *The Leiden Collection Catalogue* (4th ed.), New York 2023—(<https://theleidencollection.com/artists/pieter-verelst/>, accessed October 04, 2026); P. Hancox, 'The multigenerational and cross-national artist family Verelst (c. 1618-1752): The myth of Cornelius and Maria', in: *Oud Holland* 137 (2024), pp. 174-200.

² Hancox 2024, p. 175, 178, 193, note 6. It remains unclear at what point the mistaken assumption that Verelst became a brewer in Hulst entered his biography. Hancox' statement that Veth (1896) 'tentatively linked Pieter to a brewer of the same name who died in Hulst in 1671' seems incorrect. In fact, Veth 1896, p. 105 stated that 'Wat sedert met hem is voorgevallen en waar en wanneer hij overleden is, is mij onbekend.' ('What happened to him after [November 1688] and where he went and died, is unknown to me'). A. von Wurzbach, *Niederländisches Künstler-Lexikon : auf Grund archivalischer Forschungen bearbeitet*, 3 vols., Vienna/Leipzig 1904-1911, 2 (1907), pp. 765-766, does not mention it, but by 1940 it is part of the biography. See U. Thieme, F. Becker, *Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, 37 vols., Leipzig 1907-1950, 34 (1940), pp. 237-238.

³ Hancox 2024, p. 178.

⁴ See Hancox 2024, and the three pedigrees provided (Appendices 1-3, pp. 191-192).

SALOMON LILIAN

DUTCH OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

⁵ In theory the seal with Verelst's monogram could have belonged to someone else, presumably with a (family) connection to Pieter Verelst, one possible candidate being Peter Emmanuel Verelst (1669-1721), the son of Pieter's son Herman, who had the same initials PVE as his grandfather did. Purely hypothetically, Peter, by way of honouring his grandfather, could have adopted his monogram, and used it for his – again hypothetical – wax seal. However, such a theory remains without any credible foundation and seems far-fetched. I wish to thank Verelst expert Professor Peter Hancox for sharing his thoughts on the wax seal (email correspondence May 2026). Specifically with regards to Verelst's serious financial challenges at the time, Hancox does not hold it for possible that the present portrait, or any other work of art, remained in Verelst's possession upon his move to England, c. 1668. Hence, there would have been nothing for any of the (grand)children to inherit, certainly not from the Dutch period. I fully concur with Hancox' conclusion 'that the wax seal shows ownership by Pieter Verelst before 1668.'

⁶ See W. Burgemeister, in: W. Burgemeister et al., *Salomon Lilian : Old Masters 2007*, Zwolle 2007, pp. 66-67, cat. no. 26.

⁷ See H. Rahusen, 'Portrait of a Man (Possible Self-Portrait)' (2017), in: A.K. Wheelock Jr., E. Nogrady, C. van Cauwenberge (eds.), *The Leiden Collection Catalogue* (4th ed.), New York 2023 (<https://theleidencollection.com/artwork/portrait-of-a-man-possible-self-portrait/>), accessed October 05, 2026).

⁸ Rahusen 2017 compares the work to Rembrandt's *Self Portrait at Age 34*, 1640, oil on canvas, 102 x 80 cm, London, National Gallery, inv. no. NG672, in which Rembrandt likewise wears a beret.

⁹ W. Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols., Landau/Pfalz, 1983-1994, 1 (1983), pp. 83, 97, ill., 'in die vierziger Jahre zu datieren'. The painting had been previously attributed to Govert Flinck. Tellingly, Sumowski, in corroborating his attribution, referred to Verelst's *Portrait of a Man Wearing a Beret*, signed and dated 1646, our fig. 7.

¹⁰ For the various functions of Rembrandt's self-portraits, see E. van de Wetering, 'De Meervoudige functie van Rembrandts zelfportretten', in: C. White, Q. Buvelot (eds.), *Rembrandt zelf*, exh. cat. London, National Gallery, The Hague, Mauritshuis 1999-2000, pp. 8-37. For Backer's broad range of self-portraits, see J. Hillegers, 'Jacob Backer : Tronie of a Bearded Man with a Large Beret', in: J. Hillegers et al., *Salomon Lilian Old Masters 2022*, Amsterdam 2022, pp. 6-15 (cat. no. 1).