



Lot h2709 Studio of Michael Dahl

1659 – 1743 Swedish

Portrait of John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough (#014)

oil on canvas, circa 1705
50 x 41 in, 127 x 104.1 cm

ESTIMATE: \$3,000 - \$5,000 CAD

This portrait of the Duke of Marlborough was purchased in London by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1928 with an old attribution to Sir Godfrey Kneller. It was exhibited in 1934 still with the Kneller attribution.[1] It was not mentioned, however, in J. Douglas Stewart's exhaustive monograph on Kneller published in 1983. So presumably that scholar rejected the attribution, which has nonetheless lingered to the present day. The three-quarter length portrait represents the Duke of Marlborough, the celebrated British military commander, bare headed in armour under a flamboyant orange robe trimmed with ermine, while brandishing a commander's baton. On a blue sash he wears his badge featuring Saint George slaying the dragon of the Order of the Garter, as appointed by the English King. The Duke was the third governor of the Hudson Bay Company from 1685-92, hence their motivation for the purchase.

Kneller frequently portrayed the Duke of Marlborough, so the attribution seemed reasonable, but his hand is not evident in this example, which lacks the force and directness characteristic of his style. Instead, an attribution can be supported to Kneller's Swedish-born contemporary Michael Dahl, who worked in a more fluid and polished manner, fully evident in this canvas.

The Dahl attribution first receives indirect support from Nisser's monograph published in 1927.[2] While the book does not include any painted portrait by Dahl, it discusses an undated miniature of the Duke of Marlborough by his Swedish colleague Charles Boit (1662-1727) in the Earl Spencer collection. Astutely, Nisser stated that it 'strongly reminds us of Dahl whose soft modelling he has curiously made use of here'. Boit's image is clearly related to the Hudson Bay Company portrait, but with some slight variations, so it was probably not the direct source. While Nisser was unaware of the Hudson Bay Company picture, he explored Dahl's closeness to Boit, suggesting they may even have travelled to London together from Sweden in 1682. With that relationship Dahl must have eventually exposed Boit to his monumental portrait of the Duke in one of its versions. Nisser's comment then, although speculative, is the source for attributing this likeness of the Duke of Marlborough to Dahl.

Indeed, a closely related version of the portrait of the same dimensions was purchased at Christie's, London, on June 16th, 2000, lot 13, by the National Army Museum in London (inv. 2000-06-146-1), was auctioned as attributed to Michael Dahl. It has a different treatment of the sky than in the Hudson Bay Company painting and the robe is crimson rather than orange, but otherwise the two canvases are nearly identical. This other portrait also has a few small variations from Boit's miniature, which was presumably based then on a lost third version. Given the sitter's fame, it is to be expected that multiple copies emerged from the artist's workshop.[3] Nisser's opinion linking Dahl's name to the Duke of Marlborough portraits clearly resonated in at least part of the art market. Stylistic analysis will have to assert whether one version is superior in quality and can be regarded as primary, but at the very least we can confidently assign the Hudson Bay Company portrait of the Duke of Marlborough to the studio of Michael Dahl.

We thank David Franklin, art historian, curator and expert in Renaissance and Baroque art, for his extensive research on this work and for contributing the above essay.

[1] *A Loan Exhibition depicting Marlborough and the Reign of Queen Anne, Chesterfield House*, London, in Aid of the Young Women's Christian Association, 29 January - March 1934 (no precise end date given), p. 18, and Plate XXI: No. 76, John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1685-1692. Attributed to Sir Godfrey Kneller. Canvas, 55 x 40 inches. Lent by The Hudson's Bay Company. (To note the caption drops the "attributed to"). In his review Martin R. Holmes, 'Marlborough and Queen Anne Exhibition at Chesterfield House', *Connoisseur*, XCIII, February 1934, pp. 110-13, illustrates the portrait on p. 110, but does not comment on the attribution.

[2] Wilhelm Nisser, *Michael Dahl and the Contemporary Swedish School of Painting in England*, Uppsala 1927. The miniature is catalogued under items by Boit, no. 19a, p. 112-113, plate LIV, fig. 1. The quote is from p. 160.

[3] Another version of the portrait was recently sold through Titan Fine Art, but as Studio of Kneller. It traces a provenance to Badmondfield Hall, Wickham Brook, Suffolk. It also differs from Boit's miniature. There is a drawing in the British Museum (1881,0611.138) said to be of the Duke and attributed to Dahl but it does not relate to these paintings.