

Agatha Bas, 1641, Rembrandt Van Rijn, RCIN 405352

Painted by Rembrandt van Rijn in 1641, this portrait of Agatha Bas is an oil on canvas painting and measures one metre high and eighty centimetres wide.

Agatha Bas was the daughter of a director of the Dutch East India Company who later married Nicholas van Bambeeck, a successful cloth merchant.

The most striking thing about this portrait is how the subject, the 30-year-old Agatha Bas, looks out as if fixing us with a steady gaze. She is viewed at three-quarter length from her head down to her waist. Her elaborate black, white and gold clothes are clearly expensive and they stand out against a plain, dark green background.

Agatha's figure is placed in an illusionistic frame - a dark green arch just inside the actual frame of the painting. This fictional frame blurs the boundaries between the real world and the imagined space of the artwork. Agatha breaches the illusion frame as she stands with her left arm raised, as though leaning against this painted frame. Her thumb curls around the frame, breaking the barrier between the sitter and the viewer. It seems as if she is bracing, about to step out of the image towards us. Her right arm curves across her lower body, the hand holding a delicate golden fan. The corner of the open fan also seems to protrude over the bottom edge of the frame, adding to that

arresting feeling that a living Agatha is turning her attention towards us. It almost feels as though we could just reach out and touch the edge of that fan for ourselves.

Now that we are starting to understand something of Agatha's character and status, let us have a detailed look at the lady herself.

Her face, lit softly from the left, is pale, with dark eyes gazing straight into the eyes of the viewer. At the top left of her pupils there is a subtle dot of white which suggests there is a light source shining from her left-hand side. On close inspection, there are natural creases under and at the sides of her eyes which make her appear - although still only 30 years old - like a maturing woman. It takes away any suspicion of youthful naivety.

Agatha has a long straight nose, and just a hint of a smile. The right-hand side of her nose and mouth is covered in shadow which again portrays light from the left of the painting makes her appear three dimensional, almost real. From a distance her pale skin looks flawless. However, Rembrandt has rendered a realistic portrayal of Agatha's skin pigmentation. Her cheeks look as though she is wearing just a touch of rouge to highlight her cheekbones. A closer look suggests that instead of make-up, this is an unevenness in Agatha's natural skin tone.

Her light brown hair has a slight hint of red to it and is pulled back from her smooth brow by a close-fitting cap or hair band. In the centre of her hair, you can see the straight lines where the teeth of a

comb have been used to pull it back. At the sides, the hair is quite thin and frizzy and reaches down to her shoulders. Through her hair we catch a glimpse of earrings peeping through. The earrings are large droplets which dangle freely towards her shoulders. There is a central jewel in the earring surrounded by smaller jewels all encased in gold. They appear to be exquisite, but not ostentatious.

Whilst her face is delicate in its detail, it is Agatha's finely rendered clothing, that really draws our attention. Her costume is built up with thick paint which gives it a heavy and an almost starched-like effect to the clothing; but there are soft and light textures too.

Agatha wears a heavy, front-lacing, high-waisted gown made of black velvet-like fabric. The black cloth is patterned, black on black, and is clearly of great quality. Black was one of the most expensive dyes at the time, and wearing it for your portrait painted was akin to putting on your Sunday best. The long, wide sleeves of the gown each have a thin slash, revealing the crisp whiteness of the lining or chemise beneath.

The black gown is open down the middle, held by criss-crossed lacing which reveals a fashionable stomacher panel. This is a triangular-shaped piece, decorated and often boned for stiffness, which is pinned to the bodice at the front. Richly decorated with gold threads and bead, Agatha's stomacher is a silvery white colour and has a fabulous edging of gold cut-out floral motifs. Stomachers were also often used to show off wealth and status in their rich gold thread embroidery, braiding and use of lace.

Agatha wears a crisp white cotton shawl, with scalloped edges of intricate lacework. Folded into a large triangle, the shawl wraps around her sloping shoulders, falling in two neat points just above her waist.

More expensive white lace decorates her large turned-back cuffs. These cuffs are made of fine linen, which is pleated and edged with bobbin or needle lace. The softness of this material is shown by the lace of her right cuff, which is gently curling over on itself at the edges. With the rest of her costume being crisp and precise, this curling of the lace cuff creates a sense of natural realism. Perhaps not enough starch was used when pressing the outfit; perhaps she had changed positions for her sitting and disturbed her cuff. A slight imperfection in design that makes Agatha Bas feel relatable and real.

Her left arm, which leans on the illusionistic frame, reveals a single strand of pearls on her wrist. On the wrist of her right arm, the one holding the fan, there are three bands of shimmering white pearls. Her index finger displays a ring a simple plain band of silver or gold. As the hand is descending into shadow beyond her waist, it is difficult to determine more about the ring.

Agatha's fan is the latest luxury article in fashion amongst the Amsterdam elite of the 1640s. The fan appears to be open $\frac{3}{4}$ of its full span. Her thumb rests on the bottom centre of the spokes to control its opening. The bottom of the spokes are plain and wooden. This then leads to the material of the fan which feature and gold and silver

pattern which is quite ambiguous but clearly very ornate and edged with lace at the top.

Caught by the intensity of her gaze; the simplicity of Agatha's face and the informality of her posture is an arresting contrast to the elaborate layers of rich clothing she wears.

This painting entered the Royal Collection when it was purchased for the Prince Regent (the later King George IV) in 1819. This is truly one of the most beautiful portraits by Rembrandt Van Rijn in the Royal Collection that can still be enjoyed by visitors today.