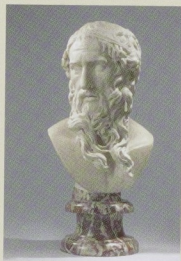
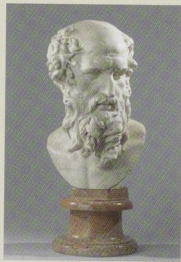


Bald or Headband?

• FRITS SCHOLTEN •

Elsewhere in this *Bulletin* Menno Jonker argues that two marble portraits of philosophers in the Rijksmuseum's collection should be identified as Socrates and Plato – challenging my identification of this pair of busts as the two portraits of Plato and Aristotle in Sandrart's collection that were praised by Vondel in 1644.¹ Jonker supports this new identification by comparing the works with a number of seventeenth-century portraits of classical philosophers. The examples he gives appear to confirm the correctness of his interpretation, particularly where Plato's headband and hair style are concerned.

The problem, however, lies in the 'pictorial tradition' on which Jonker bases his argument. The iconography of classical philosophers was much less rigid in the early modern age than his well-chosen examples would suggest. His own words illustrate this. 'Whereas a philosopher can usually be recognized in a painting by his attributes or an anecdotal context, a bust can generally only be identified on the basis of an inscription. Often, the physical features of classical thinkers are simply reduced to an old man with a beard.'² It is with just such bearded old men that we are concerned here, and the lack of clarity about their identity down through the centuries – see note 2 to Jonker's article for a



clear summary – is caused by precisely this: the absence of inscriptions and/or attributes. If the iconography of philosophers was as consistent (and reliable) as Jonker thinks, why would the authors who have written about our philosophical pair since the early eighteenth century have struggled so with the question of their identity? The answer is simple: because a reliable pictorial tradition did not yet exist.³

The erudite Lambert ten Kate, who owned and described the two sculptures in the early eighteenth century, was not concerned with headbands. Child of his time that he was, he was chiefly interested in the character expressed in the features. 'One is very dignified, like a great philosopher, such as Plato, portrayed with bald head; displaying serious reflection, and a force of mind capable of the most elevated thoughts.'⁴ Baldness and a serious expression, symbols of the greatest wisdom – to Ten Kate these, not what he tied around his head, were Plato's attributes. Ten Kate described the other bust as less serious and gentler – features and character traits he associated with a poet or an army commander and thinker. 'The other head most characteristically portrays a poet, such as Sophocles, or rather an army commander and at the same time wise philosopher with a gentle and charming face, such as Xenophon.'⁵

In his famous and frequently reproduced fresco *The School of Athens*, Raphael did not portray the two philosophers according to Jonker's guidelines either: Plato is a bald old man with a long beard, Aristotle a younger man with a full head of hair and a short beard.⁶ Rembrandt's *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer* of 1653 (Metropolitan Museum of Art) is another illustration of the lack of a clear philosopher iconography. The bearded bust of Homer has a bald head *and* a headband – a conflation of Jonker's Plato and Socrates – while the standing philosopher with his wild hair and beard has much in common with the Platos that Jonker puts forward.

In short, these are examples that underline the fact that in this period there was no consensus about the specific features of classical philosophers.

This is why, in 1644, Vondel could sing the praises of the two Rijksmuseum philosophers, then owned by Sandrart, as Plato and Aristotle – leaving open, incidentally, the question as to which bust he thought was Plato and which Aristotle. We cannot rule out the possibility that Vondel took the philosopher with the headband to be Plato. And that would mean that Jonker does have a degree of right on his side after all.

NOTES

- 1 Frits Scholten, 'Sandrart's Philosophers on the "Amsterdam Parnassus"', *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* 57 (2009), pp. 327-41.
- 2 Menno Jonker, 'Boselli's Philosophers Identified as Socrates and Plato', *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* 59 (2011), pp. 177-78.
- 3 For the interpretation of historical portraits and the hesitant emergence of a pictorial tradition of famous men see Francis Haskell, *History and its Images. Art and the Interpretation of the Past*, New Haven/London 1993, pp. 60-74.
- 4 'De eene is zeer achtbaar, als een groot Wysgeer, gelyk Plato, met een kaal hoofd verbeeld; aantoonende de ernstige overdenking, en een kracht van geest tot de allerverhevenste gedachten bekwaam.'
- 5 'De andere kop verbeeldt niet oneigenaartig eenen Dichter, gelyk Sophocles, of eerder eenen Veldoverste en tevens verstandigen Wysgeer, van een zacht en aanminnig gelaat, gelyk Xenophon.' For the source of both quotes see Scholten 2009, pp. 330-31.
- 6 The example of Raphael does not fit in Jonker's argument, so he dismisses it by saying that it 'does not seem to be very applicable' (Jonker, op. cit. (note 2), note 19).

