

# AUTHENTICATION IN ART

AiA Art News-service

## The painter by himself; a late self-portrait by Michael Dahl (1659 – 1743).

This newly-rediscovered painting is a rather exciting thing – a rare self-portrait by Michael Dahl, one of the all-time greats of British portraiture, and an important addition to the painter's work.



Photo (c) [imaphotography.co.uk](http://imaphotography.co.uk)

As Professor JD Stewart writes, ‘Likenesses of Dahl are uncommon,’ (*Dictionary of National Biography*) and this is the artist’s last-known self-portrait.

It is one of only four surviving from a fifty-year career. It shows the painter at the age of about sixty, and it is a portrait of experience. A mature artist takes a good look at himself, intently, honestly, with a touch of humour; it’s been a remarkable life.

I believe that Dahl painted this portrait as a private exercise for himself, though it may equally have been a gift to a close friend. The sketchiness of the drapery, the air of self-examination, the unpretentiousness of it, have all the feeling of a man looking into his own mirror, into his soul. It’s full of the man’s presence, almost as fresh as when he painted it, with the artist’s design process on show. The dark line to the right of the face is a pentiment which shows that the original position of the head was slightly further to that side. Dahl changed his mind and moved the head more centrally. In moments like this you feel you are standing with him in his studio as he worked on it.

Like all great painters, Dahl is always modern, and only gets better with age. He was always one of the greatest drapery painters, and in this private work the drapery is beautifully quick. The brown gown is laid in with a flick of casual strokes that resolve perfectly. The texture of the velvet cap is suggested by light hatching that predicts Gainsborough.

Dahl was also a superb colourist; his high-keyed palette shines through in bottle-green, hot pink, blue-grey and warm brown. It sets the tone for reflection, serious, but not sombre, and it serves the picture perfectly. Dahl sculpts himself in the luscious blended flesh-tones that handle the play of light across the picture and make his face mobile, expressive and alive with personality.

As a young man Dahl came to England from his native Sweden in the early 1680s. The portrait now in the National Portrait Gallery marks his beginning as a portraitist in London.



by Michael Dahl, oil on canvas, 1691 (c) National Portrait Gallery  
Just back from his Grand Tour, he launches himself on London with a Hollywood self-portrait, a glamorous, romanticising vision of ideal beauty in which he turns himself into a classical statue, and every inch of the picture showcases his entire talent, his ease with likeness, elegant poses and spatial relationships, different textures, still-life and especially drapery.

Two self-portraits from the following decade show Dahl at the height of his success, when he was the favourite painter of Queen Anne and her husband Prince George of Denmark. The portrait of at Grispholm Castle in Sweden – which was once in the collection of Horace Walpole – shows the Court painter in a private moment.



(c) Nationalmuseum, Stockholm

The portrait recently rediscovered by Dr Bendor Grosvenor at Philip Mould must have been painted for a connoisseur patron, who would appreciate the painter's virtuosity.



(c) Philip Mould.

And it must have been painted to be seen. The coolly arrogant gaze is the look of Dahl the courtier; Dahl the astute businessman shows himself in the superb painting of the hand, which is an advertisement to clients and a challenge to his rivals.

Our painting casts a new light on the next phase of Dahl's career. With Sir Godfrey Kneller (1646 – 1723) and John Closterman (1660 – 1711), Dahl had been one of the Big Three of late Stuart painting. It seemed that every major portrait commission in England between the 1690s and the early 1710s would go to one or other of them; regiments of their sitters line the walls of Royal and country house collections of the period. All this changed in 1714, when Queen Anne was succeeded by King George I.

Dahl lost Court patronage with the new dynasty. When Kneller died in 1723, Dahl might have succeeded him as Principal Painter to the King, but he disobeyed a command to paint the infant Duke of Cumberland at Kensington Palace. Professor Stewart suggests that Dahl may have been reluctant to take on the post due to old age; an official painter's duties could be shattering. Our portrait shows a man looking into the next chapter of his life.

Dahl continued to enjoy aristocratic and academic patronage, and painted some of his greatest work at this date. Stewart describes his group portrait of Three Gentlemen in a Library c.1720 (Presently unlocated; Sotheby's July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1952) as 'a masterpiece' – and it is absolutely brilliant if you ever see an image of it. This portrait of a lady (Private Collection) is another superb example of Dahl's early Georgian style, with its spare elegance and powerful sense of character. This is the direct, straightforward idiom of our self-portrait, an icon for the age of common-sense.



In 1725 Dahl gave up the studio in ultra-fashionable Leicester Fields, now called Leicester Square, where he had lived since 1696, and moved to a

smaller house in Golden Square in Soho. It was in this mood of retirement that he seems to have painted our self-portrait.

The painting was previously in a private collection in Yorkshire, but its provenance before that is unknown. The fact that the drapery has been left as a sketch suggests that it was either kept by Dahl himself, or painted as a gift for a fellow painter who would have appreciated this sign of the painter's hand at work.

Before Dahl left for Italy, way back in the early 1680s, he and Sir Godfrey Kneller had painted each other's portrait, in the days when they were more friends than rivals. It is irresistible to wonder if this portrait was painted as a response to Kneller's recent death. The two artists became friends when Dahl first came to London from Sweden in 1682, straight from the studio of the Swedish Court painter David Klöker Ehrenstrahl. He worked for a while in Kneller's studio before going to Italy. When he returned in 1689 Dahl and Kneller would be rivals for the next thirty years. When Kneller died in 1723 it would have been the end of an era, and Dahl must have felt suddenly alone, like the last of his generation.

In the event, this period opened up a new phase of Dahl's life. He was a painter's painter, and a very clubbable man, and the next two decades see him as friend and mentor to the next generation of young British artists and designers.



by Gawen Hamilton, oil on canvas, 1735 (c) National Portrait Gallery

Gawen Hamilton's *Conversation of Virtuosis ... at the King's Arms Tavern* 1735 (National Portrait Gallery) shows Dahl seated at the left, honourably enthroned among the leading lights of Early Georgian painting, sculpture, architecture and gardening. The retirement that Dahl seems to be anticipating in our self-portrait was to be a long and honourable one, and great patrons remembered him. When the Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole, that other great survivor, finally retired to the Lords in 1742, it was Dahl he sat to to mark the occasion (portrait at the Hepworth Wakefield).

Dahl died in the following year, succeeded by his wife, and two daughters who inherited his picture collection. I hope that further research will discover their names. A son, also called Michael, also a portrait painter, had predeceased him. The famous painters' club, the Society of Virtuosi of St Luke which Dahl had attended from 1698 until 1739 held its last meeting to mark his death before disbanding.