

Cardinal John Fisher (1469-1535), Bishop of Rochester
Northern Netherlands
c. 1540



25 x 19 x 2 cm; Oil and gilding on oak. Some minor, isolated flake losses and very subtle abrasion to the upper paint layers, with limited infilling and inpainting undertaken by Rebecca Gregg Conservation in February 2020. Larger flake losses to the otherwise well-preserved gilding on the frame. An even, generalised craquelure over the surface of the painting commensurate with age. The number '21', perhaps an old inventory number, inscribed in ink near the top of the panel on the reverse.

Provenance

With Pietro Accorsi (1891-1982), Turin, 1961 (the remains of his paper label on the reverse);
 Private collection, Ticino, Switzerland

Materials and Technique

The support is composed of a single panel of oak, identified during dendrochronological analysis undertaken by Dr Ian Tyers in April 2020 as originating in the eastern Baltic region.¹ As was convention for the preparation of panels for painting during the late medieval period, the panel is

¹ Ian Tyers, *Tree-ring analysis of a panel painting: Portrait of John Fisher*, April 2020.

aligned so that its dense, slow-growing grain runs vertically. The frame and support are carved integrally to one another, with no added members or elements. Intriguingly, the back of the painting reveals a rare insight into the processes by which such objects were created. A series of incised lines show how the frame's shapely mouldings were worked out using a sharp blade and compasses pressed directly into the plank (fig. 1). The fact that these incised mouldings are absent along one edge indicates that the panel was initially designed in a wider format, before it was cut down and turned over to start again on the other side.

The panel was first prepared with a ground layer consisting of a white, chalky coating consistent with calcium carbonate, a typical preparation layer in northern European panel painting. The pigments, applied in an oil-rich medium, consist of what appear to be carbon black, lead white, and, for the vivid backdrop, a rich green analogous in appearance to verdigris, a copper-based pigment commonly used by painters during the period. Large quantities of lead white were used in the flesh tones of the face, which have become subtly translucent over time. A small amount of red pigment, possibly vermillion, was used for the lining of the figure's cap, and some yellow, perhaps lead-tin yellow, is used in combination with white for the faux-gold lettering of the identifying inscription on either side of his head.

Description and Iconography

Cardinal John Fisher (c. 1469-June 1535), Bishop of Rochester and Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, is depicted at bust length against a green background bordered on all sides by a gilded frame carved with continuous running mouldings. The sitter is identified by his clerical dress and an accompanying inscription split into single words on either side of his portrait and reading: 'IOHAN[N]ES ... ROFFE[N]SIS'.

Fisher turns in three-quarter profile to our left, wearing the black Canterbury cap of his office, lined with a fine red cloth and adorned with a delicate (gold?) pin set on one side. He wears a black tippet and chimere over a pleated white rochet. His dark cap blends with the black of his tippet, which is worn high around the back of his neck, creating a sharp silhouette that allows his face to advance in our focus against the almost pulsating green background against which he appears. The fall of light from the left casts intricate shadows that model the right-hand side his face, while further fictive shadows cast by the left-hand section of the frame and the sitter's body on the green backdrop behind him suggest a close and intimate niche-like space. His pronounced bone structure, wide eyes, deep wrinkles and forlorn gaze all suggest a man of advanced age. The ingenuity of the artist is evident in the use of strong contrasts of light and dark to emphasise the sitter's folds and wrinkles, as well as the smooth modelling of sagging flesh and whitish highlights around the cheekbones and chin.

Context, Function, Localisation and Dating

John Fisher became Bishop of Rochester and Chancellor of Cambridge University in 1504, when he was around 35 years old. He enjoyed royal favour for much of his early life, acting as the confessor and spiritual adviser to Margaret Beaufort (c. 1441-1509), the mother of King Henry VII (1457-1509), and becoming heavily involved with the commission of Margaret's tomb from the Italian

sculptor Pietro Torrigiano following her death.² Fisher's high standing around this time is further attested to by the survival in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York of what is believed to be his portrait bust, also by Torrigiano (fig. 2), which was modelled after life along with another depicting Henry VII (V&A). He went on to advise Henry VIII (reigned 22nd April 1509 – 28th January 1547) as court chaplain and enjoyed a period of great stability at court during the 1520s while Henry sought to align church and state. He was also well respected as a scholar, for his friend Erasmus praised his humility, writing that '*He is the one man at this time who is incomparable for uprightness of life, for learning and for greatness of soul.*' However, his ascendancy ended abruptly in 1529 when he opposed the king's move to divorce his first wife Catherine of Aragon. In 1533 Henry orchestrated the Act in Restraint of Appeals, giving his royal government complete plenitude of power. This move was met with resistance by a few brave individuals including John Fisher and Thomas More.³ Fisher refused to take the subsequent Oath of Supremacy in 1534, by which Henry placed himself at the head of the Church. As a result, he was tried and beheaded on 22nd June the following year, a fate shared shortly after by his ally More.⁴

Fisher's veneration grew following his execution in 1535, but evidence provided by a surviving drawing for a now lost portrait of the Cardinal by Hans Holbein the Younger (1497-1543; fig. 3), executed either during the painter's first visit to London in 1528 or when he returned in 1532, suggests that portraits may already have been circulating before his death. Holbein's sketch, along with any lost painted portrait he was able to complete, were to become highly influential on later sixteenth-century paintings of Fisher.⁵ By the 1570s Fisher was being widely commemorated across northern Europe through the dissemination of half-length portraits in print form, often captioned with the words 'Johannes Roffensis' or variations of that title (fig. 4).

The circumstances surrounding our painting's commission and original function remain tantalisingly out of reach. The sitter's aged visage militates against the premise that the present portrait was executed while Fisher was still in favour at court, and it seems far more likely that it was made in response to his fall from grace in the late 1520s and, even more likely, when he took a valiant but ultimately fatal stance against the king in order to defend the authority of the church in 1533-4. The austere style and intimate scale of the portrait may well have been chosen to suit a potentially commemorative but very private function, for a patron who would surely have been judged in contempt of King Henry VIII to own a portrait of the man he had just put to death for 'malicious treason'. The risk that this involved may instead suggest that our painting was executed either for someone fleeing England and seeking refuge on the Continent, or for a sympathetic European supporter of the old faith that Fisher had died for. This possibility is strengthened by the treatment of the panel, which is uncharacteristic of English manufacture. Indeed, features such as the vivid green background and the sitter's three-quarter pose point strongly towards the Netherlands, and that region's early portraiture conventions. The treatment of the composition, and

² Ian Wardropper, *European Sculpture, 1400-1900, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York, 2011, p. 47.

³ John Watts, 'Politics, War and Public Life', in R. Marks and P. Williamson eds, *Gothic: Art for England 1400-1547*, London, 2003, p. 33.

⁴ John P. O'Neill et. al., *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: The Renaissance in Italy and Spain*, New York, 1987, p. 117.

⁵ Roy Strong, *Tudor and Jacobean Portraits*, London, 1969, p. 121.

especially its fictive shadow cast seemingly by the frame itself against the green backdrop against which the sitter is represented, corresponds more specifically to the tradition of Northern Netherlandish portraiture as it developed in the third and fourth decades of the century. The work of Dutch artists including Cornelis Engebrechtsz. (c. 1462-1527), Jacob van Utrecht (c.1479-after 1525; fig. 5), and Jacob Cornelisz. van Oostanen (1470-1533; figs. 6-9) share these features with our panel, and it is most likely that it was produced under the influence of their style in the years immediately following their deaths. Van Oostanen's *Head of an old woman* in the collection of the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam utilises a particularly comparable approach to the layering of pigments favoured by our painter, with thin wash-like applications consisting of ample lead white (fig. 9). A Netherlandish origin is further suggested by the carved mouldings of our panel's integral frame, which accord closely with others emerging in northern Europe by the middle of the sixteenth century. The use of a cassetta-type profile, incorporating two sets of mouldings separated by a narrow plain band, as on our panel's frame, was already pioneered on Jan van Eyck's *Virgin and Child with Canon Joris van der Paele* of 1436. But after a period of apparent disuse, remerged in Netherlandish workshops during the second quarter of the sixteenth century. The fact that such mouldings seem to be entirely absent from the large corpus of surviving portrait paintings made in Antwerp during the period and retaining their original frames suggests that our painting is not to be connected with that centre – fundamental though it was for the production of portraits at the time our painting was produced.⁶

A single other early painted portrait of Cardinal John Fisher survives in the museum in Wrocław, and has been dated in recent scholarship to the early 1570s due to the fact that it was commissioned by the Cologne-based patrician Thomas Rehdiger (1540-1576; fig. 10).⁷ The graphic and pedestrian quality of its execution and almost total absence of modelling indicates that it is the work of a copyist perhaps working from a print source, but its survival further helps to confirm the circulation of painted imagery showing Fisher's portrait in northern Europe during the general period in which our version was produced. That the treatment and style of ours can surely be dated to an earlier moment in time than the Wrocław panel makes it the earliest known painted portrait of Fisher to survive anywhere. Fascinatingly, further evidence for the circulation of Fisher's portrait in Dutch contexts survives in the form of an account, detailing how Cornelis Musius, a priest from Delft (executed in 1572 by Protestant rebel forces), reportedly carried with him portraits of both Thomas More and John Fisher, for which see Geert Janssen, *The Dutch Revolt and Catholic Exile in Reformation Europe*, Cambridge, 2014, p. 110.⁸

⁶ Hélène Verougstraete, *Frames and Supports in 15th- and 16th-century Southern Netherlandish Painting: Contributions to the Study of the Flemish Primitives* Vol. 13 Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, Brussels 2015.

⁷ B. Steinborn, *Catalogue of the Collection of Netherlandish Painting, Wrocław* (Muzeum Narodowe we Wrocławiu) 2006, p. 242-243, 370-371, nr. 89.

⁸ I am grateful to Arnoud Visser for kindly sharing this reference with me.

Related Literature

K. T. Parker, *The Drawings of Hans Holbein at Windsor Castle*, Oxford, 1945, pp. 39–40

Roy Strong, *Tudor and Jacobean Portraits*, London, 1969

Susan Doran ed., *Henry VIII: Man & Monarch*, Exh. Cat., London, British Library, 2009.



Fig. 1
Cardinal John Fisher (1469-1535), Bishop of Rochester, reverse of the panel showing scribe marks
in the timber



Fig. 2
Pietro Torrigiano (1472-1528)
Portrait bust, believed to be of John Fisher
c. 1510-15
61.6 x 65.7 x 34 cm; Polychromed terracotta
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 36.69



Fig. 3

Hans Holbein the Younger (1497/8-1543)

John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester (c.1469-1535) c.1532-4

38.2 x 23.2 cm (sheet size); Black and coloured chalks, brown wash, pen and ink, brush and ink on pale pink prepared paper

Image: Susan Foister, *Holbein in England*, Exh. Cat., London, Tate, 2006, p. 120.



Fig. 4
Attributed to Philips Galle (1537-1612)
Cardinal John Fisher
1572
London, British Museum, inv. 1864,0309.60

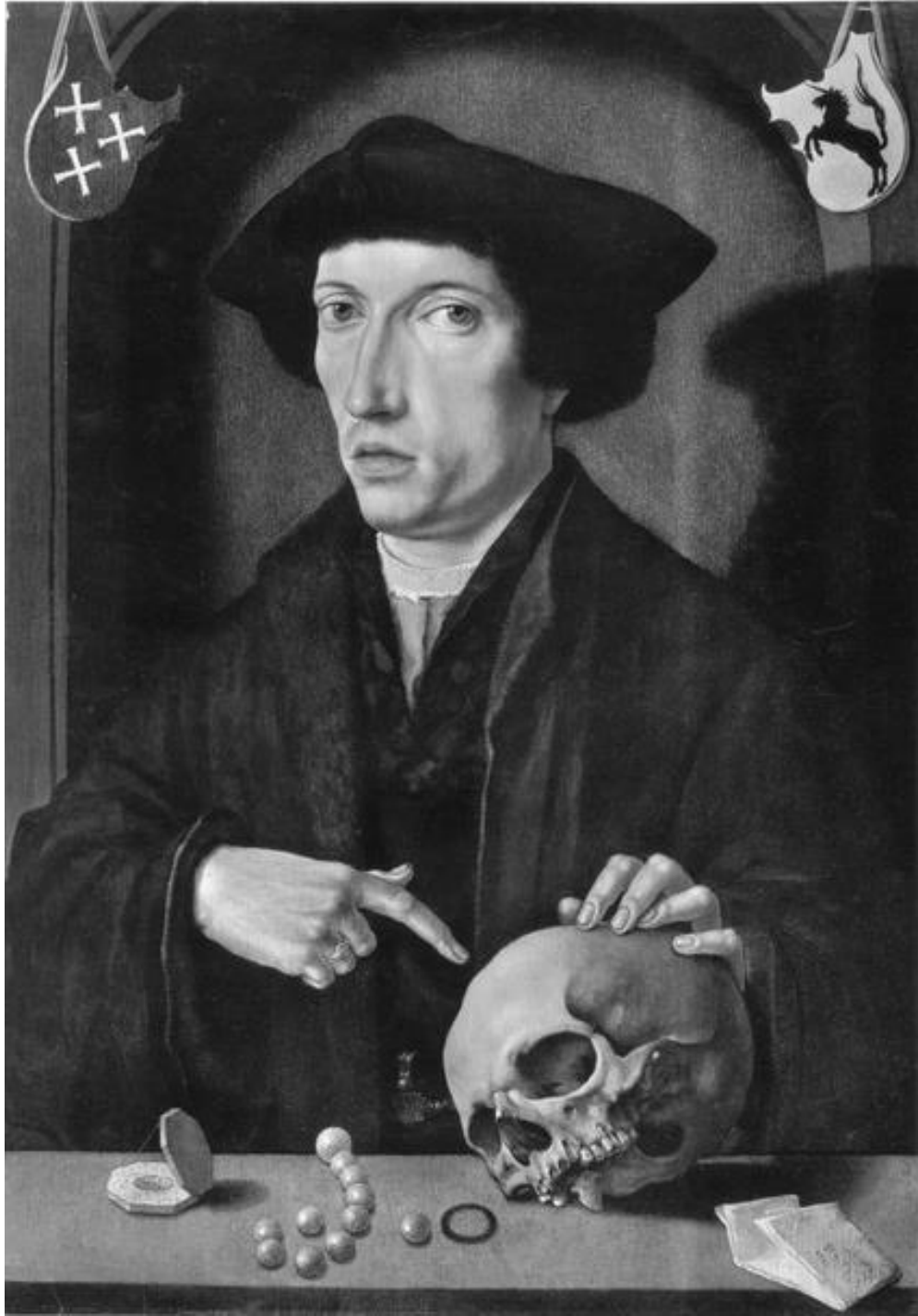


Fig. 5
Attributed to Jacob van Utrecht (c.1479-after 1525),
Portrait of Damas or Jan van der Lindt (1534)
58 x 41 cm; Oil on panel
Private Collection



Fig. 6
Jacob Cornelisz. van Oostsanen (1470-1533)
Portrait of Augustijn van Teylingen
c. 1520
51 x 34.5 cm; Oil on panel
Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, inv. 1625 (OK)



Fig. 7
Jacob Cornelisz. van Oostsanen (1470-1533)
Self Portrait
c. 1533
37.8 x 29.4 cm; Oil on panel
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. SK-A-1405



Fig. 8
Jacob Cornelisz. van Oostsanen (1470-1533)
Portrait of a man
c. 1520
33.5 x 22.5 cm; Oil on panel
Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, inv. 1970.2



Fig. 9
Jacob Cornelisz. van Oostsanen (1470-1533)
Head of an old woman
c. 1520s
13 x 5.3 cm; Oil on panel
Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, inv. 1625 (OK)

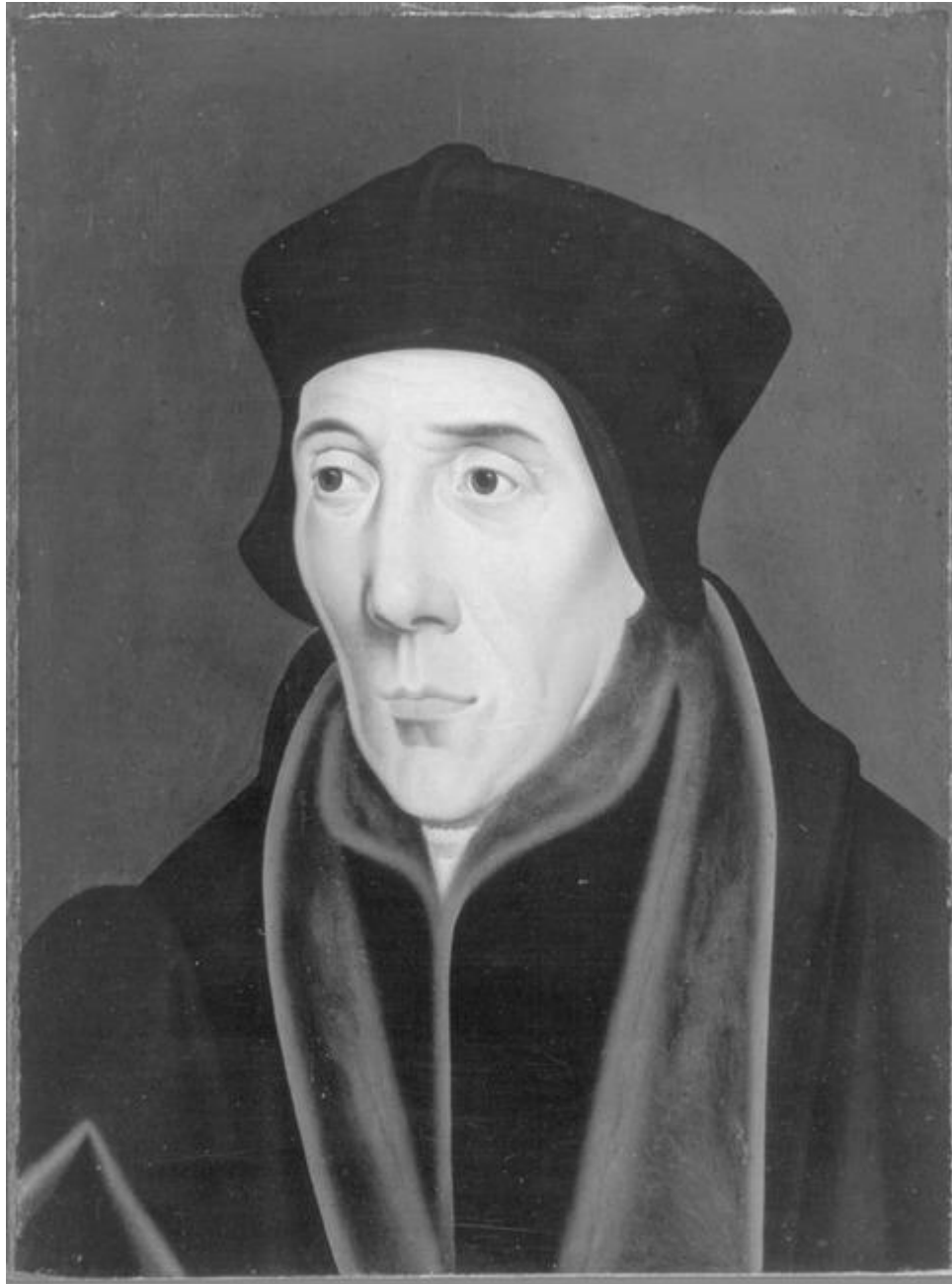


Fig. 10
Cardinal John Fisher
c. 1570-75
49.3 x 37.8 cm: *Oil on panel*
Wroclaw, Muzeum Narodowe