

A Previously Unrecognised Portrait of Joan Baptista Van Helmont (1579–1644)

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Biographers of Robert Hooke (1635–1703) have long lamented the absence of any surviving portraits of this important seventeenth-century British scientist. It is thought that at least two were made during his life, and given his importance to the early history of the Royal Society, it is surprising that neither has survived — a circumstance that has given rise to the rumour that they were purposely destroyed by Sir Isaac Newton, who was known to have had an intense dislike of Hooke.

However, in her recent biography of Hooke, historian Lisa Jardine has announced her tentative discovery of a possible portrait of Hooke among the holdings of the London Natural History Museum.¹ The painting in question (figure 1, front cover) originally belonged to the eighteenth-century botanist and electrical experimenter, William Watson (1715–1787), who bequeathed it to the British Museum upon his death in 1787. In his will, Watson indicated that the painting was a portrait of the famous British naturalist, John Ray (1627–1705), by the artist, Mary Beale (1633–1699), and, on the basis of this identification, the portrait was included in the holdings the Natural History Museum when it was moved to South Kensington in the late nineteenth century.

By comparing the portrait in question to other known portraits of Ray, Jardine was able to show that it was definitely not a portrait of Ray. However, her arguments that it is a representation of Hooke are anything but convincing. Thus she quotes two contemporary descriptions of Hooke's physical appearance which indicate that he had bulging grey eyes, curly brown hair, a sharp chin, and was thin almost to the point of emaciation. The person in the portrait has none of these physical characteristics. Though the hair has a single wave, it is neither particularly brown nor curly; the eyes are dark and not protruding; and though thin, the figure can hardly be described as emaciated or the chin as particularly sharp. Indeed, the figure has a rather thick neck and displays definite signs of an incipient double chin. In addition, as can be clearly seen in the enlargement of the face which appears on the cover of Jardine's book, the figure has a light blond moustache and a small tuft of chin hair just below his lower lip, neither of which are mentioned in the contemporary accounts of Hooke. Jardine further speculates that the portrait in question was given to Watson by Sir Hans Sloane, thus implying that it originally hung in the Royal Society, and reproduces a quote from Hooke's diary indicating that he knew Mary Beale. However, she provides no documentation for the first of these assertions and the second is only circumstantial evidence that Beale may have painted one of Hooke's missing portraits.

¹ Lisa Jardine, *The Curious Life of Robert Hooke* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), cover, 15–19, 329.

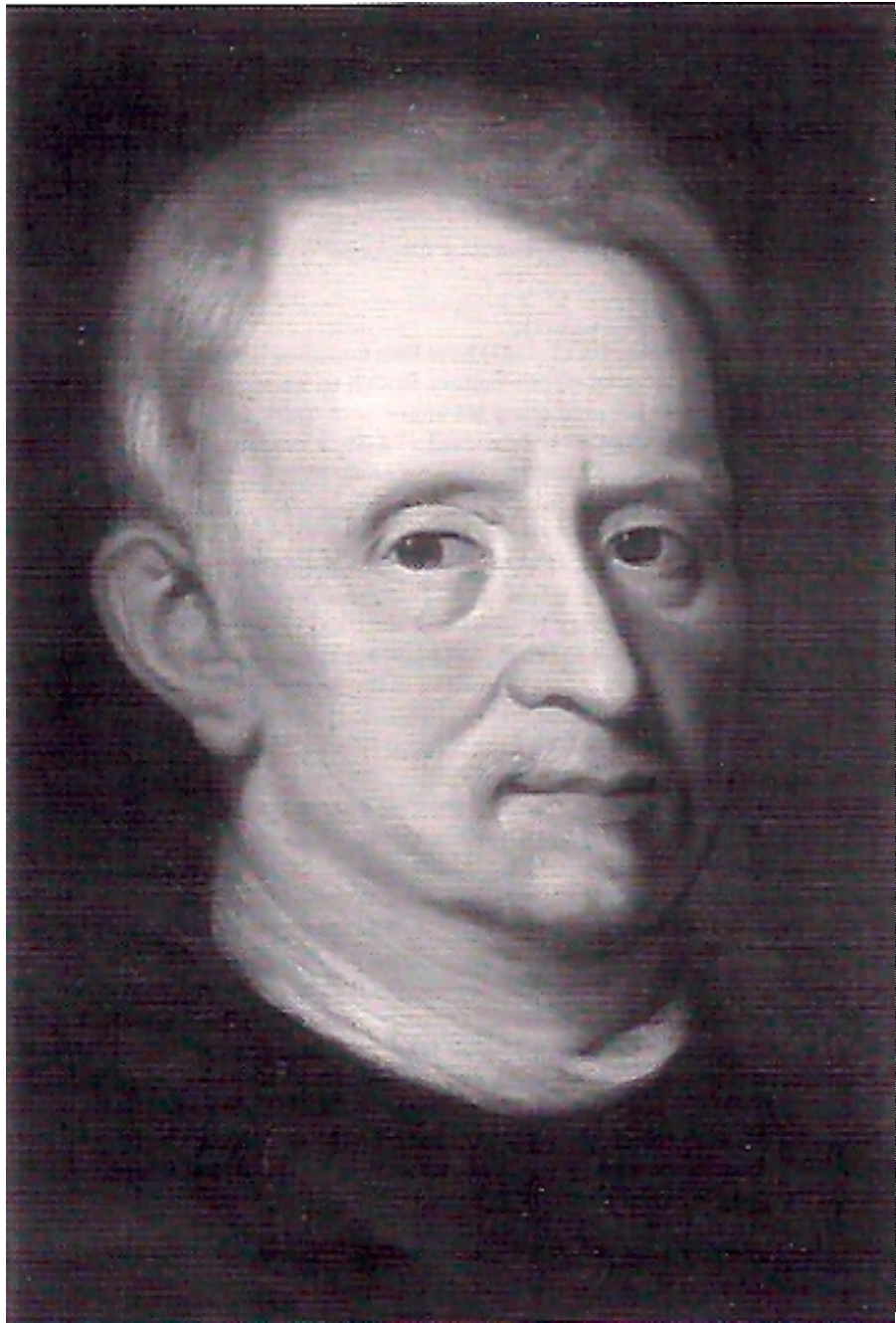


Fig. 1. (Cover). Close-up of the head in the portrait originally thought to be of John Ray but now tentatively identified as being Robert Hooke (© Natural History Museum London).

When I first saw the proposed Hooke portrait on the front cover of Jardine's book, I was immediately struck by a strong sense of *déjà vu*. I soon realised that I was looking at portrait of the seventeenth-century Flemish iatrochemist, Joan Baptista Van Helmont (1579–1644), virtually identical to a slide of an etching which I use each year in my history of chemistry course (figure 2).² This is taken from the 1648 edition of Van Helmont's *Ortus medicinae* and shows both Van Helmont and his son, Franciscus Mercurius Van Helmont (1614–1699), surrounded by various family coats of arms.³ Allowing for the differences in the two art media and the reversal of the image which occurs when one makes a print from an etching, the two figures are virtually identical. The pose and the shading are the same: both figures have the same part and wave of the hair, the same line of the ear and cheek, the same neck folds, and even the same light moustache and tuft of chin hair. This identity is easier to see if one excerpts the elder Van Helmont's head from the etching and reverses it (figure 3). The resemblance to a later etching of Van Helmont (figure 4) by Johann Alexander Baener (1647–1720), made for the 1683 German translation of Van Helmont's works, *Ausgang der Artzney-Kunst*, is also unmistakable, though this artist has greatly embellished the neck attire and clothing and added a slight hook to the nose.⁴

The most plausible explanation for these facts is that a painting, or more likely a pencil or charcoal sketch, was made of the elder Van Helmont sometime around 1630, when he was in his late forties or early fifties. This sketch was then used, after his death, to make the etching (leading to image reversal) for the 1648 posthumous edition of his collected works and, much later (see below), to make the oil painting (without image reversal) under discussion. But at what date was this painting made and how did it end up in England? Though not providing a definitive answer, Walter Pagel, in his well known study of Van Helmont, does provide some suggestive clues, as he notes that Van Helmont's son, Franciscus Mercurius, came to England in October of 1670 at the invitation of Lady Conway and that he was still there when she died in 1678, as he is reported to have been responsible for having preserved her "in her Coffin . . . with a Glass over her Face, till Lord Conway's return (from Ireland)."^{5,6} While staying with her, Franciscus had his portrait painted by Sir Peter Lely

² Many references give Van Helmont's first name as Jean and do not capitalise van. I have followed Partington and Pagel in using Joan and Van instead. See James R. Partington, *A History of Chemistry* (London: Macmillan, 1961), vol. 2, 209–243.

³ Joan B. Van Helmont, *Ortus medicinae* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1648), plate following introduction.

⁴ Joan. B. Van Helmont, *Ausgang der Artzney-Kunst* (Sultzbach: Endters, 1683), frontis piece. A much later etching of Van Helmont appears in Louis Figuier, *Vies des savants illustres: savants du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1870), opposite 380. This is obviously based on the Baener etching of 1683. It is of interest only because it illustrates the characteristic reversal of the image which occurs each time a new etching is made (the figure now faces the same direction as the etching of 1648), and the gradual corruption of the original image (which now barely resembles either the painting or the etching of 1648).

⁵ Walter Pagel, *Joan Baptista Van Helmont: Reformer of Science and Medicine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 21 and 213–14. While recognising that the Baener etching of 1683 was derived from the etching of 1648, Pagel also characterises the former as the "only known life-size portrait of Van Helmont," thus indicating that his research had failed to uncover any references to oil paintings of Van Helmont.

⁶ I would also like to thank Dr. Jardine and Susan Snell of the Natural History Museum Archives for independently bringing the connection between Franciscus Van Helmont and Lady Conway to my attention.

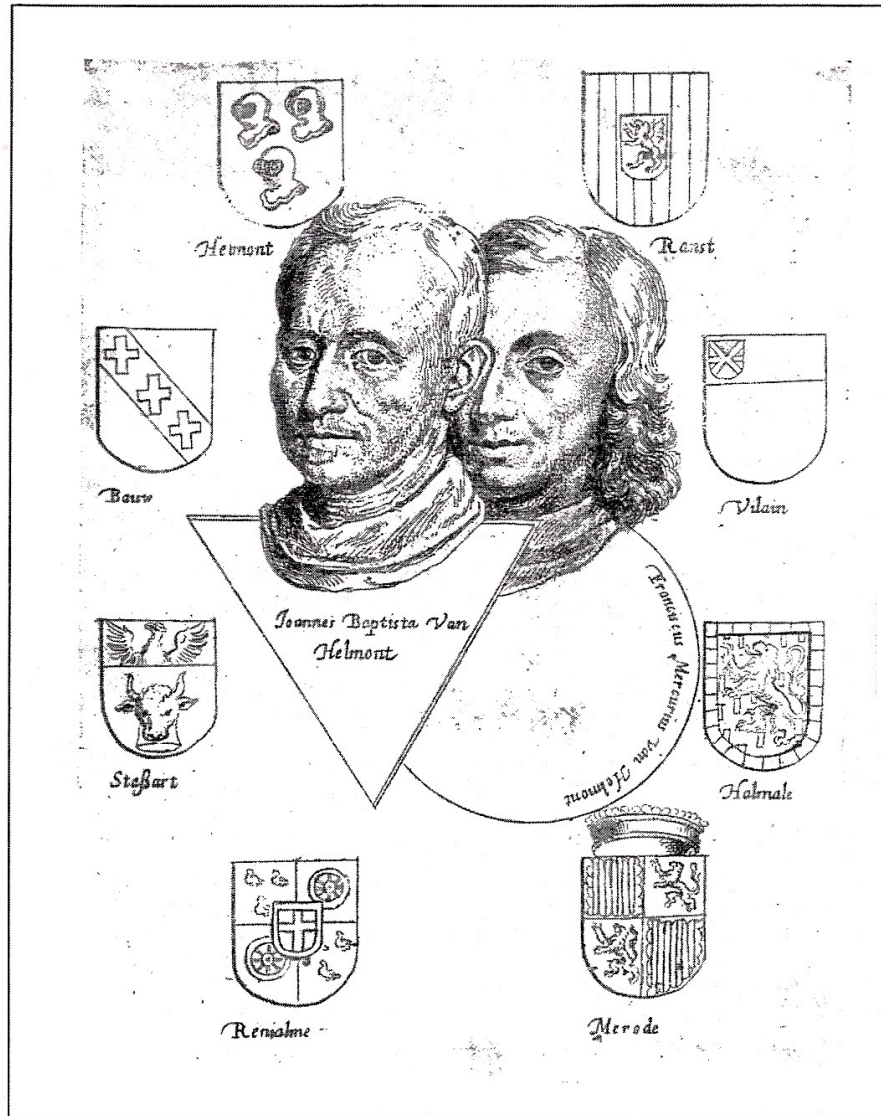


Fig. 2. Etching of Joan Baptista Van Helmont (1579–1644) and his son Franciscus Mercurius Van Helmont (1614–1699) from J. B. Van Helmont, *Ortus medicinae* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1648) (Oesper Collections).



Fig. 3. Excerpted and reversed image of Van Helmont's head from figure 2.



Fig. 4. Etching of Joan Baptista Van Helmont by Johann Alexander Baener from J. B. Van Helmont, *Ausgang der Artzney-Kunst* (Sultzbach: Endters, 1683) (Oesper Collections).

(1618–1680), probably in early 1671, as Henry More mentions it in a letter dated 29 May 1671, and it is not implausible that either Franciscus or his hostess took this opportunity to have the earlier sketch of the elder Van Helmont made into a companion painting.⁷

Whether Lely was also responsible for the painting of the elder Van Helmont, or it is the work of another artist, is impossible to tell without having both paintings inspected by an art expert. Lely's portrait of Franciscus was purchased by the National Gallery in 1921 and currently resides in the Tate Collection.⁸ It shows Franciscus as he appeared in 1671 and not as he appeared with his father in the etching of 1648. It is also radically different in style from the painting of the elder Van Helmont under consideration, though this might plausibly be accounted for by the fact that the portrait of Franciscus is an original composition, whereas that of the elder Van Helmont was constrained by the style of the original sketch. In addition to the suggested comparison of the two paintings by an art expert, the most obvious step in confirming these suppositions would be to survey the holdings of various museums and galleries in Belgium and the Netherlands in an attempt to locate an earlier copy of the painting and/or the original sketches that served as the basis for the various etchings — a project unfortunately well beyond both the means and interests of the author. Also of concern is the question of why, on the basis of either my interpretation or that of Jardine, William Watson was under the illusion that he owned a portrait of John Ray.

In closing, I wish to emphasise that, though I disagree with Jardine's interpretation of the portrait, it should not be forgotten that it was her initial questioning of the Ray identification and her efforts to publicise the portrait that provided the key to making the correct identification possible.

⁷ Marjorie Hope Nicholson, *Conway Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), 322 *et seq.*

⁸ Martin Davies, *The British School* (London: The National Gallery, 1959), 75. An actual image of the painting is given in Anon., *National Gallery Illustrations: The British School* (London: The National Gallery, 1936), 64, and the painting may now be viewed on the Tate's website at www.tate.org.uk.