

## Press Release

### **The Cobbe portrait is not a genuine likeness of William Shakespeare made from life**

#### **as confirmed by four expert opinions**

(Mainz, April 21, 2009) Working with four specialists, Professor Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel, a Shakespeare scholar at the University of Mainz, was able to refute the claim of the picture restorer and owner Alec Cobbe that the 'Cobbe portrait', in his family's possession for centuries, is a genuine life-portrait of William Shakespeare. Hammerschmidt-Hummel is the author of a book about the authentic features of Shakespeare (The True Face of William Shakespeare. The Poet's Death Mask and Likenesses from Three Periods of His Life. London: Chaucer Press, 2006), in which she employs reports by the German Bureau of Criminal Investigation (BKA=CID or FBI) and also the findings of medics and other experts to show the authenticity of four Shakespeare images. The images concerned are the Chandos portrait, dating from c. 1594-99 (National Portrait Gallery, London); the Flower portrait, painted in 1609 (in the Royal Shakespeare Company collection until c. 1999, and since vanished without trace); the terracotta Davenant bust of c. 1613 (Garrick Club, London); and the Darmstadt Shakespeare death mask, taken one or two days after Shakespeare's death (Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek, Darmstadt). Hammerschmidt-Hummel also assembled a catalogue of the poet's facial characteristics as well as the signs of illness displayed in these likenesses. These criteria can now be applied to establish whether other known or newly-discovered portraits are genuine representations of Shakespeare.

According to his own report, Alec Cobbe visited the London National Portrait Gallery exhibition 'Searching for Shakespeare' in 2006, where he saw the Janssen portrait - discovered before 1770 - on loan from the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC. (Supported by a report from BKA identification expert Reinhardt Altmann, Hammerschmidt-Hummel had already concluded by 1999 that the Janssen portrait could be authentic.) On this visit to the gallery, Cobbe decided that the Janssen portrait looked exactly like a painting in his family's collection. Today he asserts that his picture is the original and the Janssen is a copy. He is also claiming that Martin Droeshout the Younger used the Cobbe picture as the basis of his portrait engraving for the First Folio edition of 1623.

Together with the well-known Chairman of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Professor Stanley Wells, Cobbe presented his claims at the beginning of March 2009 in a high-profile worldwide publicity drive. Wells put his weight fully behind Cobbe, confirming the latter's assumptions and announcing an exhibition of the Cobbe portrait and copies of it, due to open in Stratford-upon-Avon on 23 April 2009 - the day of Shakespeare's birth and death – accompanied by a book launch.

On comparing the Cobbe and Janssen portraits, and referring also to the Droeshout engraving and the four previously authenticated true-to-life images (the Chandos and Flower portraits, the Davenant bust and the death mask), the Shakespeare specialist Hammerschmidt-Hummel found discrepancies between the Cobbe and Janssen portraits. Her investigations showed that the painter of the Janssen portrait was quite familiar with Shakespeare's characteristic features and with the symptoms of his early-stage illnesses. The artist who painted the Cobbe picture, however, was not acquainted with all the morphological characteristics of Shakespeare's face, and in particular was unaware of pathological details, apart from a slight swelling of the left upper eyelid, of which there is only a 'suggestion' in his portrait. These differences were confirmed by an authority in the diagnosis of pathological signs in Renaissance portraiture, the dermatologist Professor Jost Metz, in his professional opinion of 12 March 2009.

This clearly indicates once again that, only pending further research into its early history, we can admit the Janssen portrait to the select company of genuine Shakespeare portraits; and that it cannot in all possibility be a copy of the Cobbe portrait. On the contrary, Janssen may have served as the model for the Cobbe. Evidence for this is provided by the noticeable 'similarities in the outline of the face, and in the forehead/eyes/nose/mouth and chin areas' that identification specialist Reinhardt Altmann brought out in his report of 8 April 2009; as well as the differences also noted by him (in agreement with the dermatologist). These discrepancies include, for example, the area of the tip of the nose.

On 9 April 2009 Andreas Kahnert, a photographer and specialist in electronic image processing at the Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Darmstadt, used Photoshop to produce a montage juxtaposing the Droeshout engraving and the Cobbe portrait: this certainly reveals the significant discrepancy between the two in the tip of the nose area (see illustration).

In his 'comparison of the Cobbe/Janssen pictures with the Overbury picture', Altmann encountered 'significant differences' indicating that 'we are not dealing with one and the same person'.

A written statement of 11 March 2009 requested by Hammerschmidt-Hummel from Dr Eberhard Nikitsch, inscription specialist at the Mainz Academy of Sciences and Literature, attested that the inscription on the Cobbe portrait lacks 'the usual scripts found on contemporary portraits', i.e. 'capitals, fracture and (slightly sloping) italics': it had been carried out 'somewhat clumsily, almost in a schoolboy hand', and must have been added at a later date. For comparison, Nikitsch drew upon contemporary English examples of inscriptions that display the typical scripts of the time: the portraits of Thomas de Houghton (Houghton Tower, Lancashire, after 1564); Robert Cecil, First Minister of Elizabeth I (Hatfield House, c. 1600); and the third Earl of Southampton (Tower Portrait, Duke of Buccleuch Collection, after 1603).

We therefore conclude from these findings that the Cobbe picture can hardly be an authentic portrait of William Shakespeare painted from life. Neither can it have

served as the model for the Droeshout engraving, something that is evidently clear from a careful comparative examination of the two pictures.

3/4

**Reference:**

Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel, *The True Face of William Shakespeare. The Poet's Death Mask and Likenesses from Three Periods of His Life.* London: Chaucer Press, 2006.

**Contact and information:**

Professor Dr Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel

Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz

Phone +49 611 521989

Mobile +49 170 9668036

Email: [h.hammerschmidt-hummel@t-online.de](mailto:h.hammerschmidt-hummel@t-online.de)

<http://www.hammerschmidt-hummel.de>

4/4