



Full of Sound and Fury:

Painting a portrait of Charles the Bold

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A work in progress

Maugis – 2020

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

The Scottish play, William Shakespeare

Introduction

When I first started to think about painting a copy of the portrait of Charles the Bold by Rogier van der Weyden in the summer of 2018, I wanted to find out what he really looked like. The original portrait, which is already a copy by his workshop, is very worn and dark. And even if it had been in perfect condition, it would still not be completely realistic. Rogier van der Weyden tended to paint his portraits in a formulaic way, in stiff poses, idealised, with eyes that are slightly too round and too large.

There are countless portraits of Charles the Bold, most of them completely fictitious and painted long after his death. Many of the portraits are copies and variations of the portrait by Rogier. Rubens paints him as a baroque hero. The 19th century likes to portray Charles as a burly man in armour, with sleek short hair and a moustache. Which of these are closer to the truth? One would assume the contemporary portraits.

The research I did was two-fold:

- 1) Examine the contemporary portraits
- 2) Examine the descriptions of the chroniclers

1. The contemporary portraits

The collection of portraits I studied can be found under IV. The Burgundian Codex in the menu of my website. I am only going to repeat the essential ones here. The collection and this article are also works in progress. New portraits or information may come to light.

While I was painting the early stages of the portrait, I realised he also resembles his older half-brother Antoine somewhat:



The earliest portrait of Charles I could find is a drawing of him as a toddler, currently located in Haarlem, the Netherlands. It is probably not entirely realistic. Note the dreadful Burgundian bowl cut of the first half of the 15th century. Though crude, the portrait is still interesting because it shows his ear in detail. I have read somewhere that his ears showed an anomaly, but I don't know what yet, so this is something to start from.



Other youth portraits of Charles the Bold can be find in the dedication miniatures of manuscripts, where he is usually standing near or at the side of his father Philip the Good. They show an active, happy looking, dark-haired boy of varying ages, in fine clothes and with a bowl cut.



The best known portrait is that by Rogier van der Weyden. He is portrayed as an adult in his twenties, at least that seems the most likely age.



Charles is a stern looking adult, with a constant frown, heavy and slightly protruding bottom lip and rather heavy jaw. His hands are slender and somewhat small. That last characteristic may be due to the painting style of Rogier van der Weyden.

This portrait is currently in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, Germany. It is generally assumed that this is a copy by the workshop of Rogier van der Weyden. It was not uncommon that several versions of such portraits were painted as a series. It is possible that the original was in the hands of Margaret of Austria, the granddaughter of Charles the Bold. At least, a similar looking portrait appears in the catalogue of her possessions.

Rogier van der Weyden also painted his father and his mother. The paintings shown below are copies, probably by the workshop:



Charles seems to have been proud of his Portuguese ancestry and it seems he was more Portuguese than French looking. He probably looks more like his mother than his father, but even so I don't see much resemblance. Children often also have the traits of their grandparents, so I have been comparing them to his portrait as well. There are no good, realistic contemporary portraits, though. To be honest, I found the portrait of Margaret of Bavaria, his father's mother, the closest resemblance, but it dates from the 16th century, so it is a question of chicken and egg and worthless as a source:



There are a number of miniatures showing Charles in his twenties and thirties, but these are small and nothing more than caricatures. They do show the same main characteristics: a young man with a round face and dark curly hair.

In his prayer book we find the following miniature:



Fideles hic accē
dite vpi sc̄m
diligite. mentibus



DEI

HEI

The man with the black chaperon and red robe behind the pillar in the miniature below is supposedly a portrait of Charles the Bold. In the background his motto is written on the wall: Je l'ay emprins (I have undertaken).



Another contemporary portrait is sculpted, not painted. It is the famous reliquary of Charles the Bold by Gérard Loyet, currently in the Trésor de Liège, or the treasury of St. Pauls cathedral at Liège, Belgium. It dates from around 1468 and shows a young man with a round face and curly hair. Also typical are the frown, the heavy jaw and large round eyes.



A later contemporary portrait dates from around 1474. In 1473 he went to Dijon to bury the remains of his parents in Champmol. The portrait must have been painted for that occasion. There are a number of later copies, all slightly different. As far as I know, the painting below is also a copy.



He looks rather rough in this portrait. The features that appear in the van der Weyden portrait are still there: the frown, the jowls, the protruding bottom lip, but they are more prominent than before, and his face and body are much fuller. His unevenly cut hair is plastered against his forehead and seems rather limp compared to before. Charles is portrayed beardless but not exactly clean shaven either.

In the above portrait he was around 40. He wouldn't get much older. He was killed at the age of 43, before Nancy during the siege of the city, on 5 January 1477 (or 1476 in old counting).

At the end of his life after he lost at the battle of Grandson in the months preceding his defeat at Nancy, he became depressed, or – in medieval words – he suffered from melancholy. He locked himself up and let his beard grow. He swore he would let it grow until he had beaten his enemy. It grew very long and he looked rather wild, until he was persuaded to shave it off.

One not very important but still interesting question that is hard to deduct from the portraits: was he left- or right-handed? On the van der Weyden portrait and the Dijon portrait he is holding his sword with his left hand. On the Liege reliquary his sword is placed on his left, so for right-hand use, same in the prayerbook. In some miniatures you can see a dagger on his left side. I may need to go through the chronicles again at a later time.

Because I am copying the van der Weyden portrait I have examined it in detail over and over again. Unfortunately the portrait, particularly the face, is very worn. The hairs of his beard have faded away. There is one small detail, however, that I have not yet seen mentioned anywhere or copied on other portraits. Charles seems to have a mole near his collarbone. It doesn't look like wear on the portrait or a stain. It'd be useful to travel to Berlin to look at the original painting, but that is not possible at all right now.



2. The contemporary chronicles and other sources

According to the description of Georges Chastellain (*Eloge de Charles le Hardy, Vivant*) and Philippe de Comines, Charles was not as tall as his father but well-built, with strong shoulders - though a little stooping - and big legs, long hands and elegant feet. He didn't have too much meat or too few bones. His body was light and agile, powerful and suited for hard work. His face was slightly rounder than that of his father, and darker. He had his father's full, red mouth. He had a pronounced nose and a brown beard. His complexion was bright, light brown, his brow attractive. He had thick, dark hair and a white neck. He had a tendency

to slump and look at the ground when he walked around, but he was a fine looking, handsome prince.

Chastellain's eulogy can be found in the History of Jacques de Lalain, but an edition of unedited works (*Oeuvres historiques inédites de Sire Georges Chastellain*, Desrez, Paris, 1836, page 508 ff) has the following curious addition:

"...avoit uns yeux vairs et rians, et angéliquement clairs, lesquels quand il musoit pensant, il sembloit que le père y fust dedans tout vif..."

Vair is an undefined colour between gray and brown so freely translated that would be: "he had greybrown laughing eyes, angelically clear, and when he was in thought, it seemed his father came alive in them..." I have no idea why this sentence is not included in the same Eulogy in the history of Jacques de Lalain.

This is quite different from how the Strasbourg chronicler Trausch (quoted by De Bussière in *Histoire de la ligue contre Charles le Téméraire*) describes his appearance during the meeting with Frederik at Trier in September/October of 1473: "He was completely dressed in gold cloth and covered with numerous pearls and precious stones. But the splendour of his clothes accentuated his burly and stern physique. His big black eyes, his proud and determined air, couldn't make one forget how little elegant he was with his square build, his rather broad shoulders, his very stout limbs and his slightly bowed legs due to all the time he spent on his horse."

There is another description of Charles at this event, which is less harsh. Guillaume Faret/Farell in his *Histoire de René II* (quoted by P. Aubert Roland in *La Guerre de René II contre Charles le Hardi*): "He was small and nervous, his complexion pale with an oval face, his hair dark chestnut, his eyes black and sparkling, his presence majestic but a bit stern (nb – he uses the word *farouche* for this, which can also mean fierce, hard, shy, or cruel etc.). His spirit was lively, his heart magnanimous, he had an immense ambition, intrepid, courageous and impetuous. Capable of great deeds, he only lacked prudence to achieve them."

As for his height, there does not seem a lot of information to go on. He was shorter than his father, according to Georges Chastellain. There is also some other indication of his height in the description of the time he greeted Margaret of York before their wedding. Margaret of York, who was slightly less than 6 feet or about 1.80m (with medieval measurements probably not so standard) and he was supposed to be half a foot shorter. That would make him – wild guess – about 1.66 to 1.68 m. If someone knows more, do let me know. If one of his suits of armour is still around, that could answer the question. I haven't been able to find one so far.

His eye colour remains the biggest mystery so far. Rogier van der Weyden painted him with grey ("vair") eyes, like his father. The painter of Dijon and the Chroniclers gave him brown to black eyes. He looked more Portuguese than his French ancestors. His mother was part Portuguese. Is it safe to assume his eyes were dark, rather than grey? I have no definite answer yet.

For the portrait the description of his entire body is probably not important. In the older van der Weyden portrait where he is in his twenties, the bulky velvet doublet hides his body and the same can be said of the armour in the "newer" Dijon portrait but it is quite obvious he is

much bulkier and has aged a lot by 1474, looking rough and haggard. He has spent many years in tents and wooden cabins on battlefields and out in the rain, snow and sunshine, and he probably didn't sleep enough. He suffered from insomnia and had a habit of lying on his bed in his clothes and getting up several times during the night. The people around him complained he worked too hard, never relaxed and would probably not get old. Even in those days people seem to have been aware of the burnout syndrome.

The chroniclers mention that he never complained of tiredness but that doesn't mean he was always in good health. As a child he was quite ill several times and later in life he was so ill at one point that he nearly died. I already mentioned this earlier on. During that time he had a fever and couldn't keep his food down. He got oedema in his legs and was treated by means cupping and hot compresses to draw blood from his heart. It is not clear what illness he was suffering from, some said poison. After fourteen days he was up and about again, inspecting his troops, but according to the descriptions he had lost a lot of weight and was quite pale.

There may have been something unusual about his ears, as mentioned before.

His autopsy report is also a good source of information about his physique.

After the battle of Nancy, they found Moro, his horse, wandering around near the battlefield but Charles the Bold couldn't be found and nobody knew whether he was dead or not. After a while, a page came forward and claimed he saw Charles fall from his horse and led them to the spot where he last saw Charles. The duke was found dead, a bit away from the others, completely naked, lying face down in a ditch near the lake of St. Jean, his face frozen to the ice. His body was severely mutilated and partially eaten by wolves (though there is no word of this in the contemporary report, I need to investigate where this is coming from).

How he exactly died and his appearance in death is of little importance for the portrait painting but the description of the characteristics by which he could be identified was. For the circumstances of his death I have created a separate page. I will devote a separate chapter to his personality. I'm also devoting a separate chapter to his death.

Charles's head was mutilated beyond recognition so he was identified by the following six characteristics:

de saige / & a l'entour de luy / assez loing les vngz des aul-
 mes tous nudz cōme luy / assez loing les vngz des aul-
 tres. Il auoit trois coupz / l'ung d'une halebarde ou mi-
 lieu de la teste par dessus l'oreille iusques aux dentz / le
 deuxiesme estoit vng cop de pique au trauers des cui-
 ses / & vng aultre par le fondement.
Par ainsy le lundy ou mardy en suiuant il fut porte
 dedans la ville de nancy ou mondit seigneur de lorraine
 ne le fit enterrer bien honnorablement / & a ses obseques
 porta le ducil luy & toutes ses gens.
En oultre ledit duc de bourgoigne fut cōgnu a six
 choses principalement.
 La premiere fut aux dentz de dessus quil auoit aultres
 fois perdues par vne chente.
 La deuxiesme fut d'une cicatrice a cause de la playe ql
 eut a la iornee de montlhery ou coste dextre de la gorge
 La troisieme aux ongles quil portoit plus grandes q
 nul aultre homme de sa compaignie.
 La quatrieme fut pour vne playe quil auoit en vne
 espaule a cause d'une escharboucle que aultrefois il a-
 uoit eue.
 La cinquiesme fut a vne fistule quil auoit au bas du
 ventre du coste destre de la pennilliere.
 Et la sixiesme fut d'ung ongle que il auoit retraict en
 l'orteil.
Aux dictes enseignes donna son iugement pour
 tout vray vng sien medicin nomme maistre mathieu
 portingalops. Et aussy le dirent ses varletz de chābre /
 le grant bastard messire oliuier de la marche son cha-
 pellain & plusieurs aultres prisonniers.
Ladictes desconfiture gaigna ledit duc de lorraine

The first one was the upper teeth he had lost in a fall.

The second one was a scar on the right side of his throat, result of a wound which he received during the battle of Monthléry.

The third one were his nails which were longer than anyone else in his company.

The fourth one was a wound he had on one of his shoulders because of a carbuncle he had suffered from.

The fifth one was a fistula he had in his lower abdomen on the right side of his penis.

And the sixth one was an ingrown toe nail.

After much investigation and digging in old reports, I have deduced that he lost actually two of his upper teeth when he fell of his horse, but I don't yet know which teeth and when and where it happened. Apart from these six characteristics, some sources mention that he was identified by a ring he was still wearing and some other scars but I'm still going through the materials for a second time so I can't tell yet exactly where I read it. There is so much to digest and regurgitate.

Also note the odd detail about his long nails. Someone described it as manicured but I read another description that said they looked like 'griffes' or claws.

As for his clothes and jewels, I will describe them in a separate chapter.

And now it's time to paint.

To be continued...