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The Globetrotter's Identity: Michel Sittow in the International Historiographies

Abstract

Michel Sittow was a disciple of Hans Memling and a follower of the fifteenth-century school of Bruges, who led the art of northern portraiture through the Renaissance. This painter from Reval (currently Tallinn) travelled around Europe, working for the most significant monarchs of that time: Isabella of Castile, Margaret of Austria, Charles V, Christian II Oldenburg and perhaps Henry VIII. Even though studied by multiple researchers from Europe and the US, his oeuvre is still giving rise to many questions for art historians.

This study's aim is to analyse the international historiography of Michel Sittow, starting with the first attributions of his artworks, and comparative studies of German historians who called the painter Michel Sittow and the Spanish school where he was known as Melchior Alemán. In 1940 Paul Johannsen published the document that indicates Michel Sittow's stay in Spain. The post-war historiography was not interested in Sittow's life, except in the work of the Latvian origin Belgian researcher Jazeps Trizna, who published the first monograph on his artworks in 1976. He was the first to unify both historiographical personalities the one of Michel Sittow, and the one of Miguel Alemán. Meanwhile in Estonian literature, Sittow's story appeared as a romantic symbol of independence from the Soviet Union in Jaan Kross's novel.

In the last twenty years, with the development of the radiographic method of artwork analysis, researchers such as Else Kai Sass, Matthias Weniger, Chiyo Ishikawa, and Pilar Silva Maroto have revived many questions about Sittow's career, style, and globetrotting around European courts. However, the first exhibition that reunited Michel's artworks, held in 2018 in Washington and Tallinn marking the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Estonian independence, did not solve many of Sittow's life secrets.

Keywords: Michel Sittow, Fifteenth-century Art, Sixteenth-century Art, Habsburgs, historiography

Studies on artists' oeuvres with a biographical approach are the basis for understanding the past in a transversal and international way. Besides, it is noteworthy the reduced attention of researchers towards the cultural transfer between northern and southern Europe in the fifteenth century except some publications such as *Italia e Fiandra nella pittura del Quattrocento*,¹ or catalogues of exhibitions like *The Age of Van Eyck: The Mediterranean World and Early Netherlandish Painting 1430–1530* held in Bruges in 2002.² On that occasion the curators attempted to explain, side by side, the artistic consequences of commercial and cultural interactions between populations. In fact, this exhibition had several counterpart events south of the Alps demonstrating an increasing interest in the painting of the Flemish primitives by Italian researchers. For example, it seems appropriate to mention the monographic exhibition about Hans Memling complemented with an analysis of his Italian clients, held at the Galleria Scuderie del Quirinale in Rome in 2014,³ or the exhibition *I fiamminghi in Sicilia* at Palazzo Reale in Palermo in 2018.⁴ Both exhibitions presented original research carried out in conjunction with the museological effort that enriched the perspective on the cultural relationships between north and south, not only considered as artists' trips but also as one of the catalysts of the artistic production of the quattrocento. Finally, it is appropriate to draw attention to the studies on the Spanish-Flemish style that, outlining a pictorial trend with limited diffusion around the Iberian Peninsula, have allowed an understanding of the comparative relevance of several factors such as the travels of artists, artistic exchanges, and the flexibility and versatility of identity in the past.⁵

In particular, this study analyses the international historiography of Michel Sittow, an artist whose professional career encompasses various European territories and, in turn, can be used as an example to study the cultural transfer across the Alps. The objective of this research is to observe how, throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, art historians have studied the work and life of a person whose presence is documented in several royal courts. Moreover, the case of this artist demonstrates how national schools used to focus on the historical narrative to appropriate this artist, pioneer of modern portraits, through the selective interpretation of the scarce documentation about his activity. After the analysis of the primary sources on Michel Sittow, this study addresses the issue of connecting the northern European artist with Miguel Aléman or Melchor Alemán, documented in Castile between 1492 and 1502, and also in 1515, proving the need to examine the history of this painter in an international context. Finally, the analysis moves to the contributions provided during the second half of the twentieth century. It is

1 L. Castelfranchi Vegas, *Italia e Fiandra nella pittura del Quattrocento*, Milan, 1998.

2 *The Age of van Eyck. The Mediterranean World and Early Netherlandish Painting 1430–1530*, eds. T.-H. Borchert, A. Beyer, London, 2002.

3 Memling. *Rinascimento fiammingo*, ed. T.-H. Borchert, Roma, 2014; See also: F. Veratelli, *À la mode italienne Commerce du luxe et diplomatie dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux, 1477–1530*, Lille, 2013.

4 *Sicilië: Pittura Fiamminga*, eds. V. Abbate, G. Bongiovanni, M. de Luca, Palermo, 2018.

5 J. V. L. Brans, *Isabel la Católica y el arte hispano-flamenco*, Madrid, 1952; J. Yarza Luaces, *Los Reyes Católicos. Paisaje artístico de una monarquía*, Madrid, 1993.

worth highlighting the formalist and iconographic studies, the monographs on the painter's life, and the literary fiction inspired by his journeys. In this context the first monographic exhibition dedicated to the artist's production was entitled *Michel Sittow: Estonian Painter at the Courts of Renaissance Europe*,⁶ and took place in 2018 in Estonia, with the collaboration of American museums, commemorating 100 years of the nation's independence. In conclusion, it is clear that the history and work of this artist continue to be part of the legacy of various contemporary nations.

Primary sources on the life of Michel Sittow

Michel Sittow was an artist originally from Reval (now Tallinn in Estonia), educated in Bruges, probably in Hans Memling's workshop.⁷ He stands out for a complex biography, full of travels, stays, and visits to the various European courts of the Renaissance where he served as the personal painter of Isabella of Castile, Philip the Fair, Margaret of Austria, Christian II of Denmark, Charles V, and perhaps Henry VII or Henry VIII of England. His movements demonstrate the communication flow between the sovereigns and patrons in the late fifteenth century and the first decades of the sixteenth century. In addition, they largely reflect the diplomatic interests of the House of Habsburg as, most likely, this itinerant and emigrant painter would have been their representative.⁸

With regard to his biography, in his hometown, Reval, his family was listed on property documents. His father Claus (Clawes van der Sittow), a settler established in Reval, was a member of the guild of St Kanut, while his mother came from a family of Finnish and Swedish origin.⁹ From 1507 Sittow was a master in the same guild.¹⁰ A year later, due to a conflict with his stepfather over the mater-

6 *Michel Sittow: Estonian Painter at the Courts of Renaissance Europe*, eds. J. O. Hand, G. Koppel, Washington–Tallinn, 2018.

7 M. Weniger, "Bynnen Brugge in Flanderen: The Apprenticeship of Michel Sittow and Juan de Flandes", in: *Memling Studies*, eds. H. Verougstraete, R. van Schoute, M. Smeyers, Leuven, 1997, pp. 115–131.

8 This practice is not an exceptional case, since other diplomatic missions taken by painters can be documented, for example the case of Jan van Eyck and his travel to Portugal: T.-H. Borchert, "The Mobility of Artists: Aspects of Cultural Transfer in Renaissance Europe", in: *The Age of van Eyck...*, op. cit., pp. 42–43; B. Fransen, "Jan van Eyck y España. Un viaje y una obra", *Anales de Historia del Arte*, 2010, 22, pp. 39–58; M. Parada López de Corselas, *El viaje de Jan van Eyck de Flandes a Granada (1428–1429)*, Madrid, 2016. For more about the relation between diplomacy and portraiture, see: D. Eichberger, "Margaret of Austria's Portrait Collection: Female Patronage in the Light of Dynastic Ambitions and Artistic Quality", *Renaissance Studies*, 1996, 10, no. 2, *Women Patrons of Renaissance Art, 1300–1600*, pp. 259–279.

9 E. Kōks, "Michel Sittow: A painter from Tallinn", *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 1978, 9, no. 1, p. 33.

10 A. Mänd, "Michel Sittow and Reval (Tallinn)": A New Look at Records in the Tallinn City Archives", in: *Michel Sittow 1496–1525: The Artists Connecting Estonia with the Southern Netherlands*, ed. T. Abel, Tallinn, 2001, p. 7.

nal inheritance,¹¹ he appears in the legal records of the supreme court in Lübeck. Around 1518 Michel married Dorothea and, in the following years, he led the guild of St Kanut.¹² However, these data do not offer any detailed information about his artworks, since most of the primary sources on his activity provide information about his salaries and family situation, without any detailed description of his works.

Likewise, the sources from Castile and the court of Mechelen did not provide any more specific data about this painter, but still point to the reputation of the artist.¹³ However, words that clearly confirm his prestige and appreciation by his contemporaries can be found in a letter from Doctor Puebla, ambassador of Castile and Aragon at the English court, who, in 1505, wrote to Ferdinand the Catholic about the artist. The diplomat conveyed the advice of Catherine of Aragon, daughter of the king, to commission from Michel two portraits of Margaret of Austria, since he would be the artist who would most reliably and accurately paint them.¹⁴

Michel Sittow is one of the few artists indicated by name in the inventories, made in 1516 and 1526,¹⁵ of the painting collection of Margaret of Austria in Mechelen. Thanks to them it is possible to identify the only work that has been both preserved to this day and corroborated by the documents: *Assumption of the Virgin* from the *Polyptych of Isabella of Castile* (currently at the National Gallery of Art in Washington; Fig. 1). Moreover, the fact that the artist's name appeared in the inventories and his works were preserved in the private chambers of the Governor of Flanders, clearly shows Sittow's significance at the court of Mechelen. His relevance is also substantiated by the indication that one of his works, *The Virgin and Child* was the favourite painting of Margaret of Austria,¹⁶ and that he painted at least six more paintings, all owned by the Habsburgs,¹⁷ as specified by the same document.

11 Ibid., pp. 8–9; P. Johansen, “Meister Michel Sittow, Hofmaler der Königin Isabella von Kastilien und Bürger von Reval”, *Jahrbuch der Preußischen Kunstsammlungen*, 1960, 61, pp. 22–26.

12 A. Mänd, “Michel Sittowi sotsiaalsed sidemed Tallinnas”, *Acta Historica Tallinnensia*, 2018, 24, pp. 24–48.

13 At the court of Isabella the Catholic, Sittow was the fourth highest-paid court employee, and the painter who earned more than any other court artist. A. de la Torre, *La casa de Isabel la Católica*, Madrid, 1954, p. 228.

14 “le quería decir para le dar mayor placer que el venia a procurar cassamiento de la dicha duquesa con el rey de Inglaterra y que traya consigo dos figuras bien pintadas de la dicha duquesa para dar al Rey de Inglaterra, por las cuales le rogo la señora princessa que embiase y el lo ascebio y fue luego por ellas y las mostró; la una era en tabla y la otra en lienço; dicho me a mi la señora princessa que mejor y más cierta y perfectamente las pintara Michel”. (I wanted to tell him, in order to please him, that he came to procure the union of said duchess with the King of England and that he brought with him two well-painted figures of said duchess to give them to the King of England, which the princess lady begged to send and he accepted and then went to fetch them and showed them; one was a panel and the other a canvas; the lady princess told me that better and more accurately and perfectly would have been painted by Michel). The text refers to two portraits of Margaret of Austria. Archivo General de Simancas, Patronato Real, leg. 54, fol. 18.

15 A. J. Le Glay, *Correspondance de l'empereur Maximilien Ier et de Marguerite d'Autriche, sa fille, gouvernante des Pays-Bas, de 1507 à 1519*, t. II, Paris: X, 1839, p. 480.

16 D. Eichberger, *Leben mit Kunst. Wirken durch Kunst. Sammelwesen und Hofkunst unter Margarete von Österreich, Regentin der Niederlande*, Turnhout, 2002, p. 215.

17 Ibid., p. 380.



Fig. 1. Michel Sittow, *The Assumption of the Virgin*, ca. 1500, oil on panel, 21.3 x 16.7 cm, Washington, The National Gallery of Art, inv. 1965.1.1.



Fig. 2a. Michel Sittow, *Diptych of Diego de Guevara*, c. 1517, oil on panel, *Virgin and Child*, 33,2 x 25,7 cm, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, inv. 1722.



Fig. 2b. *Diego's portrait*, 33.6 x 23.7 cm, Washington, The National Gallery of Art, inv. 1937.1.46.

Sittow was mentioned in the theory of art treaty by Felipe de Guevara. The author owned two portraits of his father Diego de Guevara and, according to the text, one of them was painted by Rogier van der Weyden and the other by his disciple Michel.¹⁸ It is possible that Diego de Guevara was portrayed by both painters, but the indication about Sittow's apprenticeship in Rogier's workshop presents a historical incongruity, since his supposed master died in 1464 while Michel's training in Flanders should date approximately to around the eighties.¹⁹ However, this writing reinforces the possibility of linking another painting to the hand of Michel Sittow, the portrait of the *Knight of the Order of*

18 *Yo puedo mostrar en dos retratos de don Diego de Guevara mi padre. La una de mano de Rugier, y la otra de Michel discipulo del dicho Rugier. La de Rugier debe haber cerca de sus noventa años que está hecha, la de Michel más de sesenta, las cuales si las juzgaréis por pintadas, juraréis no haber un día que se acabaron.* (I can show [it] in two portraits of Don Diego de Guevara, my father. One by Rugier and the other by Michel, disciple of the said Rugier. Rugier's must be about ninety years old since it was made, Michel's more than sixty, which if you judge them by the brushstrokes, you would swear that not a day has passed since they were finished.) F. J. Sánchez Cantón, *Fuentes literarias para la Historia del Arte Español*, Madrid 1933, pp. 153–179; E. Vázquez Dueñas, *Felipe de Guevara. Comentario de la pintura y pintores antiguos*, Madrid 2016, p. 54.

19 Weniger, "Bynnen Brugge in Flanderen...", op. cit, pp. 115–131.

Calatrava also identified as Diego de Guevara, most likely made in Flanders circa 1517 (fig. 2). With this information it is possible to see how, already during the sixteenth century, Sittow's life was interpreted by historiographers highlighting specifically his prestige as a Flemish portraitist of the Castilian Royal Family and nobles, and the fact that he was trained by a distinguished master.

Finally, some researchers have attributed to Sittow paintings inventoried in the Monastery of Yuste, where Charles V spent the last years of his life after his abdication in 1556.²⁰ The inventories, drawn up in the year 1558, mention three panels made by Master Michael with the iconography of *Christ Carrying the Cross*, *the Crucifixion*, and the *Holy Sacrament Carried by Angels*.²¹ However, after comparison between the inventory and the items preserved until today from the monastic complex, it is appropriate to deny this attribution since the panels were made by Michael Coxie,²² another Flemish master whose works were appreciated in the Iberian Peninsula. Therefore, the inventory of the Monastery of Yuste does not provide any real evidence about the work of Michel Sittow.

Two identities: Master Michiel and Miguel Alemán

As far as the life of Michel Sittow is concerned, the nineteenth-century bibliography did not discover data regarding his works. On the one hand, his name as "Zittoz",²³ "Sithium", or "Master Michiel" is mentioned in the publications of sources of the court of Margaret of Austria as well as in sources farther related to it. On the other hand, the painter was called "Melchior Alemán" or "Miguel Flamenco" at the court of Isabella of Castile;²⁴ the "alemán" adjective could refer to his native language or his origin from a Hanseatic city, while the word "flamenco" could refer to his training at the workshops of Bruges.

Only the panels present in the inventory of the year 1516 of the Governor of Flanders were recognised as by the hand of Master Michiel, without precise identi-

20 E. P. Richardson, "Portrait of a Man in a Red Hat by Master Michiel", *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts*, 1958–1959, 38, no. 4, p. 80.

21 F. Mignet, *Charles-Quint, son abdication, son séjour et sa mort au Monastère de Yuste*, Paris, 1854, pp. 116–117; M. Gachard, *Retraite et mort de Charles-Quint au Monastère de Yuste: lettres inédites*, Bruxelles–Gand–Leipzig, 1854; *Los inventarios de Carlos V y la familia imperial [The Inventories of Charles V and the Imperial Family]*, ed. F. Checa Cremades, vol. 1, Madrid, 2010; AGS, CMC 1^a ep., leg. 1145, s.f.

22 Carmen García-Frías Checa in her research on the Royal Monastery of Jerónimos in Yuste identified the works mentioned in the inventory, which, to this day, remain part of its collection: C. García-Frías Checa, "La estampa de un emperador en su retiro: Carlos V en Yuste" in: *Carlos V en Yuste: Muerte y gloria eterna*, ed. C. García-Frías Checa, Madrid, 2008, pp. 23–25.

23 J. A. Crowe, G. B. Cavalcaselle, *Les anciens peintres flamands, leur vie et leurs oeuvres*, II, Bruxelles, 1862, p. 210.

24 M. Weniger, *Sittow, Morros, Juan de Flandes. Drei Maler aus dem Norden am Hof Isabellas von Kastilien*, Kiel, 2011, p. 49.

fications. Among these panels, the following stood out: a *Portrait of Isabella of Castile at the age of thirty*; a *Portrait of Isabella of Portugal*, daughter of Isabella of Castile; a *Virgin with the child named "Mignonne"*; a small *Altarpiece with the Virgin on one side and St John and St Margaret on the other*; a *Diptych with the Ascension of Christ and the Assumption of the Virgin*; and finally a *Portrait of Charles Oursson* – although only one of these works (the *Assumption of the Virgin*) could be identified among those that have been preserved to this day.²⁵

As a matter of fact, the Spanish researchers, knowing the data regarding the artist's activity at the court but without descriptions of his works, could not ascribe to his hand any specific panel, even knowing that he made them in Castile, a fact included in the royal inventories. For example, some devotional panels made by Michiel, copies of those of the Archbishop of Granada, accompanied Isabella of Castile in the last moments of her life.²⁶ It was intuitively assumed that Miguel Alemán could have been a member of guilds in Leuven or Bruges, and therefore, it was suggested that his name could have been Michel Beernaerts, Michel de Coninc, Michel Vander Valleporte, or Michel Walens.²⁷ Nevertheless, the studies on Flemish painting in Spain did not connect the information to the bibliography of Michel Sittow, but instead they analysed the artistic identity of Miguel Alemán with whom some assorted works with Hispanic Flemish characteristics were linked. Many of these works were later documented as works of an anonymous artist such as, for example, the Maestro de los Luna or the Master of the Catholic Kings (fig. 3).²⁸

The first historian to consider the individual style of Master Michiel was Max J. Friedländer who examined his works as a part of circle of Hans Memling.²⁹ According to Friedländer, Master Michiel was a court portraitist in Mechelen.³⁰ Likewise, the connoisseur underlined the role of Memling's models for this artist, like the

25 Matthias Weniger, in the monographic study on Sittow, suggested the hypothesis that the portrait identified by other researchers as Catherine of Aragon or Mary Rose Tudor could also be interpreted as the portrait of Isabela the Catholic. (Ibid., pp. 77–78).

26 P. de Madrazo, *Viaje artístico de tres siglos por las colecciones de cuadros de los reyes de España*, Madrid, 1884, p. 17. This mention resulted in the hypothesis that Sittow made the copy of the *Miraflores Triptych*, currently in the Royal Chapel of the Cathedral of Granada and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (J. Weiss, "Castilian Legacy and Juan de Flandes's Miraflores Copy", in: *Copies of Flemish Masters in the Hispanic World (1500–1700)*, eds. E. Lamas-Delgado, D. García Cueto, Turnhout, 2021, pp. 29–42).

27 P. de Madrazo, op. cit., p. 22.

28 A. L. Mayer, "Late XVth Century Castilian Painting", *Apollo* 1939, 29, p. 281; J. Brown, R. G. Mann, *Spanish Paintings of the Fifteenth through Nineteenth Centuries: The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue*, Washington, 1990, pp. 92–93.

29 M. J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Hans Memling and Gerard David*, vol. VI (2), London, 1967, p. 53. He followed the attribution of the Virgin and the Child from the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest, by Baldass: L. Baldass, "Unbekannte niederländische Bilder in Wien und Budapest", *Jahrbuch des Kunsthistorischen Instituts*, 1917, vol. 11, pp. 1–3.

30 M. J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Jan van Scorel and Pieter Coecke van Aelst*, vol. XII, London, 1967, p. 15.



Fig. 3. Master of the Catholic Kings, *The Marriage at Cana*, c. 1495-1497, oil on panel, 137.1 x 92.7 cm, Washington, The National Gallery of Art, inv. 1952.5.42.

copy of a *Virgin and Child* (Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest; fig. 4).³¹ Additionally, the scholar put in relation three female portraits: *Virgin and Child* that formed a pair with the portrait of Diego de Guevara (Gemäldegalerie Berlin; fig. 2), and a portrait of an anonymous woman, identified as Catherine of Aragon (Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien; fig. 5).³² It is important to comprehend that the assumption about a common author of the aforementioned works gave rise to multiple interpretations, not only about the pictorial style of Michel Sittow, but also about considerations regarding female beauty in the fifteenth century, including in his *oeuvre* a panel with *Saint Magdalene* (Detroit Institute of Art; fig. 6).³³



Fig. 4. Michel Sittow (?), *Virgin and Child*, mid-1480s, oil on panel, 33.7 × 23.9 cm, Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. 4327.



Fig. 5. Michel Sittow, *Portrait of a Lady* (Catherine of Aragon, Mary Rose Tudor, Katherina van der Lieppe or Isabella the Catholic as a Saint), c. 1505 or c. 1514, oil on panel 28.7 × 21 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, inv. Gemäldegalerie, 7046.

31 Idem, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Hans Memlinc and Gerard David*, op. cit., Catalogue number 53.

32 Idem, "Ein neu erworbenes Madonnenbild im Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum" *Amtliche Berichte aus den königlichen Kunstsammlungen* 36, 1915, pp. 179–181.

33 F. Winkler, "Neue Werke des Meisters Michiel," *Pantheon* 7, no. 4, 1931, pp. 175–178; M. Frinta, "Observation on Michel Sittow", *Atribus et Historiae*, 2009, 60, 30, pp. 139–156.



Fig. 6. Michel Sittow, *Saint Magdalene*, between 15th and 16th century, oil on panel, 30.7 × 24 cm, Detroit Institute of Art, inv. 40.50.

Following Friedländer's indications, the study of the *Polyptych of Isabella of Castile*³⁴ by Francisco Javier Sánchez Cantón indicated that the set of forty-seven panels was made collectively by Juan de Flandes and Master Michel, to whom at least two panels of the polyptych were undoubtedly attributed. The researcher gathered the data on Michel's life assuming that he was active in the Iberian Peninsula as early as 1481,³⁵ a fact that cannot be corroborated by the sources until 1492. Likewise, Sánchez Cantón pointed out that Michel, after his activity in Castile, became a painter at the court of Margaret of Austria and Charles V.³⁶

In 1930 Gustaf Falck published a study that added the portrait of Christian II of Denmark (fig. 7) to Michel's work. The document reproduced in his article confirmed that in 1514 a painter from Reval named "Mester Mechil" arrived in Helsingør and was presented to the King of Denmark, whom Charles V's sister, raised in Mechelen under the custody of Margaret of Austria, would soon marry.³⁷

34 Although different studies name the Altarpiece of Isabella of Castile, in this text it seems more appropriate to mention the interpretation of this work by Miguel Ángel Zalama Rodríguez, who argued that the panels form a polyptych and travelled together with the Castilian court through the Iberian Peninsula: M. Á. Zalama Rodríguez, "La infructuosa venta en almoneda de las pinturas de Isabel la Católica", *BSAA Arte*, 2008, 74, pp. 45–66.

35 F. J. Sánchez Cantón, "El retablo de la Reina Católica", *Archivo Español de Arte y Arqueología*, 1930, 6, pp. 97–133. Sánchez Cantón understood that Miguel Alemán painted the portrait of Isabella the Catholic at the age of thirty, precisely when she was at that age in 1481.

36 Ibidem.

37 G. Falck, *Master Michiel of Kunstmuseets Portraet af Christiørn II*, København, 1928.

Consequently, Michel Sittow's travels and visits were even more attractive as a subject of international research. Along the same lines, in 1933, without unpublished new documentation, Gustav Glück linked Michel's hand to a Flemish portrait of Henry VII, King of England (National Portrait Gallery in London; fig. 8).³⁸ Many succeeding analyses questioned this attribution, as it was only an assumption but, at the time, it proved successful, as many studies since then have also claimed that Michel travelled to the Tudor court to make portraits. The painter's connection to a realist portrait of around 1500 also increased the interest of American researchers, a fact that resulted in the attribution of portraits and anonymous paintings to his hand. Likewise, three panels were included in his work even if the documentation could not be identified: the *Portrait of a Young Man in a Red Hat* (Detroit Institute of Art; fig. 9),³⁹ *Man in a Red Cap* (Milan, Castello Sforzesco; fig. 10), and *Holy Night* (Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien).⁴⁰



Fig. 7. Michel Sittow, *Portrait of Christian II*, 1514-1515, oil on panel, 31 x 22 cm, Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, inv. KMSp789.



Fig. 8. Unknown Netherlandish artist, *Portrait of Henry VII*, c. 1505, oil on panel, 42.5 x 30.5 cm, London, National Portrait Gallery, inv. NPG 416.

38 G. Glück, "The 'Henry VII' in the National Portrait Gallery", *The Burlington Magazine*, 1933, 68, pp. 100-108.

39 Richardson, "Portrait of a Man...", op. cit, pp. 79-83.

40 Idem, "Three Paintings by Master Michiel", *Art Quarterly* 1939, 2, no. 2, pp. 102-111.



Fig. 9. Michel Sittow (?), *A Young Man in a Red Cap*, c. 1512, oil on panel, 16.4 x 12.7 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts, inv. 58.383.



Fig. 10. Unknown Netherlandish artist, *A Man in a Red Cap*, XVIth century, oil on panel, 18 x 23 cm, Milan, Castello Sforzesco, inv. 00660525

The suspicion that the Maestro Michel and Miguel Alemán were the same person was not corroborated by the archival documentation until 1940, when Paul Johansen included in an article the documents of Reval and Lübeck. According to them, Michel Sittow declared, while in his homeland, he had served at the court of Philip the Fair in Toledo around the year 1505. Finally, this document definitively allowed the building of a coherent biography of a traveller through the European courts, and to bring together the works of the two identities, for the first time, under one name by Trizna.⁴¹ However, some researchers differentiate the identities of Master Michel and Miguel Alemán, attributing to both names works that have not been considered part of Michel Sittow's work.⁴²

41 J. Trizna, *Michel Sittow. Peintre revalais de l'école brugeoise (1468–1525/1526)*, Bruxelles, 1976.

42 Yarza Luaces doubts that Miguel Alemán was the same as Michel Sittow, a servant of Margaret of Austria (J. Yarza Luaces, op. cit., pp. 53–55). The same doubt appears in German historiography, where some studies have pointed out that the Master Michel investigated by Friedländer may have made works that have not been attributed to Sittow (P. Strieder, "Ein danziger Bildnisdiptychon von 1518", *Zeitschrift für Kunstwissenschaft*, 1959, 13, p. 15).

Post-war research difficulties and imagery regarding Sittow's life

In the second half of the twentieth century, studies on Flemish painting and in particular on the work of Michel Sittow stand out because of an increased interest, due to the publication of sources from the Castilian court, which facilitated the conveyance of a lot of information to a wider public. These documents, edited by Antonio de la Torre, allowed readers to follow in detail the economic dynamics of the artists who worked under the patronage of Isabella of Castile.⁴³ In addition, the works linked to the globetrotting painter were analysed with various approaches, among which it is worth highlighting the monographic studies dedicated to the artist, the technical studies of the panels related to Sittow's activity, and the iconographic and iconological analyses of his work. Interdisciplinarity, internationality, and the varied points of view, with which Michel's life has been analysed reinforce even more his position as an artist of relevance in the global conversation about Art History and, above all, as a representative of the Nordic styles of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The first monograph fully devoted to the life and work of Michel Sittow was published in 1976 by Jazsep Trizna, who recovered documentary sources by commissioning the transcription of a document from the General Archive of Simancas.⁴⁴ Additionally, Trizna, carrying out the bibliographic compilation, reviewed all the primary sources mentioned in the previous significant publications. It should be noted that Trizna, in seven chapters, accurately described Michel's life according to geographical and chronological criteria, arguing all the movements of the painter. The author also included some hypotheses that were not corroborated by the documents, as is the case of the possible trips that the painter made to the Tudor court in the period 1502–1505.⁴⁵ Creating the first complete chronology of the artist's life allowed several suppositions to be postulated for the periods when the primary sources are silent. It should also be noted that his study included a reasoned catalogue divided into sections following the trends of investigating art as a conisseur, as was the case with the analyses of the first half of the twentieth century. This catalogue included the descriptions of 59 works of which only three can be confirmed by documentary sources, eleven were lost or destroyed, and five can be linked with the hand of Sittow by a great similarity to the works actually documented and preserved, while the others were designated as uncertain attributions or rejected by the author of the catalogue.⁴⁶

Going forward, after thirty-five years of publishing articles that contributed to the knowledge of Sittow, Matthias Weniger published a monograph dedicated to the three painters with Flemish training who worked at the court of Isabella of

43 A. de la Torre, op. cit.; A. de la Torre, E. Alsina, *Testamentaria de Isabel la Católica*, Barcelona, 1974.

44 Trizna, op. cit., pp. 65–74.

45 Trizna, op. cit., pp. 31–37.

46 Ibid., pp. 91–103.

Castile. This study not only analysed the period of their stay in Castile, but also studied the life of Michel Sittow, Felipe Morros, and Juan de Flandes. The volume is divided into three parts, each one with its protagonist, with an analysis of the archival documentation, a bibliography, and observations of the author. As far as Sittow's life is concerned, the author gathered not only the bibliographic studies, but also the museum displays in which the painter had a relevant role, such as the exhibitions of the portraits of the Northern Renaissance. Moreover, Weniger's monograph included the analysis of the artist's *critical fortune* in the contemporary world as well as innovative technical analyses and x-rays that ended up reinforcing the attributions of the works to Sittow's hand. The reasoned catalogue, created with interdisciplinary methods, linked the artist to 111 works, even if only few are listed as certainly his, while several were possibly strongly influenced by his style.⁴⁷

The fact that Matthias Weniger included technical studies in his monograph had its origin in the popularity of this method in the preceding decades. It is relevant to acknowledge that, thanks to this research, one of the works attributed to Michel Sittow gained a particular interest, demonstrating not only the excellence of its author, but also the practice of painting above other almost finished panels. In particular, the x-ray revealed a portrait, most likely of Charles V, which was covered by the artist with a new layer portraying the bust of Christian II of Denmark.⁴⁸ Due to the documentation, this portrait became very important in the career of the itinerant painter and, in turn, allowed the postulation of his connection or direct relationship with Bernard van Orley, an artist active at the Habsburg court. Thanks to documentation of the artist's arrival in Denmark, the precise dating of the portrait being established as in June 1514, and the confirmation by Charles V in 1515 of having met Michel Sittow in the past, the portrait became evidence that the painter had worked for the Habsburgs before 1514. Although the proofs provided by the analysis of the portrait cannot be corroborated by other sources, they undoubtedly provide relevant indications for the understanding of the painting of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the highlighting of certain pictorial practices.

Technical studies had a very significant role also in the research of Chiyo Ishikawa, author of the monograph on the *Polyptych of Isabella of Castile*.⁴⁹ In its publication, although Sittow did not have a central role, the possibility was posited that he was a collaborator of Juan de Flandes, another Flemish painter in Castile between 1496 and 1502.⁵⁰ Her research demonstrated the relevance of collaborations among courtly artists and was the first to clarify that complex works should not be considered as the result of the effort of a single author, but as the result of possible collective collaborations.⁵¹ She also gave much relevance to iconographic

47 Weniger, *Sittow, Morros, Flandes...*, op. cit.

48 E. K. Sass, *Studier i Christiern II's iconografi*, Copenhagen, 1970; Eadem, "Autour de quelques portraits de Charles Quint", *Oud Holland*, 1, 1976, pp. 1–14; *Pictures and Power: The Visual Politics of Christian II*, ed. H. Kolind Poulsen, Copenhagen, 2017.

49 Ch. Ishikawa, *Retablo de Isabel la Católica*, Turnhout, 2004.

50 Sánchez Cantón, op. cit.

51 Ishikawa, *Retablo de Isabel la Católica*, op.cit, p. 63.

studies, which underlined the theoretical and theological knowledge possessed by the painters working for the power elites.⁵²

The iconographical method was used also in other Sittow's attributions, his work was reimagined as in the cases of the *Portrait of a French nobleman* (fig. 11) or the compositions of *Virgin and Child*.⁵³ An example of iconographic and iconological study related to one of Sittow's works that generated more questions than answers was the analyses of the portrait of a lady (Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna; fig. 6). The hypotheses proposed by the first studies of this work identified the person portrayed as Catherine of Aragon, wife of Arthur, Prince of Wales and then Henry VIII, both sons of Henry VII, who's portrait according to some researchers was a Sittow's work (fig. 8).⁵⁴ However, in the early years of the twenty-first century this identification was questioned by Paul Mathews, Mojmir Frinta, and Matthias Weniger. The first one contextualised the work among the premarital portraits of the Habsburgs, indicating that the portrayed person was Mary Rose Tudor and that her effigy was commissioned in order to be presented to her possible husband in the Habsburg family. Paul Mathews assumed that Sittow visited the English court in 1505 or in 1513, when the marriage between Mary Rose and Charles V was being negotiated, and later when the marriage between her and his father Maximilian I of Habsburg was being negotiated.

The iconographic analysis identified the initials on the necklace of the portrait with the acronym of the name Karolus; also, according to Mathews, the flowers were heraldic symbols of the Tudors. His study documented the tradition of dressing the future wife in the traditional outfits of the future husband's origin. In the case of Mary Rose this would entail dressing according to Burgundian or Flemish fashion.⁵⁵ To reinforce his assumption, the researcher gave more examples of this practice, such as the small portrait of Mary Tudor with the inscription "The Emperor" that alluded to her possible nuptials with Charles V, around 1521.⁵⁶ The fragility of this theory is caused by the documentary silence about Michel Sittow's visit to the English court, since the only testimony would be the portrait of the lady.

Similarly, Mojmir Frinta interpreted the brooch of the portrayed as an L, which is the initial of the noble family of van der Leppe of Reval. In addition, he associated the letter K of the necklace with the German name Katharina, one of the members of the mentioned family, while the flowers on the necklace, according to Frinta, are not the symbol of the Tudors⁵⁷ and indeed, the comparison between the details of

52 Eadem, "Hernando de Talavera and Isabelline Imagery", in: *Queen Isabel I of Castile: Power, Patronage, Persona*, 2008, pp. 71–82.

53 E. Haverkamp-Begemann, "Paintings by Michel Sittow Reconsidered", in: *Rubens and His World*, ed. A. Balis, Antwerpen, 1985, pp. 1–8.

54 Glück, op. cit., pp. 100–108.

55 P. G. Matthews, "Henry VIII's Favourite Sister? Michel Sittow's Portrait of a Lady in Vienna", *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Museums Wien*, 2008, 10, pp. 140–143.

56 Ibid., p. 146.

57 Frinta, op. cit., p. 162.



Fig. 11. Michel Sittow (?), *Portrait of a Man with the Pearl*, 1515–1517, oil on panel, 22.4x17.18 cm, Patrimonio Nacional, Palacio Real de Madrid, inv. 10010169.

this portrait with some heraldic representations of the first half of the sixteenth century corroborate this assumption.

It is also worth mentioning the alternative, suggested by Matthias Weniger, that the portrait depicts Isabella of Castile at the age of thirty and was painted by Master Michel most likely between 1492 and 1502. This alternative is supported by two references in the inventories of Margaret of Austria of the years 1516 and 1524, which are the only sources on the paintings of Michel Sittow. However, the second inventory, the most detailed report of the Catholic queen's portrait, describes a necklace of emeralds and other precious stones, a ring and a pearl.⁵⁸ Clearly this description of the jewels does not correspond to anything that can now be seen in the panel. Once again, a portrait by Michel Sittow reveals the multiple options of interpreting the data according to the iconological method, when it is impossible to make any other identification due to the lack of documentary sources.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Trizna, op. cit., pp. 72–73.

⁵⁹ Another example of the work recently attributed to Michel Sittow, thanks to the iconographic and iconologic method, were the lateral panels of the altarpiece of the parish church of Bollnäs: I. Björkman-Berglund, "Det stora altarskåpet i Bollnäs — ett verk av Michel Sittow?", *Konsthistorik Tidskrift*, 2008, 50, no. 3, pp. 105–118.

The Estonian point of view

In addition to the academic studies about Michel Sittow, it is appropriate to point out his impact in various literary creations and in particular the prominence of the painter's life in a novel by Jaan Kross. In 1970 this Estonian writer published the novel *Neli monoloogi Püha Jüri asjus* (*Four Monologues on the Subject of Saint George*)⁶⁰ whose protagonist was Michel Sittow just after his return to his hometown. Kross, in his narratives, alludes to the historical events of the sixteenth century with the intention of making a contrast with the political situation in Estonia under the communist regime. In this context Michel's story is told across four monologues. The first monologue revolves around the conflict between the painter and his stepfather Dierik over the maternal inheritance, as Johansen indicated in his article. The second account is about Michel's arrival to Reval and is told from the point of view of his engaged girlfriend, who actually does not understand the experiences and aspirations of her future husband. The third story is told by the master craftsman of the guild of St Kanut in Reval: on the one hand he recognises the international experience of the artist and his prestige but, on the other hand, he demands the fulfilment of the typical prescribed steps needed to include Sittow among the artisans of the city.⁶¹ In the final monologue, Michel himself introduces his previous experiences, mentioning the works that real-life researchers have attributed to his hand. Kross's novel very faithfully summarises the state of affairs of the research regarding Michel during the seventies. The author follows the story presented by Paul Johansen and, at the same time, hides all the considerations on the Estonian political situation from the Soviet censorship.

Johansen's article and Kross's novel show Michel's hectic biography, reinforcing his national identity and, on the one hand his roots and inspiration in the Baltic art,⁶² and on the other hand, his impact on it. The artist was considered a pioneer for painting production and an author of the first freestanding sculpture in Estonian Art.⁶³ The *oeuvre* of Michel should be enriched by his documented works from the current Estonian territory, produced between 1518 and 1525, that are not preserved anymore. Researchers point a decoration of the clock for the St Nicholas Church in Tallinn,⁶⁴ an Altarpiece for the goldsmith's guild in Dorpat (currently Tartu) and

60 J. Kross, "Four Monologues on the Subject of Saint George", in: *Anthology of Estonian Literature: The Love That Was*, Moscow, 1982; J. Talvet, "Paigallend", or the building of Estonia in the novels of Jaan Kross", *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 2000, 31, no. 3, pp. 237–252.

61 Johansen assumed that Sittow was not recognised in Reval as a prestigious artist and had to go through a learning process or sit the prescribed examinations. This fact was refuted by Anu Mänd, who documented that Sittow was included in the guild just six months after his return to the hometown: A. Mänd, *Michel Sittow and Reval ...*, op. cit., pp. 7–9.

62 J. Maiste, "A genius and his myth: The known and unknown Michel Sittow", *Baltic Journal of Art History*, 2015, 9, p. 190.

63 S. Karling, *Medeltida träskulptur i Estland*, Stockholm, 1946, p. 64.

64 Mänd, "Michel Sittow and Reval...", op. cit., p. 8.



Fig. 12. Master of the Legend of St Lucy, *Altarpiece of the Virgin Mary of the Brotherhood of the Black Heads*, before 1493, oil on panel, 2nd view and open view, Tallinn, Art Museum of Estonia – Niguliste Museum.

twelve roses for Holy Mary Chapel in the St Olaf's Church in Tallinn.⁶⁵ In addition, since Johansen's article – a gravestone of Johann Balliw, wooden sculpture of St George⁶⁶ and then St Anthony's Altar,⁶⁷ all from the St Nicholas Church in Tallinn were linked with Sittow.⁶⁸ However, the romantic aspect of Sittow as a genius was an invention of Johansen then revitalised and exalted by Kross, which was later refuted by Anu Mänd's archival research, which presented a more realistic and grounded view on the documents.⁶⁹

Ultimately, Juhan Maiste analysing Sittow's life, remarked two contradictory approaches used to create discourses in Art History writing, mainly applied in the national history. He describes a "creative and inclusive" approach and, as the opposite one, a "critical and exclusive" tendency, both used in Michel's artistic biography. He concludes by suggesting that the Altarpiece of the Virgin Mary of the Brotherhood of the Black Heads (fig. 12) attributed to the Master of the Legend of St Lucy⁷⁰ might be a document of friendship between three painters active in Bruges in last two decades of the fifteenth century: Memling, Sittow and the Anonymous Master.⁷¹

Conclusions

The investigation on Sittow highlights several research trends that exist in Art History; besides, being an international topic that has interested several researchers over the decades, it reveals the prominent historiographical trends of each moment in time and draws attention to the reception and survival of the successful ones.

First of all, it should be noted that Friedländer's assumptions, thanks to connoisseurship, were not notably questioned by the following generations of art historians. In the same way, the monographs dedicated to the artist by Trizna and Weniger were made with scientific rigour and are still current even if some of their assumptions have been updated by individual articles. At the end of their work, both biographers of the artist concluded their research wishing to establish a line of development of Sittow's pictorial style. However, both stated that, with the current knowledge, this question cannot be solved with a simple answer.

Sittow's international career allows us to put research questions not only by national and local historians, but also at a global level, since his work demands a transversal and interdisciplinary analysis. Partial studies of Michel's work have

⁶⁵ Ibid.; Maiste, op. cit., p. 185.

⁶⁶ Johansen, op. cit.

⁶⁷ M. Lumiste, "Antoniuse altari algsest maalikihist ja ülemaalingutest", *Kunst*, 1964, 2, pp. 34–35.

⁶⁸ Currently those artworks are considered as works of his circle.

⁶⁹ Mänd, "Michel Sittow and Reval...", op. cit., pp. 7–9.

⁷⁰ A. Mänd, "The Altarpiece of the Virgin Mary of the Brotherhood of the Black Heads in Tallinn: Dating, Donors, and the Double Intercession", *Acta Historiae Artium Balticae*, 2007, 2, pp. 35–53.

⁷¹ Maiste, op.cit., pp. 216–217.

allowed the attribution of singular works whose provenance appears in documentation, as was the case of Gustaf Falck, followed by Else Kai Sass's studies on the iconography of Christian II of Denmark.⁷² In this way, researchers underlined Sittow's role as the creator of a new Danish royal iconography, which did not survive the religious reform, but allowed the Oldenburg dynasty to establish a close political link with the Habsburgs. However, other attributions that were not verified by documents did not provide any reflection beyond the link between a panel and Michel Sittow.

As far as the question of the nationalisation of Sittow's career in the historiography about his life is concerned, it is necessary to underline that the artist, in addition to being part of the visual legacy of Estonia, was also incorporated in the national independence narrative. The dispersion of his works allows several states and several nations to claim that the panels related to Michel Sittow are part of their cultural property. As noted at the beginning of this study, the first monographic exhibition dedicated to the artist took place to celebrate 100 years of Estonian independence. This event, managed by Estonian public institutions in collaboration with the National Gallery of Art in Washington, allowed the gathering for the first time and in a symbolic way multiple works linked to the hand of Sittow and their examination all together. The results of the research and the bibliographic summaries were published in the form of a catalogue as they revealed, in a global way, the role of the artist as creator of the royal portraits during the first decades of the sixteenth century. It should be noted that no other traveller with such diverse experiences is known and that he probably portrayed in person many royal families in the Early Modern time. Therefore, classifying him according to criteria of contemporary national borders does not reflect the reality of the Habsburg patronage, spread throughout Europe, as all the portraits that could be confirmed by more than one historical source are related to this dynasty.

The life of Michel Sittow, although included in various studies on the Castilian court, often appears in a very limited way due to the lack of documentary sources and definitive works. Mentioned as one of the authors of the *Polyptych of Isabella of Castile*, Sittow did not gain prominence until the publication of Matthias Weniger's theory about the *Altar de los Luna* in la Catedral de Toledo⁷³ possibly being his first work in the Iberian Peninsula. This discovery invites reflection again on the need to vindicate the role of this artist, who incidentally was the most well paid by the Catholic monarchs, and to point out the importance of his arrival at court, as a bearer of modern trends and one of the first Flemish painters hired by the royal house that would then provide the necessary financial support for Columbus' expedition.

72 E. Kai Sass, *Studier i Christiørn II's ikonografi*, København, 1970.

73 M. Weniger, "Michel Sittow, a la luz del retablo de los Luna", in: *Retórica artística en el tardogótico castellano: la capilla fúnebre de Álvaro de Luna en contexto*, eds. O. Pérez Monzón, M. Miquel Juan, M. Martín Gil, Madrid, 2018, pp. 481–500.

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