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**JOHANN ULRICH MAYR**  
**(Augsburg 1630 – Augsburg 1704)**

***Allegory of Greed (or Reality)***

Inscribed in the lower right in Italian: *Jo voglio dir se ben non son chiamato se tú non hai denar non sei stimato* (I would like to say, even though I have not been asked to do so, that if you don't have money you are not taken into consideration.)

oil on an unlined canvas

30.9 x 37.4 inches (78.5 x 95 cm.)

**PROVENANCE**

Anonymous sale, *Gemälde alter Meister aus westdeutschen und ausländischen Besitz*, Lempertz, Cologne, April 15, 1930, lot 124a

Private Collection, Munich

Anonymous sale, Galerie Fischer, Lucerne, June 16, 1995, lot 2045, illustrated

Dr. Alfred Bader, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, from whom purchased by

Weston Adams, South Carolina

**LITERATURE**

Ludwig Scheewe "Johann Ulrich Mayr" in Thieme-Becker, *Allgemeines Lexicon der Bildenden Künstler*, volume 24, Veb E A Seeman, Leipzig, 1930, p. 486 (as *Der Geizhals*, authenticated by Ernst Buchner)

Werner Sumowski, "Johann Ulrich Mayr, *Mann mit goldener Kette und Geldsäcken (Allegoric des Geizes)*" in *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, volume III, Landau, 1987, pp. 2181, 2199, no. 1464, illustrated

Sonja Vilsmeier, *Sense and Sensibility in Seventeenth Century German Art, Johann Ulrich Mayr (Augsburg 1630 – 1704 Augsburg) Classicist and Rembrandt Pupil*, Master's dissertation, Sotheby's Institute of Art – London, 2014, pp. II, 59-60, 126, cat. 19, illustrated (as *Allegory of Greed*)

Johann Ulrich Mayr was born into a wealthy merchant family in Augsburg. His father was Christoph Georg Mayr. His mother Susanna Fischer was a painter and engraver, as well as an inventor being among the earliest known German artists to make paper cutting designs (Scherenschnitte). Susanna's father Johann Georg Fischer trained in Prague and Italy as a goldsmith, and later became a painter. This information comes from Joachim von Sandrart's *Teutsche Academie*, the first art history book in German

(published in three volumes 1675 / 1679 / 1680), who dedicated a chapter to Mayr and his mother. Von Sandrart further records that Mayr entered Rembrandt's workshop in Amsterdam at around the age of fourteen, and later studied with Jacob Jordaens in Antwerp, followed by trips to England and Italy.<sup>1</sup>

By the time Mayr reached his thirties he was a celebrated portrait painter in the service of notably the electoral court of Bavaria as well as the Viennese aristocracy. He returned to Augsburg in the early 1660s and married Anna Maria Hosenestlin in 1662, the daughter of one of Augsburg's richest families. Around this time he entered the guild, and by 1665 established his own workshop.<sup>2</sup> In the fall of 1667 Mayr was honored by a visit from Cosimo III Grand Duke of Tuscany during a European tour which later included visiting Rembrandt's studio. The enhancement to his career from such a meeting would have been almost incalculable. In 1674 Mayr painted the Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I and his second wife Claudia Felicitas. Undoubtedly this led to the painter being awarded the title of Imperial Court Painter and rewarded by the presentation of coins and chains of honor of the Habsburg court. In 1684 Mayr along with Johann Sigmund Mueller became directors of Augsburg's first art academy, among the earliest in Germany.<sup>3</sup>

Mayr specialized in painting portraits and religious works. In her thesis Vilsmeier remarked upon Mayr's shared fascination with Rembrandt for human psychology, as well as his teachings imparting an "emotional depth" and "incredible sensitivity" to his pupil's work. In regard to our *Allegory of Greed* Vilsmeier proposes Rembrandt's *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer* as a possible inspirational source.<sup>4</sup> The most widely accepted interpretation of Rembrandt's painting is "Aristotle weighs the merits of worldly success, of status and wealth as opposed to the spiritual rewards of literature, art, and knowledge. The more lasting values are represented by Aristotle's great hero Homer, and temporal concerns by the medallion bearing an image of Alexander and by the cascading strands of gold."<sup>5</sup> Thematically the paintings are certainly related with their protagonists sharing similar attributes and positioning. Both are dressed in costumes best described as "historical garb" in order to imbue a timeless quality to the work while simultaneously underling the validity of their messages<sup>6</sup> Further the raised talon purse in Mayr's painting is of sixteenth century Flemish design. In Mayr's painting his subject's flowing, untrimmed beard works in a similar vein as it was a feature more often employed by Rembrandt and his school in the depiction of Biblical or as here Aristotle and other historical figures, as opposed to the portrayal of their wealthy male clientele. The gold chains depicted in these works worn diagonally across the chest, were chains of honor given for exceptional service. This was an ancient custom that had been revived in the Renaissance and remained popular in the

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<sup>1</sup> Sonja Vilsmeier, op.cit., pp. 20, 24-25, 27, & 100.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp.28, 72-73.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp. 28, 81, 102.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp. 42, 59-60, 87.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Liedtke, "Rembrandt van Rijn, Aristotle with a Bust of Homer" in *Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, volume II, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2007, p. 635.

<sup>6</sup> Marieke de Winkel, *Fashion and Fancy dress and meaning in Rembrandt's paintings*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2006, pp. 164, 167.

seventeenth century. Titian, Veronese, Rubens and Van Dyck all received gold chains from princes; whereas Rembrandt did not, yet often featured himself wearing them in his self-portraits.<sup>7</sup>

Yet there are distinct differences. Whereas Rembrandt's painting vividly depicts the noble despair of Aristotle's indecision, Mayr grounds his imagery in reality, and the painting's Italian inscription, "I would like to say even though I have not been asked to do so, that if you don't have money you are not taken into consideration", seems to leave no doubt of the painter's intent. Above the inscription, silver coins spill from an open money bag, gold coins drop from the raised purse, with a sealed bag of money filling the background, but Mayr's subject turns away from these riches with a look of bewilderment. Without doubt the artist must have known Andrea Alciati's *Emblemata*, the first emblem book which was published in Augsburg in 1531 and gave rise to thousands of imitations throughout Europe. In it Alciati refers to the "golden shackles by which courtiers are tied to their princes". This painting has been thought to date from circa 1670-1675.<sup>8</sup> I would suggest that the painting was done around 1674 in response to Mayr being awarded the title of Imperial Court Painter, the chain of honor, as well as coinage by the Hapsburg court. Mayr was an artist drawn to self-portraiture, and this sitter resembles what Mayr could have looked like in his forties. Did he view everything he had achieved, surpassing even Rembrandt in official recognition and wealth, and wonder is it sufficient? The only answer is that two years before his death in 1702, based on the tax records of Augsburg, Mayr had become the eighth richest man in town.<sup>9</sup>

We would like to thank Sonja Vilsmeier for her generosity in the sharing of her dissertation on the artist.

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Liedtke, op.cit., p. 636.

<sup>8</sup> "Johann Ulrich Mayr, Man with Golden Necklace and Talon Purse" on [rkd.nl](http://rkd.nl) (*RKD Explore*) website.

<sup>9</sup> Vilsmeier, op.cit., p. 103.