

IS THIS PAINTING BY REMBRANDT? AT AN IFAR EVENING, THE CHAIRMAN OF THE REMBRANDT RESEARCH PROJECT SAYS “YES”

It has hardly ever been on view since entering the Metropolitan Museum’s collection, and the Rembrandt Research Project (the RRP) downgraded the work in 1982 as “an imitation,”¹ but at an *IFAR Evening* in March devoted to the RRP, the current — and very influential — RRP Chairman, Ernst van de Wetering, declared the Met’s small *Portrait of Rembrandt as a Young Man* (FIG. 1) to be, in fact, a Rembrandt.²

Turning to the Met’s Curator of European Paintings, Walter Liedtke, sitting in the audience, and apologizing for not having had the chance to alert him to his revised opinion of the work, which he had examined that very morning at the museum, van de Wetering said that the reassessment was his “present” to Liedtke. “I hope you accept it; it’s a wonderful little painting.” All eyes turned to Liedtke, who answered: “I might.” With that

cautious response it became clear that the world of Rembrandt attributions — or reattributions in this case — is not so simple.

The little portrait (8 5/8 x 6 1/2 inches) on oak panel was bequeathed to the museum by an American collector in 1952 and accessioned the following year. It has a distinguished although not very old pedigree. Its first confirmed recording is in the collection of King Leopold II of Belgium (d.1909),³ and it was later owned by financier J.P.Morgan. But it was on stylistic grounds, and not lack of early provenance, that the work was relegated to the Met’s reserves and rejected by the RRP.

The *Portrait* had been accepted as a Rembrandt by many early twentieth-century scholars, including Wilhelm Valentiner, Hofstede de Groot and Abraham Bredius; however, even before the



FIGURE 1. (Self) *Portrait of Rembrandt as a Young Man*. Oil on oak panel, 8 5/8 x 6 1/2 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Evander Schley, 1952. Catalogued in the museum’s Collection Database as “Style of Rembrandt,” but said by Ernst van de Wetering on March 10, 2011 to be a work by Rembrandt. Photo: Courtesy, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

RRP, Horst Gerson questioned that attribution in his 1969 revised edition of Bredius’ catalogue raisonné.⁴

In a cataloguing system of A, B and C (accepted, uncertain, and

¹ J[osua] Bruyn et al. “1625-1631.” *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, Vol.1 (The Hague, 1982), no. C38.

² An *IFAR Evening* talk by Ernst van de Wetering on “The Rembrandt Research Project: Reflections, Revelations, Reversals,” organized by the International Foundation for Art Research and held at Christie’s on March 10, 2011. A more expansive article relating to the talk will be published in a future issue of *IFAR Journal*.

³ The RRP (*Corpus*, v.1, no. C38) believed that the painting had inspired a 1790 engraving with an inscription stating that the Rembrandt original was in a collection that the RRP could trace to the mid 18th century. But the Met questions the relationship between this painting and the engraving. See Walter Liedtke, et al. *Rembrandt/ Not Rembrandt in The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Aspects of Connoisseurship*, Exh. Cat., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Vol. 2 (New York, 1995), p. 89.

⁴ A[braham] Bredius, *The Complete Edition of the Paintings*. 3rd ed. (revised by H. Gerson), (London, 1969), p. 547, no. 10: “I am not convinced that the attribution to the young Rembrandt is correct.”

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not accepted), the Rembrandt Committee, which examined the painting in 1969, gave the work a “C”, noting, among other discrepancies, that the brush work and color “differ substantially from those found in Rembrandt’s early work,” and that the “strokes of brown used to draw the eyes . . . [were] totally unlike Rembrandt and his school.” They dated the work “well after 1630” (because of the “free brushstroke” and “aberrant use of color”). Dendrochronological tests (which study the number of rings of wood) have determined that the probable felling date (due to statistical average) of the oak tree from which the panel derived is 1614.

The Met’s own Website Collection Database lists the work as “Style of Rembrandt (Dutch, about 1630-35),” but the catalogue entry written by Walter Liedtke for the Met’s 1995 *Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt* exhibition (Vol. II, no. 21) dated it to ca.1660 or later, and described the painting as a “modest homage to Rembrandt.”

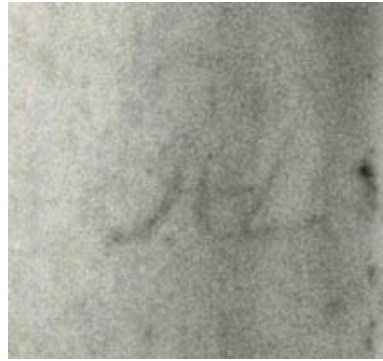


FIGURE 2. Autoradiograph of Figure 1, detail, showing the monogram signature in the right background. Photo: Courtesy, Metropolitan Museum of Art

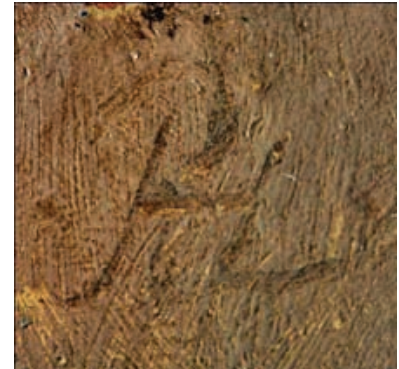


FIGURE 3. REMBRANDT VAN RIJN, *Rembrandt Laughing*. Oil on copper, 22.2 x 17.1 cm. Private Collection. Detail showing the monogram RHL in raking light.

THE RRP

The Rembrandt Research Project, an ambitious initiative formed in 1968 to reassess and prune the vast number of paintings that had been assigned to Rembrandt over the years, has since whittled the Rembrandt corpus down some one hundred works. While the final number of “accepted” works is not certain, and van de Wetering refuses to be pinned down, it will be between 300 - 350, significantly fewer than the 420 works accepted as autograph by Gerson in 1969 and the 611 works accepted by Bredius in 1935.

In the early years, the RRP was, in the minds of many people, overly restrictive in its definition of what constituted an autograph work by Rembrandt. But many of the Committee members retired after the 1989 publication of Volume 3

of the *Corpus of Rembrandt’s Paintings* (the sixth and final volume will be completed this year), and other Committee members have since left the Project, leaving van de Wetering, the youngest member, effectively alone to complete the Project. In the last few years, he has revised some of the Committee’s earlier opinions, taking a more inclusive approach to Rembrandt’s work.

It is this new, more expansive approach that led to his surprise announcement in March. Van de Wetering told IFAR’s packed audience that he had never been comfortable with the RRP’s rejection of the Met’s (Self) *Portrait* — that the painting had “haunted” him for years. He disagreed at the time with the Committee’s initial assessment that the loose, painterly brushstroke dated the work to a later period (a view also expressed in the *Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt*

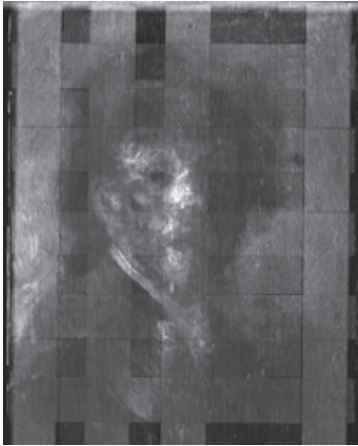


FIGURE 4. X-radiograph of Figure 1, showing traces of an underlying painting with a figure wearing a gorget (visible lower left). This figure must have been comparable to the *Laughing Soldier* in Figure 5. The shoulders of the underlying figure are vaguely visible below the shoulders of the present figure. The lead white-containing passages in the two superimposed faces interfere in the x-radiograph. Photo: Courtesy, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

catalogue). He also objected to the Committee's view that you cannot have "an early Rembrandt, which looks as if it's a late Rembrandt, painted in a rough manner. . ."

The morning of the IFAR talk he visited the museum and examined the little painting again, as well as autoradiographs taken of the work many years before. One of the autoradiographs (**FIG. 2**) showed that the monogram in the background, to the right of the face (level with the chin), previously believed to consist of only two initials — R and L — (see, for example, the Met's Website and Walter Liedtke's 2007 catalogue of the museum's Dutch

paintings) actually contained a third letter, "H", an initial included in Rembrandt's monograms from 1626 on. (Rembrandt included the "L" from around 1628 to 1632, after which he began signing with his first name.) The initials stand for Rembrandt Harmensz Leydensis. The discovery of the previously unnoticed traces of an RHL monogram in the autoradiograph added an extra argument in support of the reattribution of the painting to Rembrandt. The types of signatures Rembrandt applied during his early Leiden period were long unknown, van de Wetering told IFAR after the talk, as Rembrandt's early works were mostly not recognized as works of the young master. That, he added, makes it very unlikely that the RHL monogram was a spurious addition.

Van de Wetering bolstered his argument with additional technical evidence: an x-radiograph of the work, also taken years before, which, upon re-examination, revealed something that had previously been overlooked: highlighted areas beneath the brown paint indicating that underneath the Met's portrait was another work, a soldier wearing a finely painted metal collar, known as a gorget (**FIG. 4**). Such superimposed paintings, he said, were common in Rembrandt's early works — he had already shown the audience several, and the gorget was like that seen in a tiny painting of a *Laughing Soldier* on



FIGURE 5. REMBRANDT VAN RIJN, *Laughing Soldier (Laughing Man)*. Oil on copper, 15.3 x 12.2 cm. Mauritshuis, The Royal Picture Gallery, The Hague.

copper in the Mauritshuis in The Hague (**FIG. 5**), discussed earlier in his talk, a painting whose loose and rough brushstroke had also spurred differences of opinion amongst the RRP members, with van de Wetering arguing for it sufficiently at that time to prevent the work's total rejection (it received a B, but has since been upgraded).

The loose brushstroke of the Met's painting relates to another theme van de Wetering brought up at the talk, one of his newest insights (discussed in Volume 4 of the *Corpus*), namely, that the young Rembrandt did not paint such small self-portraits as refined masterpieces of self-reflection, but rather as something like "cartes de visite" to satisfy the curiosity of art lovers who were "interested to see or possess the effigy of this remarkable young man.

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From 1632 onwards, Rembrandt produced etched self-portraits for that purpose. His generally larger, painted self-portraits after 1632 must have served as collectors items."

NOT EVERYONE'S CONVINCED

Not so quick, Walter Liedtke, the Met's curator, told IFAR a few days later. "We really ought to study the picture more closely . . . and, pending further study, we still don't think it's a Rembrandt." Ernst van de Wetering, he added, "did not touch on the weaknesses of this painting . . . the sheer level of quality, or lack thereof."

Liedtke's concerns about the portrait are primarily qualitative. He noted that, "There are sloppy qualities of execution on the surface"; . . . "awkward qualities," and that certain elements, such as "the swirls of black and brown horizontal lines above the eyebrows, don't seem worthy of Rembrandt." "There is poor articulation"; the painting lacks Rembrandt's "convincing effect of modeling with light"; and the highlights are wrong — the patch next to the nose, for example, "flattens the cheekbone, and Rembrandt wouldn't flatten like that." Moreover, the sitter's hair lacks "the soft volume of curls that one would find in a Rembrandt."

As to the monogram, Liedtke noted that the autoradiograph that van de Wetering showed is not new; it dates to the 1980s and was made for a book published by the Met, but was not included in it. The monogram has long been known.⁵ Its "R" and "L" are visible on the painting surface. And, although the autoradiograph, Liedtke agreed, does suggest three letters, RHL — the absence of the "H" from the paint surface may simply be due to abrasion — the real question is "who painted the monogram?" Someone else could have over-painted the work on an earlier Rembrandt monogram, or the monogram could have been added by someone other than Rembrandt.

Nor is it clear at what layer of the painting the monogram lies; it could be on the surface, or lower down. Autoradiographs do not tell us the paint layer. Based on van de Wetering's observations, Liedtke added, the monogram will have to be studied to see whether it is consistent with the craquelure of the paint and varnish, and whether its chemical composition is consistent with the picture and paint layer. For now, however, the

⁵ The monogram, as RL, is mentioned on The Met's Website, in the catalogue for *Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt*, and in Walter Liedtke, *Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, Vol. 2 (New York, 2007), no. 161. Hofstede de Groot, in *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century*, Vol. 6, (London: 1908-1927), no. 564, noted 3 letters — RHL — in the monogram.

work will remain in the museum's reserves, but it will be on view "when the Met opens a gallery for Small Dutch Paintings" in 2013.

TO BE CONTINUED

The debate about the painting's attribution is clearly not over. It will be discussed again by Ernst van de Wetering in Volume 6 of the *Corpus* and in a future issue of *IFAR Journal*, where he will also elaborate on other paintings and issues addressed at the *IFAR Evening* talk in March.

— SHARON FLESCHER

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

REMINDER

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