



Rembrandt Workshop  
Dutch 17th Century

Rembrandt van Rijn  
Dutch, 1606 - 1669

## *Portrait of Rembrandt*

1650

oil on canvas

overall: 92 x 75.5 cm (36 1/4 x 29 3/4 in.)

framed: 125.1 x 107 x 11.4 cm (49 1/4 x 42 1/8 x 4 1/2 in.)

Inscription: center right: Rembrandt f. / 1650

Widener Collection 1942.9.70

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### ENTRY

For an artist whose face is so well known through his numerous painted, drawn, and etched self-portraits, it is quite remarkable that Rembrandt's image in this painting was not recognized by early nineteenth-century critics. While it was in the possession of Chevalier Énard and William Williams Hope, two important and discerning collectors, the sitter was thought to be the important Dutch admiral Maerten Harpertsz Tromp (1598–1653). One wonders what prompted this unexpected belief since Tromp's known portraits look totally different. [1] To judge from the commentary in the Énard catalog, the theory seems to have been based partially on the outmoded costume: the pleated white shirt, the dark overdress with its rich impastos bordering the front and slashed purple sleeves lined with yellow, and the brown beret worn at a jaunty angle over the elaborate yellow-and-red skullcap. The theory that the portrait depicted an admiral was reinforced by the gold-handled staff upon which the sitter rests his hand. But primarily, it seems, the depiction of the sitter's character fit what was thought to be Tromp's assured, noble, and philosophical nature. [2]

While the sitter's expression, created through subtle effects of lighting on the face as well as the unusual, sidelong glance, has continued to intrigue writers, entirely different interpretations of its character have been advanced by critics who recognized that the painting represented Rembrandt. [3] Bode found little evidence of a philosophical mind in the image. He wrote that the "somewhat leering expression, half weary, half watchful, . . . is by no means favourable to his

appearance.” [4] Valentiner, on the other hand, saw in the face “a forehead already deeply lined, melancholy, almost despondent of aspect, indicating how early he had experienced the tragic side of life.” [5] While Rosenberg described the same expression as “critical and deeply questioning,” [6] Pinder, reflecting more closely the sentiments of Valentiner, felt that the portrait expressed the cares and worries that were beginning to beset Rembrandt. [7] Contrary to these interpretations of the image as representing a despondent and questioning individual was that of Goldscheider, who described the Rembrandt portrayed here as “a handsome, distinguished adventurer without the slightest resemblance to a humble Mennonite.” [8]

While the reading of the emotional impact of the image may have varied markedly among these and other authors, they had in common a conviction that this painting was an exceptional work by the master. [9] Thus the shock that greeted Horst Gerson’s 1969 pronouncement that the painting was an “18th- or 19th-century imitation, combining light effects typical of Rembrandt’s early work with a composition and mood characteristic of the later period” was felt throughout the world of Rembrandt scholarship. [10] With that statement Gerson altered once again the way the painting has been viewed. For just as nineteenth-century critics had to reassess their interpretations of the figure’s mood when the identification of the sitter changed, it is necessary to raise the more fundamental question as to whether the expressive character of the painting is, after all, consistent with Rembrandt, and even with seventeenth-century sensibilities.

Technical analyses have shown that Gerson’s assertion that the painting is a later imitation is wrong. The character of the paint mixtures, the types of pigments used, and the presence of a double Ground—a red lower ground covered by a dark gray upper layer—are all totally consistent with Rembrandt’s workshop practices (see Technical Summary). [11] There also appears to be nothing unusual in the type of canvas used or in the buildup of the image. The initial blocking-in of the form, which can be seen in the waist and unfinished right hand, is also consistent with Rembrandt’s manner of painting. Finally, X-radiographs [see X-radiography] reveal that modifications to the shape of the hat were made during the execution of the painting [fig. 1], a phenomenon that is commonly found in Rembrandt’s own paintings (see his *Self-Portrait*). Originally, the plaid-patterned skullcap under the beret extended out behind the head more than it presently does. [12]

The conservation treatment of the painting in 1993, however, revealed that Gerson was correct in his intuition that the execution was somehow at variance with that

found in Rembrandt's own works around 1650. [13] Although the general disposition of the figure, standing at an angle to the picture plane and looking quizzically at the viewer over his near shoulder, is consistent with Rembrandt self-portraits [fig. 2], the brushwork used to model the figure lacks both Rembrandt's sensitivity and vigor. The most obvious instance where the modeling is at variance with Rembrandt's style is the hand resting on the staff. Its superficially rendered form has nothing to do with his manner of modeling hands.

The modeling of the face, likewise, lacks firmness and conviction. While the play of light across the features is sensitively rendered, the restrained brushstrokes only vaguely suggest the underlying form, whether it be the shape of the eyelids or the contour of the nose. The weakness of character conveyed through Rembrandt's questioning expression is also the result of the irresolute contours defining his features.

Another unusual aspect of this painting is that the costume is executed in a manner quite different from the face. Whereas the features are modeled with delicate nuance, the costume is indicated with a variety of bold techniques. [14] Broad, flat planes of purple and yellow enliven the surface of the split sleeve; thick impastos, mixed with a variety of bright colors and then toned with a dark brown glaze, create the appearance of an embroidered frontispiece across the chest; and, finally, the plaid pattern of the skullcap is painted with vigorous, and quite specific, strokes of red and yellow. The attribution problems raised here are threefold. First, Rembrandt generally did not use such markedly different techniques in the face and costume of a portrait. Second, by the 1650s, he had developed a manner of painting that would allow him to suggest a wide range of textures in materials without significantly altering the techniques that he used to depict them. Finally, his paint always worked toward creating structure. In this costume, most of the accents of color, as for example on the sleeve or in the skullcap, do not work effectively to convey the nature of the material. This problem is also particularly evident in the superficial black strokes that define the collar of the costume.

Although these stylistic considerations are sufficient to remove the painting from Rembrandt's own oeuvre, the identity of the artist who actually executed this portrait cannot be determined. The signature and date, while apparently not written by Rembrandt, appear to be integral to the surface and probably indicate that the painting was executed by a member of the workshop in about 1650 to be sold on the open market. It may well be that Rembrandt, after having posed for this painting, approved its concept and manner of execution before allowing its sale.

To judge from the number of self-portraits Rembrandt painted and etched, and from the numerous portraits of him painted by members of his workshop, there must have been a ready market for images of the artist.

None of the painters known to have been in Rembrandt's workshop around 1650, including Willem Drost (Dutch, c. 1630 - after 1680), Jacobus Leveck (1634–1675), Nicolaes Maes (Dutch, 1634 - 1693), and Constantijn van Renesse (Dutch, 1626 - 1680), can be convincingly associated with this work. The differences in the handling of the paint in the head and the costume are so pronounced in this work that I have wondered whether two artists might have executed the painting. No technical evidence, however, suggests that the painting was a collaborative effort. The stylistic discrepancies are probably the result of a workshop assistant basing his style for modeling the head on Rembrandt's work of the mid-1630s and his manner of painting drapery on Rembrandt's style of the early 1650s. Close stylistic comparison can be made to *Man with a Gilded Helmet* [fig. 3], an unsigned and undated work from the Rembrandt workshop that is datable to the early 1650s. [15] In this work, too, the face and costume are rendered in strikingly different manners. In the Berlin painting a marked contrast exists between the relatively delicate modeling of the face and the thick impastos in the helmet, a contrast in techniques quite similar to that found in the *Portrait of Rembrandt*. While various attributions have been suggested for *Man with a Gilded Helmet*, including the artists Karel van der Pluym (1625–1672) and Heyman Dullaert (1636–1684), none is convincing. [16] As noted by the Rembrandt Research Project, an even closer correlation exists between *Portrait of Rembrandt* and two pendant portraits from 1650 by an unknown artist from Rembrandt's workshop: *Man in a Military Costume*, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge [fig. 4], [17] and *Woman in a Fanciful Costume*, John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida. [18] They reached their conclusions on the basis of technical analyses of the paint layers, and a comparable contrast between carefully modeled faces and freely rendered historicizing costumes as seen in *Portrait of Rembrandt*. [19] Whether or not the same unknown artist painted all of these historicizing portraits is a puzzle yet to be solved.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

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**COMPARATIVE FIGURES**



**fig. 1** X-radiograph composite, Rembrandt Workshop, *Portrait of Rembrandt*, 1650, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection



**fig. 2** Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul*, 1661, oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Photo © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



**fig. 3** Rembrandt School, *Man with a Gilded Helmet*, early 1650s, oil on canvas, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie. Photo: bpk, Berlin / Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin / Jörg P. Anders / Art Resource, NY



**fig. 4** Unknown follower of Rembrandt, *Man in a Military Costume*, 1650, oil on panel, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Photo: The Bridgeman Art Library

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#### NOTES

- [1] Since the provenance for this painting is not known prior to the mention in the Énard Collection, it is not known whether the identification was based on an even older tradition. For an image of Tromp from the early 1650s, see Jan Lievens' *Portrait of the Vice-Admiral, Maerten Harpertsz Tromp* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. A 838).
- [2] Sébastien Énard estate sale, Paris, August 7–14, 1832 (rescheduled from April 23 and following days), no. 119, 136–137, includes the following description:  
Des traits mâles, une contenance assurée, de la noblesse unie à beaucoup

de simplicité, donnent une grande expression à ce beau portrait. Dans la demi-teinte qui l'enveloppe et qui va si bien à sa gravité, on pourrait voir une pensée philosophique, une allusion dont Rembrandt était bien capable. Martin Tromp, indifférent pour les titres, honorifiques, pour les choses d'apparat, modeste au plus haut point, ne dut trouver du plaisir à se montrer que quand il était en présence des ennemis de sa nation. Au surplus, quel qu'ait été l'intention du peintre, cette ombre répandue sur la figure d'un tel homme sied bien à son caractère.

- [3] John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters*, 9 vols. (London, 1829–1842), 7:86–87, no. 211, was the first to correctly identify the painting as a portrait of Rembrandt.
- [4] Wilhelm von Bode assisted by Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *The Complete Work of Rembrandt*, trans. Florence Simmonds, 8 vols. (Paris, 1897–1906), 5:15.
- [5] Wilhelm R. Valentiner, *Rembrandt Paintings in America* (New York, 1931), introduction.
- [6] Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), 1: 28.
- [7] Wilhelm Pinder, *Rembrandts Selbstbildnisse* (Munich, 1950), 81–82.
- [8] Ludwig Goldscheider, *Rembrandt Paintings, Drawings and Etchings* (London, 1960), 174, cat. 65.
- [9] Ludwig Goldscheider, *Rembrandt Paintings, Drawings and Etchings* (London, 1960), 174, cat. 65, considered it “one of the finest portraits ever painted.”
- [10] Abraham Bredius, *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the Paintings*, revised by Horst Gerson (London, 1969), 550, cat. 39. The reaction can be judged by the fact that Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, “The Present State of Rembrandt Studies,” *Art Bulletin* 53 (March 1971): 93–94, listed this work first among what he considered Gerson’s “five or six spectacular ‘disattributions’ of well-known and admired paintings, in some cases never previously doubted.” Haverkamp-Begemann noted in 1993 that he continued to believe in the attribution to Rembrandt (personal communication).
- [11] I would like to thank Barbara A. Miller (former conservation scientist at the National Gallery of Art, who first analyzed the painting in 1981), Michael Palmer, and Melanie Gifford for their help in interpreting the technical data.
- [12] Its form can also be seen with the naked eye.
- [13] The conservation treatment was undertaken in 1992–1993.
- [14] For a careful analysis of the sitter’s historicizing costume, which “is reminiscent of German or Netherlandish attire of the first half of the 16th century,” see Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 4, *Self-Portraits*, ed. Ernst van de Wetering

(Dordrecht, 2005), 399–400.

- [15] For an excellent discussion of this work, including information about its restoration, see Jan Kelch et al., *Der Mann mit dem Goldhelm*, Bilder im Blickpunkt (Berlin, 1986).
- [16] The attribution of this painting to Van der Pluym was made by Henry Adams, “If Not Rembrandt, Then His Cousin?” *Art Bulletin* 66 (September 1984): 427–441. Claus Grimm, “Handschrift, schildertechniek en beeldstructuur. Bijdrage tot het onderzoek naar toeschrijvingen, I, de helmen van Rembrandt,” *Tableau* 5 (1982–1983): 242–250, attributed the painting to Dullaert.
- [17] See Br. 256, from the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.
- [18] See Br. 380, from the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota.
- [19] Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 4, *Self-Portraits*, ed. Ernst van de Wetering (Dordrecht, 2005), 400–401.
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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The original support, a plain-woven fabric composed of tightly spun, irregular, fine threads, has been lined with the left and right tacking margins trimmed. The bottom and top tacking margins, which contain original selvages, have been opened flat and incorporated into the picture plane, slightly enlarging the dimensions. Cusping is pronounced along the top and bottom edges, slight along the right edge, and absent at the left. Original ground layers extend onto both tacking margins. Most likely, a large piece of canvas with full selvage-to-selvage width was primed on a stretching frame then cut to size.

The double ground layer consists of a thick, red lower layer covered with a thin, dark gray upper layer.[1] The ground layer is not incorporated as a mid-tone in the painting. The paint was applied thinly in broad, fluidly blended brushstrokes, with impasto in the beret and skullcap and the white and dark trim of the costume.[2] Layering is complex, resulting in some wide-aperture crackle, especially in the dark trim where dark paint was applied over thick, lighter-colored underlayers. The proper left hand is not as highly finished as the face. The background consists of a light paint layer overlaid with thin glazes.

Several artist's changes are found in the X-radiographs. The skullcap once continued farther beyond the rear of the head, and the hair farther outward on the



left. The beret appears to have been repositioned several times, or perhaps reshaped. The X-radiographs also show an area of confusing brushwork to the front of the beret, and sharp-edged marks that may be scrapings of a former lining adhesive.

A small loss is found in the upper right background, and slight abrasion in thin, dark passages such as the lower jacket. The painting was treated in 1992 to remove discolored varnish and inpainting, including a later black overglaze.

[1] The paint and ground layers were analyzed by the NGA Scientific Research department using X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy and cross-sections (see reports dated July 6, 1981, August 18, 1981, October 20, 1981, and May 14, 1991, in NGA Conservation department files). The ground was further analyzed by Karin Goren using cross-sections and X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (see Karin Groen, "Grounds in Rembrandt's Workshop and in Paintings by His Contemporaries," in Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 4, *Self-Portraits*, ed. Ernst van de Wetering [Dordrecht, 2005], 664-665). Groen found quartz in the lower ground layer.

[2] Technical examination and pigment analysis by Ashok Roy and David Bomford, National Gallery, London, May 1988, confirmed the use of smalt as an extender in impasted areas of red and yellow paint.

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## PROVENANCE

Chevalier Sébastien Érard [1752-1831], Château de la Muette, near the Bois de Boulogne, Paris; (his estate sale, at his residence by Lacoste and Coutelier, 7-14 August 1832 [originally scheduled for 23 April and days following], no. 119, as *Portrait de Martin-Kappertz-Tromp*). William Williams Hope [1802-1855], Rushton Hall, Northamptonshire, by 1836;<sup>[1]</sup> (his sale, Christie & Manson, London, 14-16 June 1849, 2nd day, no. 116, as a *Portrait of Admiral Van Tromp*); Sir Anthony Nathan de Rothschild, 1st bt. [1810-1876], London, and Aston Clinton House, near Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire; by inheritance to his wife, Lady Anthony de Rothschild [née Louise Montefiore, 1821-1910], London and Aston Clinton House; (Thos. Agnew & Sons, London); sold 13 May 1908 to Peter A.B. Widener, Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania;<sup>[2]</sup> inheritance from Estate of Peter A.B. Widener by gift through

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power of appointment of Joseph E. Widener, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; gift 1942 to NGA.

[1] John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters*, 9 vols., London, 1829-1842: 7(1836):86-87, no. 211.

[2] A transcript of Agnew's bill, from the Widener Collection records, is in NGA curatorial files.

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### EXHIBITION HISTORY

1899 Exhibition of Works by Rembrandt. Winter Exhibition, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1899, no. 18.

1909 The Hudson-Fulton Celebration, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1909, no. 94.

1969 Rembrandt in the National Gallery of Art [Commemorating the Tercentenary of the Artist's Death], National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1969, no. 10, repro.

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