



Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606 - 1669

A Woman Holding a Pink

1656

oil on canvas

overall: 103 x 86 cm (40 9/16 x 33 7/8 in.)

framed: 132.1 x 116.2 cm (52 x 45 3/4 in.)

Inscription: upper right: Rembrandt. / f.1656

Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.75

ENTRY

In writing about Rembrandt's classicism of the mid-1650s, Sir Kenneth Clark juxtaposed illustrations of *A Woman Holding a Pink* and Rembrandt's 1658 *Self-Portrait* in the Frick Collection [fig. 1]. [1] The comparison is striking, for the nobility of both figures has much to do with their frontal poses and direct gazes. Whether or not the foundation of Rembrandt's classicism of the mid-1650s derives from Titian, as Clark maintained, there is no question that Rembrandt increasingly sought to capture the essence of a sitter's presence by means of the triangular geometry of a frontal, seated pose. The simplicity of concept, the forcefulness of execution, and the nobility of character of *A Woman Holding a Pink* are qualities that have become even more pronounced after the painting was conserved in 2007–2008. The removal of the yellowed, pigmented varnish and old retouches revealed highlights in the face and the bold brushwork in the costume that greatly enhanced the figures' sense of liveliness and three-dimensionality. The changes are so striking that I now fully endorse the attribution of the painting to Rembrandt, an attribution I doubted in the 1995 catalog of the collection of Dutch paintings in the National Gallery of Art. [2]

The questions about the painting's attribution expressed in the 1995 catalog were not the first raised about this handsome portrait. Despite Sir Kenneth Clark's enthusiastic endorsement and the painting's clear relationship to Rembrandt's portrait style of the mid-1650s, Horst Gerson postulated in 1969 that *A Woman Holding a Pink* was executed by an artist trained by Rembrandt rather than by the master himself. He wrote: "Its solid structure combined with a smooth surface . . . are more characteristic of the school of Rembrandt than of the master himself. It

could be a work of Bol or Maes.” [3] In 1995 I agreed with Gerson that the relatively smooth modeling suggested that the painting had been executed by a student of Rembrandt’s workshop hailing from Dordrecht, such as Nicolaes Maes (Dutch, 1634 - 1693) or Ferdinand Bol (Dutch, 1616 - 1680), but suggested that the artist in question could have been Jacobus Leveck (1634–1675). However, this hypothesis no longer seems valid: much as with Bol and Maes, Leveck was not in the Rembrandt workshop in 1656. He had returned to Dordrecht by 1655, at which time he had joined the Dordrecht Saint Luke’s Guild. [4]

Aside from his concerns about the relative smoothness of the modeling, Gerson was skeptical of the authenticity of the signature and date. Technical examination, however, has found no evidence that they are later additions. Moreover, the handwriting of the letters in Rembrandt’s name is consistent with those of other signatures on paintings from the mid-1650s. [5] Finally, the date, 1656, is perfectly appropriate for the simple, unadorned character of the woman’s costume. [6] A particular telling comparison is with Rembrandt’s *Portrait of a Lady with an Ostrich-Feather Fan*, also in the National Gallery of Art [fig. 2]. Even though the woman depicted in *A Woman Holding a Pink* wears a relatively modest outfit, her plain white cuffs edged with lace are remarkably similar to those worn by the more elegantly attired woman holding the ostrich-feather fan. Their flat white linen collars, fastened in the center with a clasp or pin, are comparably edged in lace.

The many compelling visual and stylistic connections between these two paintings are now far more evident than they were in 1995 because *Portrait of a Lady with an Ostrich-Feather Fan* also underwent conservation treatment in recent years. [7] Beyond the comparable edging of the cuffs and collars, similarities in the bold manner in which the materials are rendered are now particularly striking. In each work, Rembrandt has modeled the collar and cuffs in broad planes with vigorously applied, bold strokes. A similar approach is also found in the blacks, where light highlights define sharp folds in the material.

The removal of thick, discolored layers of varnish has also revealed striking similarities in the handling of flesh tones in these two works that had previously been obscured. The women’s hands are extremely close in character, not only in their shapes, but also in the freely brushed modeling of their forms that consists of a rich overlay of colors, some smoothly and some roughly applied. Comparable approaches to modeling also exist in the women’s faces. Much as in the hands, the flesh tones in the faces consist of a subtle array of ochers, pinks, and whites that are brushed in complex layers. Accents on the foreheads of each woman are

modeled with carefully brushed parallel strokes. Instead of what appeared to be a rather bland application of paint, the face of *A Woman Holding a Pink* has an engaging visual richness consistent with Rembrandt's manner.

Despite the compelling similarities in these two portraits, certain differences do exist in the definition of the women's features, which are more robustly defined in *Portrait of a Lady with an Ostrich-Feather Fan* than in *A Woman Holding a Pink*. The distinctions are partially due to different physiognomies, but also to the softer light that plays over the woman's face in *A Woman Holding a Pink* as she gazes directly at the viewer rather than in the direction of her mate. The relatively soft modeling of her form, consistent with the classicism of the image, is also evident in the X-radiographs [see X-radiography], which reveals broad concentrations of lead white in the modeling of her face but few individual brushstrokes defining her features [fig. 3].

Although the young woman has a quietly restrained pose, she has slightly turned her body in space, resting one arm on a carpeted table and the other on her chair. As she sits in this dignified yet relaxed manner, she delicately holds in her right hand a pink carnation, a flower that is often associated with the sacrament of marriage. [8] Although an allusion to a marriage or betrothal may explain its presence here, such an interpretation seems unlikely given that no reinforcing marriage symbolism is present. However, the carnation also has another symbolic attribute that is probably more relevant to this image. This flower, which in Dutch is called *nagelbloem* (nail flower), is often associated with Christ's Crucifixion. [9] Thus, when appearing in family portraits, the carnation alludes to true conjugal love and the inspiration provided by the divine love of Christ's Passion. In conjunction with the still life on the tabletop to the woman's left, the carnation the woman holds would appear to have similar associations. The large book with its metal clasps probably represents the Bible and the apples the legacy of original sin that the woman must strive to overcome through her faith.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait*, 1658, oil on canvas, Frick Collection, New York. Photo © The Frick Collection, New York



fig. 2 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of a Lady with an Ostrich-Feather Fan*, c. 1656/1658, oil on canvas transferred to canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection



fig. 3 Detail of head, X-radiograph composite, Rembrandt van Rijn, *A Woman Holding a Pink*, 1656, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection

NOTES

- [1] Kenneth Clark, *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance* (New York, 1966), 127–130, fig. 120.
- [2] Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, Washington, 1995, 321–326 [available as an Archived Text, Online Editions Toolbar].
- [3] Horst Gerson in Abraham Bredius, *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the Paintings*, revised by Horst Gerson (London, 1969), 581, no. 390.
- [4] Leveck is identified as a student of Rembrandt in a document dated September 16, 1653, when he and another pupil (*dissipelen*) acted as witnesses for Rembrandt. Houbraken, who later studied briefly with Leveck in Dordrecht, mentions that Leveck had studied under Rembrandt, but he also writes that “[Leveck] still had a painting in his house from his first period in which Rembrandt’s handling was so truthfully done that one would have

taken it for a work of Rembrandt.” This “first period” must have lasted at least until 1655, the year Leveck entered the Saint Luke’s Guild in Dordrecht. In 1995 I postulated (note 9, this entry) that Leveck may have painted this work while he was with Rembrandt and that Rembrandt signed it after he had left for Dordrecht, but this proposal now seems to me to be quite unrealistic. For a further discussion of Leveck, see Peter Marijnissen et al., *De Zichtbaere Werelt* (Zwolle and Dordrecht, 1992), 220–225.

- [5] The signature, for example, conforms in most respects to Rembrandt’s *Jacob Blessing the Children of Joseph*, 1656 (Gemäldegalerie, Kassel, inv. no. 249). In this comparison only the *B* with its upper loop differs from the signature in the Kassel painting.
- [6] See Willem L. van de Watering, “On Jacob van Loo’s *Portrait of a Young Woman*,” *Minneapolis Institute of Arts Bulletin* 63 (1976–1977): 38. Van de Watering emphasizes that, except for elderly or particularly conservative women, fashion began to change shortly after 1655–1656.
- [7] The conservation treatment of that painting occurred in 2006–2007.
- [8] Fernand Mercier, “La Valeur symbolique de l’oeillet dans la peinture du moyen-age,” *Revue de l’Art* 71 (1937): 233–236.
- [9] Robert A. Koch, “Flower Symbolism in the Portinari Altarpiece,” *Art Bulletin* 46 (March 1964): 70–77.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support, a tightly woven, fine-weight fabric, has been lined with the tacking margins trimmed. Cusping is visible along all edges in the X-radiographs, indicating the original dimensions have been retained. The painting was prepared with a double ground consisting of a brown, quartz-type lower layer, followed by a yellow layer.[1]

The paint is a mixture of layers of paste consistency and glazes, worked both wet-into-wet and wet-over-dry with low brushmarking.[2] The background layer extends under the figure, which was initially sketched in broad brushstrokes. The hands, face, and tablecloth are thickly painted and finished with transparent glazes. Some texture has been lost by lining. Scattered minor losses have been retouched as have losses along the edges. The background and the figure’s dress are moderately abraded. The painting was treated in 2007-2008 to remove discolored varnish and inpainting and to inpaint the abrasion.

[1] The ground was analyzed by Karin Groen using cross-sections and energy dispersive X-ray analysis (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), 666–667).

[2] The paint layers were analyzed by the NGA Scientific Research department using cross-section and polarized light microscopy (see report dated November 4, 2010, in NGA Conservation department files).

PROVENANCE

Pierre Crozat [1665-1740], Paris, before 1740; by inheritance to his nephews, first to Louis-François Crozat, marquis du Châtel [1691-1750], Paris, and then [on Louis-François' death without a male heir] to Louis-Antoine Crozat, baron de Thiers [1699-1770], Paris; the latter's heirs; purchased 1772, through Denis Diderot [1713-1784] as an intermediary, by Catherine II, empress of Russia [1729-1796], for the Imperial Hermitage Gallery, Saint Petersburg; sold March 1931, as a painting by Rembrandt, through (Matthiesen Gallery, Berlin; P. & D. Colnaghi & Co., London; and M. Knoedler & Co., New York) to Andrew W. Mellon, Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C.; deeded 30 March 1932 to The A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, Pittsburgh; gift 1937 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

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. 16, repro.

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