

National Gallery of Art

NEWS RELEASE

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NATIONAL GALLERY ACQUIRES MISSING REMBRANDT COPPERPLATE

FOUND ON BACK OF PAINTING

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Earl A. Powell III, director of the National Gallery of Art, announced today that the Gallery has acquired a Rembrandt copperplate, which was widely believed to have been lost. The plate is in pristine condition after being hidden for more than three hundred years on the back of an oil painting by another artist who was a contemporary of Rembrandt.

"Rembrandt's etchings are clearly among his greatest works of art," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "The National Gallery is extremely fortunate to add this unique example of Rembrandt's work to our rich collection of holdings by this master." The acquisition was made possible by an anonymous gift and the Gallery's Patrons' Permanent Fund.

Rembrandt (1606 - 1669) used the copperplate to produce about two hundred impressions of one of his outstanding late etchings, Abraham Entertaining the Angels (1656), most of which are in museums. Within the powerful composition of this print, Rembrandt concentrates on the humanistic meaning of the story: the warm and genial power of the messengers from God who bring astonishing news; the tender and total obeisance of elderly Abraham, who will become the father of great peoples and great

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religions; the prying curiosity and laughing disbelief of his wife Sarah; and the boyish playfulness of the young Ishmael, who shoots his arrow over the parapet, unaware and unconcerned about his terrible future.

The copperplate for Abraham Entertaining the Angels was thought to have been lost following Rembrandt's death. However, an Antwerp artist, perhaps Pieter Gysels (1620 - 1690/1691), somehow acquired it and used the plate to paint a pleasant and typical river landscape on the smooth reverse side. The painting subsequently ended up in England and was sold by a Yorkshire antiques shop in 1946 to a British collector, who hung it in his living room until he decided to sell it at Christie's this spring. It was then that a Christie's specialist removed the painting from the frame to see if there were any marks on the back by the plate maker and made the exciting Rembrandt discovery. Experts surmise that Rembrandt may have been forced to pawn the plate in 1656 when he went bankrupt, or it may have been sold as part of his effects after his death.

From the just over three hundred etchings made by Rembrandt during his lifetime, fewer than one-third of the copperplates are known to have survived. Of these surviving plates, most were reworked by later artists, and all of them were reprinted and worn down. However, the plate acquired by the Gallery is in prime condition, unworn and unreworkeed.

"To understand how another artist used this piece of copper to make a painting, and only that fortuitous use preserved this plate through the centuries, and then to see

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this unique example of Rembrandt's etched copperplates in its original condition is almost magical," said Andrew Robison, Andrew W. Mellon Senior Curator, National Gallery of Art.

The public will be able to view the Rembrandt copperplate in the exhibition Building a Collection, on view from November 16, 1997 through April 19, 1998, in the East Building.

The National Gallery of Art, located on Constitution Avenue between Third and Seventh Streets, N.W., is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Admission is free. For general information, call (202) 737-4215, the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) weekdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's Web site at <http://www.nga.gov>.

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