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Art archaeology: X-rays & the hidden Rembrandt



Rembrandt | Portrait of Frederick Rihel on Horseback | 1663 | © The National Gallery, London

A newly restored Rembrandt will go on show this week harbouring a little-known surprise, a full-scale portrait by the Dutch master hidden from the viewer.

Conservationists have spent the last three and half years restoring Portrait of Frederick Rihel on Horseback, a life-size depiction of a nobleman from Amsterdam and his steed painted in the early 1660s towards the end of the painter's turbulent life.

But it is what lies beneath the imposing image that has also excited curators. X-ray imagery has revealed another detailed portrait at right angles to the finished work, unseen underneath the picture on view.

While the painstaking work of repairing the damaged oil painting has been ongoing, scientists and art historians have been playing detective piecing together information on the composition Rembrandt abandoned.

The surprising discovery of the concealed work was made in 2008 but this is the first time in centuries the public will be able to see the finished painting almost as Rembrandt intended thanks to the comprehensive clean-up.