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## Rembrandt expert urges National Gallery to rethink demoted painting

Old Man in an Armchair, purchased in 1957 but judged in 1969 not to be by the artist, hailed by academic as 'important' work



Old Man in an Armchair was ruled by the National Gallery to be by a follower of Rembrandt in 1969. Photograph: National Gallery, London

The [painting](#) shows an old, weary man slumped in contemplation in his armchair and has spent more time in the [National Gallery's](#) storeroom than on display because it is attributed to a follower of [Rembrandt](#) rather than the artist himself.

But the gallery is being urged to rethink. The academic widely acknowledged as the world's leading expert on Rembrandt is about to drop an art historical bombshell by arguing it was not only painted by the 17th century Dutch master himself, but it is also a pivotal work for the artist.

"It is of wonderful quality and is revolutionary in a sense," Ernst van de Wetering told the Guardian. "It is a very important painting."

Professor Van de Wetering was the long-serving director of the Rembrandt Research Project, set up in the Netherlands to organise and categorise research on the artist, and is in the process of writing the sixth and final volume overview of the painter which has meant travelling the world viewing works which have had the biggest question marks placed over them.

That includes London's Old Man in an Armchair which was purchased as a Rembrandt in 1957, but demoted in 1969 based on the views of then leading expert Horst Gerson.

Van de Wetering saw the work three years ago and will next week have his arguments published in the June edition of the Burlington Magazine. "I was amazed that the painting was rejected," he said. "Then I saw how it was and why it was rejected."

Van de Wetering said the demotion of the 1652 painting had been based on a fundamental misunderstanding. The judgment was based on connoisseurship – that if a painting did not look like Rembrandt it could not be Rembrandt. "That was a vast mistake and Gerson got many wrong."

Instead Old Man in an Armchair needs to be seen in terms of Rembrandt's experimentation, said van de Wetering. In 1651 the artist decided to start all over again, to reinvent how he painted – to both paint and draw with his brush, in what has become known as his late "rough manner".

The subject in the National Gallery painting is not a portrait, van de Wetering said. "This is a man posing to be studied ... it is a painting about painting."

Van de Wetering said it was one of a number of "paintings about painting" that Rembrandt made, but the National Gallery work was of huge importance because it was one of the earliest.

"Once you look at it from a painting about painting angle and not a portrait angle, you see it with different eyes," he said.

One reason given by Gerson to dismiss the painting as a Rembrandt was the difference in the hands. The right is "painterly" and the left is "superficially powerful and impressionistic".

Van de Wetering said: "It is a silly argument because hands in different positions never look the same unless you have a very dull painter."

He said a negative comment by Gerson – in a period when "paintings were easily rejected" – often set the tone for future judgment of a work and this was the case for *Old Man in an Armchair*.

"Of course you never can do without some sort of connoisseurship but you have not to trust your own connoisseurship – and that is what happened."

Van de Wetering is unequivocal in his attribution. It is "beautifully" signed "Rembrandt 1652" and he believes no scientific evidence exists to say it is not anything but an extremely important "early-late" Rembrandt.

The gallery on Friday stood by its "follower of Rembrandt" attribution. A spokeswoman said the artist painted many similar scenes of old men in contemplation but "the rather uneven brushwork and unusually vivid colours" indicated it was not by the master himself.

"*Old Man in an Armchair* is a picture that has generated much debate over the years – as many Rembrandts do – and we look forward to further discussions concerning its attribution."

She said the painting can be viewed at the moment, in room 23, and the debate should continue during the late Rembrandt show being held at the National Gallery this winter. *Old Man in an Armchair* will not feature, however, because the gallery is unconvinced it is by his hand.

The painting, which also featured in the gallery's "fakes, mistakes and discoveries" exhibition in 2010, was purchased in 1957.

The former director of the National Gallery Kenneth Clark – currently the subject of a show at Tate Britain – later remarked on the pronounced Venetian aspect of the painting and felt it showed the influence of Tintoretto.

The National Gallery website stresses that "it is not at all certain that Rembrandt would have known the work of the Venetian master."

But Van de Wetering agrees with Clark and writes: "If anyone was being imitated – or rather emulated – in the *Old Man in the Armchair*, then it was Tintoretto, but certainly not his portraits; rather his history paintings, in which his figures often occupy much of the pictorial space in a similar manner, and are painted with a corresponding play of light and shadow, colour and brushwork.

"Such a bold step can only be expected from a master, not from a pupil or imitator, and is doubly remarkable in that it comes so early in a new phase of Rembrandt's development."

