

AUTHENTICATION
IN ART

AiA Art News-service

*though not directly within our goals, this article is still interesting for our development of the original

THE BVRLINGTON
MAGAZINE

February 2015, No. 1343 – Vol 157

The Rembrandt Research Project and its denouement



The Rembrandt Research Project and its denouement

The publication of volume five of *A Corpus of Rembrandt's Paintings* drew a line under the original intentions of the Rembrandt Research Project (RRP), leaving a substantial body of paintings uncatalogued. This included the large history paintings, the portraits (apart from self-portraits) and the landscapes, all painted after 1642, amounting to some one hundred works, or about a quarter of his accepted *œuvre*. Students of the artist were left to take what comfort they could from Robert Louis Stevenson's dictum that 'to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive, the true success is to labour'. And labour, as even the harshest critics of the RRP would agree, the various authors most certainly did. But with the recent publication of Ernst van de Wetering's *Rembrandt's Paintings Revisited: A Complete Survey* all is not lost.¹ Corpus VI, as it is also known, can best, if prosaically, be described as a mopping-up operation, devoted to completion and revision and a good deal more. But, in view of the nature of the publication, the previously uncatalogued paintings cannot be treated to the 'full monty' in the manner of the existing volumes.

An attractive feature of the new publication is that it is very personal and in some ways idiosyncratic in its approach. Written in a relaxed, almost conversational manner, it is as much an attempt to get into the mind of the artist and assess his pictorial intentions as a scholarly catalogue of his paintings. It opens with an engrossing essay, entitled 'What is a Rembrandt; a personal account', which begins with a study of Rembrandt scholarship from the 1930s, i.e. the period when Catherine Scallen's rightly admired volume comes to an end,² and initially leads up to Horst Gerson's own catalogue of Rembrandt's paintings (1968)³ and his revised edition of Bredius (1969).⁴ The former, a modest man, was pained to find himself a figure of obloquy from a large part of the audience at the Chicago symposium in 1969. A photograph showing the participants on that occasion is included in the volume; of the twenty-five scholars portrayed, no more than four are probably alive today. With the very recent establishment but still to be defined philosophy of the RRP hanging disquietingly in the air, Chicago 1969 became a defining moment in Rembrandt scholarship, with new as yet unformed thinking and old well-established beliefs coming together and clashing. Gerson's remarks expressing doubts about the authenticity of well-loved paintings, above all the *Saul and David* in the Mauritshuis, The Hague (Fig.I), which particularly incurred Jakob Rosenberg's wrath, undoubtedly, as Van de Wetering points out, gave birth to the new reductionist phase in Rembrandt scholarship. Although often based on the briefest of observations, Gerson's approach nevertheless touched a new mood among younger scholars inclined to disattribute and, more positively, to re-attribute to pupils and followers. But this account is a mere prelude to a fascinating and seemingly fair-minded account of the often troubled history of the RRP itself, told by the only member of the original team still alive. What is little recognised is that Bob Haak was the true instigator of the project and it was only with Josua Bruyn's assumption of the chairmanship of the group that he became the dominant voice and leader in all but name. What is remarkable is how little experience the new group had in cataloguing paintings by Rembrandt, and Gerson's objection to the generous funding being considered by the Netherlands Organisation for Pure - Scientific Research is understandable. As Van de Wetering says, the team learnt on the job. The fundamental problem of the project soon became the deep ideological dispute which developed between Bruyn and Van de Wetering, who was brought on at an early stage as a junior assistant and soon became a forceful individual voice with different views from the others. As he has succinctly said, his - colleagues 'would describe images. I would describe processes'.⁵ The situation was made the more personal by the fact that the latter was the pupil of the former and, in the way these things do, gave rise to considerable animosity between the two, which ended, with other matters also playing their part, with the

closing of the originally conceived project in 1993 and by Van de Wetering assuming sole responsibility for volumes four and five.⁶

Bruyn's approach was, as he was much later to define on the occasion of the publication of volume four of the Corpus, recorded here, 'dominated by the idea that Rembrandt's way of painting changed from one period to another, but very largely remained uniform within those periods, in which there occurred no radical variations'. One can cite, for example, the RRP's treatment of the three small pictures on gilded copper, the *Self-portrait* in the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm (cat. no.33), *Bust of an old woman* in the Residenzgalerie, Salzburg (no.34), and the *Laughing soldier* in the Mauritshuis, The Hague (no.35); painted arguably at the same time, the first and last of which, because of their different styles, were placed in the B, or uncertain category. All three are now unequivocally given to Rembrandt. Bruyn rigidly, one might say blindly, adhered to this narrow viewpoint, leading, for example, to his exclusion of such admired and surely genuine pictures as *David's parting from Jonathan* in the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg (no.188), and the *Supper at Emmaus* in the Musée du Louvre, Paris (no.218), decisions which caused the breaking point between master and pupil. But at the end of his life Bruyn graciously surrendered: 'We now agree that his [Van de Wetering's] conception, backed with impressive argumentation sourced from contemporary texts from Rhetoric is an argument that makes the range of styles within the same period entirely acceptable'. And so there was a happy ending to a painful scholarly debate, and one must assume that Bruyn would not turn in his grave were he to read such statements as 'there is no such thing as a typical Rembrandt; each painting is unusual in its own way' or the dating of a picture 'based, to whatever extent, on the possibility of a predictable stylistic development within Rembrandt's late *œuvre*, is perhaps best ignored'. As many would have hoped from the beginning, the final authority on what is or is not by Rembrandt has, in this instance, become the preserve of one person and not five scholars prey to the dangers of a group mentality.⁷

Van de Wetering's more nuanced approach, which he likens to the theories of the nineteenth-century mathematician the Revd Thomas Bayes, is to bring every shred of evidence into account, items which although not conclusive in themselves can, when considered together, argue a degree of probability. (If one may be forgiven a Rembrandt pun, everything has been grist to his mill.) Traditional connoisseurship with 'judgements [. . .] largely based on intuitively applied criteria concerning style, brushwork and quality', plus iconography with relevant texts helpfully included here, has been expanded by Van de Wetering to include evidence from theoretical writings and, above all, from an analysis of painting technique, something which can be more meaningfully done by a practising artist, which the author is. Of course detailed technical examination concerning technique has been carried out for individual or groups of pictures – one thinks of what the National Gallery in London did in 1988,⁸ and what the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York did in 1995⁹ – but it is the first time it has been carried out consistently for the total *œuvre*, and now plays an important role, allied with Van de Wetering's interpretation of Rembrandt's pictorial intentions, in deciding on authenticity. Van de Wetering makes a general criticism of how much connoisseurship tends to depend on the comparison of small details between one picture and another rather than consideration of the whole work. One may note with approval that the author travelled the world over so that in the end only three pictures have escaped his personal examination.

The main body of the book is made up of colour reproductions of every work. As might be expected from the creator of that revealing exhibition of life-size reproductions of every picture by the artist – *Rembrandt. All his paintings*, on show in Amsterdam from December 2012 to April 2014 – Van de Wetering, aided by his publishers, has sought the highest standard of reproduction. Although dependent on the images provided by owners, they have succeeded in providing reproductions of quality, so that, inter alia, one can

follow his detailed examination of painting technique. A comparison of the plates with, for example, the holdings in the National Gallery backs the author's hopes. Where he is reasonably certain about the original size he has illuminatingly indicated the original format of the painting.

Van de Wetering is at pains to emphasise that he is not offering a conventional catalogue raisonné of which paintings he accepts as by Rembrandt, but instead is providing what are modestly called notes to the plates following the style of Gerson's notes to Bredius. But there the similarity ends. Where Gerson confined himself to a few lines of snappy comment, Van de Wetering – never a minimalist as a writer – is sometimes inspired to write what is virtually an essay on what particularly engages him about a picture. His notes are richly discursive, never fearing to speculate. As has been said, he is all embracing in his approach, adding examination of painting technique, a very important part of his argument, and theoretical writings and any other strands of relevant information to straightforward connoisseurship. One leitmotiv has been to give a fuller understanding of the role of oil-sketches in Rembrandt's work.¹⁰

In view of the unfinished nature of the RRP's work, the notes to the plates called for different treatment, which can be divided into different categories. In the first are the pre-1643 pictures accepted by the Corpus and accepted here. Except where further discussion seemed warranted or new information available, these entries tend to be brief, referring the reader to the entries in the Corpus, which helpfully are now available online to those unable to afford the books.¹¹ To these can be added eight newly discovered pictures, all falling into the first half of the artist's career, including the *Baptism of the Eunuch* in the Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht (no.9), and the sparkling *Self-portrait laughing*, which turned up in an English provincial auction and is now in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles (no.18).

But the discussion takes on a new character when it comes to pictures rejected by the Corpus but reinstated here. What may come as a considerable surprise, welcome or not depending on your point of view, is that no less than forty-four works rejected in the first three volumes of the Corpus are reinstated here, an increase of nearly one third on the 146 pictures accepted by the RRP.¹² In reassessing these, Van de Wetering has been able to take advantage of the more recent technical examination and conservation carried out by owners, usually museums. Moreover, scientific aids, such as X-radiograph and infra-red imaging, have become very much more sophisticated and informative in recent years. Yet leaving these important factors aside, this reassessment represents a fundamental difference in the understanding of Rembrandt the painter, which should go a long way towards answering the critics of the RRP.

The restored works include such examples as the small *Flight into Egypt* in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours (no.13; Fig.II), disattributed, as Van de Wetering admits, largely on the basis of his own original arguments, and the *Portrait of a couple in an interior* in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston (no.61), while a number of other portraits from the 1630s are also reassessed. The *Bust of a young woman* in the National Gallery of Art, Washington (no.171), accepted here, was to prove to be one of the breaking points between Van de Wetering and the other members of the RRP. This change of heart will be particularly warmly welcomed in Manchester Square where the Wallace Collection had lost all four of its pre-1643 Rembrandts, now reinstated as genuine in the case of the *Good Samaritan* (no.42) and the *Self-portrait* (no.154), or partially autograph in the case of the Pellicorne portraits (nos.177a and b).¹³ The works executed after 1642, which were not treated in the five existing Corpus volumes, receive for the most part full and stimulating entries. One can pick out, for example, his discussion of *Sarah waiting for Tobias* in the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh (no.194), or *The mill* in the National Gallery of Art, Washington (no.206). Occasionally one may feel that a work is given rather short shrift, such as the cursory treatment of *The syndics* in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (no.299), which omits any mention of the three magnificent preparatory drawings. The entries are full of acute observations, such as, for example, noticing

the presence of a flea or mosquito bite on the back of the hand of the *Girl at a window* in the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm (no.220), and speculations, such as that the *Old man in a rich costume* at Woburn Abbey (no.192) and the *Bust of a woman* in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin (no.193), may have been intended as a pair representing Ruth and Boas.

But within the group of works executed after 1642, there are no less than twenty-six which have been rejected by various authors, primarily Gerson and Tümpel. One may note with approval, or not, the reinstatement as a work by Rembrandt of *Saul and David* in the Mauritshuis, The Hague (no.212; Fig.I), an *Old man in an armchair* in the National Gallery, London (no.221), or the so-called *Auctioneer* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (no.259; Fig.III). As Sir Galahad, Van de Wetering is never more impressive than when using every weapon in his armoury to rescue *Hendrickje Stoffels in a silk gown* (no.277; Fig.IV) from languishing in storage in the Städel Museum, Frankfurt. And there are other important works of which Van de Wetering convincingly takes a favourable view. Having learnt from the experience of having to change his mind over the course of time, Van de Wetering makes no claims to finality of judgment. He is aware that a definitive answer to what Rembrandt did or did not paint is not achievable, at least at present, and there will always be much scope for discussion. Dissenters from his point of view may still dissent, but so fully does Van de Wetering put his case that they will need to come armed with detailed arguments rather than just opinions to argue their case.

And so after forty-six years of intensive research on the part of the dwindling band of the RRP, we are finally presented with a newly defined corpus of Rembrandt's painted *œuvre*. This is made all the more meaningful and valuable by the vast amount of information and discussion about his practice as an artist that has accompanied the conclusions. Clearly our overall view of Rembrandt is now on a new plateau and it is appropriate to salute Ernst van de Wetering for his remarkable achievement.

Christopher White

- 1 *Rembrandt's Paintings Revisited: A Complete Survey*. By Ernst van de Wetering, with the collaboration of Carin van Nes and translated and edited by Murray Pearson. 736 pp. incl. numerous col. + 40 b. & w. ills. (Springer, Dordrecht, 2014), £899.50. ISBN 978-94-017-9173-1.
- 2 C. Scallen: *Rembrandt, Reputation and the Practice of Connoisseurship*, Amsterdam 2004.
- 3 H. Gerson: *Rembrandt: Paintings*, Amsterdam 1968.
- 4 A. Bredius: *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of Paintings*, revised by H. Gerson, London 1969.
- 5 'Personality of the Year', *Apollo* 164 (December 2006), p.29.
- 6 As announced in a Letter to the Editor in this Magazine, 135 (1993), p.279, signed by J. Bruyn, B. Haak, S.H. Levie and P.J.J. van Thiel.
- 7 See the present writer's comments on this phenomenon in 'The Rembrandt Research Project', *The Burlington Magazine* 125 (1983), p.661.
- 8 D. Bomford *et al.*: exh. cat. *Art in the Making: Rembrandt*, London (National Gallery) 1988-89 (new ed. 2006).
- 9 H. von Sonnenburg, W. Liedtke *et al.*: exh. cat. *Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Aspects of Connoisseurship*, New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art) 1995-96.
- 10 Van de Wetering has increased the number of paintings generally recognised as being oil-sketches. The present writer was particularly intrigued by his suggestion that the *Portrait of Jan Boursse* (no.309), in the Museum Oskar Reinhart, Winterthur, accepted as by Rembrandt here, is a preliminary study for a never-executed etching.
- 11 PDF files of the first five volumes have been made available by the RKD, The Hague, at www.rembrandtdatabase.org/Rembrandt/cms/corpus.

12 It would be misleading to try and give a reliable comparison of the total number of works accepted as by Rembrandt by various authors, since Van de Wetering, for one, sometimes attributes a picture largely or partly to the studio. Bearing this in mind, the score now stands at: Bauch (*Rembrandt: Gemälde*, Berlin 1966) 560; Gerson (1968) 420; Schwarz (*Rembrandt, His Life, His Paintings*, Harmondsworth 1985) 348; Tümpel (*Rembrandt: Mythos und Methode*, Königstein 1986) 265; Van de Wetering (taking into account his use of a and b numbers) 349. As Seymour Slive was fond of saying, an artist who painted x pictures was a different artist from one who painted y pictures.

13 As Van de Wetering acknowledges, Christopher Brown in 'Rembrandts reassessed', *Apollo* 164 (December 2006), pp.54–61, had already argued in favour of all four pictures. It is a pity that John Ingamells, who was much fêted as the museum director who took the loss of 'his' Rembrandts 'on the chin', is no longer alive.