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IN ART



## A real Rembrandt? Study shows painting banished to storeroom is either by his studio or the master himself

A recent examination of the wood panel reveals that it is from the same Baltic oak tree as the panel of an authenticated work by the Dutch artist

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Head of a Bearded Man at Oxford's Ashmolean Museum has undergone a scientific examination using infrared technology Courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

A Dutch Golden Age painting of an old man, long dismissed as not by Rembrandt or his studio, is now being brought back into the oeuvre. *Head of a Bearded Man* (around 1630-40)

at Oxford's Ashmolean Museum had been banished to the storeroom, but will go on display on 2 September in the *Young Rembrandt* exhibition (extended until 1 November).

A recent scientific examination reveals that the picture was painted on a panel which comes from the very same tree as on an accepted Rembrandt, which makes it almost certain that *Head of a Bearded Man* originated from the master's studio.

The small painting has a 1777 auction label on the reverse, describing it as by Rembrandt. In 1951 it was bequeathed as a Rembrandt to the Ashmolean by Percy Moore Turner, a dealer and donor. However, in 1982 the Amsterdam-based Rembrandt Research Project rejected the painting as coming from "outside Rembrandt's circle", possibly later in the 17th century. There are two other lesser versions of the same composition—one at Houston's Museum of Fine Arts (described as "after Rembrandt") and the other in a private collection.

The Ashmolean's 2004 collection catalogue recorded the work as in the "style" of Rembrandt, but explained that it can "only be loosely associated with Rembrandt's style in about 1630". It is currently described on the museum's website as by a Rembrandt follower. Ernst van de Wetering, the leading Rembrandt specialist, excluded it from his 2017 complete survey of the oeuvre.

Peter Klein, an experienced dendrochronologist, recently studied the oak panel of the Ashmolean picture. He determined that it was painted on wood from the same Baltic oak tree as two other pictures: Rembrandt's *Andromeda Chained to the Rocks* (around 1630, Mauritshuis, The Hague) and a work by Rembrandt's collaborator Jan Lievens, *Portrait of Rembrandt's Mother* (around 1630, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden). Tree rings revealed that it was felled between 1618 and 1628 and the seasoned wood would have ready for use two years later.

This makes it virtually certain that *Head of a Bearded Man* is from Rembrandt's studio. The Ashmolean curator An Van Camp now dates it to around 1630.

The key question is whether Rembrandt himself contributed to the Ashmolean picture. It is now disfigured with discoloured varnish and overpaint which was added in the 19th or early-20th century, making it difficult to determine. After the closure of the *Early Rembrandt* exhibition the painting will be examined and restored. Conservator Jevon Thistlewood says that "we can't wait to see what we will find".