



Rembrandt Workshop
Dutch 17th Century

Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606 - 1669

Head of an Aged Woman

1655/1660

oil on panel

overall: 21.1 x 17.5 cm (8 5/16 x 6 7/8 in.)

Inscription: center left by a later hand: Rembrandt / f.1657

Widener Collection 1942.9.64

ENTRY

Informal bust-length figure studies, called *tronies* in the seventeenth century, were frequently painted by Rembrandt and members of his workshop. [1] This small oil sketch of a wizened old woman is a painting of this type. The sitter stares out from under a white headpiece, her black cape fastened at the neck. The woman's wrinkled visage is expressed with dense paints applied vigorously with a stiff brush. At the edge of the strokes are crisp and definite ridges, a characteristic of *alla prima* painting, which is also evident in the X-radiographs [fig. 1] [see X-radiography]. This technique is particularly apparent along the decorative pattern at the lower edge of the headpiece, which has been created by pushing a firm object, perhaps even a brush, into the wet paint. In contrast to the thick impastos on the face and headpiece, the black cape is thinly painted and summarily indicated. Surprisingly, the background is vigorously painted, particularly in the upper region. The paint in the background around the head is actually thicker than that of the thinly executed black cape.

The attribution of this painting to Rembrandt dates to at least 1765, when it was engraved in reverse by J. H. Bause. At that time it and a male pendant were in the Gottfried Winkler Collection in Leipzig. [2] Nevertheless, despite the expressive character of the *tronies* of this old woman, its attribution seems impossible for stylistic reasons. As Edith Standen implied in her notes on the painting when it was in Widener's collection, the compositional arrangement is rather awkward. Standen wrote: "Lower part unconvincing; head does not seem to join body, set of shoulders seems wrong." [3] As noted in the catalog of the Gallery's 1969

exhibition, the painting “differs markedly from the rest of Rembrandt’s work, and it has not yet been possible to relate this study to any of his other paintings.” [4] Stechow questioned the authenticity of the signature and date in 1937, [5] and Gerson, in 1969, published that they were forged. [6] Gerson also thought that the painting did not resemble “the style of Rembrandt’s authentic oil sketches.”

While the signature and date, 1657, differ markedly from Rembrandt’s own, there is no technical evidence that they were applied after the execution of the painting. In any event, it would appear that the sketch was executed in the latter half of the 1650s. Dendrochronological examination [see Dendrochronology] has established the felling date for the tree from which the panel was made as between 1637 and 1643. Thus one can with some assurance conclude that the work was painted during Rembrandt’s lifetime. The large number of such *tronies* that have survived from Rembrandt’s workshop indicates that he encouraged his students to paint such studies directly from the model. This direct manner of painting helps explain the bold brushwork and intense scrutiny of the aged woman’s expressive face that is evident in this work. Rembrandt’s paintings of old women from the mid-1650s, among them *An Old Woman in a Hood*, 1654 (Pushkin Museum, Moscow), and *An Old Woman in an Armchair*, 1654 (Hermitage, Saint Petersburg), would also have served as pictorial models. [7]

The old woman depicted in this painting also appears in a number of works by Abraham van Dijck (1635/1636–1672), in particular his *The Old Prophetess*, c. 1655–1660, now in the Hermitage. [8] Although the harsh angular style of the oil sketch is not characteristic of the more finished works by this artist, it is entirely possible that he could have painted in such a manner when executing a preliminary oil sketch. Until more information is known about the full range of his work, however, it is not possible to offer more than an initial suggestion of this artist, who seems to have studied with Rembrandt in the early 1650s. If the painting were, in fact, executed by Van Dijck, then it almost certainly was painted after he had left Rembrandt’s workshop and had begun painting on his own.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 X-radiograph composite, Rembrandt Workshop,
Head of an Aged Woman, 1655/1660, oil on panel,
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection,
1942.9.64

NOTES

- [1] Several of these appear in the 1656 inventory of Rembrandt's collection. See Walter L. Strauss and Marjon van der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents* (New York, 1979), 349–388, especially nos. 105, 115, 118, and 294.
- [2] Although the painting is described as being in the Gottfried Winkler Collection in Leipzig, Bause, for some reason, dedicated his print to Johann Jacob Haid of Augsburg. See this object, Provenance note 1.
- [3] Handwritten notes by Edith Standen (Widener's secretary for art), from the Widener Collection records, in NGA curatorial files.
- [4] *Rembrandt in the National Gallery of Art [Commemorating the Tercentenary]*

of the Artist's Death] (Washington, 1969), no. 18.

- [5] Stechow's verbal comments were recorded by Edith Standen (Widener's secretary for art) in her notes (in NGA curatorial files).
- [6] Abraham Bredius, *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the Paintings*, revised by Horst Gerson (London, 1969), 581, no. 392.
- [7] See Br. 383 from the Pushkin Museum, Moscow; and Br. 381 from the Hermitage, Saint Petersburg. An earlier prototype that might also have been influential is Rembrandt's etching *Sick Woman with a Large White Head-dress*, c. 1640–1641 (B. 359).
- [8] Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 5 vols. (Landau in der Pfalz, 1983), 1:671, no. 367. Van Dijck was probably a pupil of Rembrandt's in the early 1650s, although nothing definite is known about the exact period of his apprenticeship. Sumowski dates the Hermitage painting 1655/1660 on the basis of comparisons with Van Dijck's few dated works. The same model appears frequently in his oeuvre: see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 5 vols. (Landau in der Pfalz, 1983), 1: nos. 370, 372, 375, 377. An oil sketch on panel (23.8 x 20 cm) representing the same model in a similar headpiece was in a private collection in Ontario in 1973 (photograph in NGA curatorial files).

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a single, uncradled oak board with a vertical grain, cut from a tree felled between 1637 and 1643.[1] A vertical split caused a dislevel in the panel at the top edge in the center. A small, 1.3 x 0.5 cm, loss of paint and ground layers occurred there when the wood surface was mechanically planed. The left and right edges appear to have been planed, slightly reducing the panel's horizontal dimensions.

A thin, smooth, white ground layer covering the panel lies under a reddish brown locally applied layer. This layer, which must have been left as a reserve for the woman's robe, is still visible in that area. The paint was applied freely with very loose brushwork, considerable impasto, and rapid scumbles. The paint was worked wet-into-wet in rapid succession, with the face painted first, followed by the background. Small losses are found in the dark background at the right and along the edges, and mild abrasion has occurred in the thin, dark passages. The painting was treated in 1992 to remove discolored varnish and inpainting. At that time overpaint removed from the dark right background revealed a pentimento in the

placement of the woman's shoulder.

[1] Dendrochronology was performed by Dr. Peter Klein, Universität Hamburg (see report dated September 28, 1987, in NGA Conservation department files).

PROVENANCE

Probably H. Verschuring, The Hague, by 1751. Gottfried Winkler [1731-1795], Leipzig, by 1765.[1] Possibly with (Stéphane Bourgeois [Bourgeois Frères], Paris), in 1893/1894.[2] Rodolphe Kann [1845-1905], Paris, by 1898;[3] purchased 1907 with the entire Kann collection by (Duveen Brothers, Inc., London, New York, and Paris);[4] sold to (F. Kleinberger & Co., Paris);[5] by exchange to (Leo Nardus [1868-1955], Suresnes, France, and New York); by exchange early 1909 to Peter A.B. Widener, Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania;[6] inheritance from Estate of Peter A.B. Widener by gift through power of appointment of Joseph E. Widener, Elkins Park; gift 1942 to NGA.

[1] Gerard Hoet, *Catalogus of Naamlyst van Schilderijen...*, 2 vols., The Hague, 1752, 2: 482, lists in the collection of H. Verschuring "Een Oud Vrouwtje door Rembrandt. h.9d., br. 8d." The next painting listed was a pendant of an old man. Both paintings were then catalogued in the Winkler collection in 1768: Franz Wilhelm Kreuchauf, *Historische Erklärungen der Gemaelde welche Herr Gottfried Winkler in Leipzig gesammelt*, Leipzig, 1798: nos. 495 and 496. Three years earlier, in 1765, the painting had been engraved in reverse by J.H. Bause, who for some reason dedicated his print to Johann Jacob Haid of Augsburg. Bause also engraved the pendant (no. 496 from Winkler's catalogue); the description of the latter work is: "Der Kopf eines betagten Mannes, mit dickaufgeschwollener Nase, kurzem Haare und Barte." This painting has disappeared but is listed in Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century...*, trans. Edward G. Hawke, 8 vols., London, 1907-1927: 6(1916):no. 461. A photograph of Bause's engraving of the old man is in the NGA curatorial files.

[2] Émile Michel, *Rembrandt: His Life, His Work, and His Time*, Trans. Florence Simmonds, 2 vols., New York, 1894: 2:238, gives the following description of a

painting in the possession of "M. Steph. Bourgeois": "Bust Portrait of a Woman, three-quarter to the front, small size. About 1640. W[ood]. 7 7/8 x 6 1/2 inches." It is possible that this painting is in fact *Head of an Aged Woman*, and that Rodolphe Kann obtained it from Bourgeois, but so far no direct evidence has come to light that supports this theory. Bourgeois was the father-in-law of Leo Nardus, the dealer from whom Peter A.B. Widener received the painting in 1909.

[3] Kann lent the painting to an exhibition in Amsterdam in 1898.

[4] Duveen Brothers Records, accession number 960015, Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles: reels 38 and 39, boxes 115-118, Stock books, Paris Ledger, and Sales Book for the Kann Collection.

[5] Duveen Brothers Records, accession number 960015, Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles: reel 39, box 117, Paris Ledger, no. 1, Kann Collection.

[6] Nardus received this painting and NGA's *Head of Saint Matthew* (1942.9.58) from Kleinberger in exchange for a portrait of a lady by Hans Memling. The same two paintings, along with ten others, were sent to Widener in early 1909, as replacements for a dozen paintings Nardus had sold to and then took back from the collector, after they were deemed by art historians of the day to be modern copies of "Old Masters."

These two transactions involving Nardus are revealed in correspondence between Widener, his lawyer, John G. Johnson, Nardus, and Nardus' assistant, Michel van Gelder, now in the John G. Johnson Collection Archives at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (box 5, folders 5 and 6, especially a letter, Michel van Gelder to John G. Johnson, 29 January 1909). The correspondence was found, transcribed, and kindly shared with the NGA by Jonathan Lopez (letter, sent with transcriptions, 24 April 2006, to Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., in NGA curatorial files). See also Jonathan Lopez, "'Gross False Pretenses': The Misdeeds of Art Dealer Leo Nardus," *Apollo*, ser. 2, vol. 166, no. 548 (December 2007): 80–81, fig. 9.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1898 Rembrandt: schilderijen bijeengebracht ter gelegenheid van de inhuldiging van Hare Majesteit Koningin Wilhelmina, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1898, no. 100.

1969 Rembrandt in the National Gallery of Art [Commemorating the Tercentenary of the Artist's Death], National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1969, no. 8, repro., as by Rembrandt.

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