NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606 - 1669
Govaert Flinck
Dutch, 1615 - 1660

Man in Oriental Costume

c. 1635

oil on linen
overall: 98.5 x 74.5 cm (38 3/4 x 29 5/16 in.)
framed: 130.8 x 106 x 15.9 cm (51 1/2 x 41 3/4 x 6 1/4 in.)
Inscription: center left: [R]embrandt ft
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1940.1.13

ENTRY

In this imposing half-length portrait a bearded man wearing an elaborate, bejeweled turban stares out at the viewer, his features strongly modeled by light streaming in from the left. A fur-lined cape, loosely clasped at the neck with a gold chain, covers his shoulders. His right hand grasps the sash that wraps around his waist, while his other hand rests upon a wooden staff.

During the 1630s Rembrandt depicted in his paintings, drawings, and etchings numerous figures who wear Middle Eastern attire. While the commercial enterprises of the Dutch Republic had reached the Middle East by the early seventeenth century and Levantines were to be seen in the streets and marketplaces of Amsterdam, Rembrandt's images are not portraits of these people.[1] Rather, they are imaginative evocations of a distant culture that have as their basis Dutch models, including Rembrandt himself, dressed in exotic costumes.

The reasons for this fascination with the Middle East are many. There existed a great interest in exotica in the Netherlands during this period, which was also manifested in the collecting patterns of wealthy patricians. Objects from all parts of the world, including shells, swords, musical instruments, and costumes, were avidly sought by collectors. Rembrandt's own collection was a *kunstkamer* of this type. Scheller has demonstrated that Rembrandt's motivation for his encyclopedic collection of art and artifacts was that he wanted to be recognized as a member of this class of gentlemen-virtuosi.[2]

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Rembrandt's interest in the East, however, had deeper significance than mere exoticism. His aspiration as an artist was to be a history painter—a painter of biblical and mythological subjects who would not only portray the stories that comprised his cultural heritage but would also evoke the essential character of those whose lives and actions had had such an impact upon mankind.[3] The particular appeal of the Middle East to Rembrandt stemmed largely from the fact that the stories of the Bible had taken place in that distant region. The images of Levantine patriarchs that appear in his paintings, etchings, and drawings of the early 1630s evoke the character of those people, their inner strength and dignity.

The sitter in this painting has no attributes to indicate that he represents a specific person. It is not even possible to determine whether Rembrandt considered this mode of dress to be that of a contemporary or of a biblical figure. Given the presence of similarly dressed figures in his biblical scenes from the early to mid-1630s, the latter seems more probable. Particularly close to *Man in Oriental Costume* is the frontally posed oriental figure on horseback in *The Raising of the Cross,* 1632 (Alte Pinakothek, Munich), which Rembrandt painted as one of a series of the Passion scenes for Prince Frederik Hendrik. The model for *Man in Oriental Costume,* dressed in a similar although more elaborate costume, is also seen as the main protagonist in Rembrandt's dramatic *Belshazzar's Feast,* c. 1635 [fig. 1].[4] Comparisons with this latter work, and with a number of etchings of similar oriental figures dated 1635, suggest an approximate date of 1635 for this painting.[5]

As seen today, *Man in Oriental Costume* is not what Rembrandt originally intended: X-radiographs reveal that the canvas has been cut on all four sides. No evidence of thread distortions appears at either the right or bottom, and only traces of them appear along the left side and top. One may speculate that the original dimensions approached those of a comparable painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the three-quarter-length portrait *Man in Oriental Costume,* 1632 [fig. 2]. Just when the Gallery's painting was cut down is unknown, although it occurred after the signature was applied (the *R* of Rembrandt has been cut off) and before G. F. Schmidt's etching of the painting (in reverse) in 1756 [fig. 3].[6]

The image seems never to have been completed. The lower half of the body has been blocked in, in thinly applied paints: gray for the cloak, maroon for the undergarment, and ochers for the hands. Only the chain attaching the cloak has some impasto. None of the final modeling tones, which would have given this portion of the torso volume and density, have been applied. The head, in contrast,

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is fully defined with densely applied paints that carefully delineate the features, the beard, the turban, and the wrinkles around the eyes. The contrast between the treatment of the head and turban and the lower torso is unique among Rembrandt's paintings. Because it serves no logical stylistic or iconographic purpose, one can only conclude that the painting has been left in an unfinished state, and that the paint on the lower torso represents the underpainting, or, as it was known in the seventeenth century, dead-coloring, that was intended to serve as a basis for the final modeling of the form.[7] Since the painting appears to be unfinished, it seems curious that it is signed. The signature may have been added somewhat later. The straight stem on the *b,* unusual for the early to mid-1630s, is similar to that on etchings later in the decade.[8]

The extent to which the treatment of the torso and head differ had long been obscured by layers of discolored varnish. With the 1987 conservation treatment, this remarkable phenomenon, which can now be studied more precisely than was previously possible, provides much information about Rembrandt's working procedure. The ground layer upon which he worked was light gray and seems to have been uniform across the whole surface.[9] He then added a deeper gray color for the background, modeling it slightly to indicate the play of light against the backdrop. The area in which he intended to place the figure was left in reserve, although he extended the background color slightly beyond the proposed contour of the figure's form.[10] The extent of this layer, as it defined the general parameters of the figure, can be seen in the X-radiograph [see X-radiography] of the head [fig. 4].

After completing this process, Rembrandt blocked in the form in muted colors that related to his eventual color scheme. He modeled the right hand more completely than he did the left because it was illuminated by light and the other was not. He depicted the chain with a few rapid strokes of lead-tin yellow, but only sketchily indicated its form.

In its surety and similarity to other, more completed images by Rembrandt, this underpainted layer is totally convincing as being the work of the master. The right hand of *Man in Oriental Costume,* for example, is remarkably similar in structure to that of *A Polish Nobleman*. The relatively finished execution of the face and turban, however, is problematic.[11] Although bold strokes around the eyes suggest the wrinkles and folds of the skin, the eyes lack that sense of life so characteristic of Rembrandt's images. An excellent comparison is the 1633 painting in Munich*, A Man in Oriental Costume* [fig. 5], in which Rembrandt's characterization of the face

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through the eyes is unmistakable. The treatment of the beards in these two paintings is also different: whereas the curls of the hair of the Gallery's *Man in Oriental Costume* have a quite regular rhythm, a variety of waves animate the beard of the figure in the Munich painting. Finally, the yellow highlights in the colorful turban in the Gallery's picture sit on the surface of the cloth and do not become part of its structure as they do in the Munich painting.

A similar comparison can be made with the head of Belshazzar in Rembrandt's large-scale *Belshazzar's Feast* (see [fig. 1]). In this instance the similarities in the brushwork on the face, particularly in the modeling around the left eye, are extremely close, so much so that it would seem to confirm an attribution to Rembrandt. Nevertheless, the comparison also points out the relative lack of vitality in the man's face. The technique used to paint Belshazzar's turban and crown, moreover, is much freer. Whereas dense paint seems to have been applied with broad and rapid strokes of the brush in *Belshazzar's Feast,* in *Man in Oriental Costume* the paint is more carefully applied to distinguish the various colors and patterns of the turban.

The range of techniques Rembrandt used to execute his works during the mid-1630s is extremely broad. Since nothing is known about the circumstances of this painting—whether it was a commissioned piece or why it was left unfinished—one must be cautious in discussing attribution issues. Nevertheless, this work appears to be an instance where Rembrandt blocked in a composition to provide a foundation for a particularly talented assistant, one who had mastered the techniques Rembrandt had devised for painting such fanciful portraits. In this case that assistant worked up the turban, head, and shoulders before the final execution was abandoned for some reason. It may well be that at a final stage Rembrandt would have returned to the painting to add accents that would enliven the image. Such a process, which admittedly is not documented by contemporary sources, would help explain why it is so difficult to distinguish the hands of talented assistants such as Govaert Flinck (Dutch, 1615 - 1660) and Ferdinand Bol (Dutch, 1616 - 1680) while they were active in Rembrandt's workshop. After they left the workshop and began to provide their own compositional foundations, the individualities of their styles became quite obvious.

Although the identity of the assistant who worked on *Man in Oriental Costume* is not known, it may well be the same artist who executed *The Apostle Paul* in Vienna [fig. 6]. This painting, which must date to about 1634, is executed with much the same bold modeling in the face, and the gentle flow of the rhythms of Paul's

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beard and hair are comparable. Also similar in the two paintings are the simplified contour of the shoulders and the broad zigzag pattern of folds in the robe of the oriental figure and on Paul's right sleeve. The Vienna painting has been convincingly attributed to Govaert Flinck; thus it may be hypothesized that he was also responsible for the finished portions of *Man in Oriental Costume*.[12]

Flinck, who came to Rembrandt in 1633 after having studied with Lambert Jacobsz (c. 1598–1636) in Leeuwarden, must have been particularly suited for working as an assistant on such historicizing paintings, for he would have been trained in such works by his teacher. Indeed, Lambert Jacobsz painted the large *Saint Paul in Prison* in 1629 (Frisian Museum, Leeuwarden),[13] which is quite close in concept to the Vienna painting.

Whether or not Flinck was the assistant on the Gallery's painting, the type of involved collaboration between Rembrandt and an assistant that seems to be demonstrated in this piece serves as a reminder to those who would try to separate too narrowly Rembrandt's work from paintings produced in the studio. The fundamental question that needs to be asked is whether Rembrandt perceived collaborative paintings such as *Man in Oriental Costume,* which were executed in the workshop, as fundamentally different from those executed totally by his own hand. Thus far there is no indication to that effect. Indeed, given the fact that the imagination had priority over execution in contemporary art theory, it seems virtually certain that he would have understood such works as forming an integral part of his artistic production.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Belshazzar's Feast*, c. 1635, oil on canvas, The National Gallery, London. Photo © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY

fig. 2 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Man in an Oriental Costume*, 1632, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of William K. Vanderbilt, 1920

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fig. 3 Georg Friedrich Schmidt after Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Persian*, 1756, etching, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Estate of John Ellerton Lodge, 1964.18.12

fig. 4 Detail of head, X-radiograph composite, Rembrandt van Rijn and Workshop (Probably Govaert Flinck), *Man in Oriental Costume*, c. 1635, oil on linen, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1940.1.13

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fig. 5 Rembrandt van Rijn, *A Man in Oriental Costume*, 1633, oil on panel, Alte Pinakothek, Munich. Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY

fig. 6 Govert Flinck, *The Apostle Paul*, c. 1634, oil on canvas, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

NOTES

[1] Such oriental figures are seen in street and market scenes by, for example, Gerrit Berckheyde (1638–1698), in addition to many by Rembrandt. See also Leonard J. Slatkes, *Rembrandt and Persia* (New York, 1983).

[2] R. W. Scheller, “Rembrandt en de encyclopedische kunstkamer,” *Oud-Holland* 84 (1969): 81–147.

[3] See Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., “Rembrandt and the Rembrandt School,” in Albert Blankert et al., *Gods, Saints, and Heroes: Dutch Paintings in the Age of Rembrandt* (Washington, 1980), 137–141.

[4] This recurrence of the model was pointed out to me by Gregory Rubinstein.

[5] Illustrated in Ludwig Münz, *A Critical Catalogue of Rembrandt’s Etchings*, 2

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vols. (London, 1952), 2:58–61.

[6] The painting may also have been reduced in stages. One can imagine that it could have been changed initially from a three-quarter-length to a bust-length portrait that included the signature. The signature could have been cropped when the painting was lined.

[7] See Ernst van de Wetering, *Studies in the Workshop Practice of the Early Rembrandt* (Amsterdam, 1986), 23–29, for further discussion of Rembrandt's use of dead-coloring in his early work.

[8] See, for example, *Rembrandt Leaning on a Stone Sill,* 1639 (Adam Bartsch, *Catalogue raisonné de toutes les estampes qui forment l'oeuvre de Rembrandt*..., 2 vols. [Vienna, 1797], 1: no. 21).

[9] Ernst van de Wetering, *Studies in the Workshop Practice of the Early Rembrandt* (Amsterdam, 1986), 42, notes that grounds on Rembrandt's canvas paintings are generally gray during the early phase of his career, whereas he used an ocher-colored ground when he painted on wood. The ground on canvas paintings generally consists of two layers, an underlayer composed of red ocher and an upper layer consisting of a mixture of white lead and a black pigment.

[10] The process is characteristic of Rembrandt's work in his early period. See Ernst van de Wetering, *Studies in the Workshop Practice of the Early Rembrandt* (Amsterdam, 1986), 25–31.

[11] In Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 2, *1631–1634*, ed. Josua Bruyn et al. (Dordrecht, Boston, and Lancaster, 1986), B8, 581–588, the attribution to Rembrandt is considered uncertain. They date the painting about 1633.

[12] J. W. von Moltke, *Govaert Flinck, 1615–1660* (Amsterdam, 1965), 18–19, no. 71; Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 5 vols. (Landau i.d. Pfalz, 1983), 2: no. 643. The attribution to Flinck, however, was rejected by the RRP (Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 3, *1635–1642*, ed. Josua Bruyn et al. [Dordrecht, Boston, and London, 1989], 28), which compared this work to the admittedly tame execution of Flinck's earliest dated paintings, his *Rembrandt as Shepherd* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) and *Saskia as Shepherdess,* 1636 (Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig). These paintings, however, were executed after Flinck had left Rembrandt's workshop and were neither built on a foundation provided by Rembrandt nor executed in a manner intended to pass as his style.

[13] See inventory no. 2463, from Frisian Museum, Leeuwarden.

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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The original support is a fine-weight, tightly and plain-woven linen fabric[1] that has been lined to two additional fabrics at separate intervals. The original tacking margins have been removed, and 1 cm of the original support and design layers has been turned over the stretcher edges. Cusping is absent along the right and bottom edges and slightly visible on the top and left edges, indicating that in all probability, the painting's dimensions have been reduced more extensively along the right and bottom than along the top and left side. In any event, the R from the signature has been cropped along the left edge. The X-radiographs show a long horizontal tear in the background in the upper right.

The double ground is made up of a thin, red-earth lower layer and a thicker, light gray upper layer composed largely of lead white.[2] The X-radiographs indicate that the gray layer was smoothed with a broad sharp-edged tool in diagonal strokes. The thin, sketchy underpainting, applied with a wide brush in short strokes, is visible in the unfinished lower third of the painting and between the wide brushstrokes of the finished area.

The paint was applied wet-into-wet in layers of moderate thickness with impasto in the turban. The medium has been identified as oil and the pigment mixtures are complex.[3] The paint in the turban was intentionally scraped away in areas to expose the gray ground before design details were added, and lines in the feather were incised with the butt end of a brush. The hands are painted with a thin, semitransparent layer over the gray ground, and, like the lower half of the costume, are unfinished. Long, thin, broken lines of losses occur on either side of the head, in the background and turban, and below the proper left hand. Numerous small areas of abrasion are scattered overall.

The painting had been varnished and inpainted in 1931 by Louis de Wild. De Wild's notes state that it had been treated in Holland in 1930.[4] It was treated again in 1987, at which time discolored varnish and disfiguring overpaint were removed. Remnants of an aged, discolored oil coating remain on the light background,[5] and sections of the upper paint layer of the drapery have blanched.

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[1] The fabric was analyzed by the NGA Scientific Research department using cross-sections (see report dated February 4, 1988, in NGA Conservation files).

[2] The ground was analyzed by the NGA Scientific Research department using cross-sections (see report dated February 4, 1988, in NGA Conservation files).

[3] The pigments and medium were analyzed by the NGA Scientific Research department using X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (XRF) and gas chromatography in conjunction with mass spectrometry (see reports dated August 21, 1987, April 1, 1987, and February 4, 1988, in NGA Conservation files).

[4] See note dated February 2, 1968 in NGA Conservation files.

[5] This layer was analyzed by the NGA Scientific Research department using gas chromatography and found to be oil (see report dated August 21, 1987 in NGA Conservation files).

PROVENANCE

Johan Ernst Gotzkowsky [1710-1775], Berlin, by 1756 until at least 1766;[1] sold to Heinrich, prince of Prussia [1726-1802];[2] sold to Catherine II, empress of Russia [1729-1796], Saint Petersburg, by 1773;[3] Imperial Hermitage Gallery, Saint Petersburg; sold between June 1930 and April 1931, as a painting by Rembrandt, through (Matthiesen Gallery, Berlin; P. & D. Colnaghi & Co., London; and M. Knoedler & Co., New York) to Andrew W. Mellon, Pittsburgh and Washington; his estate; deeded 8 March 1938 to The A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, Pittsburgh; gift 1940 to NGA.

[1] Gotzkowsky originally bought the picture on behalf of Friedrich II (the Great), king of Prussia (1712-1786). Due to the financial straits of Prussia during the Seven Years' War (1756-1762), the painting remained in Gotzkowsky's hands. The inscription on a reproductive etching of the painting (in reverse) by Georg Friedrich Schmidt notes that it was in Gotzkowsky's collection in 1756, and Burton Fredericksen kindly brought to the Gallery's attention two catalogues of the Gotzkowsky collection that include the painting and thus extend Gotzkowsky's ownership (see letter of 2 January 2003 to Arthur Wheelock and e-mails of 2 April and 14 July [first message] 2003 to Molli Kuenstner, in NGA curatorial files). The

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first catalogue is Matthieu Oesterreich's *Description de quelques tableaux de différens Maîtres* (published 1757), in which the painting is number 33. The second, also compiled by Oesterreich, is *Catalogue d'une très-belle collection de tableaux de différens Maîtres italiens, flamands, allemands et françois laquelle se trouve dans la maison de Mr. Ernest Gotzkowsky* (Berlin, 1766). Fredericksen determined that the second catalogue includes paintings that Gotzkowsky had not sold to Catherine II, empress of Russia, which is confirmed by the fact that there is only a single Rembrandt painting included, number 146, the NGA painting, whereas Catherine had acquired more than a dozen Rembrandt paintings from Gotzkowsky in 1764. Fredericksen writes of the 1766 Gotzkowsky catalogue: "...in general [the paintings] do not appear to be of comparable importance to those we know had been sold. So we are undoubtedly dealing with the remnants of the collection as it appeared after the transaction of 1764."

[2] Gerd Bartoschek and Christoph Frank have located the painting in inventories of the Prince's collections. See: Gerd Bartoschek, *Flämische Barockmalerei in der Bildergalerie von Sanssouci*, Potsdam, 1985: 79-80; Christoph Frank, "Die Gemäldesammlungen Gotzkowsky, Eimbke und Stein: Zur Berliner Sammlungsgeschichte während des Siebenjährigen Krieges," in Michael North, ed., *Kunstammeln und Geschmack im 18. Jahrhundert*, Berlin, 2002: 117-194; Christoph Frank, "Un ours, un suicide et quelques tableaux. Le rôle de Berlin dans la constitution des collections rembranesques en Russie, à l'époque de Catherine II," in *Rembrandt et son école: Collections du musée de l'Ermitage de Saint-Pétersbourg*, exh. cat., Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon, Paris, 2003: 51-63. Burton Fredericksen brought Frank's research to the Gallery's attention (see e-mails of 14 July 2003 [both messages] and 23 February 2004, to Molli Kuenstner, in NGA curatorial files).

[3] [Ernst von Münnich.] "Catalogue raisonné des tableaux qui se trouvent dans les Galeries, Sallons et Cabinets du Palais Impérial de S. Pétersbourg, commencé en 1773 et continué jusqu'en 1785." 3 vols. Manuscript, Fund 1, Opis' VI-A, delo 85, Hermitage Archives, Saint Petersburg,1773-1785: 1:no.124.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

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1932 Art Treasures, Christie's, London, 1932, no. 1367.

1932 Rembrandt Tentoonstelling, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1932, no. 5.

1933 Loan Exhibition of Paintings by Rembrandt, M. Knoedler & Co., New York, 1933, no. 3.

1935 A Collection of Old Masters, The Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts, Delaware, 1935, no. 9.

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. 1, repro.

1988 A Question of Rembrandt, Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, 1988, no catalogue.

1996 Obras Maestras de la National Gallery of Art de Washington, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, 1996-1997, unnumbered catalogue, color repro.

2002 Rembrandt Rembrandt, Kyoto National Museum; Städelsches Kunstinstitut Frankfurt am Main, 2002-2003, no. 20, repro.

2003 Loan to display with permanent collection, Städelsches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie, Frankfurt am Main, 2003-2004, no catalogue.

2004 Rembrandt: L'homme en costume Oriental, Un prêt exceptionnel de la National Gallery de Washington, Musée départemental d'art ancien et contemporain, Épinal, 2004-2005, no catalogue.

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sculpture. London, 1907: 65, 150.

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