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

Rembrandt van Rijn and Workshop
Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606 - 1669
Dutch 17th Century

An Old Lady with a Book

1637

oil on canvas
overall: 109.7 x 91.5 cm (43 3/16 x 36 in.)
framed: 147.3 x 128.9 x 13.9 cm (58 x 50 3/4 x 5 1/2 in.)
Inscription: lower left: Rembr[an]dt. / f.1[63]7.
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.73

ENTRY

The identity of this formidable woman is not known, but her black cap indicates that she is in mourning and is probably a widow. Her stern demeanor, the wide-wheel ruff collar she wears, and the Bible she holds in her lap all suggest that she was a conservative member of Dutch society and dedicated to her religious beliefs. Despite the bold execution, the portrait is remarkably subdued. The sitter does not communicate directly with the viewer through a gaze or gesture, but rather appears lost in thought as she ponders the words of the Bible she has just read. [1] She stares outward but looks inward, gently touching the clasp of the Bible with one hand while holding her spectacles between the fingers of the other.

Because such black, fur-trimmed costumes are found in Dutch painting from the mid-1630s until the late 1650s, the dating of this imposing canvas has been particularly problematic. Until a date was discovered in the lower left at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was generally described in an all-inclusive way as belonging to Rembrandt's "best period." First read as 1643, the date was later believed to be 164[7]. [2] The confusion is understandable because damage in this area of the painting obliterates a portion of both the signature and the date. The conservation treatment of the painting in 1983, however, revealed that the date should be read as 1637. While the damage does affect both the "6" and the "3," enough of each number survives to identify them (see this painting's inscription). The signature and date are integral with the paint structure and are of a type characteristic of the late 1630s.

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This information is of some consequence when discussing the attribution of the work, which has been rejected in recent years by both Gerson and Schwartz. [3] Indeed, while the execution does not relate easily with Rembrandt's paintings from the late 1640s, close comparisons can be made with other women's portraits from the late 1630s, in particular *Alotte Adriaensdr.* of 1639 in the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam [fig. 1]. [4] Not only are the costumes worn by both women similar, but the sure modeling of features in both portraits is achieved through a variety of short, unblended brushstrokes. Among those areas of the face that best bear the characteristics of artistic approach are the articulation of the eyes, the modeling of folds just below the eyes, the formation of the mouth, and the way the pulled-back hair is indicated with thin black strokes drawn from the forehead to the hair. Since the features of the somewhat older woman in the Washington painting are rougher and the thrust of light on the face stronger, the brushwork is freer than in the Rotterdam portrait. In both works, nevertheless, Rembrandt used his paint to suggest at once the structure of the face and the patterns of light and dark that accent the form.

The woman's hands and the Bible in *An Old Lady with a Book* are likewise modeled with bold strokes and great surety. Their forms are quite geometric and their positions carefully conceived, yet Rembrandt has suggested the nuances of texture and modeling with great sensitivity. The sheen of the flesh as it is accented by the light seems to glow from within, while the metallic corners of the book glisten with specular reflections. Also remarkable is the subtle translucence of the eyeglasses, which reveal the diffused images of the thumb and finger beneath them.

The surety of Rembrandt's modeling of form is particularly evident in the X-radiographs [fig. 2] [see X-radiography]. Here also the distribution of lead white is compatible with that of other portraits from the middle to late 1630s. No Pentimenti are evident as Rembrandt seems to have worked directly on the canvas with great confidence of his intent. As is evident from the surface but also from the X-radiographs, the collar is painted very densely. Technical analysis indicates that it was executed in two layers. This technique was probably developed to help convey the translucent quality of the material. Folds along the edges of the material were articulated with strokes of gray for the shadows and strokes of white for the accented portions.

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Despite stylistic connections with Rembrandt's work from the late 1630s, the figure is unusually stiff and formal in its presentation. Gerson complained that the hands were "without expression," but the same criticism could be more aptly applied to the upright position of the woman as she sits rigidly in the armchair. [5] Indeed, compared to most Rembrandt sitters, she seems rather remote. In part, Rembrandt's characterization must be seen in response to the personality of the patron, an intangible in the process of portrait painting that can never be adequately assessed. The woman's restrained demeanor must also be understood within the iconographic content of this work. Unlike most of Rembrandt's subjects the woman does not make eye contact with the viewer. His intent was to emphasize how the word of the Bible has made an impact on the woman's state of being rather than to enliven her form with momentary expression or gesture.

The fascinating conceit of depicting the woman contemplating a written text is consistent with Rembrandt's interest in extending the limits of portraiture during the late 1630s and early 1640s. Just how remarkable the concept is can be seen through a comparison with Solomon Koninck's *Portrait of an Elderly Lady,* 1634 [fig. 3]. Here, even though all of the components of the painting are comparable, the woman has posed as though interrupted from her text rather than immersed in her thoughts. Rembrandt's interest in demonstrating the effect of words on a sitter's mind can also be found in his graphic work from the 1630s and early 1640s, in particular his etched portrait of Jan Cornelis Silvius, 1633, and his etching *Man at a Desk Wearing a Cross and Chain,* 1641. [6] In painting, this conceit culminated in 1641 in his magnificent *Portrait of Anslo and His Wife,* 1641 (Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz), [7] where he conveyed the impact of the preacher's words through the quiet, reflective mood of the woman.

Despite the inventiveness of the portrait concept and the painterly qualities evident in the face, it seems probable that Rembrandt relegated the costume, chair, and background to a studio assistant. The brushwork in those portions of the painting is comparatively uninspired. A close comparison of the treatment of the millstone ruff on this portrait and that of *Alotte Adriaensdr.* ([fig. 1]), for example, reveals that this collar is executed with less sensitivity to the delicate nuances of light and form. The result is that the translucency of the material is rendered less illusionistically than it is in the Rotterdam portrait. A small but telling detail confirms that the collar was executed after the head was completely finished: a stroke of white paint overlaps the woman's right cheek.

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It may well be, then, that Rembrandt, after devising the concept for the portrait, blocked in the form in his customary manner, executed the head and the hands, and then passed on the unfinished canvas to an assistant to bring it to completion. Although this pupil cannot be identified, a strong candidate would be Ferdinand Bol (Dutch, 1616 - 1680), a trained artist who had moved from Dordrecht to Amsterdam to work as an apprentice and assistant with Rembrandt between the years of about 1636 and 1641. [8] While it is difficult to determine which works Bol actually executed during those years, in his later career he painted a large number of portraits as well as biblical and mythological scenes. One portrait that has been convincingly attributed to him from the 1640s, and which is comparable to *An Old Lady with a Book,* is *Portrait of Elizabeth Jacobsdr. Bas* [fig. 4]. [9] Although the brushwork in the costume is somewhat rougher and bolder in the Washington painting because of the need to paint in Rembrandt's style, the bodies of both women have a massive yet static character that is quite similar, for example, in the way the fur-edged jackets fall across the women's laps. Similar also is the manner in which the shadows fall across the women's mill ruffs. Finally, the oblique perspective of the circular form of the chair arm is identical.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

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fig. 1 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Alotte Adraensdr.*, 1639, oil on panel, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

fig. 2 Detail of head, X-radiograph composite, Rembrandt van Rijn and Workshop, *An Old Lady with a Book*, 1637, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.1.73

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fig. 3 Solomon Koninck, *Portrait of an Elderly Lady*, 1634, oil on panel, Hopetoun House Preservation Trust, near Edinburgh

fig. 4 Ferdinand Bol, *Portrait of Elizabeth Jacobsdr. Bas*, c. 1640, oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

NOTES

[1] It is clear that she has finished reading the Bible since the back cover is on top, the normal position of a book when one closes it.

[2] See, for example, respectively, Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century*, 8 vols., trans. Edward G. Hawke (London, 1907–1927), 6:401, no. 876, and Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), 1:45.

[3] Abraham Bredius and Horst Gerson, *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the Paintings* (London, 1969), 578, no. 362, suggest associations with Gerbrandt van den Eeckhout (1621–1674). Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings* (New York, 1985), 380, rejects the painting in his concordance without explanation. Ernst van de Wetering (personal

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communication, 1991) has indicated to me that he does not accept the attribution of this painting to Rembrandt.

[4] Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 3, *1635–1642*, ed. Josua Bruyn et al. (Dordrecht, Boston, and London, 1989), 321–327, A132. The painting is generally in a poor state of preservation with the exception of the area around the face. The signature and date of 1639 are not considered by the RRP to be authentic, but the date is accepted as appropriate on the basis of style.

[5] Abraham Bredius and Horst Gerson, *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the Paintings* (London, 1969), 578, no. 362.

[6] For illustrations of these two etchings, see Ludwig Münz, *A Critical Catalogue of Rembrandt's Etchings*, 2 vols. (London, 1952), 2:54 and 61.

[7] See inventory no. 828L, from Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz.

[8] For an excellent overview of Bol's work see Albert Blankert, *Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680): Rembrandt's Pupil*, (Doornspijk, 1982), and also Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 5 vols. (Landau i.d. Pfalz, 1983), 1:282–425

[9] For an extended discussion of the various attributions that have been given to this painting and convincing reasons for the attribution to Bol, see Van Thiel in Christopher Brown, Jan Kelch, and Pieter van Thiel, *Rembrandt: The Master and His Workshop: Paintings* (New Haven and London, 1991), 322–327, no. 65.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support, a medium-weight, tightly and plain-woven fabric, has been lined and the tacking margins have been removed. Cusping is present on all sides, suggesting the original dimensions have been retained. The double ground consists of a thin, red lower layer followed by a very thin, gray upper layer.[1] Paint was applied as thin pastes in dark passages and thicker paste in the lights, with individual brushstrokes blended wet-into-wet. Visible in the X-radiographs surrounding the head are the limits of a rather large reserve left for this area.

Losses are found in the signature and date, to the left of the head, and along the edges. Minor flaking has occurred at junctures in the craquelure, and the pale halo around the figure is moderately abraded. The painting underwent treatment in 1981–1983 at which time early linings were removed, the painting was relined, and

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discolored varnish and inpainting were removed.

[1] The pigments and ground layers were analyzed by the NGA Scientific Research department using polarized light microscopy, X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (XRF), and cross-sections (see reports dated July 17, 1981, July 31, 1981, August 3, 1981, August 7, 1981, and May 18, 1983).

PROVENANCE

Johan van der Marck [1695-1770], Leiden; (his estate sale, by Hendrik de Winter and Jan Yver, Amsterdam, 25 August 1773 and days following, no. 259); purchased by (Fouquet), probably for Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Le Brun [1748-1813], Paris;[1] (his sale, by Pierrre Remy, Paris, 20-23 December 1773, no. 11); Alexandre-Joseph Paillet. Armand, marquis de Brunoy; (his sale, by François Charles Joullain, Paris, 2 December 1776 and days following, no. 26 [paired with a portrait of Admiral de Ruyter]); (Fournel). Thélusson collection, Paris; (his sale, by Folliot and Mabille, Paris, 1 December 1777, no. 17). probably (Antoine-Charles Dulac) or possibly La Chaise collection; (sale, by Paillet and Chariot at Hôtel d'Aligre, Paris, 30 November 1778 and days following, no. 346, as *Le portrait de la Mere de Rimbrand*); Claude Billard de Belisard.[2] Marquis de Anne-Pierre Montesquiou-Fezensac [1739-1798], Paris; (his sale, by J.B.P. Le Brun, Paris, 9 December 1788 and days following, 1st day, no. 45); purchased by Le Brun.[3] Charles-Alexandre, vicomte de Calonne [1734-1802], Paris and London; (his sale, Skinner and Dyke, London, 23 March 1795 and days following, 4th day [28 March], no. 38); John Julius Angerstein [1732-1823], London; gift immediately to Sir Thomas Lawrence [1769-1830], London.[4] John Allnutt [1773-1863], London; (his estate sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 18-20 June 1863, no. 502); (François Nieuwenhuys, Paris).[5] Alfred Louis Lebeuf de Montgermont [1841-1918], Paris, by 1900;[6] his son-in-law, Prince Louis Antoine Marie de Broglie [1862-1958], Paris; sold 1920 to (Duveen Brothers, Inc., London, New York, and Paris);[7] sold November 1924 to Andrew W. Mellon, Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C.; deeded 28 December 1934 to The A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, Pittsburgh; gift 1937 to NGA.

[1] This information, along with details about the 1773, 1776, and 1778 sales was

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kindly provided by Burton Fredericksen (e-mail, 1 September 2013, to Arthur Wheelock, in NGA curatorial files). Fouquet's name is sometimes recorded as Foucquier or Foucquer.

[2] John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters*, 9 vols., London, 829-1842, 7:163, no. 505, includes a provenance listing: "Collection of an Artist, 1783." This reference, however, has not yet been verified.

[3] This buyer information is provided by Burton Fredericksen, then director of the Getty Provenance Index, in his letter of 5 February 1988 to Arthur Wheelock, in NGA curatorial files.

[4] It is not certain the painting in the Calonne sale that was bought by Angerstein and given to Lawrence is the NGA painting. The description in the Calonne sale catalogue is extremely brief ("An Old Lady's Portrait, half length, with a Bible, very uncommonly high finished, with a force of colouring the true character of his finest works") and no dimensions are given. Further, the account of Angerstein's gift to Lawrence describes the painting as depicting the sitter with "a Bible hanging to her waist by a chain" (D.E. Williams, *The Life and Correspondence of Sir Thomas Lawrence, Kt.*, 2 vols., London, 1831, 1:129, brought to the NGA's attention by Burton Fredericksen in his letter of 5 February 1988, to Arthur Wheelock, in NGA curatorial files.

[5] The buyer is indicated in various ways in annotated copies of the sale catalogue: "FN," "Nieuwenhuys," and "Normanhays."

[6] Wilhelm von Bode, assisted by Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *The Complete Work of Rembrandt*, translated by Florence Simmonds, 8 vols., Paris, 1897-1906: 4(1900):35, 168, no. 288, repro.

[7] Meryle Secrest, *Duveen: A Life in Art*, New York, 2004: 477.

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EXHIBITION HISTORY

1861 British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom, London, 1861, no. 123.

1925 Paintings by Old Masters from Pittsburgh Collections, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, 1925, no. 60.

1930 The Thirteenth Loan Exhibition of Old Masters: Paintings by Rembrandt, The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1930, no. 36.

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. 4, 14, repro.

1989 Loan for display with permanent collection, Cincinnati Art Museum, 1989-1990.

2011 Rembrandt in America, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh; Cleveland Museum of Art; Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2011-2012, no. 23, pl. 4.

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1922 Neumann, Carl. *Rembrandt*. 2 vols. Revised ed. Munich, 1922: 2: 414, 462, fig. 114.

1923 Meldrum, David S. *Rembrandt's Painting, with an Essay on His Life and Work*. New York, 1923: 195, pl. 236.

1924 Knackfuss, Hermann. *Rembrandt*. Künstler-Monographien. Leipzig, 1924: 62.

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1930 Valentiner, Wilhelm R., ed. *Unknown Masterpieces in Public and Private Collections*. London, 1930: n.p., pl. 53, as *Portrait of an Old Lady* by Rembrandt van Ryn.

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1931 Valentiner, Wilhelm R. *Rembrandt Paintings in America*. New York, 1931: no. 79.

1935 Bredius, Abraham. *Rembrandt Gemälde, 630 Abbildungen*. Vienna, 1935: no. 362, repro.

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