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

Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606 - 1669

A Young Man Seated at a Table (possibly Govaert Flinck)

c. 1660

oil on canvas
overall: 109.9 x 89.5 cm (43 1/4 x 35 1/4 in.)
framed: 149.2 x 131.1 x 17.8 cm (58 3/4 x 51 5/8 x 7 in.)
Inscription: center right: Rembrandt 166[?]
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.77

ENTRY

This painting of a stylish young man, posed with one arm akimbo and the other gracefully resting on the table beside him, is one of Rembrandt's most sympathetic late portraits. The sitter's handsome features and gentle expression, framed by the long locks of his hair, suggest warmth and sensitivity. At the same time, the understated simplicity of his dress, from the plain white collar, left open at the neck, to his black costume and hat, reinforces the sense of self-assurance so evident in the pose.

The name of the sitter is not known. The traditional designation that he is a "young man" seems based more on his elegant pose than on the nature of his face or hands.[1] With his angular features and somewhat heavy eyes, the sitter seems more mature, probably in his early to mid-forties. Uncertainty has also surrounded the date of the painting, despite the fact that it is signed and dated in the middle right background. When the signature and date were first noticed at the end of the nineteenth century they were read as: "Rembrandt f. 1662".[2] By 1935 scholars interpreted the date as "1663".[3] Indeed, the signature and date are extremely difficult to decipher, and today the last digit of the date is no longer legible. Whether it was more legible in 1893 or in 1935 and whether the reading "1662" or "1663" was correct are impossible to determine. Although such dates are stylistically plausible, the face is more delicately modeled than one would expect after the boldly executed heads found in Rembrandt's paintings Jacob Trip and

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Margaretha de Geer (National Gallery, London) of around 1661[4] and *The Syndics of the Cloth Drapers' Guild* [fig. 1], which he executed in 1662. The impact of these works on his portrait style is evident in the impastos and rough execution of the face of the subject depicted in *A Young Man*, a portrait said to be dated 1663 (Dulwich Picture Gallery, London),[5] or in *Portrait of a Man in a Tall Hat*, which must have been executed in the mid-1660s.

In *Young Man Seated at a Table* Rembrandt's brushwork is relatively smooth, as is appropriate for the youthful appearance of the sitter. While he has used rapid strokes of the brush in the impastos on the forehead to suggest highlights and has painted the hair wet-into-wet, the features are not built up with striking juxtapositions of dense impastos and revealed underlying layers of paint. Instead, Rembrandt has modulated his forms with carefully nuanced strokes that capture the play of light on the sitter's face. Subtle accents along the eyelids, in the lower portions of the whites of the eyes, and in the irises help bring the man's face to life. Because the style falls somewhere between the more densely painted and carefully articulated portraits from the late 1650s and the roughly executed portraits of the early 1660s, it seems appropriate to propose, as others have done, a date of about 1660 for this work.[6]

The attribution of this painting has never been questioned, and there is no reason to do so. Indeed, Horst Gerson considered it "one of the most beautiful of the late commissioned portraits."[7] Much of its beauty stems from the subtle fusion of Rembrandt's vigorous brushwork with a graceful pose reminiscent of portraits by Sir Anthony van Dyck (Flemish, 1599 - 1641). Unfortunately, as Gerson also mentioned, the work has suffered, most particularly in the thinly painted hands. The character of the left hand, however, is confusing, for brushstrokes belonging to an initial concept are visible through the fingers. This earlier hand, which is more fully visible in the X-radiographs [see X-radiography], was lower and may have had a stronger accent of light upon it than does the current hand [fig. 2]. Another change evident in the X-radiographs is that the white collar originally jutted higher and covered a bit of the sitter's face, just to the left of his chin.

Behind the figure a large rectangular form, read in the 1935 Rijksmuseum exhibition catalogue as a window opening with a beveled windowsill, can be vaguely discerned. A bluish black curtain was thought to be to the left of this window.[8] Jeroen Giltaij also interprets this rectangular form as an open window.[9] The right edge of the shape curves slightly outward near the bottom in such a way as to suggest that the form is not a window but a stretched canvas.

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With such a backdrop the painting could well depict a painter seated before a canvas. Indeed, the relaxed, informal pose of the sitter speaks to such an interpretation. Rembrandt had already depicted the artist Jan Asselijn (Dutch, c. 1610 - 1652) in such a manner, seated before one of his paintings in an etching of about 1647 [fig. 3].[10] Comparable as well is the *Portrait of Paulus Potter*, 1654 (Mauritshuis, The Hague), by Bartholomeus van der Helst (c. 1613–1670).[11]

Should the Gallery's portrait represent an artist, an unexpected but probable sitter is Govaert Flinck (Dutch, 1615 - 1660)—if one is to judge from the engraved portrait of him, here shown in reverse, included in Arnold Houbraken's *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* of 1753 [fig. 4].[12] Although the source for Houbraken's print is not known, the image he depicts resembles to a remarkable degree the sitter in Rembrandt's portrait. Not only are the shapes of the eyes, nose, and mouth similar, Flinck had a similar mustache and also long, flowing hair. If the portrait does represent Flinck, Rembrandt would presumably have painted it before February 2, 1660, the date of Flinck's unexpected death at the age of forty-four, unless it was a posthumous portrait.[13]

Whether Govaert Flinck would have asked Rembrandt for a portrait at this stage of his career is, of course, a legitimate question. Flinck was at the height of his fame in 1660. He had long since left the orbit of Rembrandt, with whom he had studied in the mid-1630s, to become a successful portrait and history painter in a classicizing style admired by the important patrons he associated with in both Amsterdam and his native Germany. He was wealthy and well connected, and had a remarkable collection with a heavy concentration of sculpture and paintings by Italian and Flemish masters, including Anthony van Dyck. In 1659 Flinck had received the most prestigious commission of his life: he was asked by the burgomasters to create twelve large paintings for the gallery of the Town Hall of Amsterdam. The world in which he operated seems so different from the one in which Rembrandt moved.

Nevertheless, Rembrandt's genius as a portrait painter was still widely acknowledged by certain segments of Amsterdam's population, including artists and art collectors. A number of his late portraits, both etched and painted, were indeed of artists or art collectors, and Flinck could qualify on both accounts. More important, this portrait has an immediacy that suggests personal as well as professional contacts between the sitter and the painter. That the aging master, who had been overlooked for the enormous commission to decorate the town hall, produced such an affectionate portrait of his former protégé, either just prior to his

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unexpected death or in reaction to it, is perhaps too much to ask. Yet the evidence, such as it is, allows for this possibility.[14]

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Syndics of the Cloth Drapers' Guild*, 1662, oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Photo © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

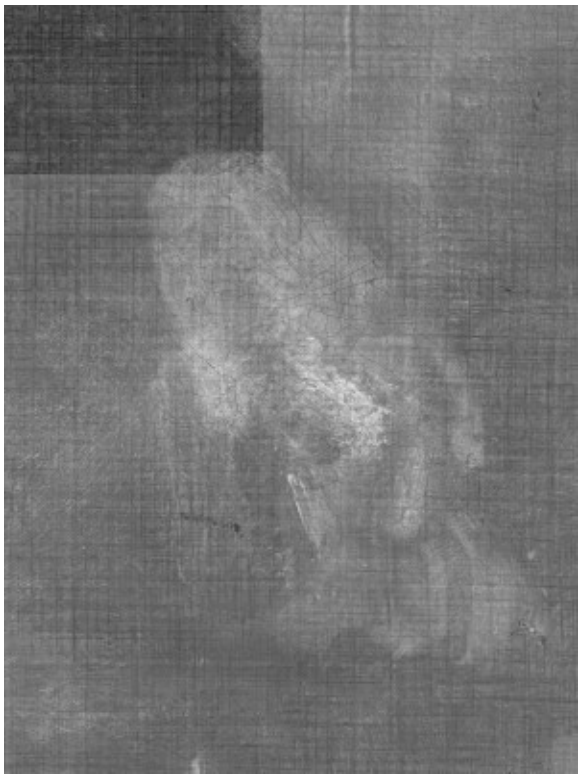

fig. 2 Detail of left hand, X-radiograph composite, Rembrandt van Rijn, *A Young Man Seated at a Table (possibly Govaert Flinck)*, c. 1660, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.1.77

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fig. 3 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Jan Asselijn*, c. 1647, etching, drypoint and burin, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.7137

fig. 4 Arnold Houbraken, *Govert Flinck*, shown in reverse, from *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, The Hague, 1753

NOTES

[1] Ben P. J. Broos in Ben P. J. Broos et al., *Great Dutch Paintings from America* (The Hague and Zwolle, 1990), 392, proposed, on the basis of quite circumstantial evidence, that the sitter was Jacob Louysz Trip (1636–1664) and that the portrait was commissioned on the occasion of his marriage in 1660. It is unlikely, however, that this portrait represents a sitter who was only twenty-four to twenty-eight years old. Jeroen Giltaij, in *Rembrandt Rembrandt* (Frankfurt, 2003), 202–205, no. 39, follows Broos in arguing that the portrait depicts Trip, noting that the sitter and his family were quite wealthy.

[2] The date was first mentioned in Olof Granberg, *Katalog ofver Utställningen af åldre Mästares taflor ur Svenska privatsamlinger* (Stockholm, 1893); it was repeated by Wilhelm von Bode and Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *The*

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Complete Work of Rembrandt, trans. Florence Simmonds, 8 vols. (Paris, 1897–1906), 6:3-4. The exact inscription was given by Olof Granberg, *Inventaire général des trésors d'art … en Suède*, 3 vols. (Stockholm, 1911–1913), 1:125. Jeroen Giltaij, in *Rembrandt Rembrandt* (Frankfurt, 2003), 202–205, no. 39, interprets the last undecipherable digit of the date as a "2" and compares the style of the portrait to that of Rembrandt's *Syndics of the Cloth Drapers' Guild*, 1662 (see fig. 1).

[3] Frederik Schmidt-Degener, *Rembrandt Tentoonstelling* (Amsterdam, 1935), 60–61, no. 29; Abraham Bredius, *Rembrandt, Schilderijen* (Vienna, 1935), 14, no. 312.

[4] See inventory nos. 1674 and 1675, National Gallery, London.

[5] See inventory no. 221, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London.

[6] *Rembrandt in the National Gallery of Art* (Washington, 1969), 30, no. 20; Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt: zijn leven, zijn schilderijen* (Maarssen, 1984), 339, no. 396 (English trans., *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings* [New York, 1985]).

[7] Abraham Bredius, *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the Paintings*, revised by Horst Gerson (London, 1969), 574, no. 312.

[8] Frederik Schmidt-Degener, *Rembrandt Tentoonstelling* (Amsterdam, 1935), 61: "Hij is gezeten voor een vaag aangegeven venster-opening met afgeschuind kozijn. Links een blauwig-zwart venster-gordijn."

[9] Jeroen Giltaij, *Rembrandt, Rembrandt* (Frankfurt, 2003), 202–205.

[10] As Seymour Slive has pointed out to me (personal communication, 1993), Rembrandt may have posed Asselijn in this manner to hide his crippled left arm.

[11] See inventory no. 54, Mauritshuis, The Hague.

[12] Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753), 2:18.

[13] Rembrandt had made other posthumous portraits, including his painting of Saskia, 1643 (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin; Br. 109), and his etched portrait of Jan Cornelis Sylvius, 1646 (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin; B. 280).

[14] As Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann notes (personal communication, 1993), the portrait could have been commissioned by someone other than Flinck himself even if it represents Flinck.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

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The support, a medium-weight, plain-weave fabric, has been lined with the original tacking margins trimmed. A row of later tacking holes along the left and top edges of the original support suggests a prior reduction in size, although cusping at right and bottom indicates that the present dimensions are close to or slightly smaller than the original dimensions. The double ground consists of a thick, red brown lower layer followed by a slightly thinner gray-tan layer.[1] The paint was applied in two stages over the gray-tan upper ground.[2] Rembrandt laid in the figure with broad strokes in black for the garment, and brighter paints for the accents and the skin color. While the facial features were worked out with some detail, the first paint strokes for the hands were quite sketchy and with some different details. The paint was applied as dry to fluid pastes, with glazes and scumbles, occasionally incised with the butt end of a brush. Brushstrokes have been worked wet-into-wet or drawn over dry impasto to create texture, although a past lining procedure has flattened the texture. The X-radiographs show changes in both hands, with the proper right hand loosely sketched and the proper left hand either lower or reconfigured, or both. The X-radiographs also show that the sitter's white collar originally covered part of the sitter's face, on the proper right side of his chin.

Large complex tears in the original support fabric are found in the lower right background and between the hands. Paint loss is confined to the tears and the edges, where sections of the original fabric have been torn away. There is some abrasion in the black garment, especially in the sitter's sleeves and vest, where a long tear is located. The painting was treated in 2001-2002, at which time discolored varnish and inpainting were removed.

[1] The ground was analyzed by the NGA Scientific Research department using cross-sections (see report dated May 15, 2002, in NGA Conservation department files). An additional sample was analyzed by Karin Groen using energy dispersive X-ray analysis (see Karin Groen, "Grounds in Rembrandt's Workshop and in Paintings by His Contemporaries," in Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project,A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings, vol. 4, Self-Portraits, ed. Ernst van de Wetering [Dordrecht, 2005]. 668–669).

[2] The painting's structure was confirmed by analysis of cross-sections. The analysis was performed by the NGA Scientific Research department (see report dated May 15, 2002, in NGA Conservation department files).

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PROVENANCE

Possibly acquired between 1768 and 1772 by Gustaf Adolf Sparre [1746-1794], Sahlgren-Sparre Palace, Göteborg, and, after 1775, Kulla Gunnarstorp Castle, near Helsingborg, Sweden; by inheritance to his wife, Elisabet Sofia Amalia Beata Sparre [née Ramel, 1753-1830], Kulla Gunnarstorp Castle; by inheritance to her grandson, Gustaf Adolf Frederik De la Gardie [1800-1833], Kulla Gunnarstorp Castle; by inheritance to his father, Jacob Gustaf De la Gardie [1768-1842], Kulla Gunnarstorp Castle; sold a few years after 1837 [when De Geer had purchased Kulla Gunnarstorp Castle] with the entire Sparre collection to Carl De Geer of Leustra [1781-1861]; placed 1855 into a family trust under care of his granddaughter, Elizabeth Wachtmeister [née von Platen, 1834-1918], Castle Wanås, near Kristianstad, Sweden;[1] sold 1926 by the Wachtmeister Trust to (Duveen Brothers, Inc., London, New York, and Paris); sold December 1926 to Andrew W. Mellon, Pittsburgh and Washington; deeded 28 December 1934 to The A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, Pittsburgh; gift 1937 to NGA.

[1] This possible provenance and the preceding chain of ownership are outlined in Ben P. J. Broos et al., *Great Dutch Paintings from America*, The Hague and Zwolle, 1990: 387, 390. For information about the Sparre collection, see Ingmar Hasselgren, Konstsamlaren Gustaf Adolf Sparre, 1746-1794: hans studieresa, va°ning och konstsamling i Go¨teborg. Ph.D. diss., University of Göteborg, 1974. The painting was first published in 1884, when it was “discovered” in the Wachtmeister collection by Olof Granberg; see his article: "Drei unbekannte Gemälde von Rembrandt," *Zeitschrift für Bildende Kunst* 19 (1884): 30-32.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1893 Utställningen af äldre Mästares taflor ur Svenska privatsamlinger, Bukowskis, Stockholm, 1893, no. 161.

1929 Exhibition of Dutch Art 1450-1900, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1929, no. 83.

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1935 Loan Exhibition of Paintings, Drawings and Etchings by Rembrandt and His Circle, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1935-1936, no. 7.

1935 Rembrandt Tentoonstelling, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1935, no. 29.

1939 Masterworks of Five Centuries, Golden Gate International Exposition, San Francisco, 1939, no. 88a, repro.

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. 20, repro.

1976 Chefs-d'oeuvre de musées des États-Unis: de Giorgione à Picasso, Musée Marmottan, Paris, October-December 1976, no. 17, repro. (organized by the Armand Hammer Foundation).

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2011 Rembrandt in America, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh; Cleveland Museum of Art; Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2011-2012, no. 36, pl. 35.

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