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

Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606 - 1669

A Polish Nobleman

1637

oil on panel
overall: 96.8 x 66 cm (38 1/8 x 26 in.)
Inscription: upper right: Rembrandt.f:. / 1637
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.78

ENTRY

One of Rembrandt's most powerfully evocative paintings from the late 1630s, *A Polish Nobleman* displays a richness of conception and technique that is unmatched by any other painting by the master in the Gallery's collection. As this imposing figure stares out beneath his tall beaver hat, he at once confronts the viewer with directness and draws him in with his introspective gaze. His confident stance as he grasps a gold-topped wooden staff, his broad mustache, and the gold chain and pendant that hang over the broad fur collar that covers his jacket give him an air of authority and exotic grandeur. At the same time, the shaded eyes, furrowed brow, and partially opened mouth suggest a caring and thoughtful individual, far more approachable than the pose and costume would initially imply.

Largely because of the individualized character of the sitter, but also because of the obvious care with which Rembrandt modeled the forms, scholars have since the nineteenth century sought to identify this sitter with a specific individual, despite the fact that no suggested identifications are given in the earlier eighteenth century references to the painting. The earliest, and most persistent, of these identifications is the one mentioned by John Smith in 1836: Jan III Sobieski (1629–1696), who was king of Poland from 1674 until his death.[1] Since Sobieski was only eight years old in 1637, such an identification is clearly impossible. Stefan Batory, the other Polish king whose name was mentioned in the nineteenth century in connection with this painting, is likewise mistaken, for he died in 1586.[2]

A more recent proposal that the figure represents the Polish nobleman Andrzej Rej would seem to have more merit.[3] Rej, who was well traveled, well educated, and

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well bred, had a close and cordial relationship to the royal court in Poland. As one of the most influential and trusted Protestants in the country, he was chosen by King Wladyslaw in 1637 to act as a special envoy to England and to the Netherlands at a time when relations between Poland and these countries were rather frosty.[4] His diplomatic ventures, first in England, where Charles I would not even receive him, and then in the Netherlands, were not successful. After leaving The Hague on December 19, 1637, he seems to have traveled to Amsterdam where his son, Mikolaj, was enrolled as a student at the Amsterdam "Athenaeum Illustre." Although Rej must not have stayed long—he was documented in Hamburg by January 19, 1638—he did take time to have his portrait painted. In a document from 1641, Mikolaj acknowledges that he owes Hendrik van Uylenburgh fifty guilders "for portraying my father."[5]

The coincidence of Rej's presence in Amsterdam in 1637 and Rembrandt's portrait of a Polish nobleman of that date would lead one to hypothesize a connection even if a document did not exist confirming that a portrait was in fact painted. Since Hendrik van Uylenburgh, who was of Polish descent, had had a business connection with Rembrandt in the early 1630s, one might assume that Van Uylenburgh would have arranged for Rembrandt to paint a portrait of Andrzej Rej. Nevertheless, the evidence is not compelling enough to make a convincing connection. To begin with, Rembrandt is not mentioned in the document. Secondly, the price for the portrait would have been extremely low for such a large-scale, fully worked-out painting of this date by the master.[6] Moreover, despite their earlier business relations, it is unlikely that in 1637 Van Uylenburgh was actively procuring commissions for Rembrandt or administering his financial affairs. Finally, the costume is not one that a Polish nobleman on an official diplomatic mission would have worn at that time. Although the elements of the costume are essentially Polish, they had been in fashion some twenty years earlier.[7]

Rather than depicting a specific individual, *A Polish Nobleman* is very likely part of the same tradition of fanciful portraits of figures in oriental costumes to which *Man in Oriental Costume* belongs (for a discussion of this type of portraiture see the entry on *Man in Oriental Costume*).[8] The models for such paintings seem to have been people close to Rembrandt, among them his wife, Saskia, his mother, possibly his father, and his brother Adriaen.[9] Rembrandt also used himself as a model for figures in his etchings and paintings. Quite frequently he radically changed his appearance with different hairstyles, beards, and mustaches. The

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penetrating expression of *A Polish Nobleman* and the striking resemblance of the sitter's features to Rembrandt's, particularly in the area around the eyes and nose, make one wonder if this painting is not, in fact, a fanciful self-portrait. The main objection to this hypothesis is that Rembrandt had not yet developed such a jowled countenance at this date. However, X-radiography clearly indicates that the pronounced jowls were not part of the initial concept but were an adaptation done when Rembrandt altered the right contour of the face [fig. 1].[10] At that time he also eliminated the earlobe and a pearl earring.[11]

The extraordinary power of *A Polish Nobleman,* which is painted on a single, large oak panel, is all the more enhanced because it has been so well preserved. Rich impastos on the face, which can be seen in the photograph of the painting taken in a raking light [fig. 2], reinforce the three-dimensional presence of the image. Similar impastos accent the gold medallion falling over his shoulder. The brown collar and reddish brown sleeve of the jacket, however, are painted thinly to suggest the softer textures of fur and cloth. In these areas the ocher ground, which is allowed to show through the surface paint, provides a unifying tone. Rembrandt has consciously sought to reveal this tone by wiping his wet paint with a cloth or, as in the beaver hat, by scratching the surface with the butt end of his brush. Even the background, which because of the painted crack must represent a wall, has been carefully modeled. Since the restoration of the painting, the care with which Rembrandt modulated his paints over the entire surface is once again visible. Indeed, he even left a thumbprint along the lower edge.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Detail, X-radiograph composite, Rembrandt van Rijn, *A Polish Nobleman*, 1637, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.1.78

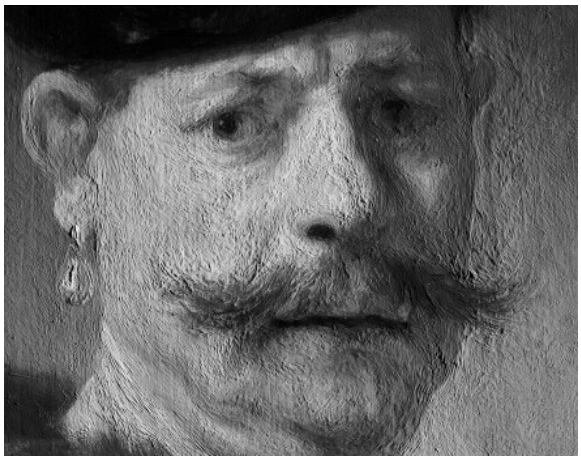

fig. 2 Detail of face, raking light, Rembrandt van Rijn, *A Polish Nobleman*, 1637, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.1.78

NOTES

[1] John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters*, 9 vols. (London, 1829–1842), 7:310: "A Military Gentleman, styled 'Sobieski.'" Although the tradition was already questioned in *Livret de la Galerie Impérial de l'Ermitage de Saint-Pétersbourg* (Saint Petersburg, 1838; "n'est justificée par aucun des documents que nous avons à notre déposition"), the identification continued to be proposed as an option throughout most of the nineteenth century.

[2] Wilhelm von Bode, *Studien zur Geschichte der holländischen Malerei* (Braunschweig, 1883), 464.

[3] First proposed by Otaker Odlozilik, "Rembrandt's Polish Nobleman," *Polish Review* 7 (Autumn 1963): 3–32. This identification was supported by Ben P. J. Broos, "Rembrandt's Portrait of a Pole and His Horse," *Simiolus* 7, no. 4 (1974): 210–213.

[4] King Wladyslaw had just gone back on his highly controversial plan to marry the niece of Charles I of England. The niece was Elizabeth, daughter of

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Frederick V, king of Bohemia and elector of the Palatinate, and his consort Elizabeth Stuart. The king and queen of Bohemia, the so-called Winter King and Winter Queen, were also intimates with the Prince of Orange, Frederik Hendrik, and his wife, Amalia van Solms. Not only was Frederik Hendrik the uncle of Frederick V, but when the Bohemian king and queen had come to The Hague in exile in the 1620s, Amalia van Solms came with them as one of Elizabeth's ladies-in-waiting.

[5] Ben P. J. Broos, "Rembrandt's Portrait of a Pole and His Horse," *Simiolus* 7, no. 4 (1974): 213, note 49. The document was published by Abraham Bredius, *Künstler-Inventare* . . . , 8 vols. (The Hague, 1915–1922), 5:1688.

[6] As Henriette Rahusen has noted (oral communication), however, the fifty guilders that Mikolaj Rej owed on the painting in 1641 may not represent the full price, but rather the balance remaining from the original commission.

[7] I am indebted for this information to Dr. Julius Chroscicki, from the University of Warsaw, who, as a fellow at the NGA Center for Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts, studied the problem of Rembrandt's depictions of Polish subjects.

[8] Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 3, *1635–1642*, ed. Josua Bruyn et al. (Dordrecht, Boston, and London, 1989), 247, considers this work a *tronie,* a term that seems inappropriate for such a large, fully conceived three-quarter-length figure. Although the meaning of the term as used in the seventeenth century is not clear, it seems most probable that *tronies* were bust-length studies of heads rather than finished paintings. The prices paid for *tronies* were quite low, as noted in Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 3, *1635–1642*, ed. Josua Bruyn et al. (Dordrecht, Boston, and London, 1989), 23, "a relatively cheap product." See also Dagmar Hirschfelder, *Tronie und Porträt in der niederländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 2008), cat. 430.

[9] Kurt Bauch, *Der frühe Rembrandt und seine Zeit: Studien zur geschichtlichten Bedeutung seines Frühstils* (Berlin, 1960), 168, suggested that Adriaen van Rijn was the model for *A Polish Nobleman*. No identifiable portraits of Adriaen, however, are known.

[10] The connections to Rembrandt's own physiognomy in the original concept for the portrait are particularly evident in a comparison of the X-radiographs with those of other Rembrandt self-portraits from the late 1630s. See in particular the X-radiographs of *Bust of Rembrandt with an Architectural Background,* Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. 1746, reproduced in Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 3, *1635–1642*, ed. Josua Bruyn et al. (Dordrecht, Boston, and London, 1989), 499.

[11] A few other minor changes, such as those on the staff and the gold

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medallion on the hat, are evident in the X-radiograph and upon close observation of the painting itself.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The panel is composed of a single piece of oak with a vertical grain and has been cradled. Dendrochronology dates the tree felling to about 1633.[1] Old repaired vertical splits are found at top center and bottom left. Moderate-sized losses of splintered wood have occurred in the panel edges.

The ground consists of two layers, a lower white layer of medium thickness covered by a very thin ocher layer.[2] A rich paste paint layer of moderate thickness has been applied with a dry brush producing a highly textured surface, with thick impasted accents on the jewels and staff. The tan ground layer is visible between the broad, opaque brushmarks and is incorporated into the structure of the cloak. Individual fur hairs have been rapidly painted with a broad, fanned-out brush. The fur hat has been incised with the butt end of a brush to expose the ground layer. Glazing is minimal, employed chiefly in the dark shadows of the face and hand.

Several pentimenti are visible with the naked eye and in the X-radiographs. Slight color variations in the background to the sitter's right were occasioned by the artist's repainting of the facial contour to slim the profile. The X-radiographs confirm alterations as well that reshape the lower portion of the head and show that the thumb was once inclined downward at a sharper angle and the index finger was more tightly curved. This original position of the hand corresponds to the grip necessary to hold the staff in its initial position, inclined away from the sitter, as evidenced by a reserve left in the background. Once adjusted to its more upright position, the staff was longer than it now appears. Its earlier form is visible through the gray covering paint of the background. A pearl drop, which once hung from the hat jewel, and a pearl earring attached to the proper left earlobe were both painted out.

The paint layer is in excellent condition, with minimal abrasion and only minor losses in the face and around the edges. A conservation treatment was carried out in 1985 to remove an aged varnish as well as discolored inpainting and overpaint.

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[1] Dendrochronological examination by Dr. Joseph Bauch of Universität Hamburg in 1977 has determined that the wood comes from a tree felled around 1633 (see report dated November 29, 1977, in NGA Conservation files). Panels from the same tree were used for two other paintings by Rembrandt at the end of the 1630s, the Concord of State (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam) and River Landscape with a Windmill (Staatliche Kuntsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie, Kassel). See Dr. Peter Klein letter, dated September 25, 1987, in NGA curatorial files.

[2] The pigments and media were analyzed by the NGA Scientific Research department using polarized light microscopy, X-ray diffraction (XRD), X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (XRF), and cross-sections in conjunction with stains (see reports on dated December 1984 and February 25, 1985, in NGA Conservation files).

PROVENANCE

Possibly Harman van Swol; possibly (his sale, Jan Pietersz. Zomer, Amsterdam, 20 April 1707, no. 15).[1] Acquired 1765 in Rotterdam by (Philippus Florentinus Vergeloo, Antwerp) for Count Johan Carl Philipp Cobenzl [1712-1770]; sold 1768 to Catherine II, empress of Russia [1729-1796], Saint Petersburg;[2] Imperial Hermitage Gallery, Saint Petersburg; sold February 1931 through (Matthiesen Gallery, Berlin; P. & D. Colnaghi & Co., London; and M. Knoedler & Co., New York) to Andrew W. Mellon, Pittsburgh and Washington; deeded 30 March 1932 to The A. W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, Pittsburgh; gift 1937 to NGA.

[1] In the 1707 sale in Amsterdam, a painting described as "Een Ambassadeur van Moscovien, van Rembrandt kragtig geschildert" (An Ambassador of Moscow, powerfully depicted by Rembrandt) may have been this work; the association of this painting with *A Polish Nobleman* was first made in Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 3, *1635–1642*, ed. Josua Bruyn et al., Dordrecht, Boston, and London, 1989: 247.

[2] On the identification of Cobenzl as the collector who sold the painting to Catherine II, and of Vergeloo as his source, see Catherine Phillips, "The

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Provenance of Rembrandt's 'Polish Nobleman' (1637) in the National Gallery of Art, Washington," *The Burlington Magazine* 151 (February 2009): 84-85. When *A Polish Nobleman* was first described in the catalogue of Catherine II's collection, compiled between 1773 and 1785, it bore the title "Portrait d'un Turc."

EXHIBITION HISTORY

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. 3, 13, repro.

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