



Rembrandt van Rijn (and Workshop?)

Rembrandt van Rijn

Dutch, 1606 - 1669

Anonymous Artist

The Apostle Paul

c. 1657

oil on canvas

overall: 131.5 x 104.4 cm (51 3/4 x 41 1/8 in.)

framed: 177.8 x 150.5 x 13.3 cm (70 x 59 1/4 x 5 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower right on desk: Rembrandt f

Widener Collection 1942.9.59

ENTRY

Sitting before a table in the recesses of his prison cell, Saint Paul has brought his hand to his head as he ponders the words he is about to write in the large tome that lies before him. The weighty expression of his strong features underscores the depth of his belief and the purposefulness of his mission to spread Christianity to the heathen. The sword visible above the book is as much the “sword of the Spirit,” the term he used to describe the word of God in his letter to the Ephesians (6:17), as it is the symbol of his military might before his conversion or the foreboding of his eventual martyrdom.

This large and imposing painting from the late 1650s depicts a figure that preoccupied Rembrandt throughout his life, from his 1627 *Saint Paul in Prison* [fig. 1] to his moving 1661 representation of himself in the guise of Saint Paul [fig. 2]. As is evident from these three paintings, Rembrandt’s concern with Paul, or Saul, was not the dramatic moment in the apostle’s life when he was converted to Christianity on the road to Damascus. Rembrandt apparently never depicted, as did

so many before him, Saul felled from his horse by a blinding light from heaven, nor Saul and his companions traveling to Damascus, where, after Saul's sight was restored, he was baptized and had his name changed to Paul. Paul the apostle, however, fascinated Rembrandt, perhaps because his writings were the most important source for Reformation theology, or, perhaps, because he personified the Christian ideal of grace received independently of merit. As Rembrandt grew older and experienced the pain and shame of his unfortunate relationship with Geertje Dirckx and the financial crises of the 1650s, the latter associations must have been strongly felt. Certainly, by the mid-1650s, Rembrandt began to focus on the frailty and the strength of the man, both as Saul—in the artist's moving depiction of Saul and David in the Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague, [1]—and as the apostle Paul in such paintings as this work and Rembrandt's portrait *An Elderly Man as Saint Paul* of 1659 (National Gallery, London). [2]

The 1627 representation of Saint Paul in Stuttgart (see [fig. 1]) offers a fascinating point of comparison with the Washington painting, for it demonstrates differences in attitude characteristic of Rembrandt's stylistic and iconographic evolution. Whereas the Rembrandt of 1627 placed Paul in an identifiable environment, where bricks and mortar, wood and straw have been carefully delineated, and where the light source can be specifically identified, the Rembrandt of the late 1650s suppressed such references to time and place. In this later representation he created the sense of the prison cell rather than its specific character. The gentle light that illuminates Paul's head, hand, and epistle, for example, has no defined point of origin. The late Rembrandt has also brought the viewer closer to the figure of the saint. He depicted Paul at half length rather than full length to allow the viewer to experience more fully the intensity of the saint's expression.

Paul's expression is also markedly different in the two works. Whereas in the Stuttgart painting Paul brings his hand to his mouth and stares into the distance, seemingly uncertain of the meanings of the words inscribed in the tomes surrounding him, in the Washington painting Paul's hand has come to his forehead as though he is pondering the significance of Christ's life. As he stares toward his sword, his demeanor is pensive rather than bewildered. The differences are in part due to the broadness of Rembrandt's mature painting technique, which emphasizes the structure of form without focusing on the specifics of veins, wrinkles, and hair, and in part due to the way light strikes Paul's head, which leaves his eyes obscured in shadow.

Paul's distinctive facial features—his flowing beard, long nose, and deep-set, slightly sad eyes—are those of a model whom Rembrandt occasionally depicted in the 1650s and early 1660s. While this model is most directly represented in two portrait studies, *A Bearded Man in a Cap*, 165(7) [fig. 3], and *A Bearded Man*, 1661, The Hermitage, Saint Petersburg, [3] Rembrandt adapted the model's features in 1653 for another contemplative, historicizing painting, *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer*, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and for *The Philosopher*, c. 1653, by a member of the Rembrandt Workshop (see *The Philosopher*). In *The Apostle Paul*, Rembrandt slightly generalized upon the model's facial characteristics, both to suggest the historical nature of the subject and to enhance the contemplative mood of the scene. Rembrandt would also have adapted his painting techniques for modeling the face so that they would relate better to the broad handling evident in rest of the composition.

The paints are applied in a somewhat dryer, thinner manner than are those in *A Bearded Man in a Cap* (see [fig. 3]), which may well be a function of Paul's larger scale and the probability that it was meant to be viewed from a more distant vantage point. Nevertheless, the general painting techniques in the two works are comparable. [4] In each instance Rembrandt drew his brush across the canvas with economical strokes that suggest but do not define form. He applied flesh tones without careful blending over a warm, underlying layer, and indicated features such as the eyes and nose with planes of color instead of accentuating them with sharp contour lines. He suggested the beard and hair with long, flowing strokes, in which a few lightly colored strands stand out against the darker forms of the rest.

X-radiographs [see X-radiography] reveal that Rembrandt may have conceived of *The Apostle Paul* at the outset as an oval composition that extended somewhat below and substantially above the present confines of the composition ([fig. 4] and [fig. 5]). [5] The fact that this large composition may originally have been oval raises the possibility that the painting was done for a specific commission. One can imagine, for example, that this broadly executed image could have been planned for an architectural setting, to be seen from a distance and from below. [6] If so, the commission must have not have been fulfilled, and the painting was subsequently reduced in size and reconceived as a rectangular composition, with corners added at the top left and bottom edges. The current inserts most likely are not the original ones, however.

Apparently a major compositional change accompanied the change in format: the large tome on the desk before Saint Paul was initially propped on a slanted surface

at the level of Paul's left elbow. As originally conceived, the apostle was leaning his elbow on the desk in a pose not unlike that of David in Rembrandt's pen and wash drawing *Nathan Admonishing David* of 1654–1655 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). [8] By lowering the surface of the desk, Rembrandt effectively changed the meaning of the gesture of Paul's left hand. Rather than providing physical support for the apostle's head, it emphasizes the spiritual intensity of Saint Paul's thoughts as he ponders the mysteries about which he writes. The X-radiographs also give the impression that in the original concept the apostle was staring at the text before him. In any event, the transformations in the composition, which emphasize the psychological over the physical, give a particularly fascinating insight into Rembrandt's creative process during this period of his career.

An extensive conservation treatment of the painting in 1999–2002 confirmed that *The Apostle Paul* had a complicated paint structure in many areas. With the removal of the darkened varnish layers and later overpainting [see [Overpaint](#)], it has become evident that at least two layers of paint are to be found in certain areas, in particular on the cloak covering Paul's right shoulder. The relatively murky paint applied with extremely free brushstrokes in this area seems to lack the clarity of the master's hand, which raises questions about when, why, and by whom this intervention was made. The sword is another area where an assistant in Rembrandt's workshop may have worked on this painting. Its careful modeling differs from Rembrandt's freer manner of painting. Paint analysis also indicates that the sword was introduced at a second stage in the artistic process. The sword's shape and the relatively smooth painting technique used to model it are comparable to the sword in *Man in a Military Costume*, a painting dated 1650 and executed by an unknown member of Rembrandt's workshop [fig. 6]. This artist may also have painted Rembrandt's signature, which seems to have been added after the underlying paint had dried. Painted in lead white, it is not brushed in Rembrandt's characteristic fluid manner. [7]

In terms of scale and iconography, *The Apostle Paul* relates closely to *Saint Bartholomew* in the Timken Museum of Art, which is signed and dated 1657 [fig. 7]. Saint Bartholomew, who leans forward and almost aggressively stares out of the picture with an alert, inquisitive expression enlivening his rugged features, holds before him a knife signifying his martyrdom. His active, dynamic personality contrasts with Paul's more contemplative one, perhaps indicating that the adjustments to Paul's image, including changing the format to a rectangular shape, were made in relationship to this work. [9]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

NOTES

- [1] For the most reasoned assessment of the attribution of the Mauritshuis painting, with which I agree, see Ary Bob de Vries, Magdi Tóth-Ubbens, and W. Froentjes, *Rembrandt in the Mauritshuis: An Interdisciplinary Study* (Alphen aan den Rijn, 1978), 148–165. The authors argue that the painting was executed at two distinct periods, about 1655 and about 1660–1665.
- [2] See inventory no. 243, from National Gallery, London.
- [3] See inventory no. 751, from Hermitage, Saint Petersburg.
- [4] For the technique of *A Bearded Man in a Cap*, see David Bomford, Jo Kirby, Ashok Roy, Axel Rürger, and Raymond White, *Rembrandt, Art in the Making* (London, 2006).
- [5] This diagram differs from the one illustrated as fig. 6 in Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century* (Washington 1995), 245, which was drawn with the mistaken assumption that the white oval shape was a Ground layer applied on the recto of the canvas support. The new diagram is made with the understanding that the oval relates to the shape of a ground or paint layer applied to the verso of the canvas. This layer would have covered the exposed area of the support and, hence, could have

ended at the curved inner edge of the stretcher. The oval shape in this diagram, consequently, is broader in shape, as it also incorporates the width of the stretcher.

No other large-scale paintings depicting apostles or evangelists are known to have been painted in an oval format. Rembrandt's *The Risen Christ*, 1661 (Alte Pinakothek, Munich, inv. no. 6471; Br. 630), was cut into an oval form at some point in its history, but was probably conceived as a rectangular painting. The central portion of Rembrandt's *Christ* in the Hyde Collection, Glens Falls, New York (Br. 628), was also cut into an irregular oval before being reattached to the original canvas.

- [6] No commission for such a work is known.
- [7] The signature was painted over a later paint layer that had covered damaged areas. An intervening varnish layer was also found between the paint layers. I would like to thank Susanna Griswald and Melanie Gifford for discussing these issues with me.
- [8] See inventory no. Ben. 948, from Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
- [9] Otto Benesch, "Worldly and Religious Portraits in Rembrandt's Late Art," *Art Quarterly* 19 (1956): 338–339, first noted the complementary relationship of the two paintings.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The original support is a medium-weight, plain-weave fabric. Triangular fabric inserts have been added to the upper left, lower left and lower right corners. The two inserts in the lower corners appear to be cut from one fabric, which is coarser than the original fabric, and the one in the upper corner is from a third fabric, which is slightly finer than the original. The bottom corner inserts appear much lighter in the X-radiograph, indicating they were prepared with a ground consisting of denser pigments than the original and they may have been cut from a previously painted composition. The support and inserts have been lined and the tacking margins have been removed. No cusping is visible.

The original canvas was prepared with a brownish quartz-based ground, of the type that is thought to be specific to Rembrandt and his workshop.[1] A faint white area in a roughly oval form is visible in the X-radiographs. [2] In the lower part of the painting, where the oval shape is most clearly visible, it is significantly narrower than the present confines of the composition, though it extended beyond the top

and bottom edges of the current canvas.

A number of artist's changes were observed in the X-radiographs and during microscopic examination. The painting seems to have been executed in two stages. In some areas of the painting cross-sections show an intervening layer typical of varnish or "oiling out" between the first and second stages.[3] Initially the apostle's elbow rested on a book lying on an inclined lectern and the background to the right was laid out with buff-colored paint. Significant revisions carried out in the second stage replaced the lectern with a flat surface and introduced the arm of the chair on which the saint leans his elbow. The sword at the right also may have been introduced at this stage.

Paint was applied thinly in dark passages and thickly in light passages, with brushes and a palette knife. Flesh tones are heavily impasted and were blended wet-into-wet. Severe abrasion in thinly painted passages has exposed the ground layer, and thicker passages are moderately abraded. Discolored varnish and inpainting were removed during a conservation treatment that was completed in 2002. Early restorations had altered the original background, introducing forms that vaguely suggested architectural features. Removal of old repaint returned the background to the original simple wall. Paint on the front of the lectern, including the signature, is not original; microscopic examination confirms that it was applied over age cracks. This repaint was not removed, but was retained for historical documentation.[4]

[1] The ground was analyzed by Karin Groen using cross-sections and 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], 666–667). Groen studied the grounds on 153 paintings by Rembrandt and his workshop. She also studied sixty paintings created in Amsterdam in the seventeenth century by artists who were not associated with Rembrandt and his workshop and numerous other Dutch paintings that originated outside Amsterdam in the seventeenth century. She found quartz only in the paintings from Rembrandt and his workshop.

[2] In the 1995 catalogue of the National Gallery of Art's Dutch paintings collection, the white oval shape was mistakenly identified as a "moderately thick, off-white

ground." Cross-sections of the recto analyzed by the NGA Scientific Research department during the conservation treatment on the painting in 1999–2002, however, did not reveal differences in the ground layers within and without the oval shape visible in the X-radiographs. It is possible that the X-ray dense material is on the reverse, hidden beneath the lining fabric (cross-sections on file with the NGA Scientific Research department).

[3] Cross-sections were analyzed by the NGA Scientific Research department (see report dated October 3, 2002, which summarizes the revisions to the painting, in NGA Conservation department files) and 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) 318–334, including the Analytical Table on page 324.

[4] The paint was analyzed by the NGA Scientific Research department using cross-sections (see report dated October 2002 in NGA Conservation department files).

PROVENANCE

Johan van Schuylenburg, The Hague; (his sale, The Hague, 20 September 1735, no. 31); Backer. Pierre-Louis Éveillard de Livois [1736-1790], Angers;^[1] (his estate sale, by Sentout, Angers, unknown date in 1791, no. 65); Gamba;^[2] (his sale, by Paillet and Geoffroy, Paris, 17-18 December 1811, 1st day, no. 26, bought in); purchased soon after this sale by Ferdinando Marescalchi [1754-1816], Bologna.^[3] Sir George Hayter [1792-1871], London, by 1841;^[4] (his sale, Christie & Manson, London, 3 May 1845, no. 82, as *Portrait of Cornelius Von Schrevelier [Schrevelius Translator(sic) of Homer]*; (Nieuwenhuys).^[5] James-Alexandre, comte de Pourtalès-Gorgier [1776-1855], Paris; (his sale, at his residence, Paris, 27 March-4 April 1865 [this lot 31 March], no. 182); purchased by (Otto Mündler, Paris) for Ivor Bertie Guest, 1st baron Wimborne [1835-1914], Canford Manor, Dorsetshire.^[6] (Arthur J. Sulley & Co., London); Peter A.B. Widener, Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, by 1912; inheritance from Estate of Peter A.B. Widener by gift through power of appointment of Joseph E. Widener, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; gift 1942 to NGA.

[1] Burton Fredericksen brought to the Gallery's attention details of the provenance

from Livois through Marescalchi; see his 14 February 1991 letter to Suzannah Fabing, in NGA curatorial files. Further details have been found in the The Getty Provenance Index© Databases.

[2] This was possibly Bartolomeo Gamba (1776-1841), bibliographer, publisher, and librarian of the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana in Venice.

[3] An 1813 inventory of Marescalchi's collection includes the painting: "Una mezza figura in grande rappresentante una Persona in meditazione o studiosa, di grande maniera, comprata alla vendita di Monsieur Gamba negozio di Parigi, come dal suo Catalogo. Quadro grande in piedi" (Monica Proni, "Per la ricostruzione della quadreria del Conte Ferdinando Marescalchi (1753-1816)," *Antologia di Belle Arti*, nos. 33/34 [1988]: 39). It is also included in later inventories of the Marescalchi collection made in 1817 and 1824 (Monica Preti Hamard, *Ferdinando Marescalchi (1754-1816): Un collezionista italiano nella Parigi napoleonica*, 2 vols., Bologna, 2005: 1:384, fig. 48; 2:131-132).

[4] Hayter lent the painting an exhibition in 1841.

[5] The dealer's name is written below lot 82 in a copy of the sale catalogue annotated by Lord Northwick, now at Yale University (copy in NGA curatorial files).

[6] *A Catalogue of the Pictures at Canford Manor in the Possession of Lord Wimborne*, Edinburgh, 1888: 63-64, no. 154.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1841 British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom, London, 1841, no. 71, as Portrait of Cornelius Pietersz Hoof.

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. 17, 27, repro.

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2005 Rembrandt's Late Religious Portraits, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2005, no. 2, repro.

2005 Rembrandt's Saint Bartholomew, Timken Museum of Art, San Diego, 2005-2006, no cat.

2008 Rembrandt: Pintor de Historias [Rembrandt: Painter of History], Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, 2008-2009, no. 36, repro.

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