



Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606 - 1669

Saskia van Uylenburgh, the Wife of the Artist

probably begun 1634/1635 and completed 1638/1640

oil on panel

overall: 62.5 × 49 cm (24 5/8 × 19 5/16 in.)

framed: 88.6 × 75.6 × 11.4 cm (34 7/8 × 29 3/4 × 4 1/2 in.)

Widener Collection 1942.9.71

ENTRY

Saskia van Uylenburgh, baptized on August 12, 1612, was raised in Leeuwarden, the principal city of the province of Friesland. Her family members were leading patricians of Leeuwarden, and her father, Rombertus Rommertsz van Uylenburgh, served as the city's burgomaster. Two of Saskia's cousins, Aaltje Pietersdr van Uylenburgh and Hendrik van Uylenburgh, lived in Amsterdam, and it was presumably on a visit there that Saskia met Rembrandt, who had moved from Leiden to live in the house of Hendrik van Uylenburgh in 1632. Van Uylenburgh was a painter and flourishing art dealer who developed an art "academy" that specialized in painting portraits. Rembrandt, who as early as 1631 invested in the business, initially lived with Van Uylenburgh and ran his "academy" until 1635. [1]

Rembrandt and Saskia were betrothed on June 8, 1633. Married a year later on June 22, 1634, they had nine years together until Saskia's death on June 14, 1642. The couple had four children, but only one, Titus, born in 1641, survived infancy.

Rembrandt's many drawings, etchings, and paintings of Saskia have preserved an incredibly varied image of this intriguing woman. One sees through them her warmth and tenderness [fig. 1], but also a certain haughtiness; her robust energy and zest for life, but also the debilitating illnesses that frequently weakened her after the mid-1630s. One senses that a strong bond existed between Rembrandt and Saskia, but at the same time her upper-class upbringing and character seem to have made it difficult for her to fully conform to the kind of life she was expected to lead as the wife, and occasional model, of this extraordinary painter.

In this painting the personal nature of Rembrandt's representation is enhanced by Saskia's pose. Glancing over her right shoulder she looks out at the viewer. With her head tilted slightly forward she has a gentle yet engaging appearance. Nevertheless, one senses even in this appealing portrait the duality of Saskia's nature. While she wears a fashionable, albeit conservative dress appropriate to her upbringing, the diaphanous shawl that covers her head and falls gently over her shoulders was not customary for a woman of her social standing. Its associations are arcadian, and similar veils are seen in representations of shepherdesses. [2] Rembrandt almost certainly draped Saskia with the veil to achieve a softer, more intimate portrayal than a conventional bonnet would have allowed.

This painting, which is neither signed nor dated, was probably begun by Rembrandt around 1634–1635, shortly after his marriage to Saskia. The idealization of Saskia's features, which derived from Rembrandt's attempt to impart an arcadian quality to the portrait, makes it difficult to date this work by comparing her features to securely dated portraits of her. [3] She is decidedly more attractive here than she appears in other paintings, as is evident in a comparison with Rembrandt's portrait of Saskia in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, signed and dated 1633 [fig. 2]. In the Gallery's painting Rembrandt has minimized Saskia's double chin and softened her features. A close comparison, however, can be made between her features in this work and in the double portrait with Rembrandt, which was almost certainly executed in 1635 [fig. 3]. In both paintings Saskia looks out at the viewer in such a way that the similarities in the shapes of her wide eyes and fully rounded nose are particularly evident.

The remarkably varied techniques that Rembrandt used to convey different textures in this painting are also difficult to date precisely. The paint on the highlighted portion of the face is applied in a dense, enamel-like fashion with diagonal strokes of the brush. Underlying this dense layer is a thinner layer of a slightly darker flesh color, visible on the shaded side of her face, that must have defined, almost as an *Imprimatura* layer, the form of Saskia's head. Over this layer Rembrandt placed freely executed strands of hair and the diaphanous shawl, which he highlighted with strokes of green, yellow, and orange. The shawl also overlays the elaborate form of Saskia's collar, the diamond-shaped design of which was created with a rich variety of strokes executed wet-into-wet. Finally, Rembrandt indicated the gold chain she wears with a succession of rapid angular strokes that were deftly applied to suggest both the shapes of the links and the light reflecting off them.

The surety of the execution is characteristic of Rembrandt, particularly the sensitivity to the various effects of light as it illuminates the face, passes through the translucent veil, and reflects off the gold chain. Despite the painting's qualities, its attribution to Rembrandt has been disputed by the Rembrandt Research Project (RRP), which considers the painting to be the work of a pupil in the workshop from around 1640. [4] Because of the late date ascribed to the work, the RRP has also concluded that the figure does not represent Saskia. The RRP therefore identified the painting as a *Bust of a Young Woman*. The RRP has buttressed its arguments for a late date for this work by comparing the technique involved with that in other paintings dated between 1639 and 1641. At the same time, the RRP pointed out differences in technique between this work and paintings from around 1640 to justify its rejection of the Rembrandt attribution.

The circular nature of these arguments is difficult to counter, in part because the extremely rigid interpretation of Rembrandt's oeuvre found in the first volumes of the RRP has eliminated so many works from this period that seem acceptable within the parameters of his style. The RRP, for example, has rejected all bust-length portraits from Rembrandt's oeuvre between 1635 and 1639 that might have served as points of comparison for an earlier dating. The one bit of technical evidence that might reinforce a date of about 1640 is that the wood support is poplar rather than oak; Rembrandt painted a few other paintings on poplar between 1639 and 1641. [5] If, however, one studies the pattern of his use of other exceptional woods, including walnut and mahogany, it is clear that he used them over an extended period of time.

The X-radiographs taken in the mid-1970s [see X-radiography] provide interesting information about the genesis of this work that was not adequately considered by the RRP in their assessment of the painting [fig. 4]. They demonstrate that Saskia's appearance in this portrait initially resembled the image in the Rijksmuseum painting (see [fig. 2]) to a greater extent than it does now. Not only did she originally have a pronounced double chin, she also had a bare neck, which was illuminated by a strong light below her hair, and a wide white collar that extended below the present edge of her black clothing. The background in the lower right was built up with lead white, and the contour between the background and the dress was different from what it is now. It would thus seem that Rembrandt substantially revised this image by reworking the face, changing the collar, and adding the veil. [6]

The complex creative process of this painting helps explain some of the anomalies of this image that raised doubts about its attribution. While the character of the image clearly relates to images of Saskia from 1633 to 1635, the diversity of painting techniques evident in the final image is admittedly unusual for that period. Nevertheless, definite comparisons can be made between certain techniques found in this work and those in other of Rembrandt's paintings from around 1635, in particular the use of white and pink accents for highlighting the nose and a strong black line to articulate the opening of the mouth. These comparisons, as well as the physiognomic relationship to images of Saskia from around 1633 to 1635, place the initial execution of this work in the mid-1630s. Rembrandt's reworking of the image may well have occurred toward the end of the 1630s to judge from the freely executed veil, which has parallels in other works by him from about 1640. [7] The style of her collar, moreover, relates to that found on the *Bust of Rembrandt*, signed and dated 163[8], in the Norton Simon Collection, Pasadena. [8] A similar lozenge-shaped pattern on the collar can be found in Rembrandt's etched *Self-Portrait* of 1638. [9]

This painting is of particular interest within the Gallery's collection because it was the first Rembrandt acquired by Peter A. B. Widener. He purchased it from Charles Sedelmeyer in 1894, perhaps at the recommendation of Wilhelm von Bode. The provenance of the painting has been confused with another portrait of Saskia in the earlier literature. [10] The earliest documented owner of this painting is Bourchier Cleeve of Fooks Cray Place, Kent, who died in 1760. Given the importance of Saskia in the life of Rembrandt, both during their marriage and through the confining stipulations of her testament, the presence of her portrait among the works by her husband in the National Gallery of Art heightens our appreciation of Rembrandt's story.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014



fig. 3 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Rembrandt and Saskia*, c. 1635, oil on canvas, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden. Photo: Elke Estel / Hans-Peter Klut

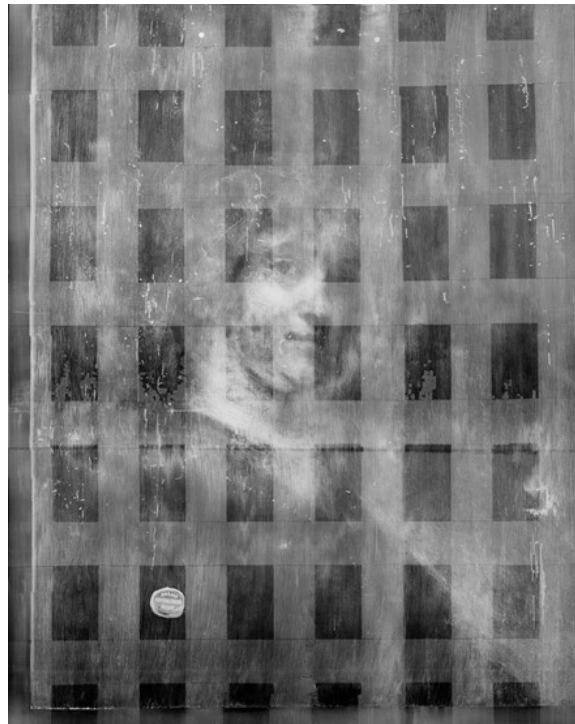


fig. 4 X-radiograph composite, Rembrandt van Rijn, *Saskia van Uylenburgh, the Wife of the Artist*, probably begun 1634/1635 and completed 1638/1640, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection, 1942.9.71

NOTES

- [1] Walter L. Strauss and Marjon van der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents* (New York, 1979), 75, doc. 1631/4.
- [2] M. Louttit, "The Romantic Dress of Saskia van Ulenborch: Its Pastoral and Theatrical Associations," *The Burlington Magazine* 65 (May 1973): 317–326. A surprising number of portraits of Saskia throughout the 1630s by Rembrandt and his school depict Saskia in arcadian guise (Abraham Bredius, *Rembrandt, Schilderijen* [Vienna, 1935], nos. 92, 93, 94, 98, 104, 105, 106, 108, 634).
- [3] Nevertheless, with the exception of the Rembrandt Research Project (RRP), which rejects the painting and believes that it was executed about 1640 (see

Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 3, 1635–1642, ed. Josua Bruyn et al. [Dordrecht, Boston, and London, 1989], 651–656, C103), all significant Rembrandt scholars have dated this work about 1633–1634. Claus Grimm, *Rembrandt selbst: Eine Neuhewertung seiner Porträtkunst* (Stuttgart, 1991), 57, who accepts *Saskia* as entirely by Rembrandt’s hand, dates the painting about 1638 to 1640.

- [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), 651–656, C103.
- [5] J. Bauch and D. Eckstein, “Woodbiological Investigations on Panels of Rembrandt Paintings,” *Wood Science and Technology* 15, no. 4 (1981): 251–263.
- [6] The veil covers freely executed strokes representing strands of Saskia’s hair. These are visible above the ribbons from which the pearl hangs.
- [7] See the arguments defending the Rembrandt attribution by Ernst van de Wetering 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), 656.
- [8] This comparison is also 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), 655. The RRP unconvincingly proposed that the painting was executed by Carel Fabritius (c. 1622–1654) instead of Rembrandt. See Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 3, 1635–1642, ed. Josua Bruyn et al. (Dordrecht, Boston, and London, 1989), 617–624, C97. The RRP rejected the authenticity of the signature and date, which read “Rembrandt f/ 163[8],” and dates the painting about 1641, the year of Fabritius’ arrival in Rembrandt’s workshop. This assessment was revised in Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 4, *Self-Portraits*, ed. Ernst van de Wetering (Dordrecht, 2005), 605, where the painting was fully accepted as being by Rembrandt.
- [9] Adam Bartsch, *Catalogue raisonné de toutes les estampes qui forment l’oeuvre de Rembrandt*, 2 vols. (Vienna, 1797), 1: no. 20.
- [10] Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century*, trans. Edward G. Hawke, 8 vols. (London, 1907–1927), 6:297, no. 615, includes in his provenance for this painting three sales that refer to a lost painting, the latter appearing in John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters*, 9 vols. (London, 1829–1842), 7: no. 502. The sales are: De Gaignat, Paris, 1768; De Calonne, Paris, 1788; and De Choiseul-Praslin, Paris, 1793.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The cradled wood support consists of a single poplar board with a vertical grain, with a 2.1 cm L-shaped wood strip added along the left and bottom edges, and a 5.1 cm square insert at the lower right.[1] The dimensions of the original panel are 60.4 x 46.9 cm. The frame hides the added strip. A thin chalk and lead white ground covers the surface.[2] A preliminary sketch in black paint is visible under the features.

The paint was applied fluidly in the background and figure, with slight impasto in the chain and collar. The X-radiographs show changes in the design, some of which are visible with the naked eye. The white collar and dark neckline were originally lower, exposing more of the neck. The dress was slightly fuller, as were the chin and cheek profile. The paint is in good condition, with little inpainting or abrasion.

The date of cradling is not known, nor is the date of the attachment of the L-shaped strip. The painting was cleaned in 1930 by Herbert Carmer. In 1976 the painting was treated again to remove discolored varnish. A lower varnish layer was left in place, along with a hardened, pigmented varnish layer on the dress.

[1] Dendrochronology cannot be used to date poplar panels (see report by Dr. Joseph Bauch, Universität Hamburg, dated November 29, 1977, in NGA Conservation files).

[2] The paint and ground layers were analyzed by Dr. Robert Feller at the Carnegie Mellon Institute of Research using polarized light microscopy and cross-sections (see memos and letters of various dates in 1976 and 1977 in NGA Conservation files).

PROVENANCE

Bourchier Cleeve [d. 1760], Fooks Cray Place, Kent; by inheritance to his daughter, Elizabeth; by marriage 1765 to her husband, Sir George Yonge, Bart., London; (his

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sale, at his residence by Mr. White, London, 24-25 March 1806, 2nd day, no. 79); Foster. William Wells [1760-1847], Redleaf, near Penshurst, Kent, by 1831;^[1] by inheritance to his grandnephew, William Wells [1818-1889], Redleaf; (his granduncle's estate sale, Christie & Manson, London, 12-13 May 1848, no. 67, probably bought in for or by Wells); (his estate sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 10 and 12 May 1890, no. 93); (P. & D. Colnaghi & Co., London); Henry Bingham Mildmay [1828-1905], Shoreham Place, Kent, and Flete House, Devon; (his sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 24 June 1893, no. 58); (Wertheimer, London). (Charles Sedelmeyer, Paris); sold 30 July 1894 to Peter A.B. Widener, Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; 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] Wells lent the painting to an 1831 exhibition at the British Institution.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1831 British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom, London, 1831, no. 85.

1909 The Hudson-Fulton Celebration, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1909, no. 81.

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. 2, 12, repro.

2003 Dutch and Flemish Treasures from the National Gallery of Art, Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, 2003, no cat.

2005 Loan for display with permanent collection, The Hyde Collection, Glens Falls, New York, 2005.

2013 Amsterdam DNA, Amsterdam Museum, 2013-2015, no catalogue.

2019 Inside Rembrandt. 1601-1669, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne; Narodni galerie v Praze, Prague, 2019-2021 (shown only in Cologne).

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- 1899 Bell, Malcolm. *Rembrandt van Rijn and His Work*. London, 1899: 185.
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- 1910 Valentiner, Wilhelm R. *Catalogue of a Loan Exhibition of Paintings by Old Dutch Masters Held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Connection with the Hudson-Fulton Celebration*. New York, 1910: 9, 278,

- no. 81, repro. 279.
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