



Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606 - 1669

Self-Portrait

1659

oil on canvas

overall: 84.5 x 66 cm (33 1/4 x 26 in.)

framed: 122.9 x 104.1 x 8.9 cm (48 3/8 x 41 x 3 1/2 in.)

Inscription: center left: Rembrandt f. 1659

Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.72

ENTRY

The face is familiar, as is the penetrating gaze with which the sitter stares directly out at the viewer. No question, it is Rembrandt, late in his life, at a time when he has suffered through the cruel indignities of failure after so many years of success. Indeed, this portrait, painted in 1659, dates to the year after Rembrandt's possessions and his house on the Sint-Anthonisbreestraat had been auctioned as a result of his insolvency. It may well have been one of the first works he painted in the small house on the Rozengracht, in the painters' quarter of Amsterdam, where he had moved when his fortunes and his prospects were at low ebb. In the following year Rembrandt set up a business agreement with his son Titus and Hendrickje Stoffels, the artist's companion in the last decades of his life, that prevented him from being sued by any of his dissatisfied creditors for recovery of debts. [1]

Rightly or wrongly it seems almost impossible to ponder this work without interpreting it in light of what is known about Rembrandt's life. This inclination is felt in part because of the extensive biographical information that has come down to us, through which we are able to feel a closer contact with the man and his life than we do with most artists of this period. It also seems possible to interpret Rembrandt's mood in such paintings because he painted, drew, and etched so many self-portraits that changes in his appearance can be measured and analyzed by comparing one to another. Even more significantly, however, we read these images biographically because Rembrandt forces us to do so. He looks out at us and confronts us directly. His deep-set eyes peer intently. They appear steady, yet heavy and not without sadness. As Hofstede de Groot remarked in reference to

this painting when it was shown in the 1898 Rembrandt exhibition in Amsterdam, “It would be difficult to find in any of his paintings a pair of eyes that peer at us more sharply or penetratingly.” [2] Émile Michel, in his review of the exhibition, was even more expressive about the forcefulness of Rembrandt’s gaze through the heavy wrinkles that had come to age his face so prematurely. [3]

While the observations of Hofstede de Groot and Michel seem entirely appropriate to the image, too often this painting has been subjected to overly romantic interpretations, in which authors have tried to read into this somber image Rembrandt’s own reflections upon the profound tragedy of his life. [4] Interpreting paintings on the basis of an artist’s biography is dangerous, particularly with an artist whose life has been romanticized to the extent that Rembrandt’s has been. [5] In this instance the inclination to interpret this image as a tragic one was reinforced by the thick layers of discolored varnish that had given the portrait a heavy, brooding quality. With the removal of the discolored varnish during restoration in 1992, the fallacy of such interpretations became particularly apparent. With the rich range of pinks and other flesh tones on his face once again visible, Rembrandt’s state of mind seems to have improved remarkably. While the thick impastos and bold strokes he used to model his face still create the dynamic vigor of the head, apparent now as well is the economy with which Rembrandt handled his paint: he has allowed a greenish gray *Imprimatura* layer to read as the shadowed area around the eyes. Finally, the firmness of his touch is accented by the wiry rhythms in his mustache and in the hair protruding from under his beret, which he has delineated by scratching the wet paint with the blunt end of his brush.

An added benefit from the restoration was the removal of Overpaint that had flattened the appearance of Rembrandt’s torso. With the three-dimensional character of this portion of the painting restored, the head seems far more firmly planted on the body than it had previously. The light that so effectively illuminates the head now also accents Rembrandt’s left shoulder and, to a lesser extent, his broadly executed clasped hands. The X-radiograph [see X-radiography] of the head, which reveals the vigorous, almost sculptural character of Rembrandt’s handling of paint, also indicates, through the density of the paint in the beret, that Rembrandt initially painted the beret a different color [fig. 1]. It may well have been white, for the upper ridges of a whitish paint layer can be seen through the overlying black paint.

Although Rembrandt's pose seems so appropriate to the forcefulness of his gaze, quite surprisingly, it was inspired by Raphael's portrait of Balthasar Castiglione [fig. 2]. The memory of Castiglione's direct gaze and clasped hands, which Rembrandt first saw when the painting appeared in an auction in Amsterdam on April 19, 1639, must have remained deeply ingrained in his mind for the intervening twenty years. [6] This famous work had made a tremendous impact on Rembrandt, for he even made a rough sketch after it at the sale (Albertina, Vienna). [7] In that same year, 1639, Rembrandt etched a self-portrait that was in part inspired by Raphael's image and in part by Titian's portrait, then known as *Ariosto*, which was in Amsterdam in the Alfonso Lopez Collection (National Gallery, London). [8] In the following year, 1640, Rembrandt painted a self-portrait (National Gallery, London) [9] that reflected in composition and intellectual concept both the Raphael's *Balthasar Castiglione* and Titian's *Ariosto*. In this 1640 *Self-Portrait*, Rembrandt, dressed in a fanciful historicizing costume, portrayed himself with all of the elegance and dignity of the renowned Renaissance men of letters thought to have been depicted by Raphael (Marchigian, 1483 - 1520) and Titian (Venetian, 1488/1490 - 1576). [10]

In Rembrandt's 1659 *Self-Portrait*, all compositional references to Titian's portrait have disappeared, particularly the stone parapet upon which the artist rests his arm in the 1639 etching and the 1640 painting. [11] Perhaps at this later moment of his life he was drawn to Raphael's painting because of its self-contained composition, which he must have felt appropriate for expressing the quiet intensity with which he wished to imbue his self-portrait; perhaps he remembered the subdued colors of Castiglione's costume or the effective way in which Raphael used the beret to frame his head. Clearly Rembrandt has adapted all of these aspects of Raphael's painting in his self-portrait, while at the same time transforming the nature of his image through dramatic light effects and the rich impastos of his paint.

Most fundamentally, however, Rembrandt returned to Raphael's prototype because he found in it a vehicle for expressing his perception of himself as a learned painter, a theme that in one way or another underlies a number of his late self-portraits, particularly his magnificent paintings in the Frick Collection, c. 1658, [12] and in the Iveagh Bequest, Kenwood, c. 1665. [13] In all three of these works Rembrandt projects a strikingly positive self-image, in which allusions to his self-esteem as an artist are conveyed through pose, costume, and expression. [14]

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Detail of head, X-radiograph composite, Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait*, 1659, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.1.72



fig. 2 Raphael, *Balthasar Castiglione*, c. 1514–1515, oil on panel, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: © RMN / Art Resource, NY. Photographer: Jean-Gilles Berizzi

NOTES

- [1] Walter L. Strauss and Marjon van der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents* (New York, 1979), 462–465, doc. 1660/20.
- [2] Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *Rembrandt. Collection des oeuvres des maîtres réunies, à l'occasion de l'inauguration de S. M. la Reine Wilhelmine* (Amsterdam, 1898), 13. “Het zou moeilijk wezen in al zijn schilderijen een

paar oog en aan te wijzen, die ons scherper en doordringender aanzien.”

- [3] Émile Michel, “L’Exposition Rembrandt à Amsterdam,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 20 (December 1898): 478–480. “Sous l’influence d’une vie trop casanière, une graisse malsaine envahit les chairs flasques et boursoufflées; des rides nombreuses et profondes sont creusées sur son large front.... Avec leur paupières épaissies, les yeux, devenus plus petits, ont conservé leur étincelle et sous les sourcils en broussaille, le regard interrogateur et pénétrant du peintre persiste, obstiné, ardent comme le charbon sous la cendre. Sans l’abattre, les soucis et les malheurs n’ont fait qu’épurer en lui la passion de son art qui le soutient et cet amour de la nature qui lui permet de découvrir des trésors de beauté et de poésie là où les autres passent indifférents.”
- [4] Perhaps the most insupportable claims about this painting were suggested by John Walker (John Walker, *National Gallery of Art, Washington* [New York, 1976], 270), who wrote, in part: “[Rembrandt] saw a mouth and a chin weak, infirm of purpose, manifesting that flaw in his character which had ruined his life. His hands are grasped as though in anguish at the spectacle of a self-ruined man. There exists no painting more pitiless in its analysis or more pitiful in its implications.”
- [5] For the nature of these myths see Seymour Slive, *Rembrandt and His Critics, 1630–1730* (The Hague, 1953) and Jan Ameling Emmens, *Rembrandt en de Regels van de Kunst* (Utrecht, 1968).
- [6] The painting was acquired by Alphonso Lopez, a Portuguese Jew who lived in Amsterdam from 1636 to 1640. See Walter L. Strauss and Marjon van der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents* (New York, 1979), 177, doc. 1639/8. Lopez had a large collection that included Titian’s *Ariosto* and *Flora* (see Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and George Keyes, *Rembrandt’s Lucretia* [Washington, 1991]). He was also known to Rembrandt since he bought directly from the artist his early *Balaam and the Ass* (Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 1, 1625–1631, ed. Josua Bruyn et al. [The Hague, Boston, and London, 1982], A2).
- [7] See Ben. 451, from the Albertina, Vienna.
- [8] See inventory no. 1944, from the National Gallery, London. For the etching, see: Adam Bartsch, *Catalogue raisonné de toutes les estampes qui forment l’oeuvre de Rembrandt...*, 2 vols. (Vienna, 1797), 1: no. 21.
- [9] See inventory no. 672, from the National Gallery, London.
- [10] For a discussion of the relationship of Rembrandt’s self-portraits from 1639 and 1640 to Raphael and Titian, see Eddy de Jongh, “The Spur of Wit: Rembrandt’s Response to an Italian Challenge,” *Delta: A Review of Arts, Life and Thought in the Netherlands* 12 (1969): 49–67; and H. Perry Chapman,

Rembrandt's Self-Portraits: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Identity
(Princeton, 1990), 72–78.

- [11] J.L.A.A.M. van Rijckevorsel, *Rembrandt en de Traditie* (Rotterdam, 1932), 150, however, did suggest the additional influence of Titian's *Portrait of "Ariosto"* (National Gallery, London, inventory no. 1944) on Rembrandt's 1659 *Self-Portrait*. The illusionistic format of self-portraiture was put in the context of the northern portrait tradition by Stephanie Dickey during a Rembrandt symposium held at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, in January 1992.
- [12] See inventory no. 06.1.97, from the Frick Collection, New York.
- [13] See inventory no. 57, from the Iveagh Bequest, Kenwood.
- [14] For a discussion of various interpretations of these paintings see H. Perry Chapman, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Identity* (Princeton, 1990), 94–95, 97–101.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The original support, a tightly, plain-woven fabric with fine threads, has been lined. The tacking margins have been removed and a coating of white lead has been applied to the back of the lining. The double ground consists of a thick, reddish brown lower layer and a very thin, light gray layer.[1] The design was then sketched in a transparent brown underpaint layer intentionally left visible in the proper right sleeve and in the nostrils, mouth, and neck bordering the collar. The exposed areas of the brown sketch are abraded, which has diminished their significance.

The figure was painted with opaque, broad, flat brushstrokes, while the background and hands were thinly painted. The hair has been articulated by fine brushstrokes and lines incised with the butt end of a brush into the still-wet paint. The highlights of the face were first created overall with heavy short strokes of richly impasted paint, with individual brushstrokes swirled wet-into-wet rather than blended. Once dry, the paint was reworked with unblended, short, distinct strokes of darker colors following the initial brushwork pattern. These were softened with half-shadow mid-tones. Strokes of white paint under the beret indicate that Rembrandt initially planned a lighter color beret than the present black one.

While the face and hands are largely intact, much of the figure and the background at the left have suffered from abrasion. The painting underwent treatment in 1992 to remove discolored varnish and overpaint. The blackish paint to the left of the

figure and a patchy semi-opaque coating, applied in a prior restoration to disguise abrasion, were left in place.

[1] Cross-sections were analyzed by the Scientific Research department (see report dated November 13, 1992, in NGA Conservation files).

PROVENANCE

Purchased by George Brudenell, 4th earl of Cardigan [1712-1790, later George Montagu, duke of Montagu (new creation)], Montagu House, Whitehall, London, by 1767;^[1] by inheritance to his daughter and sole heiress, Elizabeth, duchess of Buccleuch [1743-1827, née Lady Elizabeth Montagu, wife of Henry Scott, 3rd duke of Buccleuch and 5th duke of Queensberry, 1746-1812], Montagu House; by descent through the dukes of Buccleuch and Queensberry to John Charles Montagu, 7th duke of Buccleuch and 9th duke of Queensberry [1864-1935], Montagu House; sold 1928 to (P. & D. Colnaghi & Co., New York), on joint account with (M. Knoedler & Co., New York);^[2] sold January 1929 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] The Knoedler prospectus for the painting (in NGA curatorial files) states that the painting was purchased by Brudenell in 1740. However, the first firm evidence for his ownership is a mezzotint after the self-portrait, dated 1767 and published by R. Earlom (1743-1822), which is inscribed as "From the Original Picture...In the Collection of his Grace the Duke of Montagu" (see John Charrington, *A Catalogue of the Mezzotints After, or Said to Be After, Rembrandt*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1923: 34-35, no. 49. According to an inventory of Montagu House, Whitehall, made in 1770, this painting and Rembrandt's *An Old Woman Reading* (still at the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry's Drumlanrig Castle in Dumfriesshire, Scotland) were purchased together for 140 pounds; see Francis Russell's entry on *An Old Woman Reading* in Gervase Jackson-Stops, ed., *The Treasure Houses of Britain: Five Hundred Years of Private Patronage and Art Collecting*, exh. cat., National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., New Haven and London, 1985: 363-364, no. 292. See also Burton B. Fredericksen, "Leonardo and

Mantegna in the Buccleuch Collection," *The Burlington Magazine* 133 (February 1991): 116.

[2] Nicholas H.J. Hall, ed., *Colnaghi in America: A Survey to Commemorate the First Decade of Colnaghi New York*, New York, 1992: 24, fig. 24. According to the Getty Provenance Index® Database of Public Collections (J. Paul Getty Trust, Paintings Record 17095), there is no regular entry in Colnaghi's stockbooks, but transactions for the painting are documented in Colnaghi's Private Ledger; the painting was Knoedler's number A-409. The 1928 sale of the painting by the 7th duke is also confirmed by a letter of 28 November 1928, from Charles J. Holmes, then director of the National Gallery, London, to Otto Gutekunst of Colnaghi (in NGA curatorial files, received at the time of the 1937 gift). Gutekunst had shown Holmes the painting "in confidence" and Holmes wrote to ask if it could be lent briefly to the Gallery "before it crosses the Atlantic."

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1872 Exhibition of the Works of the Old Masters. Winter Exhibition, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1872, no. 181.

1898 Rembrandt. Collection des oeuvres des maîtres réunies, à l'occasion de l'inauguration de S. M. la Reine Wilhelmine, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1898, no. 102.

1899 Exhibition of Works by Rembrandt. Winter Exhibition, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1899, no. 6.

1930 A Loan Exhibition of Sixteen Masterpieces, Knoedler Galleries, New York, January 1930, no. 8.

1930 The Thirteenth Loan Exhibition of Old Masters: Paintings by Rembrandt, The Detroit Institute of Arts, May 1930, no. 62.

1935 Loan Exhibition of Paintings, Drawings and Etchings by Rembrandt and His Circle, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1935-1936, no. 6.

1935 Rembrandt Tentoonstelling, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1935, no. 26.

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Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

1939 Masterpieces of Art. European Paintings and Sculpture from 1300-1800, New York World's Fair, 1939, no. 307.

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. 19, repro.

1989 Masterpieces of Western European Painting of the XVIth-XXth Centuries from the Museums of the European Countries and USA, State Hermitage Museum, Leningrad, 1989, no. 13, repro.

1992 Dutch Art and Scotland: A Reflection of Taste, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, 1992, no. 53, repro.

1996 Rembrandt: His Pupils and Followers, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, 1996, unnumbered brochure, repro.

1999 Rembrandt By Himself, The National Gallery, London; Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague, 1999-2000, no. 73, repro.

2002 Rembrandt: Dipinti, incisioni e riflessi sul '600 e '700 italiano, Scuderie del Quirinale, Rome, 2002-2003, no. 6D, repro. on title page.

2009 Rembrandt's People, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, 2009-2010, brochure no. 3, repro. and cover.

2011 Rembrandt in America, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh; Cleveland Museum of Art; Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2011-2012, no. 34, pl. 9.

2014 Rembrandt: The Late Works, National Gallery, London; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 2014-2015, no. 2, repro.

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