



Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606 - 1669

Portrait of a Man in a Tall Hat

c. 1663

oil on canvas

overall: 121.3 x 94 cm (47 3/4 x 37 in.)

Widener Collection 1942.9.69

ENTRY

The identity of this imposing sitter has long been lost, but his dress and demeanor indicate that he was a well-to-do burgher, probably an Amsterdam merchant. The date of the portrait is also unknown, but similarities between this work and Rembrandt's *Syndics of the Cloth Drapers' Guild* of 1662 [fig. 1] suggest that the two paintings are not far removed in date. The sitter's hairstyle and costume, particularly his wide, flat collar with its tassels, are similar, as is the dignified gravity that he projects as he focuses his eyes on the viewer from beneath his wide-brimmed black hat. Even the herringbone canvases that Rembrandt used for these paintings are comparable.[1]

The vigor and surety of Rembrandt's brushwork are particularly evident in the head. He has modeled the man's face with broad strokes heavily loaded with a relatively dry paint. Since it is mixed with little medium, the paint has a broken character that enhances the sitter's rough-hewn features. Stylistically, this manner of execution is broader than that found in the Gallery's *A Young Man Seated at a Table* (possibly Govaert Flinck), with which it is often compared,[2] and, to a certain extent, even broader than that of the *Syndics of the Cloth Drapers' Guild*, an evolution of style that suggests a date of execution subsequent to these works, perhaps 1663.

Unfortunately, aside from the well-preserved face and the relative disposition of the figure, it is extremely difficult to make precise assessments about this painting. The basic problem is that the original character of the painting has been distorted through flattening, abrasion, and discolored varnish.[3] Infrared examination [see infrared reflectography] reveals that extensive abrasion in the reddish brown

background has been heavily restored. The degree to which the massive black form of the man's robes has been damaged by abrasion and/or reworking, however, cannot be determined. Presumably, this illegible mass once had some definition of form that would have related to the three-dimensionality of the man's body.

The issue about the condition of the robe is of some consequence because the X-radiographs [see X-radiography] reveal significant pentimenti in the figure's body. Rembrandt originally had depicted the gentleman with an even longer collar and with his hands in quite different positions. The sitter initially held his left hand higher, at waist level [fig. 2]. His cuff was visible, and he held a pair of gloves. The right hand, clasping the armrest of a chair, is harder to read, but it appears as though it used to extend downward in front of the sitter, perhaps resting on or holding some object. To judge from the X-radiographs, these hands were fully modeled. Sharp ridges of lead white paint along their forms indicate that Rembrandt used a palette knife in creating them, a technique not otherwise evident in this painting, but one that Rembrandt began exploiting during the mid-1660s.[4]

As is also clear from the X-radiographs, the different placement of the hands affected the position of the arms. As a result the contour of the body is now much larger than it was originally. It may well be that the sitter initially did not have a cloak draped over his shoulders. X-radiographs also indicate that the crown of the hat was slightly smaller and was silhouetted against a lighter background than at present. At the time that the composition was changed, it is likely that the dimensions of the painting were also reduced.[5]

These changes may have been undertaken to give the sitter a greater presence and added austerity. Moreover, by minimizing the activity of the hands, the head received added emphasis. Unfortunately, large portions of the figure in its present appearance are without visual interest. Because of the thick layers of discolored varnish, it is virtually impossible to determine whether the lack of modeling in the robes results from the condition of the painting or from the quality of the artistic representation. One should not exclude the possibility that someone other than Rembrandt made these changes. In the hands, the only area of the body that can be seen properly, the evidence is not conclusive. The portrayal of the right hand is particularly unsuccessful, and the arm of the chair floats disconcertingly in the midst of the robes surrounding it.[6] Nevertheless, the sitter's left hand is firmly modeled in a manner not unlike that of the face, so an ultimate judgment as to who

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executed these changes of composition must be reserved until the painting is restored.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

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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 X-radiograph composite, Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of a Man in a Tall Hat*, c. 1663, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection, 1942.9.69

NOTES

- [1] Rembrandt used herringbone canvas in a number of paintings from the 1660s, including the *Claudius Civilis* (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm), *Family Portrait* (Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig), *Man with a Magnifying Glass*, and *Woman Holding a Pink* (both Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). See also discussion of the pendants *Portrait of a Gentleman with a Tall Hat and Gloves* and *Portrait of a Lady with an Ostrich-Feather Fan*.
- [2] Wilhelm von Bode assisted by Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *The Complete Work of Rembrandt*, trans. Florence Simmonds, 8 vols. (Paris, 1897–1906), 7:3.
- [3] See Technical Summary.
- [4] See the discussion of Rembrandt's *Lucretia*.
- [5] No thread distortions are found along any edge, which is evidence that the painting was once larger on all sides. It is rather unusual for a portrait of this size to have a horizontal seam, a fact that may indicate that the painting was initially quite a bit larger. *Syndics of the Cloth Drapers' Guild* has a similar construction (its dimensions are 191.5 x 279 cm).
- [6] This area is so confusing that Bode thought that the sitter was holding a letter (Wilhelm von Bode assisted by Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *The Complete Work of Rembrandt*, trans. Florence Simmonds, 8 vols. [Paris, 1897–1906], 7:36, no. 487). He titled the painting *Portrait of a Man in a High Hat Holding a Letter in His Right Hand*. This same reading was continued in Cornelis Hofstede de Groot and Wilhelm Reinhold Valentiner, *Pictures in the Collection of P. A. B. Widener at Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania*, vol. 1, *Early German Dutch and Flemish Schools* (Philadelphia, 1913);

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), 6:365, no. 781; and Bernard Berenson, Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, William Roberts, and Wilhelm Reinhold Valentiner, *Paintings in the Collection of Joseph Widener at Lynnewood Hall* (Elkins Park, Penn., 1923).

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a medium-weight, herringbone-weave fabric consisting of two pieces seamed horizontally at center, 65 cm from the top. The seam protrudes slightly. The support has been double lined using a gauze interleaf, which is visible in the X-radiographs. The tacking margins have been removed. Absence of cusping on all sides suggests a reduction of the original dimensions. Although a thin ground is present, the color could not be determined because it is obscured by a thin, black layer, which is probably a painted sketch. An additional reddish brown underpainting occurs in selected areas such as the face.

Paint was applied as thick pastes with complex layering and lively brushmarking in the features. Brushes and a palette knife were used to apply the paint, and lines were incised with the butt end of a brush. The figure was painted after the background. The red paint of the table continues underneath the black cloak. Several artist's changes are visible in the X-radiographs. The proper left arm was originally lower at the shoulder, but bent sharply at the elbow with the hand resting just above the sitter's lap holding a pair of gloves. The proper right arm originally extended downward, ending in a hand that grasped some draped object. White cuffs were eliminated from both sleeves, the left collar tassel was moved to the right, the collar was shortened, and the hat was slimmed.

Numerous small losses have occurred in the white collar and scattered minor losses are located overall. The face is intact save minute flake losses. Severe abrasion in the background and costume has been inpainted. The paint texture has been flattened, probably due to an aggressive lining procedure. A thick, discolored varnish layer covers the surface.

PROVENANCE

Stanisaw August Poniatowski, king of Poland [1732-1798]. (Mr. Noe, Munich). Gasser collection, Vienna. Prince Klemens Wenzel von Metternich [1773-1859]; purchased by (Otto Mündler, Paris); sold 1865 to Ivor Bertie Guest, 1st baron Wimborne [1835-1914], Canford Manor, Dorsetshire.[1] (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] The painting was first published by Wilhelm von Bode, *Studien zur Geschichte der holländischen Malerei*, Braunschweig, 1883: 530, 579–580, no. 148. The early provenance is given in *A Catalogue of the Pictures at Canford Manor in the Possession of Lord Wimborne*, Edinburgh, 1888: 62, no. 153, but it has not yet been confirmed through other sources. The painting does not appear in Tadeusz Mankowski's reconstruction of the 1795 inventory of the Polish king's collection, *Galerja Stanisawa Augusta*, Lwów, 1932. Gasser, described in the 1888 catalogue as "the sculptor of Vienna," was perhaps Hans Gasser (1817-1868), an Austrian sculptor and painter who also built up an art collection (see Walter Krause, "Gasser, Hans," in *The Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner, 34 vols., New York, 1996: 12:172).

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. 21, repro.

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