



Anonymous Artist
Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606 - 1669

Old Woman Plucking a Fowl

1650/1655

oil on canvas

overall: 133 x 104.7 cm (52 3/8 x 41 1/4 in.)

framed: 162.6 x 136.2 cm (64 x 53 5/8 in.)

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Walter Timme 1956.1.1

ENTRY

The early history of *Old Woman Plucking a Fowl* is not known with certainty. Traditionally this painting has been associated with a work listed in the 1734 sale of paintings owned by Willem Six, where “Een Hoenderwyf, van Rembrandt” was purchased by Wilkins for 165 fl. (see Provenance).[1] Wilkins may have brought it to England, for a “woman plucking a fowl” by Rembrandt appeared in the Blackwood sale of 1757.[2] The first secure reference to the painting is from the mid-eighteenth century when Richard Houston (Irish, 1721 - 1775) made his mezzotint with an inscription indicating that the painting was in the collection of Francis Charteris, Earl of Wemyss (1723–1808) [fig. 1].[3]

Viewed today, this painting would never be confused with a work by Rembrandt; yet an attribution to the master was strongly defended when the painting surfaced in a Paris sale in 1912. It had previously been known only to the most important Rembrandt scholars of the day, Wilhelm von Bode, Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, and Abraham Bredius, through reproductive mezzotints, among them the one made by Houston. The painting’s appearance generated much interest, and it was acquired by the Paris dealer Francis Kleinberger for a substantial price. Of the three scholars mentioned above, only Bredius demurred at the attribution, arguing that the painting was a workshop production, one of those paintings listed in Rembrandt’s 1656 inventory as being retouched by Rembrandt.[4] He wrote that the woman “with the strange wrinkles above her left eye and underneath her right eye, with the monotonously painted fur coat and the oddly shaped hands” had

nothing to do with Rembrandt, but that the fowl was by the master. “You feel his genius in the light he gave to its wings and how the touches in its head make it perfect.”

Bredius’ comments initiated an exchange of letters in *The Burlington Magazine* with Kleinberger, who vigorously defended the attribution to Rembrandt.[5] He pointed out that large areas of the painting had been overpainted by an eighteenth-century restorer before the mezzotint had been made by Houston. Kleinberger added that shortly after acquiring the *Old Woman Plucking a Fowl* he had sent the painting to Berlin to be restored by Professor A. Hauser. Hauser removed overpaint in the background, which revealed the windowsill and the gun leaning against it. As Hofstede de Groot also noted, Hauser discovered that the fowl’s left wing was overpainted, as were both of the woman’s hands.[6] Her costume had also been overpainted. Hofstede de Groot was quite enthusiastic about the changes that had been wrought by Hauser: not only had the woman’s expression improved, but so too had the overall lighting and color harmonies. He compared the painting to Rembrandt’s *Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) and the *Dead Bittern Held High by a Hunter* (Gemäldegalerie, Dresden),[7] and concluded that this painting likewise must date c. 1638–1640.

Just what transpired in Hauser’s studio is unknown. No records have been preserved that allow any judgment about the layers of paint he removed and the extent of overpainting he then added.[8] Valentiner later wrote that Hauser had been forced to reconstruct “essential parts” of the painting, but just what these were has never been determined.[9] If one were to judge the painting as it appears today, it is hard to imagine how anyone, let alone experts of the stature of Bode, Hofstede de Groot, and Valentiner, could have reacted positively to Hauser’s restoration. A close comparison with the photograph of the painting published in 1912 after the restoration, however, indicates that a second restoration must have been undertaken before the painting was given to the National Gallery of Art in 1956. Not only has the shape of the headdress once again changed, the costume has lost definition in the folds, and the face and right hand have been heavily overpainted. The Rembrandt signature is also far less visible today than it was in 1912. With all of these layers of restoration, it is virtually impossible to determine the original character of the image. The sole exception is the dead fowl on the woman’s lap, which seems to have survived fairly well intact.

The vigorous execution of this animal does reveal a boldness of touch that provides a glimpse of the qualities that the rest of the painting may originally have possessed.[10] While the dry brushwork used to suggest the feathers on the bird's body is, in fact, quite different in character from Rembrandt's handling of similar areas in the Rijksmuseum painting of dead peacocks, a similar technique is found in the work of one of Rembrandt's pupils and followers from the early 1650s, Karel van der Pluym (1625–1672). A particularly close comparison is found in the brushwork on the armor of *Mars* in Liechtenstein, a painting convincingly attributed to Van der Pluym by Sumowski and dated to the early 1650s, after the artist had left Rembrandt's workshop and returned to Leiden.[11] If one were to extrapolate, moreover, from the general compositional format, large scale, and figure type, what the image might originally have looked like, a painting generally attributed to Van der Pluym, *Woman Cutting Her Nails* [fig. 2], once again serves as an excellent point of reference.[12] Here one finds the same deep-set eyes, square face, and blocky hands. Even the thick, heavy, fur-lined cloak is comparable.

The information available, however, is not sufficient to attribute this heavily overpainted work to Van der Pluym. Neither of the comparative works mentioned above is signed or dated, so their attributions to Van der Pluym should be understood as tentative. Moreover, other artists in the Rembrandt circle during the 1650s, including Gerrit Willemsz Horst (1612–1652), Abraham van Dijck (1635/1636–1672), Heyman Dullaert (1636–1684), and Willem Drost (Dutch, active c. 1650 - active 1655), also painted large-scale, blocky figures that are comparable to the woman in *Old Woman Plucking a Fowl*. Indeed, a painting of this subject by Drost belonged to an Amsterdam collector in the 1670s.[13] Despite the admirable efforts of Sumowski and others to construct a body of works for these painters, too little is presently known about their artistic personalities to make a precise judgment about the attribution of this work.[14]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Richard Houston, engraving of *Old Woman Plucking a Fowl*, mid-18th century, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Photo © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



fig. 2 Style of Rembrandt, *Old Woman Cutting Her Nails*, 1655–1660, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913, 14.40.609. Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY

NOTES

- [1] I would like to thank Quint Gregory for helping reconstruct this provenance.
- [2] Frank Simpson, "Dutch Paintings in England before 1760," *The Burlington Magazine* 95 (January 1953): 42.
- [3] The provenance of this painting was confused by 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), 6:176–177, no. 298, with that of another work owned by the Marchese Riccardi in Florence, where it was exhibited in 1737 and 1767. A description of the Riccardi painting in 1764 by Edward Gibbon clearly indicates that the composition was different. Edward Gibbon, *Gibbon's Journey from Geneva to Rome: His Journal from 20 April to 2 October 1764*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (London, 1961), 205, visited the Riccardi Palace in Florence on August 10, 1764, and saw, among other paintings he describes: "4. *Un Rembrandt. Une Vielle femme qui deplume une poule. Quel sujet mais quelle verité dans l'exécution. La Nature elle meme ne rendroit pas mieux la Vielle-elle-meme, les plumes de la poule, la corbeille où elle les recoit et le chauderon où elle doit la cuire, et assurément dans la nature je les verrois avec bien moins de plaisir.*"
- The Riccardi painting may have been acquired by Sir William Forbes, who bought many of his paintings in Italy. In the sale of his collection on June 2, 1842, he lists *An Old Woman Plucking a Fowl* by Rembrandt that had come from the collection of Count Lecchi at Brescia. The painting's dimensions were listed as 5 ft. 9 in. by 5 ft. 1 in. (175.3 x 154.9 cm), substantially larger than the painting in the National Gallery of Art. This painting then may have passed into the collection of Lord Clinton, who exhibited a work of this

description in Edinburgh in 1883. This painting's current location is not known.

- [4] Abraham Bredius, "On Two Paintings Usually Ascribed to Rembrandt," *The Burlington Magazine* 11 (June 1912): 164. None of the paintings so listed in the inventory, however, can be specifically identified with this work. See Walter L. Strauss and Marjon van der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents* (New York, 1979), 349–388, doc. 1656/12. For the dispute between Bredius and Charles Sedelmeyer about the attribution of this painting, see Catherine B. Scallen, *Rembrandt, Reputation, and the Practice of Connoisseurship* (Amsterdam, 2004), 233–234, 252, 367 note 75, 370 note 27.
- [5] F. Kleinberger, letter to the editor, *The Burlington Magazine* 11 (July 1912): 296–297.
- [6] Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, "Nieuw Ontdekte Rembrandts, II," *Onze Kunst* 22 (December 1912): 178–180.
- [7] See inventory no. A 3981 from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; see inventory no. 1561 from the Gemäldegalerie, Dresden.
- [8] Partial X-radiographs of the painting exist (head, left hand, and dead fowl) [see X-radiography]. They reveal that the surface is very worn, suggesting that the eighteenth-century overpainting was necessitated by reasons of condition rather than of aesthetics.
- [9] Wilhelm R. Valentiner, *Rembrandt: Wiedergefundene Gemälde (1910–1920)*, 2nd ed., *Klassiker der Kunst in Gesamtausgaben* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1923), pl. 50: "dabei wurden einzelne wesentliche Teile ergänzt."
- [10] As late as 1966 Jakob Rosenberg still maintained that the dead fowl had been painted by Rembrandt (letter, April 25, 1966, in NGA curatorial files).
- [11] Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 5 vols. (Landau in der Pfalz, 1983), 4:2364, no. 1592b, 2374 repro.
- [12] Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 5 vols. (Landau in der Pfalz, 1983), 4:2365, no. 1595, 2377 repro. Bernhard Schnackenburg, in Christopher Brown, Jan Kelch, and Pieter van Thiel, *Rembrandt: The Master and His Workshop: Paintings* (New Haven and London, 1991), 371, however, argues that the painting is too good for Van der Pluym, and attributes it to Nicolaes Maes (Dutch, 1634 - 1693) with a date of c. 1650. I find the attribution to Maes unconvincing.
- [13] Abraham Bredius, "Darf die Kritik sich nicht mit Bildern in Privatbesitz befassen?" *Kunstchronik* 24, no. 20 (February 1913), noted that in 1676 "een hoenderwyff van Drost" was in the Spaarrough Collection in Amsterdam.
- [14] Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 5 vols. (Landau in der Pfalz, 1983), 2:1387–1417, discusses Horst; Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 5 vols. (Landau in der Pfalz, 1983), 1:666–711, discusses

Van Dyck; and Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 5 vols. (Landau in der Pfalz, 1983), 1:652–665, discusses Dullaert.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The medium-weight, plain-weave fabric support consists of two pieces seamed vertically at the left. It has been lined with the tacking margins trimmed. Diagonal marks from a tool used to apply the thick white ground are visible in the X-radiographs. The paint was applied both thickly and thinly in dry opaque pastes, with colored glazes applied over lighter base tones. Dry brushstrokes of varying length create impasto in light areas, such as the feathers. Extensive glazing was employed in the dark passages to model forms and shadows, and impart a dark, glowing appearance.

Thin paint layers and glazes, particularly in the dark passages, are severely abraded and covered by discolored inpainting. The extent of repaint is difficult to determine precisely due to the heavy, discolored surface coating. An old lining was removed and the painting was relined, varnished, and inpainted in 1956-1957. The painting had previously been treated by Professor A. Hauser in 1912 and, based on photographs, possibly one other time between 1912 and its acquisition in 1956.[1] It is interesting to note that in a mezzotint of the painting from the mid-eighteenth century both of the woman's hands are visible above the fowl, but in photographs taken after the 1912 restoration, the woman's proper left hand is no longer depicted. Hofstede de Groot wrote that Hauser noted that both of the woman's hands were overpainted.[2] Presumably, the woman's left hand was entirely a later fabrication and, consequently, Hauser removed it.

[1] See the entry text for more information about the restorations prior to 1956.

[2] Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, "Nieuw Ontdekte Rembrandts, II," *Onze Kunst* 22 (December 1912): 178–180.

PROVENANCE

Possibly Willem Six [1662-1733], Amsterdam;[1] possibly (his estate sale, Amsterdam, 12 May 1734, no. 170); possibly Wilkins. Possibly John(?) or W.(?) Blackwood; possibly (his sale, Mr. Prestage, London, unknown dates in 1757, 2nd day, no. 70).[2] Francis Charteris, de jure 7th earl of Wemyss [1723-1808], Gosford House, Longniddry, East Lothian, Scotland; Ralph Willett [1719-1795], Great Canford, Dorset; bequeathed to his cousin, John Willett Adye [d. 1815], who later assumed the surname Willett in lieu of Adye; (his sale, Peter Coxe & Co., London, 31 May-2 June 1813, 2nd day, no. 62, bought in); (sale, Christie's, London, 8 April 1819, no. 124); Anthony Stewart [1773-1846], London; sold to Andrew Geddes [1789-1844], London, by December 1820; (sale, Christie & Manson, London, 23 May 1835, no. 94, bought in); by inheritance to his wife, Mrs. Andrew Geddes; (Geddes estate sale, Christie & Manson, London, 8-12 and 14 April 1845, 5th day [12 April], no. 646, bought in); (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 30 November 1867, no. 53); (Alimonde).[3] Étienne-Edmond Martin, baron de Beurnonville [1825-1906]; (his sale, by Paul Chevallier, Paris, 3 June 1884 and days following, no. 295). Madame Levaigreur, Paris; (her estate sale, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 2-4 May 1912, no. 29); (F. Kleinberger & Co., Paris and New York); (Kleinberger sale, American Art Association, New York, 18 November 1932, no. 50); (L.J. Marion); Dr. and Mrs. Walter Timme, Cold Spring, New York; gift 1956 to NGA.

[1] Francis Kleinberger, letter to the editor, *The Burlington Magazine* 11 (July 1912): 296–297, reconstructs much of the earlier provenance of the painting, through the 1912 sale, based on “the researches of Mr. W. Roberts.” His account does not include the 1757 Blackwood sale, and instead speculates that Charteris might have acquired the painting on the continent during his tour from 1739 to 1744.

[2] This information comes from a two-volume manuscript in the library of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, containing transcripts of collection and sale catalogues from the years 1711 to 1759; these volumes are partially examined by Frank Simpson, “Dutch Paintings in England before 1760,” *The Burlington Magazine* 95 (January 1953): 42.

[3] Helen Smailes, *Andrew Geddes, 1783–1844, Painting-Printmaker, “A Man of Pure Taste”*, Edinburgh, 2001: 49–50, 113 n. 76.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1861 British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom, London, 1861, no. 17.

1930 The Thirteenth Loan Exhibition of Old Masters. Paintings by Rembrandt, Detroit Institute of Arts, 1930, no. 31.

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To cite: Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Anonymous Artist, Rembrandt van Rijn/*Old Woman Plucking a Fowl*/1650/1655," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions, <http://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/43512> (accessed April 24, 2014).