The Golden Chain: Rembrandt's Cologne *Self-Portrait*, or The Tragicomic Excellence of Painting

La Chaîne en or : l'Autoportrait de Rembrandt au Musée de Cologne, ou l'excellence tragicomique de la peinture

La Catenella d'oro: l'Autoritratto di Rembrandt al Museo di Colonia ovvero la tragicomica eccellenza della pittura

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THE GOLDEN CHAIN:
REMBRANDT'S COLOGNE *SELF-PORTRAIT*,
OR THE TRAGICOMIC EXCELLENCE OF PAINTING*

Lorenzo Pericolo

“Were Democritus still on earth, he would laugh; whether it were some hybrid monster—a panther crossed with a camel—or a white elephant that drew the eyes of the crowd—he would gaze more intently on the people than on the play itself, as giving him more by far worth looking at. But for the authors—he would suppose that they were telling their tale to a deaf ass.”¹

The Laughing Painter

Scholars now tend to agree that in the *Self-Portrait* at the Wallraf-Richartz Museum² (Cologne, 1660s) Rembrandt depicted himself as Zeuxis, the

* This essay is dedicated to an exceptional woman, Laura Malvano, with whom I had the privilege to work, and from whom I benefitted enormously. All of the translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

1. HORACE, *Epistles*, II.2, in *Satires, Epistles, and Ars Poetica*, ed. H. Rushton Fairclough, London and Cambridge MA, Heinemann and Harvard University Press, 1970, pp. 194–200: “Si foret in terris, rideret Democritus seu / Diversum confusa genus panthera camelo / Sive elephans albus volgi converteret ora; / Spectaret populum ludis attentius ipsis / Ut sibi praeberentem nimio spectacula plura: / Scriptores autem narrare putaret asello / Fabellam surdo.”

2. For the painting, see E. van de WETERING, *Stichting Foundation-Rembrandt Research Project: A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings IV*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2005, pp. 551–61 (IV, 25). I do not agree with De Wetering's dating of the picture to the early 1660s. De Wetering adduces two reasons to this chronology: Arent De Gelder's familiarity with the picture and his presence in Rembrandt's workshop between 1661 and 1663; the technical affinities between the Cologne *Self-Portrait* and Rembrandt's 1663 *Homer* (Mauritshuis, The Hague). As I will point out later in my essay, De Gelder's familiarity with Rembrandt's composition is not so compelling as to postulate that Rembrandt executed the Cologne *Self-Portrait* during De Gelder's apprenticeship. As for the second argument it could be objected that, physically speaking, Rembrandt's effigy in the Cologne picture is more similar to those represented in later self-portraits, as for instance the one in Florence (Galleria degli Uffizi), painted around 1667–9. A. BLANKERT, “Rembrandt, Zeuxis, and Ideal Beauty”, in J. BRUYN, J. A. EMMENS,

renowned Greek painter, laughing to death while portraying a hideous hag (fig. 1). Yet, until recently the picture had for many years been interpreted in diverse ways: Rembrandt impersonating the ever-grinning Democritus (Wolfgang Stechow),³ and Rembrandt bitterly smiling in front of Death's terminus (Jan Bialostocki).⁴ Although I am thoroughly persuaded that the Cologne *Self-Portrait* truly and overall likens Rembrandt to Zeuxis for reasons I will expound further on, I also believe that one risks misunderstanding Rembrandt by considering that his paintings' subjects can be construed univocally, labeled with a definitive title, and pigeonholed within a well-established genre. By doing so, in my view, one bypasses or—this is no pun—passes by Rembrandt. Indeterminacy,⁵ in fact, is one of the master's pictorial trademarks, so that through his self-depiction as a laughing elder, Rembrandt could allude to Zeuxis's fatal laughter as well as to Democritus' attitude toward mankind. In the same respect, the elongation of his sitter's torso on the canvas in the Cologne picture conveys a notion of magnificence that may conjure up the monumentality of an ancient terminus, or a parody thereof. More precisely, the complexity of the Cologne *Self-Portrait* rests on the master's blend of various modes, formulas, and iconographies that might have literally clashed with each other, causing incomprehension, had Rembrandt not ingeniously struck the delicate balance of their mutual coexistence.

Specifically with regard to Rembrandt's numerous self-portraits, it is imperative to chart their various and complex interplays in order to thoroughly grasp Rembrandt's intentions. Perhaps oblivious to the frequency with which a particular attribute—the golden chain, present also in the Cologne *Self-Portrait*—recurs in the pervasive network of Rembrandt's self-depictions, many scholars have underestimated or disregarded a theme essential to most of these pictures: that of the excellence of painting.

E. de JONGH, and D. P. SNOEP (eds), *Album Amicorum J. G. van Gelder*, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1973, pp. 32–9, was the first to posit that Rembrandt represented himself as Zeuxis. This essay has been reprinted in A. BLANKERT, *Selected Writings on Dutch Painters: Rembrandt, Van Beke, Vermeer and Others*, Zwolle, Waanders, 2004.

3. W. STECHOW, "Rembrandt-Democritus", *Art Quarterly*, 7 (1944), pp. 232–8. Stechow relies on the intuition of F. SCHMIDT-DEGENER, *Rembrandt tentoonstelling: ter herdenking van de plechtige opening van het Rijksmuseum op 13 juli 1885*, exh. cat., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, 1935, 50, nr. 38.

4. J. BIALOSTOCKI, "Rembrandt's *Terminus*", *Wallraf-Richartz Jahrbuch*, 28 (1966), pp. 49–60. For a different interpretation of the painting, see F. VONNESSEN, "Selbstporträt und Selbsterkenntnis: Zu Rembrandts Selbstdarstellung als Lachender Alter", *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 37 (1992), pp. 123–52.

5. For indeterminacy in Rembrandt's painting see L. PERICOLO, "Nude in Motion: Rembrandt's *Danae* and the Indeterminacy of the Subject", in A. NAGEL and L. PERICOLO (eds), *Subject as Aporia in Early Modern Art*, London, Ashgate, 2009. See also the still compelling essay by Ch. TÜMPPEL, "Studien zur Ikonographie der Historien Rembrandts", *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, 20 (1969), pp. 107–98.

Fig. 1. – Rembrandt's Cologne *Self-Portrait*.

Rembrandt either brings this topic up to the surface clearly or keeps it lurking surreptitiously and allusively underneath. I will return to the golden chain shortly, but as a preliminary note, I would like to stress that curiously enough, Rembrandt never addressed the issue of excellence publicly. When he started as a painter, Constantijn Huyghens declared that Rembrandt and his colleague Jan Lievens were destined to equal or surpass the past's great masters, albeit each in a separate field. Rembrandt

excelled in expression, which implied that he was well poised to reign in history painting, art's supreme category at the time.⁶ Since these events all occurred before Rembrandt settled in Amsterdam, and because he stopped painting for the court at The Hague at an early stage of his career, scholars have surmised that he had given up altogether on history painting, and hence on the social and intellectual supremacy engendered by its practice. However, despite his profuse production of portraits, Rembrandt continued throughout his life to deal with subjects that, though treated with the utmost unorthodoxy, plainly belonged to history painting. Unlike his colleagues or former apprentices, he never indulged in genre-scenes, and even as he actualized a mythological or historical episode, he always resorted to a type of theatrical apparel that contributed to, yet paradoxically inhibited, actualization.⁷

In the light of these elements, it is of paramount importance to understand how Rembrandt conceived of his profession. Would he have defined himself as a history painter? Only the self-portraits may answer this question with a certain degree of plausibility. Of course, it is highly predictable that Rembrandt's notion of himself as a painter evolved over time, and it is clear to me that the very process of self-definition that he underwent by portraying himself relentlessly until his death carried within it not only tensions and oscillations, but also unsolvable contradictions. Therefore, by dwelling on the Cologne picture, I will be able to approach but a small part of this vast problematic. Nevertheless, I hope that this essay will elucidate how tragically contradictory Rembrandt's quest for artistic identity was, especially at the end of his life.

Seventeenth-century Dutch artists rarely represented themselves laughing. When they did so, they constantly depicted themselves as comic actors, and therefore as practitioners of comedy in painting. In his *Self-Portrait as a Lutenist* (Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Madrid), executed around 1663–65—and almost contemporary to the Cologne picture—Jan Steen features himself as a jester playing a lute, guffawing unabashedly in front of the viewer.⁸ As Mariët Westermann has pointed out, the oblique posture of Steen's head, in addition to his unrestrained smile, are specific to the representation of comic features and actors, as evinced respectively by

6. A. H. KAN, *De jeugd van Constantijn Huygens door hemzelf beschreven*, Rotterdam, A. Donker, 1946, pp. 78–81.

7. For the related notions of theater and studio in Rembrandt's painting, see S. ALPERS, *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988.

8. See G. M. C. JANSEN (ed.), *Jan Steen: Painter and Storyteller*, exh. cat., Washington DC, National Gallery of Art, 1996, pp. 180–2, and *ibid.*, H. P. CHAPMAN, "Player in his Own Paintings", pp. 11–23.

Frans Hals' famous *Peeckelhaering* (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Kassel), and Barendt Graat's *Portrait of Jan Pietersz. Meerhuysen, Nicknamed Jan Tamboer*.⁹ It is noteworthy that, in Steen's picture, any reference to painting has been obliterated, so that it is impossible to recognize that the person represented in it handled the brush. More interesting, in my opinion, is Steen's *Self-Portrait* at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (c. 1670), and particularly what transpires from its infrared reflectogram: before representing himself in a rather serious countenance, Steen obviously depicted his face wider as an effect of his joyous smiling, his eyebrows arching low over his eyes.¹⁰ Evidently, Steen came to the conclusion that the very smile connoting him as a comic painter was intrinsically at odds with his self-depiction as a respectable burgher. In any event, Steen proves to be less bold than Rembrandt when it comes to self-representation: either he disguises himself as a jester or, if evoking his public persona, he doffs the merry attire of his risible actors.

To be sure, Rembrandt began to reproduce himself laughing at the dawn of his career. In 1630, he issued a set of four etched self-portraits punctuated by different expressions: wide-eyed, angry, open-mouthed and, of course, smiling, his teeth largely exhibited, his eyes half-closed.¹¹ It has been opportunely observed that the etchings reflect studio practices endorsed, among others, by Karel van Mander in *Den grondt der edel vry schilder-const* (1604).¹² In other words, Rembrandt donned various "masks" in front of the mirror with a view of both identifying himself with the characters he would represent in history paintings, and improving his technical skills of expression. From this perspective, this set of self-portraits mark Rembrandt less—if at all—as a comic painter than as a universal interpreter of human "affects": properly speaking, these etchings proclaim Rembrandt's ability and excellence in history painting, and thereby echo Huyghens's appraisal of the young master.

Later on, but always at an early stage of his production, Rembrandt depicted himself in his *Self-Portrait in Gorget*, a painting recently rediscovered, whose composition is also reproduced in an eighteenth-century

9. M. WESTERMANN, *The Amusements of Jan Steen: Comic Painting in the Seventeenth-Century*, Zwolle, Waanders, 1997, p. 114, and the entire chapter pp. 89–135.

10. See G. M. C. JANSEN (ed.), *Jan Steen: Painter and Story Teller*, pp. 228–30.

11. See Ch. WHITE and Q. BUVELOT (eds), *Rembrandt by Himself*, exh. cat., London, Thames and Hudson, 1999, pp. 125–8, nrs. 20–23. For the general issue, see H. P. CHAPMAN, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Identity*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 12–21.

12. K. van MANDER, *Den grondt der edel vry schilder-const*, ed. Hessel Miedema, Utrecht, Haentjens Dekker & Gumbert, 1973, I, pp. 166–9.

engraving by Lambertus Antonius Claessens.¹³ Here, Rembrandt's source of inspiration is undoubtedly Hals's *Peeckelhaering*:¹⁴ the three-quarter view of the torso, the right arm akimbo, whereas the left, bent, is oriented forward (though covered with a mantle in Rembrandt's painting), and the head tilted over the twisted neck—all of these elements corroborate the kinship. As a self-portrait, Rembrandt's image incorporates a nuance of ambivalence unknown to Hals's picture. Bust and shoulders loaded with a metallic gorget, Rembrandt tilts his head up and sideways not only in response to the beholder—whom he clearly lures into laughing—but also to himself as reflected in the mirror before him. Put otherwise, the *Self-Portrait in Gorget* encompassed a notion of artistic self-irony that was unique at the time. And indeed, the soldier does not only incarnate the mere essence of patriotism—as Chapman highlighted—but he also belongs to a stock of comic characters. Like Jan Steen's *Self-Portrait as a Lutenist*, but much earlier, Rembrandt's depiction of himself as a laughing soldier thus qualifies its maker and sitter as a comic actor as opposed to a practitioner of history painting. Indirectly, Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait in Gorget* inverted the concept of artistic excellence as celebrated in many a self-portrait by his contemporaries: it is a real, albeit ephemeral, attack against the highest category of art, and—though in an amused register—it certainly voices an undeniable detachment from the idea of artistic and social superiority intrinsic to history painting. Analogously, a few years later, Rembrandt portrayed his refusal of moral excellence in his *Self-Portrait as the Prodigal Son with Saskia* (Gemäldegalerie, Dresden).¹⁵

For the sake of clarity, it must be underscored that Rembrandt's rebellions against the paradigm of artistic, social, and moral excellence current at his time are rather sporadic, and were never carried out in a systematic manner. At will, Rembrandt would invest his own effigy with the rank of a gentleman courtier, with the dignity of a king, or with the ridiculousness of a soldier. Much could be—and has been—said about Rembrandt's Proteus-like identities, or his pictorial evanescence. But discussing this issue would constitute a major digression. For the time being, I will content myself with arguing that in the Cologne picture, Rembrandt unearthed a

13. An interesting essay by Gary Schwartz on this oil on copper signed "RHL" (23.7 x 17 cm) can be read at <www.garyschwartzarthistorian.nl/schwartzlist/?id=121>. See also CHAPMAN, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

14. See S. SLIVE, *Frans Hals*, exh. cat., Munich, Prestel, 1989, pp. 216–9, nr. 31.

15. J. BRUYN, B. HAAK, S. H. LEVIE, P. J. J. van THIEL, and E. van de WETERING, *Stichting Foundation-Rembrandt Research Project: A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings III*, Dordrecht, Nijhoff, 1989, pp. 134–47, nr. A III. See also CHAPMAN, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits*, *op. cit.*, pp. 114–20, and E. van de WETERING, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings IV*, *op. cit.*, pp. 217–32.

theme of self-representation that he had buried for thirty years or so: once again and for the last time, he depicted himself as both a comic actor and painter. This time, the message is spelled out loud and clear: the comic character Rembrandt is playing out here is indeed an artist, and as such he appears beside an unfinished canvas, holding a maulstick, and sporting a golden medal. The presence of these artistic paraphernalia radically changes the perception of Rembrandt's laughing effigy: his laughter is also addressed to the surrounding objects, which could metaphorically replace the globe specific to another paradigmatic grinning figure of the pictorial tradition, the philosopher Democritus.¹⁶ As the old Democritus traditionally laughs at the world often pointing a hilariously accusing finger—see for instance the *Democritus* attributed to Johannes Moreelse in the Art Institute, Chicago—so too does Rembrandt, through his maulstick, indicate the canvas nearby as the object of his laughter.

There is no doubt that, intuitively, a seventeenth-century Dutch beholder could have associated Rembrandt's smiling face with Democritus's. The Greek philosopher was a well-known feature of contemporary Dutch comic literature. In 1665—that is, around the time or before Rembrandt executed the Cologne *Self-Portrait*—Democritus featured on the title page of a jest book, *Den nieuwen clucht-vertelder*. As Westermann has already noted, comic actors were often assimilated to the Greek philosopher in Rembrandt's Amsterdam: "like Democritus, it [their image] invites everyone to laugh".¹⁷ In the 1665 title page, Democritus holds a booklet, while hinting that it is the cause of his hilarity. Of course, the book at issue is the very *Den nieuwen clucht-vertelder* on which Democritus is depicted. It bears underlining that the picture-within-the-picture of the booklet on the title page corresponds to the depiction of the canvas in the Cologne *Self-Portrait*. Put otherwise, Rembrandt's smiling effigy accomplishes the function of a laughing Democritus: it engages the beholder to laugh at the portrait on the canvas. But exactly why? And is it only

16. For the laughing Democritus, his representation and meaning see E. WIND, "The Christian Democritus", *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, 1 (1937), pp. 180–2; C. E. LUTZ, "Democritus and Heraclitus", *Classical Journal*, 49 (1954), pp. 309–14; A. BLANKERT, "Heraclitus en Democritus bij Marsilio Ficino", *Simiolus*, 1 (1966–7), pp. 128–35; R. W. WALLACE, "Salvator Rosa's *Democritus* and L'Umana Fragilità", *Art Bulletin*, 50 (1968), pp. 21–32; D. KIANG, "Heraclitus and Democritus: The Frieze", *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 51 (1988), pp. 262–8; Ch. LÜTHY, "The Fourfold Democritus on the Stage of Early Modern Science", *Isis*, 91 (2000), pp. 443–79 (especially 455–61); N. GALLEY, "Cornelis Ketel: A Painter Without a Brush", *Artibus et Historiae*, pp. 87–100 (2004). For the representation of Democritus by Hendrick ter Brugghen, see L. J. SLATKES and W. FRANITS, *The Paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen 1588–1629: Catalogue Raisonné*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 2007, pp. 136–40, nrs. A 39, A 41. For the representation of Democritus by Johannes Moreelse, see J. DE MEYERE, *Utrechtse Schilderkunst in den Gouden Eeuw*, exh. cat., Utrecht, Matrijs, 2006, pp. 309–15.

17. See WESTERMANN, *The Amusements of Jan Steen*, op. cit., p. 114.

the fragmentary canvas that is the cause of laughter, or is the grinning Rembrandt as laughable as the rest? Here lies the main difference between the Democritus theme as interpreted in the early modern tradition and Rembrandt's self-representation as a new Democritus. Consider the Cologne picture: the old master bows over the canvas, his head bending forward. Apparently fortuitous, this detail is nevertheless substantial. In most cases, the comic actor is represented with his head thrust upon his shoulder—and not lowered over the bust—thereby channeling the viewer's gaze upward: the beholder's eyes are raised, as his or her spirit should be. In the Cologne picture, the head's orientation brings the viewer's gaze back toward the painting's surface: only the tilted beret aims toward the top, particularly toward the face left unachieved—and brutally cropped—on the canvas nearby. As in his youthful self-portraits, through his posture in the Cologne picture Rembrandt makes the beholder imagine—or even perceive—the picture's surface as a mirror: as if it were a transparent diaphragm between the painter regarding himself and the viewer on the other side. Accordingly, Rembrandt's smiling figure is not only stirring the spectator's laughter by revealing the foolishness of the sitter who is being portrayed; the master is also laughing at himself in the mirror, thereby making himself the conscious and primary object of laughter in a triangular relationship involving the beholder, himself, and the personage on the canvas. Who or what is then represented in this obscure portion of the Cologne picture? It is time to focus on this point. Yet, before further scrutinizing the painting, it is necessary to admit that the Cologne *Self-Portrait* presents itself as a contradictory work with regard to its genre. At first glance a comic effigy, the old Rembrandt in the painting wears a golden medal that betrays his lofty and earnest status as a history painter. Rather than belonging to comedy, this *Self-Portrait* seems to fit better within a heterogeneous category, tragicomedy: that is, a disguised parody of a noble, historical subject.¹⁸ However, the allusion to Zeuxis's absurd death—brought about by an excess of laughter—tinges the Cologne picture with a definite note of tragedy.

Rembrandt as Zeuxis

In 1973, Albert Blankert correctly noted that Arent de Gelder, one of Rembrandt's most devoted pupils, imitated his master's Cologne picture

18. For a definition of tragicomedy in Dutch seventeenth-century painting, see *Ibid.*, pp. 278–312.

by depicting himself in 1685 at work on the portrait of an old lady (Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main) (fig. 2). Blankert's interpretation of De Gelder's painting is irrefutable. Relying on an ancient anecdote reported by both Karel van Mander (*Het Schilder-boek*, 1604)¹⁹ and Samuel van Hoogstraaten (*Inleyding tot the hooge schoole der schilder-konst*, 1678),²⁰ Blankert came to the conclusion that De Gelder represented himself as Zeuxis, who died of laughing at the ugliness of an old woman that he was portraying at the time. From this conclusion, Blankert also inferred that Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait* in Cologne represented the same subject. To support his claim, Blankert pointed out that in the 1761 edition of *London and Its Environments Described*, the Cologne picture, then in Sampson Gideon's collection at Belvedere House, was described as "Rembrandt painting an old woman".²¹ In Blankert's opinion, the portrait's eighteenth-century owners were thus aware of its true subject and thereby of Rembrandt's disguise as Zeuxis. Consequently, Blankert hypothesized that the Cologne painting was just a fragment of a larger composition, most similar to De Gelder's picture in Frankfurt. Laboratory analyses have confirmed that the canvas was cropped at the upper corners at an indeterminate time, and that two subsequent additions were painted in order to fill in these lacunae.²² Yet, it is highly unlikely, if not impossible, that the painting was significantly wider than it is now. In sum, Rembrandt never intended to represent a sitter to the left, as De Gelder did later. Due to De Gelder's familiarity with Rembrandt's painting, one feels compelled to agree with Blankert, though partially, and not on his whole reading. It is undeniable that De Gelder expanded on Rembrandt's invention. To take on his master's posture in the Cologne painting, he imagined himself in an awkward posture: he is about to stand up, yet is slightly hunched over a table strewn with his implements, his brushes and maulstick bundled up within the grip of his left hand, whose heel simultaneously wields the palette. Even if the gesture of De Gelder's other hand is difficult to decipher—is he rubbing down the tip of a brush?—it is obvious that the artist tried laboriously to provide Rembrandt's elusive pose in the Cologne picture with narrative consistency.

19. K. van MANDER, *Het Schilderboek*, Haarlem, 1604: note to fol. 301.

20. S. van HOOGSTRAATEN, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilder-konst anders de zichtbaere werelt*, Rotterdam, 1678, pp. 78, 110.

21. BLANKERT, "Rembrandt, Zeuxis and Ideal Beauty", art. cit., p. 34.

22. E. van de WETERING, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings IV*, op. cit., p. 554.

Fig. 2. – De Gelder's *Self-Portrait as Zeuxis*.

Blankert also postulated that De Gelder was familiar with Rembrandt's original version of the *Cologne Self-Portrait*, now visible through X-rays. At a previous stage, Rembrandt's right hand seemingly holds the brush over the canvas as if the excessive laughter prevents him momentarily from painting. If this were the case, De Gelder would have adopted his master's solution for the right hand, which is more natural and congruous than his. In any event, he certainly preserved the original orientation of Rembrandt's maulstick, albeit mechanically. Rembrandt's idea of creating an inexplicable link between himself and the figure on the unfinished canvas was lost on De Gelder. I would like to stress this point. It demonstrates that De Gelder did not copy, but rather interpreted, Rembrandt's painting. Put otherwise, he caught his master's allusion to Zeuxis, and reconstructed what he deemed was missing: the ungraceful hag. To this comical figure, he added the golden apple of discord from the mythical beauty contest between Olympian goddesses. Therefore, De Gelder rendered even more explicit the drollness of the old woman, who shamelessly

poses with the apple's oxymoronic symbol. All of these factors confirm that De Gelder sought to clarify the obscurities of Rembrandt's painting: he normalized what looked unconventional in his master's work.

Yet, on closer analysis, De Gelder's painting fails to explain many of Rembrandt's ambiguities. For one thing, there is no certainty that the figure portrayed in the Cologne self-portrait is a woman, as Blankert peremptorily states. If one visualizes the painting cropped at the upper left corner, and tries to make out the sitter's identity and gender, one realizes that the only clue offered by Rembrandt resides in the glowing chain dangling majestically over the figure's bust. Strands of a golden necklace, albeit difficult to detect, also seem to loop around its neck. Judging from these attributes, and considering the sitter's heavy and partial features, an eighteenth-century viewer might have easily deduced that Rembrandt meant to depict an "old woman". However, I do not believe that the 1761 description of Rembrandt's picture qualifies as evidence of the painting's subject. In this regard, I must mention Perry Chapman's alternative interpretation of the figure on the canvas. Without underpinning her thesis, she suggested in her 1990 seminal monograph on Rembrandt's self-portraits:

The face [Rembrandt] laughs at, like the mortality he accepts, is his own. [...] Looking in the mirror, he laughs at himself and, perhaps, at the irony of his life-long self-portrayal, which, meaningless in the face of death, can assure him only earthly immortality.²³

Is it then possible that Rembrandt represented himself as depicting his effigy in the Cologne picture, and therefore invented a sophisticated *mise-en-abîme* of his own portrayal? And if so, why did he blur his features on the canvas to the point of apparent misrecognition? If one investigates the picture in search of a specific identity to assign to Rembrandt's sitter, one will inevitably end up in a hermeneutic impasse, from which one can extricate oneself only through an act of faith: at first glance, an old lady or Rembrandt are indeed equally eligible for identification. In this event, however, one would not follow the hints of self-characterization left by Rembrandt in the painting. The only element that distinguishes the enigmatic figure on Rembrandt's canvas-within-the-canvas is the gold chain shining in the darkness, pointed to discreetly by a prodigiously-aloft maulstick. It is this attribute that enables us to assert who or what causes Rembrandt's lethal laughter, ultimately assimilating him to the glorious, yet unfortunate Zeuxis.

23. P. CHAPMAN, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits*, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

As explained by many scholars, the gold chain, with or without a medalion, is a token of artistic excellence. Hoogstraten, Rembrandt's pupil, declares in his *Inleyding*:

Similarly, just as brave warriors and victorious soldiers were honored with triumphal wreaths and laurels, so has [the present of a gold chain] remained the custom among noble-hearted princes when they see one artist surpassing others.²⁴

It is absolutely unnecessary here to insist on the association in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries between the golden chain and artistic supremacy, as it has been overwhelmingly confirmed and widely acknowledged. There is no doubt that Rembrandt, too, regarded this attribute as the sign of the painter's excellence and social status. As I will show later on, Rembrandt represented himself several times wearing a golden chain, and Perry Chapman has justly interpreted its reiterated depiction in the self-portraits as evidence of the painter's profound concern for artistic supremacy.²⁵ Yet, Marieke de Winkel has recently objected to this argument by claiming that the golden chain is nothing but a studio prop, an item exhibited by numerous figures in Rembrandt's pictures, without any specific connotation.²⁶ At best, she thinks, it denoted solely Rembrandt's assimilation of himself into Amsterdam's high bourgeoisie.

It is easy to understand why De Winkel has considered Rembrandt's golden chain in the self-portraits with skepticism: unlike Titian, Rubens or Van Dyck, Rembrandt never received this princely gift. Instead of suspecting the painter of self-aggrandizement, it is perhaps preferable to downplay the importance and meaning of the golden chain. Nonetheless, this explanation leaves the question far from being satisfactorily resolved. Suppose that the gold chain is simply a studio prop. Is it a coincidence that, in addition to highly ranked sitters, protagonists of Rembrandt's

24. HOOGSTRAATEN, *Inleyding*, p. 356, quoted in C. BRUSATI, *Artifice and Illusion: The Art and Writing of Samuel van Hoogstraaten*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 147. For the meaning of the golden chain, see *Ibid.*, pp. 138–51.

25. P. CHAPMAN, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits*, *op. cit.*, pp. 62–9. For the golden chain in seventeenth-century Flanders, see J. PEACOCK, *The Look of Van Dyck: The Self-Portrait with a Sunflower and the Vision of the Painter*, London, Ashgate, 2006, with abundant bibliography.

26. M. de WINKEL, *Fashion and Fancy: Dress and Meaning in Rembrandt's Painting*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2006, p. 169: "The highly fanciful, often jeweled chains draped horizontally over the shoulder's in Rembrandt's self-portraits are similar to the ones worn by historical and biblical figures in his work. [...] The way these chains are draped horizontally closely resembles the way they were worn in the early sixteenth century. Until around 1540, the chain was used in this way to give the desired broadening of the silhouette, as seen in both portraits and history pieces from the period. Given that chains draped like this are seen with widely different historical figures in Rembrandt's work, it seems unlikely that their significance relates solely to the iconography of the artist. Like the bonnet, the chain appears to be part of the historicising costume that was based on fashionable dress at the beginning of the sixteenth century."

history paintings sport it? By donning a golden chain in the guise of a Renaissance dignitary or an Old-Testament monarch, Rembrandt surely projected his own image into a nobler, more idealistic dimension. Even if one rules out the possibility that the chain symbolizes artistic excellence, it remains unquestionable that the attribute in and of itself magnifies Rembrandt's persona: the painter's image transcends actuality and metaphorically displaces itself into an indefinite in-between locus, neither past nor present. Put bluntly, any attempt at dismissing the golden chain in Rembrandt's self-portraits as a fanciful adornment is inconclusive, since its presence definitely involves an effect of self-projection and ennoblement on the painter's part.

If this conclusion is unavoidable, then it is legitimate to wonder if one can define with more precision the function that this item accomplishes in Rembrandt's self-portraits. In this regard, I will introduce two paintings by two pupils of Rembrandt's: a 1645 *Self-Portrait* by Samuel van Hoogstraaten (Vaduz Castle, Vaduz), and a 1647 *Self-Portrait* by Ferdinand Bol (Museum of Art, Toledo). In the Vaduz painting, a young Hoogstraaten depicted himself wearing a gold chain and a medallion, the very tokens that he would relate to artistic excellence in his 1678 *Inleyding*. It is worth noting that in 1645 Hoogstraaten had not yet received the gold chain and medallion that the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand III would eventually offer him, and which he would proudly exhibit in his 1677 *Self-Portrait with Pen in Hand*.²⁷ The use of these attributes in 1645 thus expresses a yet unfulfilled ideal of artistic perfection. In the Toledo *Self-Portrait*,²⁸ Bol once again—it was not the first time, and would not be the last—borrowed a pictorial formula of self-representation inaugurated by Rembrandt in his famous 1640 *Self-Portrait* (National Gallery, London).²⁹ It is relevant that Bol inserted in his Toledo *Self-Portrait* an element that, whether implicit in his master's work or inexplicably omitted, he deemed integral to his self-celebration: the gold chain that, in the absence of any other pictorial epithet, attests to his being a painter of the loftiest class.

By cross-examining these testimonies, it becomes evident that the depiction of the golden chain was fraught with multi-layered implications. Apart from simply magnifying the sitter's status by supplying

27. For the Vaduz painting and the *Self-Portrait with the Pen in Hand*, see C. BRUSATI, *Artifice and Illusion*, *op. cit.*, pp. 42, 136–7.

28. See A. BLANKERT, *Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680): Rembrandt's Pupil*, Doornspijk, Davaco, 1982, p. 118, nr. 61; A. BLANKERT, *Rembrandt: A Genius and His Impact*, exh. cat., Zwolle, Waanders, 1997, p. 248, fig. 45 b.

29. J. BRUYN, B. HAAK, S. H. LEVIE, P. J. J. van THIEL, and E. van de WETERING, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings III*, *op. cit.*, pp. 374–81, nr. A 139.

him with an a-historical aura, it embodied a notion of desirable or self-bestowed artistic excellence. More interestingly, the utopian nature of this token in the eyes of Rembrandt is reflected by the variety of ways in which he wears it in his self-portraits: adorning the neck (Pasadena), hanging at mid-bust with its center affixed to the coat (Liverpool) or girding the shoulders (Boston, and two in Paris); duplicated at mid-bust (Wallace, Madrid, Windsor and private collection) or drooping twice around the neck and below (Karlsruhe).³⁰ In two cases (Vienna and Kassel), the gold chain supports a medallion of a personage difficult to identify.³¹ This point is most relevant: as a princely present, the medallion usually reproduces the august effigy of its donor, denoting the recipient as his or her subject. The visual indeterminacy of Rembrandt's medallions (including the one in the Cologne *Self-Portrait*) declares the painter's independence from any authority thereby exalting his artistic excellence. All the examples I have just mentioned clearly confirm that the golden chain is a recurring, or even obsessive, feature of self-identification in Rembrandt's self-portraits. It visually encapsulates Rembrandt's notion of artistic excellence and high social status, and symbiotically inheres in his figure as a signifier. The more so—I would underscore—in the Cologne picture, since the old Rembrandt laughing in front of the viewer sports the regalia specific to his artistic supremacy: around the neck, a red ribbon with a medallion, and nearby a maulstick morphed into a scepter.

This last observation must not be read as a simple metaphor. In fact, in Rembrandt's self-portraits the maulstick tends to incorporate the meanings of both a cane and a scepter. Consider the superb 1658 *Self-Portrait* in the Frick Collection (New York).³² It has been justly noted that Rembrandt relied on Van Dyck's *Portrait of Martin Ryckaert*, engraved by Jacob Neefs, as a source of inspiration.³³ Aside from this model, I believe that an unfin-

30. J. BRUYN, B. HAAK, S. H. LEVIE, P. J. J. van THIEL, and E. van de WETERING, *Stichting Foundation-Rembrandt Research Project: A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings I*, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1982, pp. 218–24, nr. A. 20 (Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum), pp. 322–30, nr. A. 33 (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool); Id., *Stichting Foundation-Rembrandt Research Project: A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings II*, Dordrecht, Nijhoff, 1986, pp. 332–6, nr. A. 71 (Louvre, Paris), pp. 338–43, nr. A. 72 (Louvre, Paris); Id., *Stichting Foundation-Rembrandt Research Project: A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings III*, op. cit., pp. 612–8, nr. C. 96 (Wallace Collection, London), pp. 619–24, nr. C. 97 (Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena); van de WETERING, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings IV*, op. cit., pp. 353–60, nr. IV. 1 (Windsor Castle), pp. 361–70, nr. IV. 2 (Thyssen-Bornemisza Foundation, Madrid), pp. 371–7, nr. IV. 3 (Private Collection, Germany), pp. 385–93, nr. IV. 5 (Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe), p. 604, nr. III. C. 96 (Wallace Collection, London), pp. 605–8, nr. III. C. 97 (Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena).

31. Van de WETERING, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings IV*, op. cit., pp. 418–28, nr. IV. 9 (Staatliche Museen, Kassel), pp. 440–6, nr. IV. 11 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 460–8, nr. IV. 14.

33. See CHAPMAN, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits*, op. cit., p. 93.

ished print by Albrecht Dürer, *The Sultan*, aroused Rembrandt's imagination as well.³⁴ To be sure, Rembrandt avoided the hieratic frontal view of Dürer's figure and, following in Van Dyck's footsteps, shifted the viewpoint sideward by trimming the figure at thigh level. Despite these variations, he emulated the nearly symmetrical disposition of the sultan's arms. The left hand, protruding amid the mantel's folds, so akin to that in Dürer's print, deploys itself powerfully around an object that is a scepter, a maulstick and a cane at once, and which substitutes for the globe, a symbol of the sultan's earthly power. Perhaps not coincidentally, other regalia of Dürer's figure, the turban and the sword, absent in the Cologne picture, reappear in another late painting by Rembrandt, the 1661 *Self-Portrait as Saint Paul* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).³⁵ By visually likening his figure to Dürer's sultan, Rembrandt thus employed a device of aggrandizement in a view of self-celebration. In the Frick *Self-Portrait*, the indeterminacy with which Rembrandt's cane is pictorially brought forth—a glittering item eroded by darkness—permits the metaphorical transition from a walking instrument into both a tool of his profession (a maulstick) and a symbol of supremacy (the scepter). Paired with the medallion and even the flickering shawl around Rembrandt's shoulders, the maulstick likewise takes on the appearance of a scepter in the Cologne painting.

Furthermore, as in the Kenwood House *Self-Portrait* (around 1661), Rembrandt erases his hands here, as though the maulstick—or for that matter the palette and the brushes—were innate or in-built implements of his own body.³⁶ Yet, in the Kenwood House *Self-Portrait*, Rembrandt's robot-like figure suggests the assimilation of the painter with his profession: his left hand is metamorphosed into a mechanical, multi-purpose tool. On the contrary, in the Cologne picture the disappearance of the hand in favor of the maulstick enhances the effect of sovereignty, as if accordingly the portrait before the master could be executed without manual intervention. In this regard, it bears remarking upon an often-misread detail: the canvas' borders vanish in the painting, creating the uncanny impression of contiguousness between the painter and his sitter's image. Indeed, Bialostocki has firmly believed that Rembrandt depicted himself in front of a sculpture, and more precisely, Death's terminus. On the other hand, Rembrandt himself attenuated the effect of proximity between the

34. See R. SCHOCH, M. MENDE, and A. SCHERBAUM, *Albrecht Dürer: Das Druckgraphische Werk. Band I: Kupferstiche, Eisenradierungen und Kaltnadelblätter*, Munich, Prestel, 2001, pp. 50–2, nr. II.

35. Van de WETERING, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings IV*, *op. cit.*, pp. 541–50, nr. IV 24. See also P. CHAPMAN, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits*, *op. cit.*, pp. 120–7.

36. Van de WETERING, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings IV*, *op. cit.*, pp. 562–9, nr. IV 26.

figure on the canvas and himself by manipulating his sitter's proportions: his bust is elongated beyond likeliness, whereas his profile, albeit heavily caricatured, outlines a small face in comparison to Rembrandt's.

As a result, Rembrandt appears to lean in front of a depicted sitter who impersonates his opposite with respect to proportion: a strong-nosed, pointed-chinned relatively small head towering over an enormous torso onto which the golden chain clings. Between this disproportionate figure and himself, Rembrandt placed his maulstick-scepter as a visual link: not an instrument of painting, but an almost-regal vector of comparison. As a pointer, the maulstick thus evokes a relationship between the painter and the sitter on the invisible canvas: a relationship that goes beyond the physical act of painting, for—as I have already stressed—Rembrandt himself suppressed his hand and, previously, the brush.

Who is then depicted on that canvas? Before answering the question, it is appropriate to bear in mind that Rembrandt and his sitter on the canvas sport the two complementary parts of a precious attribute, a common denominator binding the two figures together in a conceptual manner: the gold chain dangling down over the sitter's bust, indicated by the maulstick through a subtle *chiaroscuro*, and the gold medal appended to the red ribbon around Rembrandt's neck.

Rather than giving a name to this enigmatic figure, I will start declaring what it represents: an ideal of artistic excellence, of social respectability, and probably of wealth and success that Rembrandt depicted over and over again in his self-portraits. It is no coincidence that the chain on the sketched figure and the medallion around Rembrandt's neck combine in some of the master's self-depictions. In the Cologne picture, instead, they are temporarily disjoined. Structurally, the personification of artistic supremacy and status summoned by Rembrandt here is forced into overstretching (its bust's disproportion) and parody (its caricatured features). In other words, the ideal of excellence it incarnates is not only unlikely or exaggerated, but also intrinsically susceptible to laughter. Therefore, Rembrandt—not only as a new Democritus, but also as a modern Zeuxis—is laughing to death at an old image of excellence that he had cherished throughout his life. There is something both tragic and comic in the way Rembrandt, adorned with his artistic regalia—the medallion and gold maulstick—turns to the viewer unrestrainedly laughing at his own self-projection on the canvas. Almost antithetically, the old master claims, denigrates and belies his artistic supremacy.

From this viewpoint, it is secondary to ascertain whether or not the figure on the canvas is Rembrandt himself. As in his ca. 1629 *Young Painter*

in His Studio (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), what is significant here is not the painter's specific identity, but his general characterization.³⁷ And indeed, in the Boston picture the painter may or may not be Rembrandt, although, as the deep holes of his eyes betray, the figure in front of the canvas with his palette and brushes presents the features specific to many of Rembrandt's early self-portraits. However, on closer scrutiny, it becomes clear that, in the Cologne picture, Rembrandt himself invites viewers to recognize his own features in the unknown sitter on the canvas: despite his caricatured traits, and aside from the gold chain, his nose in profile is the same as the laughing Rembrandt's, albeit observed from a different angle. In the end, both the Rembrandt on the canvas and the one in front of it are supplied with warped features: features that aging had obviously changed to the point of misrecognition. If one focuses on the X-rays of the Cologne picture, one is able to hypothetically reconstruct the work's genesis: Rembrandt, looking in the mirror, portrays himself on the canvas, the brush applied to it with diligence and seriousness. Then, as he contemplates his effigy in the mirror's portrait, an unrecognizable elder now, he laughs at himself; and, in laughing as a new Democritus, he remembers the fate of the greatest Zeuxis. From this thunderous intuition, he decided to develop a new concept on the canvas, depicting himself laughing endlessly at the man that he both was and had wanted to be: briefly, at the tragicomic impossibility of being a modern Zeuxis, a model of excellence in painting that he had contradictorily pursued throughout his entire life.

37. J. BRUYN, B. HAAK, S. H. LEVIE, P. J. J. van THIEL, and E. van de WETERING, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings I*, *op. cit.*, pp. 208–13, nr. A 18.