Back to Basics: Rembrandt and the Emergence of Modern Painting

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Regreso a los orígenes: Rembrandt y la emergencia de la pintura moderna

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Back to Basics: Rembrandt and the Emergence of Modern Painting

Mariët Westermann

In the opening paragraph of his book *Rembrandt and the Female Nude*, Eric Jan Sluijter charmingly confesses the belatedness of his interest in Holland's most famous artist. In 1976, when he was at the beginning of a distinguished career that would make him one of the leading voices in Dutch art history, Sluijter resisted working on Rembrandt: "At that time it was 'out' to study the masters of the old canon: every artist was equally important and painters that had been looked at with disdain by former generations of art historians were precisely for that reason all the more interesting. [...] At first I considered it my main task to bring to the fore neglected works of art, from painted wall hangings by unknown eighteenth-century artists, via depictions of mythological themes, to the art of the Leiden 'fine painters' and works by Hendrick Goltzius. For many years I did not dare to study an awe-inspiring figure like Rembrandt" (SLUIJTER, 2006, p. 9). This statement is not only an accurate summary of Sluijter's major contributions to the study of early modern Dutch art, but also gives insight into the condition of that field from the early 1970s until recently. The diversification of scholarly interest beyond Rembrandt and Vermeer to artists and types of art that had yet to enter the canon was a collective enterprise, shared by leading Dutch art historians such as Eddy de Jongh, Albert Blankert (BLANKERT, 2004), and Peter Hecht, as well as a growing cohort of scholars and graduate students in the United States, Germany, and Great Britain (for an analysis of this trend, see WESTERMANN, 2000a, 2002, 2009). Now, after decades of attending to the sorts of art and artists that motivated Sluijter's youthful inquiries, the most interesting scholars working on Dutch art of the Golden Age have returned to Rembrandt and transformative artists like him (fig. 1). Invigorated by intervening studies of less heralded artists and of systemic changes in the

1. Rembrandt,
*The blinding
of Samson*,
1636, Frankfurt,
Städelsches
Kunstinstitut.

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political, economic, intellectual, and cultural life of Holland in the seventeenth century, the latest scholarship on Dutch art appears more willing to accept that, in the long span of history, certain artists and artistic phenomena merit more sustained attention than others because their achievements shaped the course of art and its historiography beyond their immediate environments. This is not to deny that our understanding of their accomplishments has benefitted immeasurably from the full mapping of seventeenth-century Dutch art that we now have.

By such a measure of innovation, Rembrandt, Frans Hals, Jacob van Ruisdael, Gerard ter Borch, Gerrit Dou, Jan Steen, and Johannes Vermeer should claim a disproportionately sustained and pluralistic effort from art historians. Without these artists, Dutch painting in the seventeenth century would be an interesting but minor backwater of the discipline, populated by competent and sophisticated painters with little reach beyond their time and place: Govaert Flinck, Pieter de Grebber, Jan Verspronck, Pieter Molyn, Caspar Netscher, Jan Miense Molenaer, and Esaias Boursse were all excellent painters, but none can be credited with transformative interventions in the history of painting compared with European peers elsewhere. Those painters and many others who operated in the Dutch Republic are of national or local historical interest, and they form a rich context for understanding the emergence of major artistic innovations in Holland, a province that had not fully participated in the Netherlandish efflorescence of art and the birth of painting in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries¹. In the sweep of art history from the late Middle Ages to the present, however, many of the relatively forgotten painters referred to by Sluijter were bit players, of no great interest to artists or thinkers of later periods; they were recovered primarily with the professionalization of art history in the twentieth century, aided by the growth of universities, museums, and photography. For artists, Rembrandt never lost relevance (*Rembrandt in Eighteenth-Century England*, 1983; MCQUEEN, 2003), and Van Ruisdael, Hals, and Vermeer have proved of lasting interest since the nineteenth century. Sluijter's self-aware return to Rembrandt and the place of the nude in his art is symptomatic of a welcome revival of research into the development of painting as an art that eventually diverged from the productions of a system of craft, patronage, and religious function in place in the late Middle Ages.

Beyond the Master Narrative

Between 1976 and the turn of the millennium, the picture of Dutch seventeenth-century art was enriched kaleidoscopically by publications and exhibitions on paintings of mythological, biblical, and pastoral subjects; imaginary and topographical views of faraway lands; portraits of the dour, the delightful, and the pretentious; pictures of Caravaggesque rakes and courtesans, classical heroes and goddesses; perspective constructions in and outside peep boxes and churches (for the most relevant bibliography, see WESTERMANN, 2002). New artists appeared on the scene, some heralded in their time but long forgotten, others never famous but revived as exemplars of a new and radically democratized market. Painstaking archival research into the urban art market allowed art historians to speculate about its effects on the behavior of collectors as well as painters. The rich fruits of this market research, which arose in conjunction with a wider socio-economic turn in art history that took shape around 2000, continue to refine our understanding of art making and circulation from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century (NORTH, ORMROD, 1998; *Art for*

the Market, 1999; MONTIAS, LOUGHMAN, 2000; BAKOS, 2004; fig. 2). Suddenly, the finicky *fijnschilders* of the Leiden school – a rare Dutch genealogy worthy of the designation “school” – were recognized as innovators of technique, workshop process, and marketing who justly garnered high prices and distinguished patronage at home and abroad.

Dutch painters became more fully integrated into spheres of ethics and learning, too. The significant discovery of the 1960s, by Eddy de Jongh, Josua Bruyn, and others, of standard Calvinist references across a wide range of Dutch pictures was soon challenged but also complemented by Svetlana Alpers’s recognition of formative relationships between the observational ideology of early modern science and the ways in which Dutch artists pictured the world (ALPERS, 1983; DE JONGH, 1995; for an overview of this debate and its repercussions, see FRANITS, 1997; SWAN, 2005; WESTERMANN, 1996, 1998a, 2002, 2009). In the decade or so after the publication of Alpers’s *The Art of Describing* in 1983, its obvious divergence from De Jongh’s iconographic approach polarized the field; as the history of Dutch art pursued less familiar artists and genres, shying away from their respective frameworks of text-secured interpretation and pictorial looking and making, the debate settled into a quiet but unresolved détente (see WESTERMANN, 2011). However incompatible (and reductive) the overarching paradigms of “iconography” and “describing” may have been, the field appears to have accepted that artists could be readers and thinkers, if not writing for their peers and a growing cohort of art lovers, then talking in their workshops or conducting meta-discourses through their paintings. Pleasure was recovered for Dutch painting, too: comedy, satire, paradox, nudity, and the outspoken delight of Dutch collectors and viewers of painting all received new consideration.

The late twentieth-century literature that enriched the scholarly discourse about Dutch painting in these myriad ways is far too extensive to be acknowledged fully here; its thoroughgoing effects on the field were sufficiently evident in the moment to stimulate comprehensive review activities and ecumenical tracking (*Newsletter of the HNA*; *HNA Review of Books*; DE JONGH, 1985; WESTERMANN, 1998b, 2002). These historiographic instruments give access to fundamental shifts in our approach to the study of the Dutch Golden Age. That the evolving historiography of Dutch painting closely tracked its collecting in the twentieth century, particularly in the United States, was demonstrated by the fascinating exhibition of 2007 “The Age of Rembrandt: Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art,” in which the Metropolitan Museum of Art displayed almost all of its Dutch paintings in chronological order of their acquisition since 1871 (no exhibition catalogue was published; see LIEDTKE, 2007). To any historian of seventeenth-century Dutch art who came of scholarly age in the last three decades, an introductory course in the field would be inconceivable without Hendrick

2. Hendrik van Vliet, *Portrait of Henck Cornelisz van Dussen, his wife Wilhelmina van Setten, and their five children*, 1640, Delft, Museum Het Prinsenhof [MONTIAS, LOUGHMAN, 2000, p. 38].

3. Hendrick Goltzius, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1607, Douai, Musée de la Chartreuse.

Goltzius (fig. 3), Joachim Wtewael, Dirck van Baburen, Paulus Moreelse, Cesar van Everdingen, Jan de Bray, Jacob van Loo, Nicolaes Berchem, Gerard Houckgeest, Samuel van Hoogstraten (fig. 4), Adriaen van der Werff, or Gerard de Lairesse. Most scholars of previous generations would have had difficulty locating these major figures precisely, and the collective understanding of the Dutch art ecosystem in

the seventeenth century was the poorer for it. They would have seen the Golden Age through a sharp but narrow-angle lens that encompassed Dutch realist landscape, burgher portraiture, scenes of domestic life, approachable biblical narratives, and the occasional Caravaggist picture; their field of vision was ordered by the towering presence of Rembrandt, Hals, Van Ruisdael, and Vermeer. They would have positioned Dutch artistic achievements as products of a politically decentralized society, driven by a class of empowered burghers with a relatively tolerant religious attitude. They would have contrasted Dutch painting with an Italian art weighed down by the heritage of antiquity and the imperatives of autocracy and the Counter-Reformation church. While this is surely too tendentious a representation of either Dutch seventeenth-century pictorial culture or of the scholars who produced and sustained it in a long arc from Théophile Thoré-Bürger, Eugène Fromentin, Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin to Abraham Bredius, Jakob Rosenberg, Julius Held, and Seymour Slive, it is the picture that scholars and students have tried to complicate, or even to undo, since Sluijter's student days.

What motivated these concerted efforts at diversifying the standard view of the Dutch Golden Age, how successful were they, and what were the consequences for our understanding of the significance of painting in the Dutch Republic? The careful charting of a more complex and nuanced history of Dutch art in the last quarter of the twentieth century mirrored a turn away, across the humanities, from traditional master narratives based on a heroic vision of artists founding entire schools or, in the case of Rembrandt, rebelling against them. In the Netherlands, art history's cooptation by National Socialism and its offshoots produced deep discomfort with any efforts to identify characteristically "Dutch" contributions to the history of art, and propelled new interest in minor figures that could not be accused of looking local, let alone Dutch (DE JONGH, 1990-1991; GRIJZENHOUT, VAN VEEN, [1992] 1999). Much of this work was propelled by the plain curiosity to know more and probably also by a confidence that the outlines of the careers of Hals, Rembrandt, and Vermeer were sufficiently well understood. In this sense, the recovery of knowledge about lesser known artists and the connoisseurial sorting of their work continued the project of building the Dutch archive of art that was begun in late nineteenth-century Holland by such leading scholars as Bredius and Cornelis Hofstede de Groot (GRIJZENHOUT, VAN VEEN, [1992] 1999; SCALLEN, 2004). It also carried forward and well beyond the Netherlands the discourse about the meaning of Dutch painting first stimulated by Wilhelm Martin, J. Q. van Regteren Altena, and Jan van Gelder.

The resultant view of Dutch art in the seventeenth century is pluralistic and multi-medial, and it is surely more representative than it was around 1970 of the original extent, range and conditions of production, circulation, and reception of Dutch painting. A livelier discourse about art among seventeenth-century witnesses than we could ever have fathomed has emerged, both in texts and in pictures. Our window onto this literature was thrown open by the foundational studies of Jan Emmens and Hessel Miedema and the targeted interventions of Walter Melion, Eric Jan Sluijter, and Paul Taylor (EMMENS, 1968; MIEDEMA, 1973, 1993-1994, 1994-1999, 1996; MELION, 1991; TAYLOR, 1992, 1998; SLUIJTER, 2001). Much more of the Dutch art once considered un-canonical is now shown in museums and exhibitions. The role of art within a broader culture of daily commodities and far-flung exotica is acknowledged, and the selective and partisan representation of those who did not reap the benefits of the Dutch miracle or suffered at its hands is now a regular subject of scrutiny (*Culture of Home...*, 2001; SCHMIDT, 2001; *Albert Eckhout...*, 2004; PARKER BRIENEN, 2006; BERGER HOCHSTRASSER, 2007; *Black is Beautiful...*, 2008; BINDMAN, GATES, 2010). All of this scholarship has reconstituted a plausible and dynamic ecosystem of Dutch art makers, sellers, consumers, and critics in the seventeenth century, with twinned attention to minor artists of their time and to more significant figures overlooked by the modern discipline of art history.

But art history has historically had more ambitious drive than the comprehensive charting and categorizing of the production of one nationally defined entity or historical period. The transnational and trans-historical essays on the discipline published in *Perspective* since its launch in 2006 give strong evidence that this disciplinary history is alive and well, as does *The Burlington Magazine's* series of essays on major art history books of the long twentieth century, entitled "Art History Reviewed" and published in fifteen installments since June 2009 (see, for example, WESTERMANN, 2011). Over the course of its formation during the nineteenth century, art history served and often shared the goals of aesthetics, its foundational academic discipline along with archaeology and the study of peoples. Despite their vastly differing professional protocols and instruments, all of these disciplines studied and categorized the art objects of specific cultures as generalizable evidence of the progress of human civilization, striving, or awareness. Around 1900, art history was entwined with material strands of anthropology; Riegl as well as Warburg studied arts of disparate cultures to discern principles of formal evolution that might serve as indices to social or collective psychological development (for an anthology of perspectives by anthropologists and art historians, see WESTERMANN, 2005). While aesthetic and anthropological investigations

4. Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Perspective of a Dutch interior through a doorway* ("the slippers"), c. 1660, Paris, Musée du Louvre.

5. Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Feigned letter rack* painting, c. 1670, Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle [GROOTENBOER, 2005, pl. 2].

in the twentieth century became tainted by their association with nationalism and racism and colonial notions of European supremacy, art history's rejection of trans-historical and cross-cultural aesthetics led perhaps too easily to a dismissal of the possibility that not all art is created equal.

In its origins in critical philosophy, art history allowed for the idea that some art made in a given culture may be especially worthy of our interest because it has had a prolonged or pervasive impact beyond its moment and place of making,

that such art might have special relevance for our times, and that, with careful study, the reasons for that heightened resonance may help us understand the novelty or power of that art in its moment and place of origin (DIDI-HUBERMAN, [1990] 1995, 2000). After a strong socio-historical turn towards visual culture studies in the 1980s and 1990s, art history has recently reconsidered its formative relationship to aesthetics, both in historiographic examinations of the discipline and in scholarship that puts the aesthetic workings of art in its own time at the center of the inquiry (PODRO, 1982; MOXEY, HOLLY, 2003). In the study of Dutch art of the seventeenth century, aesthetics has resurfaced in that second, historical sense, as scholars are asking new questions about painting's anticipation and conditioning of viewer response. Engagement of the field with critical theory and aesthetics as a philosophical discipline remains very limited, and efforts to approach Dutch painting through such a lens are usually received with silence or suspicion, even if they make no claims that their views of artists or works should be taken as authoritative substitutions for alternative readings. With few exceptions, there has been no sustained dialogue within the field, for example, with or about Mieke Bal's and Harry Berger's readings of "Rembrandt" as a cultural and pictorial phenomenon, nor Victor Stoichitá's and Hanneke Grootenboer's attempts to give illusionist still life a shaping role in the development of modern aesthetics (BAL, 1991; BERGER, 2000; STOICHITÁ, 1996; GROOTENBOER, 2005; fig. 5).

Returning to Rembrandt

Recent scholarship of art of the Dutch Golden Age suggests that Sluijter's *volte face* towards Rembrandt may be characteristic of a broader return to art, artists, and questions of significant reach beyond the confines of their local Dutch settings. Rembrandt is back, and so is Hals (BIESBOER, 2006; ATKINS, 2011; LIEDTKE, 2011). Dutch landscape painting of the realist variety has received fresh attention, as an art reflective and formative of a worldview that could be compatible with a Calvinist ethos and urban in orientation (BAKKER, 2004; LEEFLANG, 1998, 2002). Among genre painters, Vermeer continues to compel broad public interest, and that situation will (and should) not change as long as our own technological future appears ever more driven by the urge to visualize the world. Truly innovative scholarly work on the artist has dried up since the great advances occasioned by the fundamental arguments about Vermeer's family and patronage put forward by J. Michael Montias (MONTIAS, 1989), and the tireless work of Arthur Wheelock

and Walter Liedtke that culminated in landmark exhibitions and stimulated engaging new research (WHELOCK, 1995; *Johannes Vermeer*, 1995; GASKELL, JONKER, 1998; *Vermeer and the Delft School*, 2001; LIEDTKE, 2001).

Genre painting by Vermeer and others is now studied not so much for its implied morality but for its finesse, humor, and wit, and for the spirited competition and exchange it lays bare among its finest practitioners, including Gabriel Metsu, Gerrit Dou, and Frans van Mieris (*Gerrit Dou...*, 2000; *Jan Miense Molenaer...*, 2002; *Gerard ter Borch*, 2004; *Frans van Mieris...*, 2006; *Gabriel Metsu*, 2010). This lively new research is usually generated for single-artist exhibitions; the catalogues of these shows offer fresh material to work with and new interpretative tracks, but they do not deliver a comprehensive understanding of the domestic or social scene in the Dutch Republic, one of the most innovative and influential legacies of seventeenth-century art. The exceptions to this particularizing trend are a pluralistic survey by Wayne Franits (FRANITS, 2004) and Elmer Kolfin's detailed and convincing account of the Merry Company (KOLFIN, 2005a). There has been notable attrition in the study of comic modes of Dutch painting since the completion in the 1990s of a series of studies on Jan Steen, Adriaen van de Venne, and Jan Miense Molenaer (SALOMON, 1987; WELLER, 1992; *Jan Steen...*, 1996; WESTERMANN, 1997, 1999a, 1999b; *Jan Miense Molenaer...*, 2002; for remarks on this situation, see KOLFIN, 2005b). With rare exceptions (SCHILLER, 2006), the most interesting recent work in this vein is on seventeenth-century painters in Antwerp, not the Dutch Republic (DE CLIPPEL, 2003, 2004, 2006).

The balance of current research, then, is weighted toward the seemingly familiar artists beloved of the nineteenth century. Foremost among them is Rembrandt as a pictorial artist *sui generis*. New books since 2000 offer probing investigations of his milieu, his formation, his learning, his ideas, his material practices, and his markets. They gesture towards what we used to call his artistic persona but perhaps might now designate, in a less explicitly psychological register, his vision, if we understand "vision" as his attitude toward the roles of his art in relation to the world, affected by ideas and practices that interested him and of which his works of art are the principal deposits (along with a very few words of aesthetic interest and the evidence of transactional documents). Given the extensive but no longer assured history of painting as a unique resource of European culture, this return to the major contributions of Dutch seventeenth-century art seems both just and timely. Although the possibilities of painting continue to stimulate innovative pictorial thought and ambitious new works by painters such as Gerhard Richter, Marlène Dumas, and Luc Tuymans – fascinatingly, all in Northern Europe –, painting has long ceded pride of place among innovative media, and this trend shows no serious signs of reversal even if people will continue to make paintings. Nevertheless, some of the most engaging non-painting produced by artists today has begun to absorb and transform the remits of European painting from the early modern era, including the theatrical impact of Rembrandt's history paintings, the performative shape-shifting of Dutch portraiture, and the camera vision of Vermeer (FRIED, 2008).

Rembrandt had never disappeared from view, of course. Study of his work had been reinvigorated in 1968 with the launch of the government-sponsored Rembrandt Research Project (RRP), which created a Dutch committee of five experts to put out or at least contain the wildfire of attributions of Rembrandt paintings by creating a definitive *Corpus* of his paintings. In his catalogue of 1935, Abraham Bredius, the leading Dutch Rembrandt scholar and director of the Mauritshuis, had swelled the oeuvre of accepted Rembrandt paintings to 611. In revising Bredius's catalogue in 1968, Horst Gerson had already reduced this number to 420,

but his more rigorous selection caused its own difficulties of coherence. The RRP later found that some of Gerson's excisions from Bredius's catalogue had caused new problems. In part because of its scrupulous investigative method, which was continually being adjusted to new findings, the RRP team never settled on delimiting criteria that could be applied consistently over time and published in a stable format (VAN DE WETERING, 2005). Because the impact of the RRP on the field of Rembrandt studies has been profound and because its recent dissolution is indicative of the return to more holistic studies of Rembrandt, a brief review of the project's evolution is in order. Using a combination of new technical investigations and old-fashioned connoisseurship, the original RRP team applied itself to sorting out the œuvre, producing large amounts of new documentation and yielding finely argued, occasionally controversial opinions on attribution. After two decades of work and the publication of the third volume of *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings* in 1989, the team had come to the unexpected and path-clearing conclusion that the vast majority of Rembrandtesque paintings were not imitations and forgeries of the eighteenth century and well beyond but had been made, if not by Rembrandt, then almost certainly in or near his studio. In the introductory essays to the volumes and throughout the copious entries, the team published major new findings on Rembrandt's studio organization and painting practice, producing a labyrinthine treasure trove of research dispersed across various publications even as its vigorous shrinkage of the œuvre began to cause dissension within the team (BRUYN, 1991; VAN DE WETERING, 1991, 1997).

In 1993, rifts about the scope of attributions to Rembrandt and the emerging pictures of the artist and his pupils led to the resignation of the four senior members of the project. Ernst van de Wetering, whose fine ability to synthesize detailed observations of pictorial phenomena and contextualize them with written sources had become increasingly prominent, took over leadership and brought several younger scholars into it (BRUYN, HAAK, LEVIE, VAN THIEL, 1993). Reconfiguring a major cataloguing effort would be difficult for any artist considered a national treasure, but it was virtually impossible for Rembrandt, given the enormous size of the community of stakeholders, from the Dutch government and many owners of Rembrandt paintings to scholars and students impatient with the protracted publication process. As further publication of the *Corpus* lagged for fifteen years, the RRP's findings filtered out in other venues, particularly exhibitions co-organized with the team (*Rembrandt by Himself*, 1999; *Mystery of the Young Rembrandt*, 2001; *Rembrandt: Quest of a Genius*, 2006). These publications often appeared more interested in revising the opinions of the erstwhile RRP, particularly of pictures by the young Rembrandt, than advancing the discussion of the mid- to late career paintings that were still to be catalogued.

To many, the potential cohesion of which Volumes I and II had offered a glimmer appeared to dissipate. The quibbling around the margins of the young artist, an interesting and ambitious painter but not a child prodigy by any means, offered little conclusive insight about his formation and distracted from work on the major transitions in Rembrandt's career, from youthful striving to early maturity in the late 1620s, to savvy competitiveness and cosmopolitan brilliance in the 1630s and 1640s, to astounding material and pictorial innovations in the last two decades of his career. New research by other scholars, while often informed by the RRP's prodigious documentation and arguments, led them to draw different conclusions about attributions, the roles of pupils, and the functions and meanings of Rembrandt's art. In this discursive process, knowledge about Rembrandt as an artist was atomized to a high degree of technicality and, by 2005, the limits of what might be agreed among Rembrandt experts about the scope of his œuvre appeared to have been reached.

Characteristic of the field's dispersed view of the early Rembrandt is the continuing debate over pictures such as the early *Self-Portrait* in the Mauritshuis (fig. 6; there is a more plausibly autograph version in Nuremberg, but the picture in The Hague is strong and not easily re-assigned) and *Anna and the Blind Tobit* in the National Gallery in London, which has been called a work by Dou, Rembrandt, Dou with Rembrandt, and Jan Lievens (most unlikely); the RRP had rejected it as the work of a pupil, but the National Gallery now believes it to have been painted by Rembrandt (*Corpus IV*, 2005, no. I A 21; BOMFORD *et al.*, [1988] 2006, p. 62-69). The reconsideration of accomplished paintings of strong pictorial concept is not at all unusual, and reasonable options need to be kept on the table. In some cases, however, new confusions have been introduced. One example is a picture of a *Smoker* in the Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille, long thought to be by Pieter Codde but attributed to Rembrandt by Bernard Schnackenburg; neither attribution seems convincing (fig. 7; SCHNACKENBURG, 2004). Equally fascinating is the reattribution to Rembrandt by Van de Wetering in 2005 of four single-figure pictures that had receded from scholarly view: *Portrait of an Elderly Woman in a White Bonnet* (private collection); *A Woman Weeping* (Detroit Institute of Arts); *Old Man with a Beard* (private collection); *Old Man in Profile* (private collection). Despite their marked differences from each other, Van de Wetering grouped them under the common rubric of oil sketches preparatory to multi-figured paintings; neither these attributions nor the implied working procedure for Rembrandt have garnered consensus (VAN DE WETERING, 2006; BROWN, 2007; VAN DE WETERING, 2008).

In the late years of the RRP, the picture of Rembrandt as an artist with an evolving but distinctive vision seemed to be fuzzing and fading even as techniques and workshop practices of painters in the seventeenth century were clarified and the design and conservation histories of specific pictures became well understood. It is perhaps fair to say that the growth and internationalization of Dutch art research eventually outpaced the

6. Circle of Rembrandt, Version of a self-portrait by Rembrandt, c. 1629, The Hague, Mauritshuis.

7. Anonymous artist, probably Leiden, c. 1628-1630, *Smoker*, Lille, Palais des Beaux-Arts.

RRP, making the idea of a definitive Rembrandt corpus by an authoritative group of experts in Amsterdam a throwback to an earlier era when a catalogue raisonné could be expected to stand for at least a generation. The Dutch government eventually stopped support. In 2005, the RRP published Volume IV on radically revised organizational principles (*Corpus IV*, 2005). Whereas the earlier volumes had been arranged chronologically, Volume IV includes only self-portraits from 1642 till the end of Rembrandt's life. Volume V, published in 2011, is dedicated to small-scale history paintings over the same period (*Corpus V*, 2011). The prefaces to both volumes give detailed descriptions of the project's evolution and valuable justifications of the shifts in approach over the history of the RRP. The drift away from a focus on attribution to attendant contextual and thematic issues is evident in the growing presence of introductory essays, which account for half the text in these massive books. Both volumes present streamlined and reduced treatment of works of questionable attribution.

Early in 2011, the RRP announced the closing of the project, leaving eighty of Rembrandt's paintings, including some of the most extraordinary and complex late works, uncatalogued. Although this decision has attracted considerable criticism, the last two published volumes show that, even if the RRP does not leave its intended legacy of a fully clarified oeuvre, the project's research has fundamentally changed our understanding of the extent of Rembrandt's workshop and circle as well as the astonishing range of his material practice. That range was not unique to Rembrandt, as a peer research team at the National Gallery concluded: "Rembrandt's oeuvre is not distinguished by the use of unusual pigments, or a radical departure from conventional painting practice, but by the subtle manipulation of common materials which were available to all his contemporaries. None of these contemporaries, however, demonstrates Rembrandt's supreme understanding of these materials and confidence in their use, exploiting their different properties of opacity and translucency and using simple mixtures of pigments to achieve powerful and infinitely variable effects of

colour and depth" (BOMFORD *et al.*, [1988] 2006, p. 9). This conclusion may not sound surprising, but in 1968 no one had the technical knowledge to know or prove it, and many surely believed that paint recipes proprietary to Rembrandt might account for the uncanny physical presence of, say, Willem van Ruytenburch in *The Nightwatch*, or the magical integration of paint surface and sentiment in *The Jewish Bride*. The RRP has forever corrected that heroic view of Rembrandt as an alchemist beyond his time.

Volume IV of the *Corpus* offers some fine demonstration pieces of the RRP's strengths. In a brilliant move, it includes an entry on a *Self-Portrait with Sketchbook* known in a mezzotint reproduction and six painted versions, none of which can be considered to be by Rembrandt, though a few may have originated in his studio (fig. 8; *Corpus IV*, 2005, p. 101-109 et 429-439).

8. Mezzotint
by Jacob Gole
after a painting
by Rembrandt
of c. 1655,
*Self-portrait with
sketchbook*,
c. 1700, London,
British Museum.

In the introductory essay, Van de Wetering describes the process by which he reached his conclusion that the versions all had to be derived from an autograph but lost work. The scintillating exercise shows that identification of authorship depends not only on recognizing distinctive manual skill, registered in facture or automatisms of representation, as Giovanni Morelli and Bernard Berenson saw it, but also on understanding the conceptual craft that shapes particular works.² To develop a framework for attributions, the RRP has developed a matrix of procedures of design, composition, material choices, and handling that can plausibly be associated with Rembrandt and his workshop in certain types of pictures in a given period. The matrix can be mapped onto extant paintings; painstaking comparison and consideration may then yield a reasoned opinion on the plausibility that a picture was designed and/or executed by Rembrandt, with or without others. This procedure leads to a convincing result in this case. Unfortunately, the matrix is not equally well defined for all periods, genres, and pictorial modes across Rembrandt's career, but, at its best, the detective protocol allows you to see clearly through RRP eyes.

The reconfiguration of the *Corpus* on the basis of broad types of paintings stimulated new thematic and methodological work of inestimable value. Marieke de Winkel, for example, in *Fashion and Fancy: Dress and Meaning in Rembrandt's Paintings*, applied her wide-ranging archival and pictorial knowledge of seventeenth-century dress to our understanding of Rembrandt's portraits, self-portraits, and fabulously engaging historical figures (DE WINKEL, 2006). A sophisticated reader of inventory evidence and literary reference as well as pictorial tradition, she avoids the pitfall of using paintings to argue for the existence of particular types of costumes of which no physical traces survive. Instead, her research primarily advances our understanding of Rembrandt's use of costume in the design process, which turns out to be as innovative and subtle as his other pictorial choices. Her book should be an attractive resource for the methodology of costume history in other fields and disciplines.

By focusing Volume IV on self-portraits, the RRP created an opening to present a more coherent view of Rembrandt's interests than the previous chronological *Corpus* format allowed. The RRP had already conveyed its basic ideas about his self-portrait production in an exhibition catalogue of 1999 (*Rembrandt by Himself*, 1999). There, and in the expanded discussion in Volume IV, the RRP demonstrates a reluctance to engage the field on the implications of Rembrandt's work beyond attribution, material practice, iconography, and workshop organization. To put it more strongly, the team has resisted the idea that Rembrandt had a distinctive artistic vision that is more than the sum of the inventions in individual paintings or pictorial types, and that its research, brought into dialogue with other studies, can bring that vision into sharper focus. Faced with the historically exceptional phenomenon of Rembrandt's large self-portrait production in an unparalleled range of media, poses, costumes, and types – about ten percent of his production over time – the RRP rejects as “anachronistic” any sustained consideration that this practice might have had personal functions for Rembrandt. To the RRP, the self-portraits offered the painter a convenient laboratory for trying out new pictorial ideas on his reflected image, for making an occasional gesture towards a notion of art theory, and, most crucially, for giving collectors a specimen of his work with a personalized signature in the form of his face. Following in the footsteps of others (CHAPMAN, 1989; DE JONGH, 1991; DICKEY, 2004), the team makes a compelling case that these were functions of the self-portraits within a broader European history and context. It then leaps from this finding to the conclusion that these pictures could not possibly have had any remotely private functions for Rembrandt, and rejects the idea that such functions could have evolved over his career.

This dismissal seems rash for a period of unprecedented autobiographical production in literary, religious, and philosophical texts, a sudden rise in self-portrait production, and a fashion for mirrors inscribed with the Socratic injunction to Know Thyself. As Van de Wetering describes beautifully, Rembrandt's self-portrait practice forced a relentless progression of self-study in the mirror over many years. Is it therefore inconceivable that the artist might have experienced a sentiment akin to that of Michelangelo, who, on looking in the mirror, declared he was "the enemy of himself, uselessly shedding tears and heaving sighs that no loss is as great as the loss of time" (WESTSTEIJN, 2008, p. 323)? Other statements and pictorial evidence indicate self-scrutiny in the mirror on the part of early modern artists; even if such examinations sought and fostered philosophical forms of understanding that differ from modern psychological investigation, they stand in a formative relation to it (WESTSTEIJN, 2008, p. 177 et 321-325). Van de Wetering maintains that a personal stake in self-portraiture of any kind cannot be described in seventeenth-century terms, and could only have arisen as the result of a radical change in the conception of self in the nineteenth century. This position assumes that such a complex form as the introspective self-portrait arrived by thunderclap after artists spent four centuries looking at themselves in mirrors (VAN DE WETERING, 1999, p. 17-19; *Corpus IV*, 2005, p. 132-136). More troublingly, it dismisses without serious engagement a large body of research that documents how Renaissance literature and painting developed mechanisms for identity formation that provided the historical ground for the nineteenth-century cult of the artist as a soul-searching genius (GREENBLATT, 1980; KOERNER, 1993; SOUSSLOFF, 1997).

Scholars who allow for the possibility of evolutionary linkages between demonstrative Renaissance explorations of personhood and their nineteenth-century heirs do not claim Rembrandt for the Romantic era. Informed by Renaissance autobiography, traditions of artist portraits, and the documented events of Rembrandt's life, the fullest study of Rembrandt's self-portraiture presents a reasoned account of shifting functions of the self-portrait in the early modern period that is commensurate with pictorial and written statements from Albrecht Dürer to Michelangelo and from Constantijn Huygens to John Donne (CHAPMAN, 1989). The RRP's restrictive view of Rembrandt's self-portrait functions is unable to resolve why he represented himself in as many guises as he did (including executioner of Christ, Prodigal Son, Saint Paul, and Zeuxis), why he painted his eyes in a way that forces us to look at them in a way few other artists did, and why none of his market-savvy peers took up self-portraiture on such a scale (on the RRP view of Rembrandt's self-portraits, see PODRO, 1999; DICKEY, 2000; SCHWARTZ, 2006a).

The *Corpus* will stand as a monument to a twentieth-century mode of art history that had great confidence that connoisseurship could be made more reliable by using the latest investigative techniques. Its work has inspired analogous efforts to sort drawings by Rembrandt and his students and followers. Although this endeavor has been less centralized than the RRP, it has led to an emergent consensus about drawing practice in the Rembrandt workshop and how to go about associating works with specific artists, even if many attribution questions are unlikely ever to be settled and some scholars believe that new *œuvres* by pupils and associates have been established on scant evidence. Most of this work has proceeded through exhibitions and through the study of individual collections that allow for the close comparison of drawings once attributed to Rembrandt to others unquestionably by him or by other known artists (*Rembrandt auf Papier...*, 2001; *Dresdener Zeichnungen*, 2004; *Aus Rembrandts Kreis...*, 2006; *Drawings by Rembrandt and His Pupils...*, 2009; SCHATBORN, 2011).

A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings will remain a first resource for the study of Rembrandt paintings, even if one can only regret the inaccessibility online of such a fundamentally public project, published in volumes whose unwieldy heft, dense two-column printing, and prohibitive price invite comparison to the Gutenberg Bible. But the Gutenberg Bible repays continued consultation, and so will the *Corpus*. The field can move on while using the work as the prompt to new art historical methods that it has always been.

Owing in great part to the RRP's multi-disciplinary technical studies, interest in painting practice has radiated well beyond Rembrandt. For three decades, the National Gallery in London has been a major driver of the technical study of European paintings. Its popular exhibition series *Art in the Making*, launched in 1988 with a study of the collection's paintings by Rembrandt and his followers, translated this technical research for art historians and the general public; the publication was recently reissued with important new revisions (BOMFORD *et al.*, [1988] 2006; fig. 9). Many such investigations are conducted collaboratively by curators, art historians, conservators, and conservation scientists. As fascinating as the individual studies are, their collective results have yet to be adequately integrated into the scholarly study of Dutch art; "technical art history" remains the preserve of conservators and conservation scientists, with few exceptions (for such rare cases, see *Looking through Paintings*, 1998; *Rembrandt et la figure du Christ*, 2011; ATKINS, 2011). Finding new structures for linking art historical and conservation documentation appears urgent, if we accept Bomford's description: "Technical art history today concerns itself with all the processes for making art, and the technical and documentary means by which we throw light on those processes. It is principally concerned with the physical materials and structures of works of art and how they are prepared, used, combined and manipulated – but (and this is what makes technical art history so intellectually satisfying) it also interests itself in how an artist arrived at the finished – or, indeed unfinished work. It charts the stages of invention, development, realization, elaboration and revision: in short, it is a route into – it is our access to – the heart of the artist's intentions and changing ambitions" (BOMFORD, 2008, p. 199).

Over the past decade, much excellent work on Rembrandt has proceeded more or less independently of the RRP's goals while gratefully mining its storehouse of X-rays, infrared examinations, and paint samples, records of copies, provenances, and iconographic sources, and fine-grained observations of design changes and paint application. The only comprehensive account of recent years is *The Rembrandt Book*, Gary Schwartz's revision and expansion of his engaging, argumentative book of 1985 (SCHWARTZ, 2006b). Schwartz's evaluation of Rembrandt, whose paintings he admires, combines imaginative use of archival research with an unsentimental, even peeved attitude to the artist's presumed humanity; skepticism is certainly in order on that score, but in Schwartz's assessment, something is lost of the pictorial finesse by which Rembrandt created a compelling sense that painting *could* probe and convey human motivation and doubt.

9. BOMFORD *et al.*, (1988) 2006, p. 50-51: study of Rembrandt's *Portrait of an 83-year-old woman* (now identified as Aechje Claesdr.), London, National Gallery, including a detail of the face, analysis of the pigments, and an X-ray mosaic.

Sluijter's book on Rembrandt and the female nude is the richest of the new Rembrandt studies (SLUIJTER, 2006). Despite its ostensible thematic restriction, it presents a remarkably cohesive view of Rembrandt as an artist. The elegant structure of Sluijter's book alternates detailed studies of individual paintings or themes of Rembrandt paintings with "Intermezzi" on topics in art theory and reception of long-standing interest to the author. We dive deeply into Rembrandt's world of Andromeda, Susanna and the Elders, Diana and her nymphs, Danaë, and Bathsheba, and come up for air once in a while to learn about the Dutch discourse on the passions, the erotic hazard and appeal of nude images in a Calvinist culture, Rembrandt's commitment to *colorito* as the sign and means of lifelike painting, the virtues and pitfalls of artistic competition through emulation, and the evidence for the gradual (and controversial) introduction of nude models into studio practice in the course of the seventeenth century. Each intermezzo has clear relevance to our understanding of Rembrandt's nudes.

In the chapters on Rembrandt's pictorial themes, Sluijter follows a standard and impressively thorough procedure: he surveys the textual and pictorial sources for a particular theme that Rembrandt would likely have known; discusses Rembrandt's own pictures in relation to those precedents and, where possible, internal linkages among Rembrandt's inventions; and shows traces of Rembrandt's work, or the absence thereof, in pictures in or outside his circle. Throughout, Sluijter credits the artist with a command of a comprehensive, almost unfathomable *musée imaginaire*, much of which we know to have been physically present in the artist's collection in the form of prints. In Sluijter's detailed parsing of sources of motif, composition, and coloring, Rembrandt appears as an artist with uncanny powers of recall and reconfiguration, cut and paste, a vision that perhaps compensates for the author's earlier disinterest in Rembrandt's extraordinary standing. The repeated suggestions that viewers in Rembrandt's time, or we ourselves, would "immediately" pick up every one of the often quite arcane references sometimes defy belief, and the presumption of constant recollection and checking back sometimes seems stretched, whether for Rembrandt's process of making a coherent painting or for our viewing of a unified pictorial field.

The book makes a completely compelling argument for Rembrandt's unique and acute understanding of the female nude as the arena for painterly prowess, for artists from Antiquity to the Renaissance and his own time. Signaling his ambition with the youthful *Andromeda*, advancing it with his *Danaë*, and consummating it in his *Bathsheba*, Rembrandt inserted himself in the lineage of Nicias and Apelles, Titian and Rubens (fig. 10). This case has never been laid out as fully and convincingly as Sluijter has done here, effectively integrating the research of many previous authors on individual paintings and broad topics in the history of Italian and Dutch art. Resisting the normaliza-

tion of Rembrandt's interest in the nude, Sluijter shows how consistently Rembrandt used the unclothed female form to put forth a theory of painting that is committed to conjuring an emotionally and visually persuasive view of the world. Emotional and pictorial illusion are conjoined in this practical theory of art, for which we have one rare statement by Rembrandt

10. SLUIJTER, 2006, p. 26-27, plate comparing representations of *Andromeda chained to the rock*: (left to right) Rembrandt, c. 1630, The Hague, Mauritshuis; Adam Willaerts and Cornelis van Poeleburgh, 1624, Lübeck, St. Annen Museum; Peter Paul Rubens, c. 1638, Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie.

himself: his remark in a letter to Constantijn Huygens of 1637 that he had striven, in two paintings of his Passion series, for *die meeste ende die natuereelste beweegelijkheid* (best translated as “the utmost and most natural [e]motion”; see fig. 1). With an assist from the textual studies of his student Thijs Weststeijn, Sluijter refines our understanding of this comment (WESTSTELJN, 2008). He argues convincingly that coloring, in the Italian distinction from drawing, was central to this dedication to persuasively picturing the real, and he lays to rest once and for all the idea that Rembrandt’s promotion of unvarnished realism became controversial only after his death. In the Dutch Republic, arguments about the unselective representation of nature, in which the nude formed a particularly problematic subtheme, were burning by the time Rembrandt began his experimentations around 1630. This discussion can be traced in fragments of studio talk, treatises, lawsuits, and conflicting modes of painting well before the middle of the century. Rembrandt, over time, found himself on the losing side of this debate.

Rembrandt and the Female Nude also takes up the challenge David Freedberg put to the field long ago, of accepting that paintings could elicit and stimulate violent and sexual response (FREEDBERG, 1989). In cautious and couth language, Sluijter gives some specific evidence of seventeenth-century thought and practice in these matters, but the experience of viewing Rembrandt’s female flesh remains abstract. The sensuous reaction and empathetic recognition that Sluijter attributes to seventeenth-century male viewers of Rembrandt’s nudes ultimately would have depended on the sensuousness of his facture and the disposition of his nudes. Whether Rembrandt’s pensive nudes and his mimicry of flesh under skin would have been alluring and arousing by the standards of the age remains a question. Here, the study might have benefited from more detailed comparison to the painting of flesh by Titian and Rubens, who set a high bar that Rembrandt, with his preference for reality effects over seductiveness and glamour, may not have striven for or matched. What is missing is a consistent account of Rembrandt’s controlled experimentation with pigments, oils, and brushes in delivering highly complex, often condensed narratives through painted female flesh; it is this closeness to Rembrandt’s material and manual practices that makes the *Corpus* so valuable. Nevertheless, Sluijter’s Rembrandt coheres as an artist of inventive narrative capacity and pictorial wit, engaged in the relentless pursuit of the integration of lifelike coloring and persuasive emotionality.

In a very different but equally illuminating study, *Rembrandt’s Bankruptcy: The Artist, His Patrons, and the Art Market in Seventeenth-Century Netherlands*, Paul Crenshaw parses the details of Rembrandt’s infamous bankruptcy of 1656 to shine a bright new light on the interactions between commerce, morality, and artistic achievement in Rembrandt’s milieu (CRENSHAW, 2006). Written with economic verve and crystal lucidity, the book is an archival page-turner. It sets out for the first time all the documents that can be brought to bear on the complex question of Rembrandt’s financial failure, its causes, its aftermath, and its relation to his patrons, his works, and his style. Crenshaw is meticulous in his transcriptions and translations of the documents, scrupulous about the extent of the information they convey, and both imaginative and plausible in making them yield a composite portrait of Rembrandt as a person, a client manager, and, above all, an artist bent at every turn on his artistic autonomy (fig. 11). The author is equally even-handed in

11. Rembrandt, *Satire on Art Criticism*, pen and brown ink corrected with white, 1644, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection [CRENSHAW, 2006, fig. 35].

his interpretation of previous scholarship. And so, from the seventeenth-century evidence, the pictures, and the rich historiographic record, the proto-modern artist arises with greater clarity than ever before. Crenshaw demonstrates compellingly that Rembrandt's repeated and willful defaulting on his loans was questionable according to the moral and ethical standards of his time, and must have led to the poorly understood break with Jan Six, subject of two of the artist's greatest portraits. Crenshaw makes no apologies for Rembrandt's unattractive behavior but does not chastise him either, arguing that, to have the great artist, we may have to accept the unpalatable details of his life that modern biographers tried to suppress or normalize. *Rembrandt's Bankruptcy* is not only a sharp biopic of Rembrandt in his society, but also a model study of the relationship between market forces and individual agency in the early modern world of art.

Other recent books and exhibitions on Rembrandt proceed similarly, working outward from specific themes in his career to make insightful inferences about his practice or the broader ecosystem in which it operated (*Rembrandt's schatkamer*, 1999; *Rembrandt Creates Rembrandt...*, 2000; *Rembrandt's Women*, 2001; CHONG, ZELL, 2002; GOLAHNY, 2003; DICKEY, 2004; ZELL, 2004; *Rembrandt's Late Religious Portraits*, 2005; *Rembrandt, pintor de historias*, 2008; PERLOVE, SILVER, 2009; *Rembrandt et la figure du Christ*, 2011). In the process, attitudinal directions of Rembrandt's art have been clarified, particularly towards the representation of religious themes in a post-Reformation culture. The picturing of biblical figures and events in a society where images were proscribed in worship posed a fascinating challenge to a painter as ambitious as Rembrandt. Besides the female nude, religious painting was one of the great fields of competition for artistic fame and autonomy. Rubens's infinite opportunities to paint large altarpieces and design series of tapestries on religious themes put Rembrandt at a comparative disadvantage in this realm. He turned this deficit into a lifelong creative engagement with figures from the Bible, rethought as human beings of fallible flesh and recognizable conflicts between worldly desires and spiritual imperatives.

Recent publications emphasize Rembrandt's development of new types of religious image unprecedented in the work of artists he looked to, such as Pieter Lastman and Rubens, including "the religious portrait" and a genre we might call "the study of Christ based on a Jewish model". Some of this research recasts Rembrandt as an amateur theologian (PERLOVE, SILVER, 2009), and some of it takes an overly liberal view of attributions, seizing on the erosion of clarity over authorship in the last decades of the RRP (fig. 12; *Rembrandt's Late Religious Portraits*, 2005; *Rembrandt et la figure du Christ*, 2011). A coherent account of Rembrandt's approach to religious themes as opportunities for a new kind of artistic ambition remains to be written, but that task has been lightened by Michael Zell's nuanced study of Rembrandt's responses to the seventeenth-century rapprochement between Protestant and Judaic thought in Amsterdam (ZELL, 2002). Zell's book *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* at last advances the discussion of this topos of the Rembrandt historiography to a new level of specificity and plausibility. Like Schwartz, Zell is clear-eyed about the lack of evidence that Rembrandt would have been immune to the anti-semitism of his time, but he offers a more generous view of the artist's pictorial uses of Judaic sources and thought.

Another resource for the study of Rembrandt as a religious painter is the truly pluralistic catalogue of the exhibition *Rembrandt et la figure du Christ* of 2011, which marks the happy reintegration of the Musée du Louvre into the field of Dutch art scholarship (*Rembrandt et la figure du Christ*, 2011). After many decades of being a remote and unwelcoming participant in this lively field, the Louvre invited scholars from all over the world to attend a stimulating study seminar on the museum's Rembrandt collection in 2006. The curatorial team proceeded to act on some of the findings of the study days, and the show on the face and figure of Christ, a collaboration

with the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Detroit Institute of Arts that was prompted in part by the cleaning of the Louvre's *Supper at Emmaus* (fig. 13), is an early outcome of this work. The catalogue includes a great variety of essays, including perceptive studies by Blaise Ducos of Rembrandt's new iconography of Jesus and a fine argument by Lloyd DeWitt on the radical character of Rembrandt's humanization of the Word Made Flesh (DUCOS, 2011a, 2011b; DEWITT, 2011). On balance, *Rembrandt et la figure du Christ* evinces both the continuing lack of clarity about fundamental attributions and a new willingness to ask larger questions about Rembrandt's innovative vision. The study of the relation between religious affiliation and art in the Dutch Republic has been revitalized well beyond Rembrandt in recent years, and this development is characteristic of renewed interest in the study of religion as a cultural force throughout the humanities (VAN ECK, 1993-1994, 1999, 2003; MANUTH, 1993-1994, 2006; MOCHIZUKI, 2008; POWELL, 2010).

The collective scholarly portrait of Rembrandt one decade into the twenty-first century is of a deliberate, striving, thoughtful, materially adept, well-informed, even learned artist, of such stubborn commitment to what he thought art should be like that he not only transformed the field of painting in Amsterdam and the Dutch Republic but ran into uncommon trouble with creditors and critics. The Rembrandt of our generation has been de-normalized from the standardizing approach characteristic of art historical studies of the 1960s and 1970s. That normalized view had been shaped powerfully by Jan Emmens, who saw the classical critique of Rembrandt's work as a posthumous phenomenon (EMMENS, 1968); Robert Scheller, who presented Rembrandt's determined collecting of an astonishing range of art, exotica, and knick knacks as entirely characteristic of a gentleman-scholar's chamber of curiosities (SCHELLER, 1969); Josua Bruyn, who presented Rembrandt's approach to the female nude as orthodox for the seventeenth century (BRUYN, 1970); and Christian Tümpel, who detected Rembrandt's many free borrowings from iconographic tradition but downplayed the creative uses the artist made of familiar compositions and motifs (TÜMPEL, 1969, 1986). The RRP's conclusions about Rembrandt's workshop practices, powerfully argued by Bruyn, initially had a similar effect of blending Rembrandt into a background of common studio routines and dozens of pupils, but the accumulation across the RRP volumes of numerous decisions by Rembrandt in making individual pictures has restored

12. Attributed to Rembrandt and studio, *Head of Christ*, detail of the inserted portion, c. 1648-1656, Philadelphia Museum of Art, John G. Johnson Collection [*Rembrandt et la figure du Christ*, 2011, pl. 2.2].

13. Rembrandt, *Supper at Emmaus*, 1648, Paris, Musée du Louvre [*Rembrandt et la figure du Christ*, 2011, pl. 1.1].

the relative exceptionality of his artistic interests even within standard frameworks of the time. But if Rembrandt is once again an exceptionally daring and counter-intuitive artist, he is not the tragic, ill-understood genius art history long left behind. His art has something for everyone: sensuous address, religious sensitivity, occasional bouts of wit and lusty humor, learned appeal, and those eyes forever looking at us, the way he saw them. Just how the sophisticated ideas that scholars now assume Rembrandt to have mastered and transmitted might have entered his studio is a matter the community of Netherlandish art historians is now well prepared to consider.

Networking Netherlandish Art

The strength and variety of recent work on Rembrandt and Dutch seventeenth-century art are predicated on the impressive infrastructure the field has developed over the past century and significantly revitalized in the last two decades. The Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RKD) remains the central library and archive of literature, documents, and images relating to Dutch seventeenth-century art. From its origins in the scholarly bequests of Hofstede de Groot and Frits Lugt, it has over the years grown into an increasingly rich, diversified, and technologically accessible repository. Although its remit extends well beyond the seventeenth century and present-day Dutch borders, it has special significance as the first stop for all study of Dutch art of the Golden Age. To broaden resources for and exchange about Rembrandt research, the RKD has been developing *The Rembrandt Database* (www.rembrandtdatabase.org). The project, to be launched online in the winter of 2012, describes itself as “a multi-lingual online research resource capable of integrating conservation, technical and art historical documentation on paintings by or (formerly) attributed to Rembrandt from different museums and international institutions.” Unlike the *Corpus* or other catalogues raisonnés in print, it is conceptualized as a living resource that will record evolving debates about attributions but will not express an opinion on them.

This and other flourishing efforts to develop a research community, most notably through the Historians of Netherlandish Art (see *Newsletter of the HNA*), come with the paradoxical risk of the self-isolation that can result from a field's strength in numbers, encouraging retreat from the wider discourse of art history to stay within the accepted borders of Netherlandish art, possibly precipitating further compartmentalization within historiographic constructions such as “Early Netherlandish Art,” “The Hapsburg Netherlands,” or “The Dutch Republic.” Among these different areas of Netherlandish research, the flow of ideas remains restricted, although there are some promising exceptions of studies at the interface between Northern and Southern Netherlandish culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (HONIG, 1998, 2001, 2004; WOODALL, 2008; *Jan Lievens...*, 2008; BARRETT, 2012). Often, even if striking innovations are clearly tied to such geo-political entities, as was the case for Rubens and Rembrandt, the traveling character of art and artists in the seventeenth century seems at odds with a geographically curtailed approach to Netherlandish art research.

A new book on Samuel van Hoogstraten by Thijs Weststeijn, *The Visible World: Samuel van Hoogstraten's Art Theory and the Legitimation of Painting in the Dutch Golden Age* (WESTSTEIJN, 2008), demonstrates the value of looking beyond Netherlandish linguistic borders to understand the specificity of artistic developments in Holland. Van Hoogstraten, a student of Rembrandt in the 1640s who wrote as much as he painted and associated with courtiers and scientists across Europe, is the epitome of a new type of cosmopolitan citizen of Europe's republic of art and letters. Michiel Roscam Abbing and Celeste Brusati made this point about him in their very different books of the 1990s (ROSCAM ABBING, 1993; BRUSATI, 1995); Weststeijn's stimulating

new study of Van Hoogstraten's *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst* ("Introduction to the high school of painting," 1678) now presents the full range of the man's philosophical, literary, and artistic thought (see also studies of Van Hoogstraten's treatise by CZECH, 2002; BLANC, 2006, 2008). It is a model of thoroughness and nuance. Weststeijn describes and documents Van Hoogstraten's nodal position in an international network of "'idea brokers' who disseminated views about art" in letters and treatises, courtly debates and studio conversations. Writers like Van Hoogstraten and Franciscus Junius could move in and out of these spheres as fluidly as Rubens did, from studio to princely collection, from the Royal Society to the new confraternity of painting in The Hague. Rembrandt scholars have long believed that passages in Van Hoogstraten's text transmit or reflect discussions held in Rembrandt's studio when the author was there in the 1640s and possibly later; Weststeijn's comprehensive reading leaves no doubt of the closeness of their thought. Fine studies by Amy Golahny of Rembrandt's knowledge of ancient authors and by Stephanie Dickey on the artist's portrait etchings had already indicated how at ease Rembrandt himself would have been in the learned world frequented by his erstwhile pupil, particularly from the 1640s on (GOLAHNY, 2003; DICKEY, 2004).

As others have done before him without his fine-grained arguments and extensive cross-references, Weststeijn attaches great significance to Van Hoogstraten's decision to subtitle his book *de Zichtbaere Werelt* ("the Visible World"), which he sees as a legitimizing strategy for painting's identity as a liberal art. To Van Hoogstraten, the term first of all implied the universal reach of painting: it is a capacious knowledge system, for it can apply itself to, and render visible, all that is seen and known under the sun. It also stood for a new resistance, specific to Rembrandt and to Van Hoogstraten's own painting (see fig. 4), to the selective idealization of painting long dominant in the Italian Renaissance theory and practice of art and still present in Karel van Mander's *Schilder-Boeck* of 1604. Weststeijn's analysis of Van Hoogstraten's respectful but sometimes tortuous efforts to integrate Van Mander's foundational writings into his framework draws significant new distinctions between the only two major writers on the theory of painting in seventeenth-century Holland.

Of the principle of emulation in seventeenth century art theory, Van Hoogstraten wrote: "By making changes to the original in his version, the painter demonstrates that he has been able to evoke the mental world of his example. He may then achieve true emulation as it existed among the authors of antiquity" (WESTSTEIJN, 2008, p. 163). Just as Van Hoogstraten creatively matched the ancients and early modern heirs such as Gerardus Vossius and Franciscus Junius, Weststeijn appears to have emulated Van Hoogstraten himself, translating his dazzling multiplex of verbal and pictorial thoughts and regrouping them within a flexible rhetorical organization meant to persuade the reader of the argument's truth. Like Van Hoogstraten's book, Weststeijn's has an organization that seems lucid in its rhetorical and pedagogical structure of chapters and sections, but is very hard to keep in view as the reader wades into each chapter. Chapters, sections, and even individual paragraphs become rapidly discursive in their inclusiveness of comparanda and illustrations, sources and redactions, echoes and developments of previous statements. One can open Weststeijn's book profitably on almost any page and learn something of value to the understanding of seventeenth century Dutch painting as contemporaries made and saw it; much the same might be said of Van Hoogstraten's *Inleyding*. Despite the challenge such a compendium presents to the reader, who needs to design a personal cross-referencing system to keep track of the relevance of particular passages to overarching questions about painting in the seventeenth century, Weststeijn's 350 dense pages and hundreds of footnotes gradually amount to a rounded picture of Van Hoogstraten's mental universe and painting as Visible World.

Weststeijn establishes without doubt the character of Van Hoogstraten's book as a fine specimen of early modern rhetoric, true to the history and structural forms of the orator's treatise and nimble in its use of commonplaces to convey an amalgam of old and new thought about the painting of past and present times. Like any good rhetorician, Van Hoogstraten draws liberally on the arguments and exempla of others from many different domains, and bends them to the purpose of persuading his readers of the ancient and continuing value of painting as he defines it. From the form and substance of his presentation, painting itself appears to be a venerable rhetorical art, adept at convincing viewers of its true representation of the Visible World. Weststeijn demonstrates that Van Hoogstraten's arguments about painting as guide to the Visual World have their underpinnings in Neostoic strains of moral philosophy that advocate a steady following of nature in all its aspects, as well as Reformed theology that presents Creation as a Book of Nature, God's second gift, alongside his Word, for all to read and for painters to paint. These overlapping conceptual frameworks – the rhetorical, the Neostoic, the Protestant – have obvious relevance for Rembrandt's innovations in the expression of the passions and his staunch defense of nature as his guide, as well as for the many types of seventeenth-century Dutch painting that appear to convince us that they render the visual world unadorned. Van Hoogstraten weaves these strands together in his art as well as his writing, and Weststeijn, although too mute on specific artists and paintings, indicates their relevance for understanding the distinctive achievements of Rembrandt, Dutch landscape painters, and artists like Vermeer.

Weststeijn concludes that, as an art dedicated to studying all that might be found in the Book of Nature, "the depiction of the visible world [could] in itself be seen as a form of philosophical contemplation" (WESTSTEIJN, 2008, p. 119). Van Hoogstraten's departure from Neoplatonic conceptions of visible phenomena, including paintings, as corrupted shadows of divine Ideas could turn painting into "the sister of philosophy," as the artist claimed (WESTSTEIJN, 2008, p. 329-351). Weststeijn's argument outlines a generalized, capacious, and intuitively plausible framework for understanding the ambitious innovations of Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, and Van Ruisdael, even if these artists may not have worried about the finer points of moral philosophy that captivated Van Hoogstraten and his learned interlocutors. Many of the evident pictorial novelties of his time might be understood as the experiments of research artists and pictorial thinkers, practical philosophers of sorts who, for all their diversity, shared a commitment to the notion of painting as visible world: Hals's shorthand brushwork suggestive of optical phenomena as well as spiritedness, Van Ruisdael's seemingly infinite panoramas on small to medium-sized canvases, Rembrandt's ceaseless striving to vary paint substances and techniques of facture, Vermeer's studied compositional and coloristic refinements.

The books of Sluijter, Crenshaw, and Weststeijn are examples of an encouraging trend in which interests that were compartmentalized methodologically are integrated to create fuller views of individual artists and of the creation of an early modern system of art. In these studies and others, the evidence of material practice, biography, art market, theory, reception, literary reference, and religious culture is reviewed and recombined. The scholarly voices are distinctive, but the products represent emergent views produced by new feedback loops within the networks of scholars of Netherlandish and European art, as the books' copious footnotes and cross-references indicate. This mature scholarly system generates new knowledge and insight through collaboration and exchange rather than top-down transmission, and it is beginning to reconnect Dutch painting and its historiography to questions long pursued by the discipline outside the Netherlandish field.

This networked mode of scholarship that lets knowledge find its way towards consensus and convergence when that is feasible (even as vigorous debate and disagreement remain possible and necessary) has an appealing parallel in the seventeenth-century emergence of innovations in Dutch painting itself. For the understanding of art that was made and circulated in a decentralized web of cities without a politically or aesthetically dominant court, a church sponsoring artistic renewal, or a royal academy tied into a patronage system, a networked approach to research rather than a quest for authoritative texts or models seems appropriate. Like many features of our complex world that were shaped over several centuries, the transformation of painting into “art” was an emergent phenomenon, the outcome of many individual decisions made by informed people in dense communities of exchange. In emergence theory, the beehive, the city, and the worldwide web are exemplary sites of emergence in that they work not only by hierarchical decision-making and articulated consensus, but also by establishing information loops through the community’s many constituent units (JOHNSON, 2001; CORNING, 2002).

Dutch painting in the seventeenth century was such a complex system, in which new pictures and new thoughts about painting arose because art works and ideas moved rapidly among people, and not only because dedicated thinkers about painting such as Van Hoogstraten or Junius develop rhetorically effective theories of it. The system operated on the local, urban level of the studio and the market as well as a European one of courts, diplomacy, trans-regional trade, collecting, scholarly institutions and correspondence, and a burgeoning publishing industry that was itself an emergent and urban creation. In the relational system of makers, buyers, and critics described by Weststeijn and Sluijter, painting became a resource for pleasure and thought through its actions upon its viewers, whose implicit and explicit responses were fed back into the knowledge network for artists and critics to consider and use. Thinking about seventeenth-century painting as an emergent system gives the art and its practitioners some responsibility for the medium’s descendant formation as an autonomous space of thought and making in modern times (*Art for the Market*, 1999; WESTERMANN, 2000b; WESTERMANN, 2010; ZELL, 2011).

Much more is to be learned about and from the processes by which a demographically dense, decentralized, and economically powerful polity that was linked into a European web of learning and luxury renovated painting and gave it a long reach into the present. The bottom-up and networked approach to the study of this development is now advancing and diversifying our understanding in much the same way this astonishing art arose.

Notes

1. Great exceptions to this relative isolation of earlier art in the Northern Netherlands were chronicled in an ambitious series of exhibitions held in 1986 on art before the iconoclasm of 1566. Organized by the Rijksmuseum and other institutions, the events surveyed all media, from drawings, prints, and paintings to sculpture, architecture, and decorative arts (*Kunst voor de beeldenstorm...*, 1986a, 1986b). Although these shows and publications painted a rich and diverse picture of the interlocking character of

these arts in Holland and of their shared design principles, it remains fair to say that the region in this period did not have workshops or artists of the innovative capacity, material virtuosity, and wide impact beyond Netherlandish borders associated with Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, and Hugo van der Goes.

2. I owe the term “conceptual craft” to Jonathan Hay, who is developing a theory of formal analysis in a “post-stylistic” mode in his work on authorship of African sculpture and Chinese painting (HAY, 2011).

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