

On Rembrandtness

The Rembrandt Research Project Revisited

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[G A R Y S C H W A R T Z]

The year 2014 saw the appearance of the closing volume, vol. VI, of *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*. The *Corpus* was the main product of the world-famous Rembrandt Research Project (RRP, founded in 1968), which came to a close after forty-six years. The Project has a founding myth. A full sixty years ago, in 1956, a young curatorial assistant at the Rijksmuseum, Bob Haak (1926-2005), was arranging the displays for a major exhibition of Rembrandt paintings commemorating the 350th anniversary of the master's birth in 1606. As the paintings leaned against the wall to be hung, Haak was struck by their diversity. They couldn't possibly all have been painted by the same artist, he thought. In stages, he and his friend Josua Bruyn (1923-2011), professor of Dutch art at the University of Amsterdam, forged plans to launch an investigation that would distinguish between paintings by Rembrandt himself and works wrongly attributed to him.

The programme they set up for this purpose, funded by the Dutch government, was unprecedented in its scope and thoroughness. Two by two, 'in constantly changing combinations', the team members – in addition to Bruyn and Haak, the others were Simon Levie (b. 1925) and Pieter van Thiel (1928-2012) of the Rijksmuseum and Ernst van de Wetering (b. 1938) of the University of Amsterdam – travelled the five continents to study all the Rembrandt paintings in the world. On the spot, they wrote descriptions of the painting 'seen as an object, as fully as possible'. They also set out 'to benefit as much as possible from ... scientific examination in the laboratory ... and from the various photographic techniques.'¹ The RRP set up headquarters in the Central Laboratory for the Study of Works of Art in Amsterdam and assembled a vast archive of information on all aspects of Rembrandt's paintings. All aspects, that is, which the group felt were relevant to distinguishing between an A-group of 'Paintings by Rembrandt' and a C-group of 'Paintings Rembrandt's authorship of which cannot be accepted.' (Between these is a small B-group, to which only five percent of the entries belong: 'Paintings Rembrandt's authorship of which cannot be positively either accepted or rejected.') The aspects considered relevant for this end do not include iconography, provenance or archival references, which are given short shrift by the Project, as are seventeenth-century prints after Rembrandt's paintings. 'Authorship', in the view of the RRP, is a property



Rembrandt, *Saul and David*, ca. 1650-1655,
Oil on canvas, 130 x 164.5 cm
Photo by Ivo Hoekstra
Credits: Mauritshuis, Den Haag

of the painting 'as an object,' a property whose presence or absence can be established only by observation and comparison. The completion of *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, the monumental six-volume set in which the RRP published its findings, affords an outstanding opportunity – indeed, it demands of us – to evaluate the project in terms of its original intention. At the close of this review we will reveal the results of this stress test.

An unfinished, hybrid product

As work on the first three volumes proceeded, from 1968 to 1989, covering the years 1625 through 1642, Ernst van de Wetering brought an increasing amount of material research and historical reconstruction to bear on the definition of authorship. His dissatisfaction with the overly deterministic way in which the RRP defined Rembrandt's style, with consequently unconvincing de-attributions, led to a break in 1992. Van de Wetering took over the RRP on his own and revamped the format of the *Corpus*. Rather than continuing chronologically, he devoted vol. IV to the self-portraits and vol. V to the small history paintings postdating 1642. Underestimating the extent of the task, he found himself unable to write subsequent volumes on the landscapes, portraits and larger



Rembrandt, *Self-portrait*, 1635.
Oil on panel, 90,5 x 71.8 cm.
Buckland Abbey (National Trust)

history paintings. Instead, he devoted vol. VI, the final one in the *Corpus*, to what he calls a 'complete survey.' The book offers good colour plates of all the paintings and entries on all. This is needed especially for paintings not included in vols. I-V. Unfortunately, the coverage of those paintings as well as others is uneven. Some entries, such as that on *The Jewish Bride* in the Rijksmuseum and *Simeon and the Christ Child* in Stockholm, are too brief. This internal inconsistency, compounded by constant cross-references to vols. I-III, means that vol. VI does not function well as a stand-alone one-volume catalogue of Rembrandt's paintings. It is in fact misleading to speak of 'a' corpus in six volumes. What we have is an unfinished, hybrid product with three distinct constitutions.

Not only was the format of the *Corpus* revised by van de Wetering, he also reversed the tendency to reduce Rembrandt's oeuvre into a spirit of expansionism. From 1982 to 1989, with the publication of vols. I-III, we grew accustomed to stories of this kind in the press and the media:

AMSTERDAM, Dec. 8, 1989 (Reuters, in *The New York Times*): The Rembrandt Research Project, a group of art experts, said today that 39 paintings attributed to Rembrandt are not genuine, including one at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Among the 39 paintings deemed by the group to be painted by students of Rembrandt are works in the Metropolitan, the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad, the Louvre in Paris and Britain's Wallace Collection.

Then, from 1993 until today, the rejected paintings began coming back into the fold, and we were treated to reports such as this one from *Die Welt*, 15 October 2014:

Braunschweig. Art experts have withdrawn their doubts concerning two Rembrandt portraits in the Herzog-Anton-Ulrich-Museum in Braunschweig. Researchers of the Dutch Rembrandt Research Project concede that the *Portrait of a Man* (1632) and *Portrait of a Woman* (1633) are by the Dutch Baroque painter after all. Twenty-eight years ago the group of experts had still doubted this.

The reversal is apparent for all to see in the six monumental volumes of the *Corpus*. Vols. I-III were heading for an oeuvre of about 260 works. Vol. VI ends up with a list of 348.² What are we to make of this self-contradictory project? And now that it has been closed, what assurance does it offer us concerning the authorship of the paintings attributed to Rembrandt van Rijn?

Which volume to believe?

The shift from deletion to expansion is accounted for by Ernst van de Wetering, the director of the RRP since 1993, in a remarkably personal essay in vol. VI. There he sketches an epic methodological and personal drama that took place in the course of the decades. As the RRP rolled on, he became increasingly convinced that the project was on the wrong track. Bruyn and the others, he felt, were concentrating too exclusively on Rembrandt's style in their judgements.





Saul and David,

1. Before restoration
2. During restoration
3. UV Light
4. After restoration

All photos by Margareta Svensson
Credits: Mauritshuis, Den Haag

Saul and David (Retouch during restoration)

Photos by Margareta Svensson

Credits: Mauritshuis, Den Haag





Any painting that showed excessive divergence from the way they thought Rembrandt painted was eliminated from his oeuvre. Van de Wetering wanted to give more weight to the different functions of the paintings and their techniques, to allow greater latitude for levels of quality and to acknowledge the participation of workshop members in some Rembrandt originals. (Of the 146 A-paintings in vols. I-III – ‘Paintings by Rembrandt’ – none is said to contain even a single passage by an assistant.)

It is often a matter of choice which volume of the *Corpus* to believe. One example will have to serve for all to demonstrate how confusing this can be.

In vol. III (1989), the RRP devoted a dismissive entry in the C-category to a painting of Rembrandt (see p. 158) that until then nearly all cataloguers of Rembrandt’s paintings had considered to be an autograph self-portrait.³ In vol. III of the *Corpus* they wrote of it in notably disparaging terms.

At first sight the painting has a certain impact... On closer inspection, however, no. C 92 exhibits a great many jarring features... it is disappointing to see how clumsily the structure of the body relates to the arms hidden beneath the cloak; the depiction of form is so poor that large areas of the painting have a strange emptiness. This extends to the head, where the rather uncertain modelling in the lit and shadow parts produces hardly any effect...; the eye area, in shadow, is not only fairly flat... but is also weak and insensitive in its linear construction. Brushwork and use of paint do lead, seen overall, to rembrandtesque effects, but they differ quite decisively from Rembrandt’s own... The remarkably diffuse appearance of the X-ray... in this respect must be termed untypical for Rembrandt.... The signature and date on the painting do not give an impression of authenticity... The painting belongs in the ... category of portraits of Rembrandt done by another hand.

The entry goes on to specify other aspects of the painting that are irreconcilable with the RRP’s standards of Rembrandtness, concluding that it is not a self-portrait but a ‘Half-length figure of Rembrandt’ ‘that was probably done in Rembrandt’s workshop around 1638.’ (The panel is signed and dated 1635.)

Then, in vol. IV (2005), Ernst van de Wetering returned to the painting, which he now calls 'Rembrandt workshop (or Rembrandt?).'

There are several reasons for once again raising the question of the authorship of this painting. The visual material that a user of the *Corpus* would have needed to arrive at his or her own judgement over this (long since virtually inaccessible) painting was missing from the relevant entry in vol. III. In retrospect, it is regrettable that owners of paintings allegedly by Rembrandt, but whose authenticity we doubted (as, in this case, had others before us), refused us permission to publish the relevant visual material.

In the rest of his remarks, van de Wetering deals only with the X-rays and repentirs. He does not comment on the specific weaknesses that are described in detail in vol. III, of which he was co-author. In a remarkable twist, he lays responsibility for what has turned out to be a completely misleading judgement in vol. III at the feet of the painting's owner, while suggesting that the arbiter of authenticity is not the RRP but the 'user of the *Corpus*.' Yet the RRP had been given every opportunity to examine the 'virtually inaccessible' painting and its X-rays. In vol. VI (2015), van de Wetering moves the question mark in his attribution, to 'Rembrandt (and workshop?).' His entry (no. 134) is full of evidence corroborating an attribution to Rembrandt. There too, however, he fails to explain when, how and why the pertinent observations and criticisms in vol. III ceased to be valid and why the X-rays are no longer untypical of Rembrandt. The lessons that could be learned from this concerning Rembrandt and the ways of the connoisseur now remain unlearned and the methodological faults perpetuated.

This particular case is more than a little painful, involving as it does a considerable loss to a family that deserved better. The private owner of the painting in the 1980s was the wealthy property developer Lord Harold Samuel of Wych Cross (1912-1987), who had the generosity to bequeath his outstanding collection of Dutch and Flemish old masters to the City of London.⁴ The Rembrandt was not in the collection, because he had given it during his lifetime to his wife Edna. She too, upon her death in 2008, bequeathed art to a public body, the National Trust. Under the terms of her will, which was passed in 2010, her daughters were each entitled to keep a painting for themselves. Consulting Sotheby's for an estimate of what the 'half-length of Rembrandt' would fetch at auction, they were told that it would be in the vicinity of 20,000 pounds. This suggests that Sotheby's was basing its estimate on the entry in vol. III of the *Corpus* rather than vol. IV or taking the opinion of any other expert than the RRP. Believing that the painting was not worth very much, neither daughter kept it.⁵ In 2010 the National Trust deposited it in Buckland Abbey, Devon, which at first treated it as a non-Rembrandt and put it into storage. Apparently, it was only when the new owners became aware of van de Wetering's remarks in vol. IV that a new investigation was launched, including in-depth scientific examination by the outstanding Hamilton Kerr Institute of Cambridge University. On the basis of the positive outcome of the investigation, the painting was treated to a cleaning. Following this campaign and a re-examination of the painting, Ernst van de Wetering has been quoted as declaring 'I am satisfied it is by Rembrandt', which has also satisfied the National Trust and the media. The painting went



Saul and David (Detail)

on view as an undoubted Rembrandt self-portrait in a special exhibition in June 2014, with an estimated value of 30 million pounds.⁶ (One re-reads with some amazement the remarks in vol. IV castigating the Samuel heirs for displaying less than exemplary cooperation in robbing themselves of 30 million pounds).

While Ernst van de Wetering's opinion on attributions is considered to be definitive, it should not be ignored that none of the three long, involved passages in the *Corpus* on the Buckland Abbey painting is an adequate representation of the evidence concerning its attribution. This reflects on the *Corpus* as a whole.

A treasure chest after all

Despite its deficiencies, inconsistencies and incompleteness, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings* is the most extensive catalogue ever published on the master's paintings, with an unequalled, immense wealth of information and opin-

ion. It is indispensable for all and any Rembrandt research and will remain so into the distant future. Discussion will continue on specific attributions and on the nature of connoisseurship, but no serious publications on Rembrandt will ever bypass the entries and judgements in the *Corpus*.

The project also produced some important collateral benefits. It has drawn the attention of scientists in the fields of dendrochronology, molecular research, conservation science and even engineering, who have broadened the scope of art research. In the later volumes there are valuable essays on the Rembrandt documents, costume and material substances. Van de Wetering himself, in illuminating and stimulating ways, has pursued favourite themes such as hitherto unrecognized sets and series among Rembrandt's paintings; patterns in his use of formats, supports, grounds and pigments; the original compositions of cut-down works; the function of particular kinds of paintings; and the relevance for Rembrandt's art of the theoretical writings of Karel van Mander and Samuel van Hoogstraten.

What we are left with is a treasure chest of sorts that did not fulfil its initial promise and never acknowledged that it failed to do so. It is an extended exercise not in science and not in logic – van de Wetering claims incorrectly to be practising the Bayesian variety – but in amplified connoisseurship, in which the amplifications mainly add to the traditional uncertainties of connoisseurship.

Looking forward to a different corpus

What is the RRP's answer to Bob Haak's dilemma? The Rijksmuseum exhibition of 1956 that irritated Bob Haak into initiating the RRP showed no fewer than 101 paintings. Of these, sixty-four are still today accepted unanimously as works by Rembrandt. The input of the RRP, as against the choice of the Rijksmuseum in 1956, lies in the other thirty-seven paintings. However, if we inspect them, we find that the RRP has left out sixteen of these debatable attributions completely. It did so, on its own statement, because Horst Gerson had removed them in 1968 from his own catalogue of Rembrandt paintings. In other words, the *Corpus* is based in significant measure on the judgement of a connoisseur of an older generation whose intuitive style it was out to improve and replace.

Ten more paintings rejected by the RRP were already doubted by Gerson, and one more by Claus Grimm, so they would have been omitted from future Rembrandt catalogues even without the RRP. That leaves nine paintings out of the 101 that the RRP excised on its own authority from the Rembrandt corpus. When, in 1969, the 300th anniversary of Rembrandt's death was marked by another exhibition in the Rijksmuseum, thirty-four paintings were included that all, without exception, are accepted by the RRP. One can therefore say that Rembrandt connoisseurship was already, in the first months of existence of the RRP, moving in a direction that the project would not catch up with until nearly half a century later.

In terms, then, of Bob Haak's discomfort, the contribution of the RRP to Rembrandt attribution lies less in the removal of paintings from the oeuvre in vols. I-III than in van de Wetering's additions to it in vols. IV-VI. These include mainly marginal works which, if they were put on the floor next to the traditional corpus, would undoubtedly lead another young curator – probably even

the older Haak himself, who did not support van de Wetering's re-attributions – to wonder whether they could possibly be by the same hand. In fact, most of the de-attributions and many of the new attributions in the *Corpus* have been challenged by others.

At the presentation of vol. VI in the Rijksmuseum on 8 October 2014, Ernst van de Wetering declared that he had put to an end uncertainty concerning the attribution of Rembrandt paintings. This is not his judgement to make. It is to be hoped that the next round, based less on categorical judgements and more on consistency and sound methodology, is at hand. To help things along, allow me to remark that the built-in assumption of the RRP that authorship is a property of the object and the object alone is disputable. If authorship is conceived not as hardened pigment but as a set of dynamic physical but also historical and conceptual criteria, in constant movement, then we can look forward to quite a different corpus of Rembrandt paintings than that of the RRP. ■

A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings, vols. I-VI, is published by Springer. Vols. I-V are available online at The Rembrandt Database.

NOTES

- 1 Quotations from the introductory matter in vol. I of the *Corpus*.
- 2 Van de Wetering made the world press with his statement that in vol. VI he reversed the attributions of seventy paintings rejected in earlier volumes. In a blog of 8 November 2014 Michael Savage criticizes this claim.
- 3 Disclosure: in my own book on Rembrandt of 1984, which covered all paintings accepted as by Rembrandt by Horst Gerson and the Rembrandt Research Project, I did not include this self-portrait. This was not an independent judgement on my part. As I indicated in a table on p. 380, I did so on the authority of Gerson, who had suggested in 1969 that the panel was by Govert Flinck.
- 4 See Peter Sutton, *Dutch and Flemish Seventeenth-Century paintings: the Harold Samuel Collection*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 1997.
- 5 Information kindly provided by a grandson of Harold Samuel.
- 6 See various pages on www.nationaltrust.org.uk.