



CURATOR
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An Enigmatic Laugh in Cologne

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Oh, that laugh! No less mysterious than the secretive smile of the Mona Lisa, it has preoccupied art historians for decades and never fails to fascinate the viewer. Rembrandt's self-portrait is one of the best-known paintings in the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Cologne. And at the same time it is one of the most enigmatic. I return to it again and again, wondering, marvelling, admiring.

Another Cologne icon, the contemporary artist Gerhard Richter, once said: 'To me, pictures which I understand, are bad.'¹ That explains, conversely, my fascination. In a masterly way, Rembrandt does not make it easy for us to understand his work.

How should we interpret the old man, portrayed with such humility, who stands out brightly against the darkness? Is the artist striving for that 'one' interpretation anyway? Is Rembrandt alluding to the philosopher Democritus laughing at the world? Is he depicting himself cynically scorning death? Or, mahlstick in hand, does he step into the role of the classical painter Zeuxis, who notoriously laughed himself to death painting the portrait of an ugly old woman? Could she be the grotesque profile on the left-hand edge of the picture?²

Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1662/1663, oil on canvas, 82.5 x 65 cm,
Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud, Cologne
© Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln, Britta Schlier



On closer inspection the comedy is also art historical drama, because that forthright laugh, like the raised eyebrows, was the result of overpainting. Many comprehensive technological studies have been carried out, yielding numerous discoveries regarding the possible original state of the painting and its current precarious condition, which further lessens its readability.³

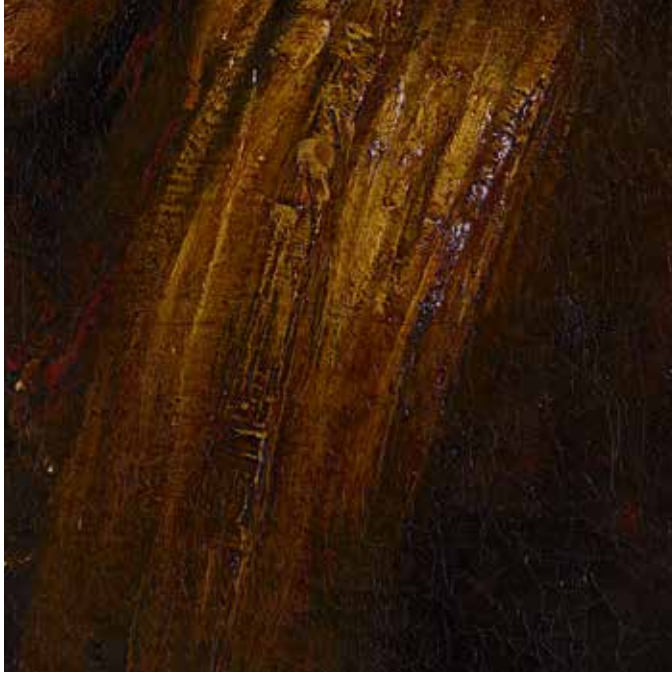
The indiscernibility, the 'great blackness' that dominates many of Rembrandt's works, 'because one must often do without three-quarters of a work for a stirring section gleaming with light,'⁴ already irritated the connoisseur Gerhard Morell in 1767. No, Rembrandt was never easy to digest. His grasp of painting, the virtuoso mountain of layers that unite to form an ecstasy of brown and gold tones, challenges the viewer. The comparison of his art, in a play in 1648,⁵ with haptically gleaming gold embroidery is apposite. Nonetheless, in Rembrandt's work it is the grand gesture rather than painstaking handwork that dominates, that conceals his art – real *dissimulatio artis*. John Elsum describes it congenially in 1704 in his epigram to 'an Old Man's head, by Rembrandt':

'What a *coarse rugged* Way of Painting's here, / *Stroake* upon *Stroake*, *Dabbs* upon *Dabbs* appear. / The Work you'd think was huddled up in haste, / But mark how truly ev'ry Colour's plac'd, / With such *Oeconomy* in such a sort, / That they each other mutually support. / *Rembrandt!* Thy Pencil plays a subtil Part / This *Roughness* is contriv'd to hide thy Art.'⁶

With laughter in my eyes, I draw on this wonderful ekphrasis for the old man of Cologne.

Translated by Lindsay Edwards





NOTES

- 1 Quoted by Christoph Menke in *Die Kraft der Kunst*, Berlin, 2013, p. 77.
- 2 See for further explanation: Jürgen Müller, *Der sokratische Künstler. Studien zu Rembrandts Nachtwache*, Leiden/Boston, 2015, pp. 102-109.
- 3 Iris Schaefer, Kathrin Pilz, Caroline von Saint-George, 'Rembrandts Selbstbildnis als Zeuxis. Neues zum Original, zur Erhaltung und zur Frage der Restaurierung', in: *Zeitschrift für Kunsttechnologie und Konservierung*, 25/2011, pp. 285-323.
- 4 Gerhard Morell, *Beurtheilendes Verzeichniß aller in der Neuen Gallerie befindlichen kostbaren Malereyen [...]*, Copenhagen 1767, cited in Michael North, *Gerhard Morell und die Entstehung einer Sammlungskultur im Ostseeraum des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Greifswald, 2012, p. 143.
- 5 Jan Zoet, *Zabynaja of vermomde loosheid*, cf. Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *Die Urkunden über Rembrandt*, The Hague, 1906, no. 112a.
- 6 John Elsum, *A Description of the Celebrated Pieces of Paintings of the most Eminent Masters, Ancient and Modern [...]*, London, 1704, p. 92, CXIX.