The Tronie of a Young Officer with a Gorget in the Mauritshuis: a second version by Rembrandt himself?

The confidence with which the attribution to Rembrandt of the youthful Self-Portrait with Gorget in the Mauritshuis (fig. a, p.162) has lately been rejected – in the exhibition Rembrandt by Himself it was presented as a copy by another hand, with Gerrit Dou as the most likely author – is in my opinion quite unwarranted. I would like to show that the arguments put forward in favour of de-attribution are not always convincing and that there are other possibilities to ponder. In preparing this paper I have relied on the recently published literature, including Edwin Buijzen’s contribution to the exhibition catalogue Rembrandt by Himself, the article in Mauritshuis in Focus by Quentin Buvelot and Jorgen Wadum, and a communication to the staff of the Mauritshuis from Ernst van de Wetering.

In the first volume of A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings it was admitted that the Mauritshuis painting (examined in 1973 by Josua Bruyn and Ernst van de Wetering) was quite different from the other early self-portraits. The authors of the Corpus, however, were of the opinion that ‘the attribution to Rembrandt – which does not encounter any difficulties – is fully justified not so much by a clear similarity to comparable works in its overall “handwriting”, as by, on the one hand, resemblances in motifs and details, and, on the other, a strong impression of authenticity that is borne out by examination of the paint structure. Regarding the Nuremberg painting, examined by Simon Levi and Pieter van Thiel, they wrote: ‘A very faithful copy, datable to the 17th century and 2 cm wider, this is of relatively high quality yet has unmistakable weaknesses, most evident in the neck area.’

Since then, Claus Grimm contended in 1995 that the Nuremberg painting was the original; two years later Ernst van de Wetering was also convinced when he saw the painting himself, and the discovery in 1998 of the underdrawing by infra-red reflectography subsequently clinched the matter.

My thesis – and I have since discovered that Simon Schama presented the same opinion in an appendix to his new book – is that the self-portrait in Nuremberg (fig. b, p.164) is undoubtedly an authentic, earlier version. Rembrandt then made a second version to show off his ability to paint in two different manners, demonstrating that, apart from the loose manner (‘loose manner’) with which he experimented in the Nuremberg painting – a loose, nimble and sweet-flowing brush (‘een los, wacker en soet-vloeiend penseel’) in the words of Philips Angel – he was also perfectly capable of painting an aristocratic portrait in a ‘net’ detailed and smooth manner (‘nette manier’).

My supposition is that Rembrandt himself transferred the most important outlines of the Nuremberg painting to the ground of the Mauritshuis panel (fig. c, p.166). It might seem unusual for Rembrandt to have made a tracing, because we know of no other works where he did this. But that is not a valid argument against the attribution, for he may well have used this common studio practice simply to make a second version in the quickest and most efficient way possible. He may have been prompted to do such a thing at this early stage in his career for a variety of reasons: apart from showing off, outstripping other painters who worked in a ‘net’ manner (as most painters did), he may have wanted to show potential customers that he was also capable of painting portraits in a more conventional style. Indeed, perhaps he was even asked to do so. Neither can one argue that the manner of drawing outlines, as seen in the infra-red reflectograph (fig. c, p.166), does not correspond to known drawings, because transferring traced outlines, as well as changing and correcting these outlines to provide the basis for a portrait, has nothing to do with a free drawing on paper. There is, quite simply, nothing to compare it with. Only the quick early lines in the hair were added in a free hand, and the kind of rapid elliptical strokes visible there do bear some resemblance to the sketchy lines in a few early chalk drawings.

After having transferred the outlines with a tracing, he drastically changed the first design, a few lines of which are still to be seen in the infra-red reflectograph (one eye and the left hairline are clearly visible in the illuminated half of the face, but more to the right and lower down; cf. fig. c and fig. 8). He then placed all the facial features higher and shifted them a bit to the left – undoubtedly with the help of the same calque which was also tilted slightly backwards (this can be verified by making a tracing of the reproduction in the exhibition catalogue and shifting its position, this procedure being possible because the two paintings are reproduced at exactly the same scale) (figs. 1 and 2). After that he tilted the calque slightly more backwards so that the left-hand side of the neck and shoulder line moved consider-
of the highest noblemen at the courts of Prince Maurits and the Winter King, has lost the curliness of Rembrandt’s own hair and has been given the same flowing wave as the cadenette of Christian, Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg, as seen in a print after a portrait by Michiel van Mierevelt (fig. 5), 7 which must have been a well-known engraving. Interestingly, this same print of Christian of Brunswick—a man notorious for his recklessness as a general, and, of all the noblemen in the service of Maurits, the one who perhaps appealed most to the imagination—appeared a year earlier, in 1668, in the background of the Student in his study by Jan Davidsz. de Heem, 8 a young painter working at that time in Leiden with whom Rembrandt was undoubtedly acquainted. Perhaps Rembrandt was also thinking of the famous print by Lukas Vorsterman after Rubens’ copy of Titian’s portrait of Charles V, in which we see the same type of small collar above the armour, a glimpse of the neck, and the slightly raised chin (fig. 4). Compared to these portraits, however, the pose was updated by introducing a stronger and livelier turning of the head with respect to the body. Looking at these prints, one even wonders if the artist made the mouth and lower lip more protruding and the chin more prominent because these were considered features belittling an aristocratic face.

Even though he used a smooth technique to create an even, unbroken surface, the artist painted the face brilliantly. 9 The subtle modelling around the mouth, including the suggestion of moistness above the upper lip, the shadow of a moustache, the transition from the concave to the convex form around the mouth, moving from there to a slight deepening and then to the curvature of the cheek, are all painted with great refinement, command of technique, and understanding of structure, as is the receding from cheek to ear. The stronger suggestion of a certain roundness around the mouth is perfectly in keeping with the mouth now being closed and one corner lifted slightly in a smile. The suggestion of shape in general, though rendered in a different technique, is certainly no less convincing than in the Nuremberg panel and is infinitely better than in the Indianapolis painting. 10

When a painting loses its aura of authenticity, connoisseurs start to point out weaknesses that no one ever noticed before, easily persuading those afraid of being considered uncritical. In this case, however, the supposed weaknesses are not always convincing. A striking example, in my view, is the contention that ‘the reflection on the left of the lower lip is not quite right; given the direction of the light it should be set a little higher, as in Rembrandt’s original’. 11 This is considered a mistake typically made by a copyist who does not thoroughly understand the prototype. 12 In my opinion, the position of such a highlight depends on the shape of the lip, the curve of the lower lip, and the extent to which it protrudes. By shifting the highlight slightly, the shape of the lip simply changes a bit. Besides, why should this copyist—obviously a painter of great ability—do things differently? Nothing would have been easier for him than to imitate this highlight carefully. But this painter chose to change it, and one could even argue that he had good reasons for doing so. Since the mouth protrudes a bit more—as mentioned above, to obtain this effect it was moved slightly to the right—and also exhibits more of a smile which stretches the lower lip a bit, the highlight should indeed be moved ever so slightly, which is exactly what the painter did.

A second weakness, or possible mistake, was found in the iris, which was said to be a dark hole with a tiny point of light, apparently according less well with the direction of light than the iris in the Nuremberg painting. 13 Again, one could say that a copyist with the ability of this painter would have had no problem imitating this. In fact, what he did is less conventional and more daring. It might be considered an adjustment to the stronger shading, at the same time giving the gaze a less accessible character. Moreover, one could even argue that it is more in keeping with the slightly changed direction of the gaze: since the convex shape of the
eye has moved a little to the right, the inner side of the iris would indeed catch less light. The small touch of grey left at the bottom of the pupil prevents it from becoming merely a dark hole, giving it a hint of transparency and roundness.

We have also been told that the heightened light and dark contrasts seem unnatural in places. One example is the area around the left eyelid: the transition to the shaded part is so abrupt that it gives the eyelid an oddly triangular shape. Van de Wetering contends that the shadow on the eyelid is too oblique, which leads to an annoying distortion. In my view, the transition from light to the heavy shadow on the eyelid and from there to the even deeper shadow in the eye socket and back to the eyebrow is beautiful, while the virtuosity with which the irregular eyebrow is painted and its hairs suggested (at the same time emphasizing a kind of arrogant frown) is nothing less than breathtaking.

That the hair in the Nuremberg painting 'is conceived more as a single entity' and not 'as if each hair has been painted separately and reflects its own light' was also presented as a quality judgement. This was compared with the fur hat of Gerriet Dou's old woman in the Rijksmuseum. I see no connection at all, however, with the stripier and more regular way in which Dou paints such passages. Moreover, we see the same technique of finely painted hairs that catch the light in slightly earlier works, such as the Two Disputing Old Men (Peter and Paul) in Melbourne. Two years later we still find this in the hair, beards and moustaches of several of Rembrandt's earliest portraits of men. Finally, the way in which the fine hairs on the chin are painted bears a strong resemblance to the same passage in the earlier self-portrait in the Rijksmuseum.
NOTES

1 I recently received the manuscript of the entry for the catalogue of the portraits of the Mauritshuis (by Yvar van Solkhov). Moreover, at the symposium in December 1999 where I presented this paper, I attended the presentation of the papers by Edwin Bijsterveld and Jorgen Wachtler. I think, however, that the arguments presented here are valid.


4 Communicated by telephone to the staff of the Mauritshuis, 6 November 1998.


7 Remarkable indeed is the ethnology with which the staff of the Mauritshuis supported the dating of three of its portraits. The title of the above-mentioned article was *Mauritshuis in Focus* – "Rembrandt's early self-portrait unmasked" – even suggested a name had been committed. The parenthetical note to this illustrious painting contains reproductions of the pictures from Zürich in full colour and the Mauritshuis painting next to it in black and white.


10 Regarding this practice as a means of producing replicas and copies in the 17th and 17th centuries, see the recent publication by E. Buzac and S. Colson, *Drawings in some works by Carel van der Hoeven*, De Bataafse Magazine 141 (2000), pp. 144-145, with reference to older literature.

11 Compare the quickly sketched lines in the left background of *Danae* at the half (around 1610) in the British Museum (M. B. Raynal, *Rembrandt and his Circle in the British Museum, London 1972*, pp. 13, cat. no. 5).


15 The fact that the underpainting also looks different in the infra-red photographs seems to me quite natural and not an argument capable of refuting Rembrandt's authorship of the "true" master also required a different build-up of the paint layers. One could even sum the argument around and say that a young pupil in Rembrandt's studio would rather imitate Rembrandt's usual painter.


18 One might even suppose that Huygens was looking for a successor to the old Van MSS (who, as he said, was declining), though he was still the greatest portrait painter of living at the time and that Rembrandt therefore probably a special of his ability in this field.


20 I was gratified to learn that the other art historians present at the symposium who had done research on the paintings of Brueghel – Russian Baur and Peter Hacht – did not see any similarities with Zucchi's work either and thought him a most unlikely candidate.

21 *II. Il quale fu conservero quanto seme di talo giudico muto* in *tali giudici presenti* *di quelli che*, *aversi veduto* un tal quadro di maniera indimenticati, vedi l'ultimo e ultimo un simile in *La novelle* a *per tratenuto* e per *la persuasione*; *o Balthasar ordinatamente una opera* *senza* *referire che* *sarebbe affascinante, non mancare* *meno* *che adesso e* *più* *della stessa* *sara d'io lettre*? E. F. Baldusini, *I. 5& al art-giudeo XVIII/XIX*, ed. A. Mantelli, Rome 1973, p. 58.

22 Guided by Bruce Colton 1999 (note 10), p. 43. This Baldusini is nephew of the better known Filippo Baldusini who wrote each an interesting biography of Rembrandt in 1648.
Rembrandt, Self Portrait with Gorget, or Anonymous after Rembrandt, Portrait of Rembrandt with Gorget, panel, 13.3 x 15.3 cm. The Hague, Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis. Photo: Mauritshuis.

Rembrandt, Self Portrait with Gorget, panel, 38.5 x 31 cm. Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum. Photo: Germanisches Nationalmuseum.