

## 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,<sup>1</sup> including Edwin Buijsen's contribution to the exhibition catalogue *Rembrandt by Himself*,<sup>2</sup> the article in *Mauritshuis in Focus* by Quentin Buvelot and Jørgen Wadum,<sup>3</sup> and a communication to the staff of the Mauritshuis from Ernst van de Wetering.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> The authors of the *Corpus*, however, were of the opinion that 'the attribution to Rembrandt – which ... does not encounter any difficulties – is thus 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 Levic 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.'

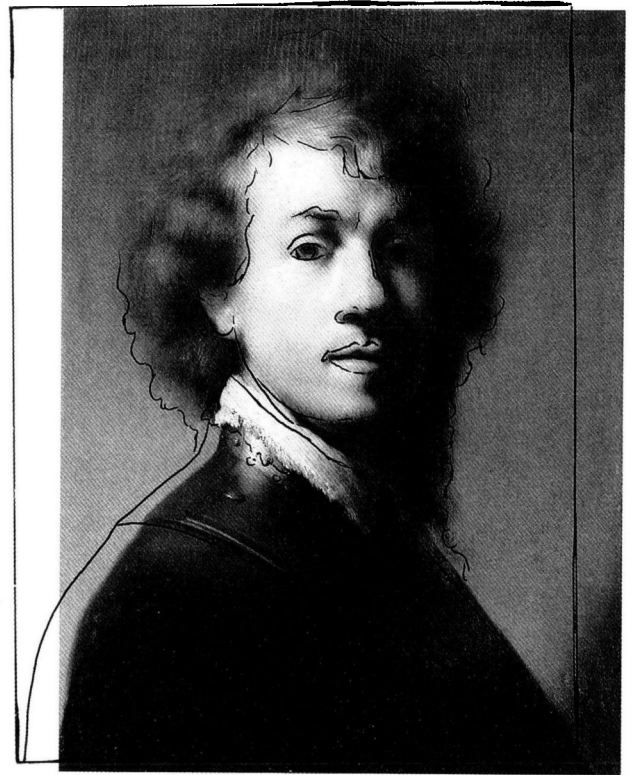
Since then, Claus Grimm contended in 1991 that the Nuremberg painting was the original;<sup>6</sup> two years later Ernst van de Wetering was also convinced when he saw the painting himself, and the discovery in 1998 of the underdrawing by infrared reflectography subsequently clinched the matter.<sup>7</sup>

My thesis – and I have since discovered that Simon Schama presented the same opinion in an appendix to his new book<sup>8</sup> – is that the self-portrait in Nuremberg (fig. b, p. 163) 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 ('losse manier') with which he experimented in the Nuremberg painting – a loose, nimble and sweet-flowing brush ('een los, wacker en soet-vloeyend penceel') in the words of Philips Angel<sup>9</sup> – he was also perfectly capable of painting an aristocratic portrait in a 'neat', 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. 186). It might seem unusual for Rembrandt to have made a tracing, because we



1  
Tracing of the Nuremberg painting over the painting in the Maurithuis, first position. Photo: Ed Brandon.



2  
Tracing of the Nuremberg painting over the painting in the Maurithuis, second position. Photo: Ed Brandon.

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.<sup>10</sup> 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 'neat' 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.186), 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 curly 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.<sup>11</sup>

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; c.f. fig. c and fig. 1).<sup>12</sup> 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 from 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-



3  
Willem Jacobsz. Delft after Michiel van Mierevelt, *Christian Duke of Braunschweig-Lüneburg*, 1623, engraving (Hollstein, p. 150, no. 14)



4  
Lucas Vorsterman after Peter Paul Rubens, *Titian's Portrait of Charles V*, engraving.

ably to the right. Since the line of the body at the right-hand side stayed in the same place, the body became somewhat narrower. These manipulations changed the concept of the painting considerably. Instead of portraying the sitter in a tense attitude – the head slightly oblique, directing a searching gaze in the mirror – the painter now tried out a bold, upright, aristocratic posture, a pose he knew well from portraits of the aristocratic elite by the famous Michiel van Mierevelt. This change, however, was not only the result of shifting the calque; the painter also made many small alterations. The forehead now seems to be a bit higher, but this suggestion was attained merely by moving the indentation in the hairline a bit to the left. The position of the mouth is now somewhat lower and slightly more to the right in relation to the nose. The sitter's left eye (on our right as we view him) was changed and moved slightly to the left. The jawline on the lighted side has become somewhat narrower, causing the position of the ear to shift as well. All of these changes, as well as the stronger shading, were meant to emphasise the impression of taut slenderness, accentuating the straight, upright vertical and thereby contributing to a sense of noble hauteur.

In this way the original *tronie*-like self-portrait (Rembrandt himself posing before the mirror as a fashionable, aristocratic officer) was altered to become a *tronie* that truly presents the image of a young, fashionable, arrogant nobleman and army officer. The painting technique was adjusted to this change in concept, the smooth refinement of the painted surface being perfectly suited to this purpose. Rembrandt's own unruly curls have disappeared and the hair now displays a chique wave. Similarly, the *cadennette*, or lovelock, which we know from several portraits

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 *cadette* of Christian, Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg, as seen in a print after a portrait by Michiel van Mierevelt (fig. 3),<sup>13</sup> 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 1628, in the background of the *Student in his study* by Jan Davidsz. de Heem,<sup>14</sup> 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's 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 befitting an aristocratic face.

Even though he used a smooth technique to create an even, unbroken surface, the artist painted the face brilliantly.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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'.<sup>17</sup> This is considered a mistake typically made by a copyist who does not thoroughly understand the prototype.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> Again, one could say that a copyist with the ability of this painter would have had no problem in 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



5  
Rembrandt, *Portrait of Joris de Caullery*, dated 1632, canvas on panel, 102.9 x 84.3 cm. San Francisco, The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.



6  
Gerrit Dou, *Old Man with a Gorget*, signed, panel, 24 x 18 cm. Cassel, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Schloss Wilhelmshöhe.

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.'<sup>20</sup> Van de Wetering contends that the shadow on the eyelid is too oblique, which leads to an annoying distortion.<sup>21</sup> 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 emphasising 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 Gerrit 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.<sup>22</sup>

In short, I propose that Rembrandt, at this early stage in his career, was showing off his ability to paint in two different manners ('handeligen'). In the Mauritshuis painting he poses as an up-to-date Michiel van Mierevelt, who, we should not forget, was still the most famous and admired portrait painter in the country, as testified to by Constantijn Huygens at about this time.<sup>23</sup> In this painting Rembrandt shows that he was also a virtuoso in using the smooth manner suited for such aristocratic portraits. For some reason it did not bring him the portrait commissions from The Hague that he might have expected. Nevertheless, he still used some of these elements when painting Joris de Caullery dressed as an officer in 1632 (fig. 5),<sup>24</sup> in which the position of the head with respect to the body is quite similar. And although in this later painting De Caullery's face is painted much more cursorily – lending it a suggestive, atmospheric quality – the way in which De Caullery's gorget is painted is still remarkably close to the Mauritshuis painting. It exhibits the same carefully observed play of light, rendered with smooth brushwork but displaying a thick impasto in the white catchlight on the standing rim, in both cases thicker than in the Nuremberg painting. Of a totally different nature is Dou's rendering of the same motif in his very early *Old Man with a Gorget* in Cassel, which shows a finely striped surface with no raising of paint, not even in the catchlight (fig. 6). Jorgen Wadum referred to this painting because of its underdrawing, but the painting technique and its suggestion of various surfaces is quite different from what we see here. In his 'smooth' paintings (Dou could also paint in a 'loose' manner when he wanted to), Dou's brushwork was more descriptive, giving an accurate rendering of meticulously observed details by means of very fine, regular lines of paint blending into one another.<sup>25</sup>

In my view, the brilliant suggestion of an almost palpable, youthful skin and the virtuosic rendering of the fringe-like edge of the collar (depicted with small, thick strokes of white painted wet-in-wet in the dark grey of the gorget) could not possibly have been the work of either the fifteen-year-old Dou or the more mature man. Neither do I think it could have been done by any other copyist. We should bear in mind the words of Francesco Saverio Baldinucci, who mockingly describes as ill-advised and hasty those who would brand every replica the work of a copyist, although the greatest painters have often made two or more paintings of the same subject and composition: '... which shows us how rash the judgement of some present-day art judges sometimes is, who have seen an undisputed work by a certain master, and, seeing a similar one – in both invention and perfection of execution – passionately declare it to be a copy, without reflecting on the possibility that the same master might have produced two or more of the same sort.'<sup>26</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I recently received the manuscript of the entry for the catalogue of the portraits of the Mauritshuis (by Ariane van Suchtelen). Moreover, at the symposium in December 1999 where I presented this paper, I attended the presentation of the papers by Edwin Buijsen and Jørgen Wadum. I still think, however, that the arguments proposed here are valid.

<sup>2</sup> E. Buijsen in C. White and C. Buvelot (ed.), exh. cat. *Rembrandt by Himself*, London (National Gallery), The Hague (Mauritshuis) 1999–2000, pp. 112–117, cat. nos. 14a and 14b.

<sup>3</sup> Q. Buvelot and J. Wadum, 'Rembrandt's early self-portrait unmasked', *Mauritshuis in Focus* 12 (1999) 3, pp. 32–42.

<sup>4</sup> Communicated by telephone to the staff of the Mauritshuis, 6 November 1998.

<sup>5</sup> J. Bruyn, B. Haak, S. H. Levie, P. J. J. van Thiel and E. van de Wetering, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 1, The Hague/Boston/London 1982, pp. 225–230, cat. no. A 21.

<sup>6</sup> C. Grimm, *Rembrandt selbst: Eine Neubewertung seiner Porträtkunst*, Stuttgart/Zürich 1991, pp. 21, 24–28.

<sup>7</sup> Remarkable indeed is the enthusiasm with which the staff of the Mauritshuis supported the degrading of their own picture. The title of the above-mentioned article in *Mauritshuis in Focus* – 'Rembrandt's early self-portrait unmasked' – even suggested a crime had been committed. The punishment meted out to this delinquent painting consisted in reproducing the picture from Nuremberg in full colour and the Mauritshuis painting next to it in black and white.

<sup>8</sup> S. Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, New York etc. 1999, p. 703, 'Author's note. But are they Rembrandt's?'

<sup>9</sup> Ph. Angel, *1. of der schilder-konst*, Leiden 1641, p. 56, English translation: 'Philips Angel, *Praise of Painting*', Translated by Michael Hoyle with an introduction and commentary by Hessel Miedema, *Simiolus* 24 (1996), pp. 227–249, especially p. 249.

<sup>10</sup> Regarding this practice as a means of producing replicas and copies in the 16th and 17th centuries, see the recent publication by L. Bauer and S. Colton, 'Tracing in some works by Caravaggio', *The Burlington Magazine*

142 (2000), pp. 434–436, with references to older literature.

<sup>11</sup> Compare the quickly sketched lines in the left background of *Diana at the bath* (around 1630) in the British Museum (M. Royalton-Kisch, *Drawings by Rembrandt and his Circle in the British Museum*, London 1992, p. 33, cat. no. 5).

<sup>12</sup> See London/The Hague 1999–2000 (note 2), fig. 14b. The eyes and the hairline, lower and more to the right, visible in the infra-red reflectographs, fit the Nuremberg painting precisely.

<sup>13</sup> For this engraving by Willem Jacobsz. Delft, dating from 1623, see *Der Krieg als Person. Herzog Christian d. J. von Braunschweig-Lüneburg im Bildnis von Paulus Moreelse*, exh. cat. Brunswick (Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum) 2000, p. 112, cat. no. 30.

<sup>14</sup> Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, reproduction in G. Schwarz, *Rembrandt. Zijn leven, zijn schilderijen*, Maarssen 1984, fig. 86.

<sup>15</sup> The fact that the underpainting also looks different in the infra-red reflectographs seems to me quite natural and not an argument capable of refuting Rembrandt's authorship; the 'neat' manner also required a different build-up of the paint layers. One could even turn the argument around and say that a young pupil in Rembrandt's studio would rather imitate Rembrandt's usual manner.

<sup>16</sup> London/The Hague 1999–2000 (note 2), pp. 100–101, cat. no. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Communication of Ernst van de Wetering to the Mauritshuis (note 4); this was repeated in the catalogue entry, London/The Hague 1999–2000 (note 2), p. 116.

<sup>18</sup> Another supposed mistake considered typical of copyists is the enlargement of the forms. However, if one puts the tracing of the Nuremberg painting over the Hague painting, one realises that there are no 'enlarged' forms at all. It is quite amazing to see that many of the so-called mistakes and misunderstandings of the copyist – it has also been alleged that the face is elongated, the nose longer, and the ear too far to the left – all of them listed in the catalogue entry of Ariane van Suchtelen (see note 1), are simply not there, and this can easily be verified with the tracing. Other alterations considered to be mistakes are, as I have argued,

either improvements – such as the eyes which are indeed closer to each other – or a deliberate change, such as the altered position of the mouth. The allegation that the position of the head on the body is unstable in the second version seems to me unjustified.

<sup>19</sup> Communicated by E. van de Wetering to the Mauritshuis (note 4) and London/The Hague 1999–2000 (note 2), p. 116.

<sup>20</sup> London/The Hague 1999–2000 (note 2), p. 113.

<sup>21</sup> Communicated by Van de Wetering to the Mauritshuis (note 4).

<sup>22</sup> See London/The Hague 1999–2000 (note 2), pp. 94–96, cat. no. 5; Bruyn *et al.* 1982 (note 5), vol. 1, cat. no. A 14.

<sup>23</sup> See *Constantijn Huygens. Mijn jeugd*, transl. by C. L. Heesakkers, Amsterdam 1987, 1987, pp. 82–84. Huygens must have met Rembrandt in 1629. One might even suppose that Huygens was looking for a successor to the old Van Mierevelt (who, as he said, was declining, though he was still the greatest portrait painter living at the time) and that Rembrandt therefore produced a specimen of his ability in this field.

<sup>24</sup> San Francisco, The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Bruyn *et al.* 1982 (note 5), vol. 1, cat. no. A 53.

<sup>25</sup> I was gratified to learn that the other art historians present at the symposium who had done research on the paintings of Dou – Ronni Baer and Peter Hecht – did not see any similarity with Dou's work either and thought him a most unlikely candidate.

<sup>26</sup> '... il quale fa conoscere quanto temerario talvolta sia il giudizio di taluni giudici presentuosi di quadri che, avendo veduto un tal quadrio di maestro indubitato, vedendone un altro simile – e per l'invenzione e per la perfezione – lo dichiarono arditamente una copia, senza riflettere che non è impossibile che lo stesso maestro ne abbia due e più della stessa sorta dati alla luce.' F. S. Baldinucci, *Vite di artisti dei secoli XV–XVIII*, ed. A. Martelli, Rome 1975, p. 58. Cited by Bauer/Colton 1999 (note 10), p. 433. This Baldinucci is a nephew of the better known Filippo Baldinucci who wrote such an interesting biography of Rembrandt in 1686.