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Portrait of an Old Man (Possibly a Rabbi)

Rembrandt van Rijn
(Leiden 1606 – 1669 Amsterdam)

ca. 1645
oil on panel
22.2 x 18.4 cm
RR-109

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This expressively rendered half-length oil sketch of an elderly bearded man depicts the sitter in profile with slightly downcast eyes as he gazes toward the book he holds in his hands. His fur-lined cloak and fur hat are rendered in ocher and brownish tones, with only the shirt, beard and face standing out from their tonal surroundings. Although the man's physiognomy has been articulated clearly, the body is so sketchily handled and thinly painted that the vertical grain of the panel is visible through the reddish-brown paint. His arms and hands are indicated with only a few rough strokes, giving the work an unfinished appearance.

This freely executed painting, which is known in nine other versions, has been attributed to various artists over the years.[1] Wilhelm von Bode published it in 1883 as an autograph work by Rembrandt van Rijn.[2] On the basis of a drawing in the Teylers Museum, which very likely was made directly after the present painting **(fig 1)**,[3] Horst Gerson attributed both the drawing and the painting (which he knew only from a photograph) to Gerbrand van den Eeckhout (1621–74).[4] The painting's location remained unknown throughout the twentieth century, but when it resurfaced for sale in 2004 it was attributed to Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627–78).[5] In 2006 the painting was included in an exhibition at the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam as attributed to Van den Eeckhout.[6] Three years later Ernst van de Wetering argued that this small oil sketch was by Rembrandt and was the primary version of the composition.[7]

The fact that so many copies were made after this oil sketch reinforces the argument that it should be attributed to Rembrandt. The existence of these copies also strongly suggests that this work was viewed as having a special significance in Rembrandt's workshop, perhaps as a study of a special character type (such as an old man), or as a lighting study, such as Van de Wetering has established for other oil sketches by the master.[8]

Dates of oil sketches are extremely difficult to determine. A *terminus post quem* has been established by the dendrochronological analysis of Peter Klein, who determined that the wood support would have been ready for use from 1631 onwards.[9] Van de Wetering has argued that the painting can be dated loosely between 1645 and 1655.[10] One comparable oil sketch by the master that narrows the chronological framework for this work is *Woman Weeping* **(fig 2)**.[11] Not only do these two small panel paintings have similar dimensions (21.3 × 16.8 cm compared to 22.3 × 18.6 cm), but also in each instance the face is described in more detail than the body and background.[12] *Woman Weeping* presumably dates to around 1644, since it almost certainly served as a preparatory study for *Woman Taken in Adultery* in London.[13] The Leiden Collection sketch of this old man, thus, probably dates to this

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Attributed to Gerbrand van den Eeckhout, *Profile of an Old Man,* black chalk heightened with white body color on paper, 206 x 157 mm, Teylers Museum, Haarlem, inv. no. P64

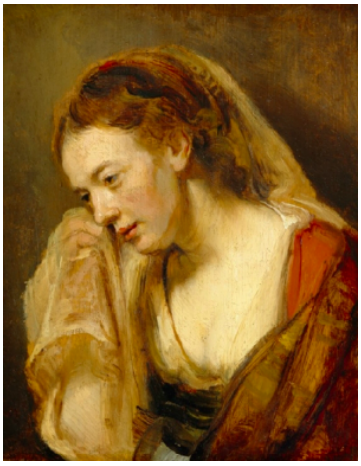

Fig 2. Rembrandt van Rijn or School of Rembrandt, *Woman Weeping*, ca. 1644, 21.3 x 16.8 cm, The Detroit Institute of Arts, inv. 56.183, photo © 2014, Detroit Institute of Arts



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same period, although in this instance it does not seem to have served as a preliminary study for one of Rembrandt's larger compositions.

Rembrandt had already had conceived a composition similar to this one early in his career, in a drawing of a seated old man dated 1628.[14] Evidently this drawing remained in use in his studio (not uncommon for his drawings), because he revisited the subject matter and pose around 1639 in an elaborate study in pen and ink, now in Paris (**fig 3**). This pen and ink drawing depicts what appears to be the same model wearing the same costume, including the distinctive hat.

The identification of the old man as a rabbi, which Émile Michel had already proposed in the nineteenth century, is not certain.[15] The basis of this identification is the wide flat beret, which Ashkenazi Jews wore in the seventeenth century.[16] However, Rembrandt's follower Salomon Koninck (1609–56) often incorporated exotic features, including Jewish attributes, when depicting learned old men,[17] and it remains possible that Rembrandt also intended this kind of open reading for his figure. Koninck, who likely had some contact with the studio in the mid-1640s, also recast Rembrandt's 1628 drawing into a painted composition,[18] and subsequently made a specialty of single-figure depictions of old men in fancy costume. He may well have known the present painted study as well.

- David de Witt, 2017

Fig 3. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Seated Old Man*, pen and brown ink, brown wash, 164 × 129 mm, Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt, Paris, inv. no. 4502

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Endnotes

1. Follower of Rembrandt, *Profile of an Old Man*, oil on panel, 21 x 18 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. R.F. 2384; Follower of Rembrandt, *Profile of an Old Man*, oil on panel, formerly (perhaps still) in the collection of Werner M. Wolf, Küsnacht, Switzerland; Workshop of Rembrandt, *Profile of an Old Man*, oil on panel, 17 × 15 cm, private collection, Geneva; Attributed to the School of Rembrandt, *Profile of an Old Man*, oil on panel, 21.3 × 17.7 cm, The Wernher Collection, Ranger's House, London; Follower of Rembrandt, *Profile of an Old Man*, oil on panel [?], 21.5 × 16.5 cm, whereabouts unknown (sale, Huize Oolde, Laren, Netherlands, on 25 September 1947); Attributed to Rembrandt van Rijn, *Profile of an Old Man*, oil on panel, Van Tilburg Collection, University of Pretoria, South Africa; Follower of Rembrandt, *Profile of an Old Man*, oil on panel [?], dimensions and whereabouts unknown (with Schoneman Galleries, New York, 1954); Follower of Rembrandt, *Profile of an Old Man*, oil on panel, 19.7 × 15.7 cm, formerly in the Mikhailov collection (sale, Drouot Montaigne, Paris, 31 May 1988, no. 33, as by Circle of Gerbrand van den Eeckhout); Attributed to Rembrandt van Rijn, *Head of a Rabbi*, oil on panel, 20.3 x 16.5 cm, whereabouts unknown (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 4 March 1899, no. 44).
2. Wilhelm von Bode, *Studien zur Geschichte der holländischen Malerei* (Braunschweig, 1883), 514.
3. See Michiel C. Plomp, *The Dutch Drawings in the Teyler Museum* (Haarlem, 1997), 2: 143–44, no. 129.
4. In Abraham Bredius and Horst Gerson, *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the Paintings* (London, 1969), no. 228.
5. Wendela Burgemeister, "A Portrait of a Rabbi," in *Salomon Lilian Old Masters* (Sales cat. Amsterdam, Salomon Lilian, B. V.) (Zwolle, 2004), 30–33, no. 10.
6. Mirjam Alexander-Knotter, Jasper Hillegers, and Edward van Voolen, *The "Jewish" Rembrandt: The Myth Unraveled* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Joods Historisch Museum) (Zwolle, 2006), 78.
7. Van de Wetering provided an unpublished, informal essay on this work (on file at The Leiden Collection) entitled "Remarks on Bredius 228," in which he argued that RR-109 is an autograph painting and is the primary version of the composition. He concluded that the scratches into wet paint in this work were imitated superficially in the other versions.
8. Ernst van de Wetering, "Rembrandt's Oil Studies: New Light on an Old Problem," in *Rembrandt: Quest of a Genius*, ed. Ernst van de Wetering (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (Zwolle, 2006), 178–207.
9. Prof. Peter Klein, report on dendrochronological analysis, 16 September 2006.
10. See Ernst van de Wetering, "Remarks on Bredius 228," unpublished, informal essay on RR-109 (on file at the Leiden Collection), in which the later date is suggested by the comparison to a drawing: *Hendickje Stoffels Seated at a Window, Eyes Shut*, around 1655, pen and brush, 163 × 175 mm, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, inv. NMH 2084/1863.

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11. The reattribution to Rembrandt was proposed and argued by Ernst van de Wetering in "Rembrandt's Oil Studies: New Light on an Old Problem," in *Rembrandt: Quest of a Genius*, ed. Ernst van de Wetering (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie) (Zwolle and Amsterdam, 2006), 197–200, against the previous assessment of Detroit Institute of Arts curator George S. Keyes et al., in *Masters of Dutch Painting: The Detroit Institute of Arts* (Detroit, 2004), 180–81, in which he assigned the painting to an Anonymous Dutch artist of the seventeenth century.
12. A certain restraint, however, is maintained in the Leiden Collection painting, even in the sketchier, looser passages.
13. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Woman Taken in Adultery*, signed and dated, 1644, panel, 88 × 65.4 cm, The National Gallery, London, inv. no. NG 45.
14. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Seated Old Man with a Stick, Turned to the Left*, 1628, red chalk and brown and gray wash with white heightening, 204 × 157 mm, Dreiflessen Collection (Libernia Collection), Mettingen; Peter Schatborn and Leonore van Sloten, *Old Drawings, New Names: Rembrandt and His Contemporaries* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis) (Varik, 2014), 103.
15. Émile Michel, *Rembrandt, sa vie, son oeuvre et son temps* (Paris, 1893), 343. Jasper Hilligers allows the possibility as well in his entry on the painting; Mirjam Alexander-Knotter, Jasper Hillegers, and Edward van Voolen, *The "Jewish" Rembrandt: The Myth Unraveled* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Joods Historisch Museum) (Zwolle, 2006), 78.
16. Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (Berkeley, 2002), 48; with reference to Alfred Rubens, *A History of Jewish Costume* (New York, 1967), 158.
17. For example, a scholar with a tall hat and a richly embroidered robe, in Salomon Koninck, *The Old Scholar*, around 1648/1650, oil on canvas, 102 × 144 cm, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, inv. no. GE 768; Werner Sumowksi, *Gemälde der Rembrandtschüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 3: 1647, no. 1119, 1693 ill.
18. Salomon Koninck, *Seated Old Man with a Stick, Turned to the Left*, around 1645/1650, oil on panel, 60 × 48 cm, Galleria Sabauda, Turin, inv. no. 394; Werner Sumowksi, *Gemälde der Rembrandtschüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 3:1648, no. 1124, 1698 ill. Peter Schatborn reports that Bernhard Schnackenburg has attributed this painting to Jan Lievens, which does not appear convincing: Peter Schatborn, *Old Drawings, New Names: Rembrandt and His Contemproaries* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis) (Varik, 2014), 103.

Provenance

- Éduard Warneck, Paris, by 1883 (his sale, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 27 May 1926, no. 70 [to Blummereich for 200,000 francs]).

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- Richard von Schnitzler, Cologne, by 1931.
- Private collection, Baden-Württemberg, Germany, by 1958 [to Kunsthandel Piet de Boer].
- [Kunsthandel Piet de Boer, Amsterdam, 1962.]
- [Guttmann Galleries, Los Angeles, 1985.]
- Private collection, possibly Switzerland.
- Private collection, possibly Norway.
- [Salomon Lilian, B.V., Amsterdam (to Michiel and Debbie Zwetsloot).]
- Michiel and Debbie Zwetsloot, Scotland, by 2004 [to Salomon Lilian, B.V.].
- [Salomon Lilian, B.V., Amsterdam, 2004.]
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2005, as by Samuel van Hoogstraten.

Exhibition History

- Paris, location unknown, "Exposition de tableaux de Maîtres anciens au profit du Inondes du Midi," January 1887, no. 122 [lent by Éduard Warneck, Paris].
- The Hague, Haagsche Kunstkring, "Tentoonstelling van Oude Portretten," 1 July–1 September 1903, no. 115 [lent by Éduard Warneck, Paris].
- Düsseldorf, Kunstverein für die Rhienland and Westfalen, "Ausstellung Alter Malerei aus rheinisch-westfälischen Privatbesitz," January–February 1928, no. 72 [lent by Éduard Warneck, Paris].
- Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie, "Meisterwerke aus baden-württembergischen Privatzbesitz," 9 October 1958–10 January 1959, no. 158 [lent by a private collector].
- Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis, on loan with the permanent collection, October 2005–June 2008, as by School of Rembrandt [lent by the present owner].
- Amsterdam, Joods Historisch Museum, "The 'Jewish' Rembrandt: The Myth Unravelled," 10 November 2006–4 February 2007, as by Gerbrand van den Eeckhout (?) [lent by the present owner].
- Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, 7 May 2009–March 2011 [lent by the current owner].
- Raleigh, North Carolina Museum of Art, "Small Treasures: Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, and Their Contemporaries," 11 October 2014–4 January 2015; Birmingham, Ala., Birmingham Museum of Art, 31 January–26 April 2015, no. 35 [lent by the present owner].
- Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, 29 April 2015–14 November 2016 [lent by the present owner].
- Paris, Museé du Louvre, "Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection: The Age of Rembrandt," 22 February–22 May 2017 [lent by the present owner].

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- Beijing, National Museum of China, “Rembrandt and His Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 17 June–3 September 2017 [lent by the present owner].
- Shanghai, Long Museum, West Bund, “Rembrandt, Vermeer and Hals in the Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 23 September 2017–25 February 2018 [lent by the present owner].
- Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, “The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection,” 28 March 2018–22 July 2018 [lent by the present owner].
- St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, “The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection,” 5 September 2018–13 January 2019 [lent by the present owner].
- Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi, “Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age. Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre,” 14 February–18 May 2019 [lent by the present owner].
- Amsterdam, H’ART Museum, “From Rembrandt to Vermeer: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 9 April–24 August, 2025 [lent by the present owner].
- West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art, “Art and Life in Rembrandt’s Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 25 October 2025–29 March, 2026 [lent by the present owner].

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Versions
Versions and Copies

1. Follower of Rembrandt, *Profile of an Old Man*, oil on panel, 21 x 18 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. R.F. 2384.
2. Follower of Rembrandt, *Profile of an Old Man*, oil on panel, formerly (perhaps still) in the collection of Werner M. Wolf, Küsnacht, Switzerland.
3. Workshop of Rembrandt, *Profile of an Old Man*, oil on panel, 17 x 15 cm, private collection, Geneva.
4. Attributed to the School of Rembrandt, *Profile of an Old Man*, oil on panel, 21.3 x 17.7 cm, The Wernher Collection, Ranger's House, London.
5. Follower of Rembrandt, *Profile of an Old Man*, oil on panel [?], 21.5 x 16.5 cm, whereabouts unknown (sale, Huize Oolde, Laren, Netherlands, on 25 September 1947).
6. Attributed to Rembrandt, *Profile of an Old Man*, oil on panel, Van Tilburg Collection, University of Pretoria, South Africa.
7. Follower of Rembrandt, *Profile of an Old Man*, oil on panel [?], whereabouts unknown (with Schoneman Galleries, New York, 1954).

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8. Follower of Rembrandt, *Profile of an Old Man*, oil on panel, 19.7 x 15.7 cm, formerly in the Mikhailov collection (sale, Drouot Montaigne, Paris, 31 May 1988, no. 33, as by circle of Gerbrand van den Eeckhout).
9. Attributed to Rembrandt, *Head of a Rabbi*, oil on panel, 8 x 6 ½ in., whereabouts unknown (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 4 March 1899, no. 44).

Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular oak from the Baltic-Polish region, derives from a tree felled after 1623, with a plausible creation date from 1631 onward.[1] Narrow wood additions have been added to the left, right, and lower edges and the enlarged composition has been cradled.

The panel reverse has import stamps, handwritten numerals, and machine tool marks, but no wax seals, labels, stencils or panel maker's marks.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied followed by a pale brown imprimatura, which has been used as a middle tone. The paint is very thinly applied in some areas and thickly applied in others, creating a rich and varied surface. Fingerprints made in wet paint, presumably by the artist himself, are located along the center of the lower left edge and the lower right corner.

The painting is unsigned and undated.

No underdrawing or compositional changes are readily apparent in infrared images captured at 900–1700 nanometers.

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition and remains in a good state of preservation.[2]

Further technical information about this artwork is available in The Rembrandt Database.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on Peter Klein's 2006 dendrochronology report.
2. Entry based on an examination report prepared by Yvonne Szafran, head of paintings conservation, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2011.

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