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Woman Plucking a Duck

School of Rembrandt van Rijn

ca. 1645
oil on panel
99.8 x 73 cm
inscribed (incorrectly) in light-colored paint, lower left corner: “816 Renbrant” (written with “n” and no “d”); and lower right corner: “112.”
AD-100

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In a composition dominated by a warm palette of deep red, ochre, and brown hues, an old woman holds a dead duck above a wicker basket as she carefully plucks the last few feathers off its bare belly. Peering through spectacles perched on her nose, the woman's squinting eyes, raised eyebrows and slightly parted lips betray her total concentration as she attempts to remove every feather from the duck's body. To seventeenth-century viewers, the woman's care in properly preparing a meal would have have been an exemplar of female domestic virtue.[1]

Lying on the table in front of the woman is an exotic, white bird of paradise, identifiable by its elegant tail with distinctive fine plumage, framed by two black filamentary feathers. The red velvet beret next to its head foreshadows the bird's ornamental destination: the woman will soon attach the feathers to the hat with a needle and thread—another reference to domesticity—to create an elegantly adorned beret similar to one depicted by Dirck de Bray in 1672 (**fig 1**).[2] Against the wall at the right is a dead snipe that gracefully hangs over the edge of a round box covered by a white satin cloth. Suspended from an empty sconce on the wall above the snipe, to be tenderized before being plucked and consumed, are a dead partridge and a chicken.[3] As much as these four dead fowls present a glorious display of lush materials and various colorful bird feathers, they are also a subtle reference to the woman's old age and the foreshadowing of her imminent end.[4]

Although the painting is signed "Renbrant" [*sic*] in the lower left corner, this signature is spurious and the artist of the work, who was probably associated with Rembrandt's workshop, has not been identified.[5] This unknown master used strong lighting to accentuate the chicken, the partridge and the snipe, and painted these birds with much detail, particularly in the feathers, where he added shimmering highlights in raised impasto. In contrast, he left the woman and the bird of paradise in shadow, and executed their forms with muted colors and broad brushstrokes. The subdued cream-colored hues used in rendering the smooth, silky feathers of the bird of paradise are comparable to the broad handling seen in the woman's flowing scarf.

Another more tightly cropped version of this composition is in the Michaelis Collection in Cape Town, where it is also attributed to the School of Rembrandt (**fig 2**). The relationship between these two works is unclear and probably cannot be determined with certainty until they are compared side by side. The few pentimenti in the Leiden Collection painting occur either in areas of the composition that fall outside the Cape Town version, or are too minor to indicate which of the two paintings is the primary version.[7] Werner Sumowski considered the Cape Town painting to be of better quality than the present work.[8] Indeed, the execution of that work is more carefully rendered in many areas, specifically in the hair on the

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Dirck de Bray, *Still Life with a Hunting Sword and a Red Velvet Cap Decorated with the Plumage of a Bird of Paradise*, 1672, oil on panel, 37.5 x 25.1 cm, Private Collection, England



Fig 2. Attributed to School of Rembrandt, *An Old Woman Plucking a Duck*, probably the mid-1640s, oil on panel, 72.9 x 62.1 cm, The Michaelis Collection, Cape Town, South Africa



Fig 3. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Toilet of Bathsheba*, 1643, oil on panel, 57.2 x 76.2 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913, inv. 14.40.651, www.metmuseum.org

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woman's proper left temple, the ornamental element on the woman's upper sleeve, and the feathers of the tail of the bird of paradise, all of which suggests that the Cape Town work is the primary version of this composition.

In the early twentieth century, both paintings were considered to be by Rembrandt.[9] By the 1940s scholars recognized that although the general composition, stark lighting, and figure type are reminiscent of Rembrandt, the execution of neither work was by the master.[10] Attributions to a specific artist in Rembrandt's studio, including Abraham van Dyck (1635–72), Arent de Gelder (1645–1727), Christopher Paudiss (1630–66), and Karel van der Pluym (1625–72), however, have proven to be unconvincing.[11]

Sumowski noted that the facial features and spectacles of the woman in this composition are strikingly similar to those of the old servant in Rembrandt's 1643 *Toilet of Bathsheba* **(fig 3)**. On this basis, he proposed a dating of the present work to ca. 1645–50.[12] This dating corresponds with the results of dendrochronological analysis, which reveal that the youngest year ring can be dated to 1629. The panel, thus, could have been ready for use by around 1646. Another connection to Rembrandt's work from this period is the arrangement of brightly lit dead birds in the foreground and a shaded figure in the background, which is reminiscent of Rembrandt's 1639 *Self-Portrait with Dead Bittern*[14] and his *Still Life with Peacocks* of ca. 1639 **(fig 4)**. Although we do not know who executed the present painting, it clearly reflects the impact of Rembrandt's manner in the mid-1640s.



Fig 4. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Still Life with Peacocks*, ca. 1639, oil on canvas, 145 x 135.5 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. SK-A-3981

- Ilona van Tuinen, 2017

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Endnotes

1. Compositions featuring young girls plucking birds, on the other hand, often contained sexual allusions to the Dutch verb *vogelen* (a slang word for copulating). For a discussion of the sexual symbolism of a young woman plucking a duck in a painting of ca. 1655–56 in the Philadelphia Museum of Art by Nicolaes Maes, see Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Nicolaes Maes, *Woman Plucking a Duck*," in *The Public and Private in the Age of Vermeer* (Exh. cat. Osaka, Osaka Municipal Museum of Art) (London, 2000), 132–35, no. 21. In this painting, objects such as a shotgun (presumably of the girl's suitor) and a wine pitcher and glass in the next room enhance the sensual undertone of the girl's act. In the present painting, however, there are no such objects pointing to male company. For another painting featuring an old woman plucking a duck, see Quentin Buvelot's entry in the present catalogue on Frans van Mieris the Elder's *Elderly Couple in an Interior*, ca. 1650–55 (FM-100), in which the old woman's husband looks at the viewer as though to emphasize his wife's domesticity.
2. The exotic bird of paradise, native to Papua New Guinea and Indonesia and accessible to the Dutch via the Dutch East India Company, had long captured the imagination of artists, as is signified by a drawing by Joris Hoefnagel as early as ca. 1580 (watercolor and gouache on parchment set in gold leaf, 143 x 184 mm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., inv. no. 1987.20.8.35), as well as a study by Rembrandt of two birds of paradise (pen in brown on paper, ca. 1637, 181 x 154 mm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. 1195). See also Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke, *Arent de Gelder, Dordrecht, 1645–1727* (Doornspijk, 1994), 185, no. R 68, where the present painting is erroneously identified as representing a taxidermist.
3. For the practice of hanging dead birds to allow the blood to flow out as a means to tenderize the meat, as depicted in Rembrandt's *Still Life with Dead Peacocks* of ca. 1639 (fig. 4 below), see Ruud Priem, *Rembrandt and the Golden Age of Dutch Art: Treasures from the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam*, ed. Penelope Hunter-Stiebel (Exh. cat. Dayton, Dayton Art Institute; Phoenix, Phoenix Art Museum; Portland, Portland Art Museum) (Seattle, 2006), 37–38, no. 14.
4. For the symbolism of dead birds in combination with old age, see Dominique Surh's entry in the present catalogue on Gerrit Dou's *Old Woman at a Niche by Candlelight*, 1671 (GD-103), in which a dead chicken lies in close proximity to an old woman.
5. See Technical Summary. It is unclear when this signature was added. The number "816" next to this signature is presumably an old inventory number, but it is unknown to which collection it refers.
6. See Hans Fransen, *Michaelis Collection: The Old Town House, Cape Town—Catalogue of the Collection of Paintings and Drawings* (Zwolle, 1996), 132. The painting does not include the space above the woman's head with the sconce, and has less space next to the woman's hands on the left and the hanging birds on the right. The conservation history of this painting is unknown, and it is therefore not clear if the panel was cut. Bredius, in a letter to the keeper of the Michaelis Collection, dated 22 December 1937, mentioned a third version as well, though it is unknown where this version was at the time or is

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now. See also Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke, *Arent de Gelder, Dordrecht, 1645–1727* (Doornspijk, 1994), 185, no. R 68, who believed that one of these works was a copy of the other, but could not conclude which was the original. Many thanks to Hayden Russell Proud, curator of the Michaelis Collection, for sending a photograph of the Cape Town version. According to Mr. Proud, the painting has developed matte areas and is scheduled to be examined by the paintings conservator (correspondence, April 2014, copy on file at the Leiden Collection).

7. For a discussion of the pentimenti, see the Technical Summary.

8. Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 4:2964, no. 1984. Sumowski does not give any reasons for this observation.

9. For an overview of the early attribution history of the Cape Town painting, which includes oral or unpublished references to the Leiden Collection painting, see Hans Fransen, *Michaelis Collection: The Old Town House, Cape Town—Catalogue of the Collection of Paintings and Drawings* (Zwolle, 1996), 132.

10. See Hans Fransen, *Michaelis Collection: The Old Town House, Cape Town—Catalogue of the Collection of Paintings and Drawings* (Zwolle, 1996), 132. Although Bredius attributed the Cape Town painting to Rembrandt in a letter to the keeper of the Michaelis Collection in 1937, he did not include it in his 1942 *The Paintings of Rembrandt* (London, 1942).

11. For the attribution history to the School of Rembrandt, see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 4:2964, no. 1984; Hans Fransen, *Michaelis Collection: The Old Town House, Cape Town—Catalogue of the Collection of Paintings and Drawings* (Zwolle, 1996), 132. The Cape Town painting bore an attribution to Arent De Gelder in 1913. When the Leiden Collection painting was auctioned in 1972 and 1977 at Sotheby's London (see Provenance), it was attributed to De Gelder as well. De Gelder, however, trained with Rembrandt in the early 1660s, later than when the paintings were presumably executed. Moreover, De Gelder adopted Rembrandt's late, patchy painting style, which is not exemplified in these paintings. In 1994 Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke definitively rejected the attributions to De Gelder, see Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke, *Arent de Gelder, Dordrecht, 1645–1727* (Doornspijk, 1994), 184–85, nos. R 67–68. The other three artists mentioned were all in Rembrandt's workshop in the 1640s (Van der Pluym around 1645, Paudiss around 1642, and Van Dyck around 1650), which fits better with the dating of these paintings. Of these artists, Paudiss comes closest in terms of figure types (which was also noted by Sumowski), the delicate modeling, and the atmospheric lighting. See, for instance, his *Still Life with Cow Heads*, dated 1658, and his *Old Man with Fur Hat*, dated 1654, both reproduced in *Christopher Paudiss, 1630–1666*, ed. Sylvia Hahn et al. (Exh. cat. Freising, Diözesanmuseum) (Regensburg, 2007), nos. 7 and 12. A close comparison between these two paintings and the present work, however, shows that the handling of paint in the latter is overall smoother and the modeling less complex. The unpublished attribution to Van Dyck pertains only to the New York painting and was recorded in a note of ca. 2006 in The Leiden Collection curatorial files. In around 1660, Van Dyck painted *Still Life with Hunting Gear and a Dead Bittern*, oil on canvas, 121 x 104.8 cm, signed "Av Dÿck" (Rafael Valls Ltd., London, 2000–1), with a

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similar attention to details in the feathers as in the present painting. Van Dyck's handling of paint, however, is rougher, with more impasto, making an attribution to him unlikely. The author would like to thank Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. for sharing his thoughts on these matters of attribution.

12. See Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–45), 4:2964, no. 1984. For a discussion of *The Toilet of Bathsheba*, see Walter Liedtke, "The Toilet of Bathsheba," in *Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2 vols. (New Haven, 2007), 2: 613–23, no. 149. Liedtke points to the similarities between the servant holding Bathsheba's foot in the 1643 painting and Rembrandt's earlier painting of the same theme from ca. 1632, known only through copies. A copy of this early work is discussed in Josua Bruyn, et. al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 2: *1631–1634* (The Hague, 1986), 591–94, no. C 45. The latter source also mentions the recurrence of the same model in Rembrandt's 1654 *Bathsheba*, now at the Musée du Louvre in Paris. Whereas it is true that the servant in the 1643 painting bears general similarities to the servants in the paintings of ca. 1632 and 1654, her lorgnette and her facial features, especially the pronounced chin, correspond most with the Leiden Collection painting. This supports a dating of the latter work to around the same time as the 1643 painting.
13. The painting was examined by Peter Klein at an unknown date, who concluded that the youngest heartwood ring was formed in 1628, and that the panel could plausibly have been ready for use from 1645 upwards, with a median of fifteen sapwood rings and two years for seasoning. The panel was also examined by Ian Tyers in November 2010, who concluded that the youngest heartwood ring in the central plank is a sapwood ring that can be dated to 1629. Tyers estimated a felling date between 1636 and 1652, based on the minimum and maximum number of sapwood rings. Considering that Tyers identified a sapwood ring, which was thus formed nearer the felling date than a regular-year ring, it is plausible that the felling date was nearer the minimum or median and not the maximum. It is reasonable to assume that with a median of fifteen sapwood rings and two years for seasoning, the panel, according to Tyers's dating of the sapwood ring, could have been ready for use from 1646 onwards. There are copies of both dendrochronological reports in the curatorial files at The Leiden Collection.
14. Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait with Dead Bittern*, 1639, oil on panel, 89 x 121 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.

Provenance

- Wilhelm II (1859–1941), the Last German Emperor and King of Prussia, before 1920 [Hugo Moser, Aerdenhout, the Netherlands, 1926–45; Zuppinger, Herliberg, Switzerland, 1953–62; Galerie Rudolf Beckers, Düsseldorf, Germany, 1964].
- (Sale, Sotheby's, London, 12 July 1972, no. 26, as by Aert de Gelder [to Arlington, for £3,200]; sale, Sotheby's, London, 6 April 1977, no. 94, as by Aert de Gelder, [for £3,000]).

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- Private collection, Switzerland, by 1994 [Jack Kilgore & Co., New York, 2006 (as by Rembrandt School)].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2006.

Exhibition History

- Düsseldorf, Galerie Rudolf Beckers, "Special Exhibition of Fine Dutch, Flemish, German, and Italian Old Master Paintings," 1964 (as by Aert de Gelder).

References

- Sumowski, Werner. *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler in vier Bänden*. 6 vols. Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94, 4:2964, no. 1984 (as by School of Rembrandt).
- Von Moltke, Joachim Wolfgang. *Arent de Gelder, Dordrecht, 1645–1727*. Doornspijk, 1994, 185, no. R 68, fig. 97 (as by School of Rembrandt).
- Fransen, Hans. *Michaelis Collection: The Old Town House, Cape Town—Catalogue of the Collection of Paintings and Drawings*. Zwolle, 1996, 132 (as by School of Rembrandt).

Versions
Versions and Copies

1. Attributed to School of Rembrandt, *A Woman Plucking a Fowl*, probably mid-1640s, oil on panel, 72.9 x 62.1 cm, The Michaelis Collection, Capetown.

Technical Summary

The support is a rectangular-shaped composite panel made up of three vertically grained Eastern Baltic oak planks of similar widths, derived from a tree felled between 1636 and 1652.[1] The composite panel is unthinned and uncradled and has bevels along all but the right vertical edge, which may have been trimmed. A metal staple along the thickness of the lower panel edge bridges the join between the center and right plank, and indicates previous panel work.[2] There are mechanical toolmarks along the outer two planks and

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five import stamps, a stencil, a black inscription and chalk, but no wax collection seals or panel maker's marks.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied and spills over onto the three edges with bevels. The image was constructed with thin, smooth glazes through the background, allowing the ground to show through, with low impasto through the figure's hands and face, and with crisp delicate strokes of raised impasto defining the fine details of the four dead fowl, the white fabric, and the leaf draped over the box.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. Compositional changes evident in the images and as pentimenti indicate the edge of the white fabric along the lower right corner was shortened and rounded off during the paint stage. Changes were also made to the figure's hat and shawl and to the left side of the figure's profile from her nose to beneath her chin. In addition, a pentimento along the back of the figure's proper right hand and infrared images indicate that originally only the thumb, pointer and middle finger were depicted; the ring finger and pinky were added later in the paint stage.

The painting is unsigned and undated.

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

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on Ian Tyers's 2010 dendrochronology report. The painting underwent previous dendrochronology by Peter Klein.
2. As viewed from the reverse.

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