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Bust of a Young Bearded Man

Rembrandt van Rijn
(Leiden 1606 – 1669 Amsterdam)

ca. 1656–58

oil on panel with arched top

40.4 x 31.3 cm

signed in dark paint, center right: “Rembrandt f”

RR-117

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Rembrandt van Rijn's engaging portrayal of a young, bearded man with an intent gaze is an exciting addition to the master's oeuvre.^[1] Although this modest-scaled panel painting has a long provenance and was consistently attributed to Rembrandt until the latter half of the twentieth century, it has been neglected in Rembrandt literature since 1930 and more recently considered a work by an unknown master from the "Rembrandt School."^[2] Subsequent restorations, however, have revealed its stunning visual qualities, as well as the artist's signature in the wet paint: "Rembrandt f." The freshness and vigor of the panel's execution is entirely consistent with the master's style from the latter half of the 1650s.

With this young man, Rembrandt found a model whose face and demeanor fascinated him, with features that suggest not only an active, probing mind but also innate uncertainties about himself and his place in the world. The young man leans forward, turned somewhat to the right with his hands clasped before him, but he does not directly engage with the viewer. Instead, with his head slightly tilted, he glances to the left, his deeply set eyes cast downward. Nothing is static in this presentation, neither the figure's pose nor the way Rembrandt's paint strokes animate the young man's countenance.

Rembrandt painted swiftly, as though trying to capture the fleeting emotions he saw unfolding before him. Light entering from the upper left models the man's narrow, elongated face, with its defined eyes and pronounced nose. Complex layering of paints, including quickly brushed ochre and pink impastos around the eyes and the nose, enliven the sitter's expression in ways that are exciting to behold (fig 1). Rembrandt applied thin, somewhat translucent paints on the shaded side of the face, but he also allowed the ochre ground layer to play an active role in modeling the eye and cheek. He painted the mouth and beard thinly, leaving them somewhat undefined, as though the sitter were about to speak. A hint of pinkish red gives color to the slightly parted lips. Even the background comes alive with rapid brushstrokes that echo the rhythmic ones Rembrandt used to depict the man's mop of curly hair.

We have no information about the identity of this sitter, but the intense and psychologically acute depiction of his countenance and character indicates that he was known personally to Rembrandt. The elongated structure of his face and his distinctive features, including his somewhat scraggly beard, suggest that he was an Ashkenazi Jew, likely an individual who lived in the Jewish neighborhood near Rembrandt's home on the Sint Anthonisbreestraat.^[3] Rembrandt found great dignity and spirituality in the faces of his Jewish neighbors, both men and women, young and old, as seen in the compelling oil sketch of an older bearded scholar in The Leiden Collection (fig 2).^[4] According to an early eighteenth-century source, Rembrandt

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Rembrandt van Rijn, detail of *Bust of a Young Bearded Man*, ca. 1656–58, oil on panel with arched top, 40.4 x 31.3 cm, The Leiden Collection, New York, inv. no. RR-117.



Fig 2. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of an Old Man (Possibly a Rabbi)*, ca. 1645, oil on panel, 22.2 x 18.4 cm, The Leiden Collection, New York, inv. no. RR-109.



“turned the picturesque *tronies* [of bearded men] in the Joode Breestraat [where he lived] to good advantage.”^[15] This practice reinforces stylistic evidence that Rembrandt painted *Bust of a Young Bearded Man* in the latter half of the 1650s, presumably before 1658 when he was forced to move from his home on the Sint Anthonisbreestraat to the Rozengracht.^[16]

For most of this panel painting’s recorded history, the figure looked quite different than it does today. By the time the work entered the collection of the 1st Baron Gwydyr (1754–1820) at Grimsthorpe Castle, a later hand had given the young man a more distinguished wardrobe than the one Rembrandt had painted. An eighteenth-century restorer provided him not only with a broad-brimmed black hat, but also with a wide-collared white shirt and two tassels that hung over a black garment (fig 3). The efforts to improve the figure’s social status were successful. The first mention of the painting, a sale catalogue at Christie’s in London in 1829, described it as “Rembrandt—Portrait of a Burgomaster, with arched top.”^[17] The painting’s appearance remained unaltered until at least 1976, when it was sold at Christie’s in London as: “Rembrandt, *Portrait of a Man*, small half-length, in a black hat and black habit, bears signature—on panel—arched top.”^[18] At some point between 1976 and April 2004, when it appeared again at auction, this time with Sotheby’s in London, the painting had undergone restoration: the eighteenth-century hat, white shirt, tassels, and black coat had all been removed.^[19]

Despite the absence of these later additions, Sotheby’s remained unconvinced that the painting was by Rembrandt, and the auction house sold it as “Rembrandt School, Seventeenth Century.”^[20] The new owner soon contacted Libby Sheldon at University College London to assess whether the materials and techniques found in this work were consistent with those found in paintings by Rembrandt and his workshop. Sheldon examined cross-sections with polarizing light microscopy and energy dispersive X-ray analysis and concluded the materials and painting techniques were consistent with Rembrandt’s practice.^[21] For example, this panel painting has two priming layers, a simple layer of white chalk covering the oak support and an imprimatura layer containing chalk, lead white, and some earth tones. Rembrandt used this layer to provide a warm, underlying tonality for the painting. In a few areas, as in the sitter’s upper lip and moustache, Rembrandt left the imprimatura layer totally exposed, a practice consistent with the complex layering of paints he utilized throughout his oeuvre to model his forms.

Sheldon rightly observed in this painting many close similarities to Rembrandt’s “tricks in the handling of paint . . . [including] contrasts of thickness and thinness, warmth and coolness, fluidity and dryness, transparency, and opacity.”^[22] She emphasized the complex makeup of the paint that included a wide range of bright



Fig 3. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Bust of a Young Bearded Man* (with eighteenth-century overpaint), ca. 1656–58, oil on panel with arched top, 40.4 x 31.3 cm, The Leiden Collection, New York, inv. no. RR-117.



Fig 4. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of a Seated Woman with Her Hands Clasped*, 1660, oil on canvas, 77.5 x 64.8 cm, The Leiden Collection, New York, inv. no. RR-113.



Fig 5. Rembrandt van Rijn, detail of signature of *Bust of a Young Bearded Man* (brightened to increase readability), ca. 1656–58, oil on panel with arched top, 40.4 x 31.3 cm, The Leiden Collection, New York, inv. no. RR-117.



pigments, even in the lights of the figure's cheek and the browns in the background. Finally, as he often did in his paintings, Rembrandt used the blunt end of the brush to scratch through the wet paint to create highlights by exposing the pale ground, as with the sitter's hair at the edge of his forehead in this panel.^[13]

In 2020, Michel van de Laar, a Dutch restorer of old master paintings, discovered important additional information about *Bust of a Young Bearded Man*.^[14] His removal of remaining residues of old repaint revealed a significant pentimento near the figure's left shoulder, evidence that Rembrandt had adjusted the position of the sitter to emphasize the forward thrust of his body. Drips in the paint, broken brush hairs embedded in the sitter's coat, and fingerprints imprinted in wet paint along the panel's bottom and right edges indicate that the master worked rapidly. Most importantly, Van de Laar noticed that the signature was integral to the paint surface, and that Rembrandt had applied it while the paint was still wet.^[15] Subsequent research revealed that the form of the signature is comparable to that on Rembrandt's *Portrait of a Seated Woman with Her Hands Clasped*, 1660, which is also signed "Rembrandt f" (fig 4). In both paintings, Rembrandt added a flourish to the stem of the "f" with a stroke that sweeps to the left and then crosses back over the stem and ends in a small circle (fig 5).

The eighteenth-century transformations of *Bust of a Young Bearded Man* were far more extensive than just providing Rembrandt's sitter with a new wardrobe. Examination of the edges and back of the panel indicates that the painting's shape has been altered at the top and right, likely when the image was overpainted. The panel is quite thick, and yet original bevels are only found on the panel's verso along the bottom and left edges (fig 6).^[16] A somewhat narrow bevel exists along the right, while the panel's roughly cut arched top has no bevel at all. Strikingly, paint losses occur along this arched edge, an indication that the paint had already dried when the panel was cut. Moreover, the panel's right edge is lighter in color than the opposite edge. This color differentiation indicates that the right side of the panel has been exposed to the air for less time than the left, further evidence that the right was cut later.^[17] Finally, Rembrandt's signature is closer to the right edge than is characteristic for him.

This prompts a fascinating question: What was the original size and shape of the panel, and how might this change have affected the appearance of the sitter? While concrete conclusions remain elusive, certain hypotheses can be advanced. The sitter would not have been positioned centrally in the picture plane but instead situated somewhat to the left, as is often seen in Rembrandt's portraits from this period of his career (fig 4). This arrangement would have opened the composition to the right, creating a greater sense of movement in the young man's pose. The angle of his body,



Fig 6. Rembrandt van Rijn, verso of *Bust of a Young Bearded Man*, ca. 1656–58, oil on panel with arched top, 40.4 x 31.3 cm, The Leiden Collection, New York, inv. no. RR-117.



Fig 7. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait, Frowning*, 1630, etching on laid paper, 76 x 65 mm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Rosenwald Collection, inv. no. 1943.3.7051, courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington.



Fig 8. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of an Old Jew*, 1654, oil on canvas, 109 x 85 cm, Hermitage, Saint Petersburg.



which is evident in the tilt of his head and the forward thrust of his shoulder, would have been more pronounced. His body is now somewhat constricted within the arched space, particularly with his arm cropped at the right. The differences between the lighter tonalities in the background at left and the darker ones at right, where the contours of the sitter's body are less defined, would have played a more active role in the visual and psychological character of the image.

It is also likely, as is often seen in Rembrandt's portraits, that originally there was more "air" above the sitter's head (fig 4). Rembrandt often used his backgrounds to extend the sitter's psychological presence beyond his physical being. An element of that approach is seen in the rapid, expressive brushwork in this painting, but one can imagine more of this same effect extending beyond the panel's current confines. The reductions at the top and right side of the panel were probably no more than a few centimeters on each side, but, in conjunction with the overpainting, they transformed a somewhat asymmetrical composition depicting a thoughtful Jewish man with an unruly mop of curly hair into a respectable Dutch burgher, quietly posed and centrally placed in an arch-shaped panel.^[18]

We must ask, then, whether the change in the panel's appearance fundamentally altered the master's artistic intent, given the potential implications for the emotional valence of this work. Today, it is not entirely clear whether *Bust of a Young Bearded Man* is a portrait (*conterfeytSEL*) or a character study (*tronie*). This painting has many portrait-like qualities, including the careful and incisive rendering of the sitter's features, but one wonders whether this young man would have commissioned this work. Since Rembrandt's insightful portrayal suggests a familiarity with the subject's distinctive personality, perhaps he was a friend or associate for whom Rembrandt painted this work as a gift. This expressive image also exhibits qualities of Rembrandt's *tronies*, both in the way it captures a momentary expression, like those in Rembrandt's early self-portrait etchings (fig 7), and in its evocation of one's inner being, as in the restrained oil sketches that he painted later in his career (fig 2).

These two approaches were never as distinct as the words *conterfeytSEL* and *tronie* might indicate, but one can generally recognize where Rembrandt weighted his emphasis in his late paintings of elderly men and women, often Jewish, quietly reflecting on weighty issues (fig 8). In this evocative depiction of a young, bearded Jew pondering life's uncertainties, it seems likely that the balance initially lay in the direction of a *tronie*, but that the subsequent alteration of the shape of the panel shifted the equilibrium toward portraiture. One can only marvel that Rembrandt's compelling image has retained its visual and emotional power given this striking change in the painting's physical character.

inv.no. GE-737, image is used from www.hermitagemuseum.org, courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.



- Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., 2021



Endnotes

1. I would like to thank Caroline van Cauwenberge for her research assistance in compiling information for this entry.
2. Wilhelm Valentiner, *The Thirteenth Loan Exhibition of Old Masters: Paintings by Rembrandt* (Exh. cat. Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts) (Detroit, 1930), no. 44. The first time that the painting was not fully attributed to Rembrandt was in 2004, when it was auctioned at Christie's in London. The sales catalogue lists the work as "Rembrandt School, 17th Century." This citation is also the most recent reference to the painting in the literature.
3. Jews lived in relative harmony with their Dutch neighbors, particularly in a community around the Sint Anthonisbreestraat where Rembrandt lived, and on the more crowded streets of the adjacent Vlooienburg island. There were two communities of Jewish people in the Netherlands: the Sephardic Jews, who came from Spain and Portugal (often via Antwerp), and the Ashkenazi Jews, who came from eastern Europe, particularly Poland. The Sephardic Jews were often quite prosperous and frequently adapted Dutch modes of dress. The Ashkenazi Jews, on the other hand, had little wealth and continued to dress according to their ancient traditions, often wearing broad berets and other types of headdresses. For the Ashkenazi in Amsterdam, see Steven Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews* (Chicago, 2003), 27–34.
4. As with *Bust of a Young Bearded Man*, Rembrandt often portrayed Ashkenazi Jews with beards, intense gazes, and careworn expressions. For a discussion of a painting depicting a model with similar features, see Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Dutch 17th Century, Rembrandt van Rijn, Willem Drost / *The Philosopher* / c. 1653," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions, accessed 1 July 2021, <http://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/1205>.
5. This information is found in the biography of Adriaen van der Werff, written around 1720. For a fuller discussion of this text, see Jaap van der Veen, "Faces from Life: *Tronies* and Portraits in Rembrandt's Painted Oeuvre," in *Rembrandt: A Genius and His Impact*, ed. Albert Blankert (Exh. cat. Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria; Canberra, National Gallery of Australia) (Zwolle, 1997), 73.
6. This dating is consistent with the results of the dendrochronological analysis of the oak panel. Peter Klein concluded that a plausible felling date for the tree was in the 1650s, and that, as of 1656, the panel would have been available for painting. Peter Klein, report, 9 July 2007, The Leiden Collection archives.
7. The painting was auctioned at Christie's, London, 9 May 1829, no. 38, by Peter Drummond-Burrell, 2nd Baron Gwydyr and 21st Baron Willoughby de Eresby, one year after the death of his mother, Priscilla, 20th Baroness Willoughby de Eresby.
8. Sale, Christie's, London, 21 May 1976, no. 80, for £12,000.
9. Sale, Christie's, London, 20 April 2004, no. 238. "Rembrandt School, 17th Century. Portrait of a Bearded Man, Half-Length, Wearing Brown bears signature centre right: Rembrandt oil on panel, arched



top 40.5 by 31.3 cm.; 16 by 12 1/4 in.”

10. Apparently, however, not everyone dismissed the possibility that Rembrandt had created it, and the painting sold for over five times its high estimate, albeit for a relatively modest £33,600.
11. Libby Sheldon, technical examination report, October 2004, The Leiden Collection archives.
12. See Libby Sheldon, technical examination report, October 2004, The Leiden Collection archives.
13. This scratching technique in the hair is also seen in Rembrandt’s *Self-Portrait*, 1659 (National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.). Rembrandt also applied a series of parallel hatchings over the imprimatura layer in *Bust of a Young Bearded Man* to indicate the shape of the moustache.
14. Michel van de Laar, restoration report, 14 December 2020, The Leiden Collection archives.
15. Raking-light photographs make it clear that the painting was signed wet-in-wet. In his report, Michel van de Laar suggested that below the signature were remnants of a date: “165 . . .” However, after close examination of the painting, I do not see visual evidence of these numbers.
16. The panel is approximately 1.2 cm thick along the left edge and approximately 0.9 cm thick along the right edge.
17. This assessment of the alterations made to the oak panel was greatly aided by the astute observations of Bret Headley of Headley Conservation Services, LLC, Philadelphia, in conversations we had in front of the panel on 2 March 2021.
18. Otto Naumann has observed (email correspondence, 2 July 2021) that a comparable change in the shape of a panel is evident in a portrait of Rembrandt in the Wallace Collection. This painting, *Rembrandt in a Black Cap*, now attributed to the Studio of Rembrandt, has an arched top that emphasizes the artist’s head. As with *Bust of a Young Bearded Man*, however, the panel was originally rectangular in shape and somewhat higher and wider than in its present configuration. Beveling on the verso is found along the sides and at the bottom, but not at the top. This change in the panel’s shape was likely made in the late eighteenth century. See Josua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 3, 1635–1642, Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project (The Hague, 1989), 612–18, no. C 96.

Provenance

- Peter Burrell (1754–1820), 1st Baron Gwydyr, Langley Park, Beckenham; by descent to his son, Peter Drummond-Burrell (1782–1865), 2nd Baron Gwydyr and 22nd Baron Willoughby de Eresby, Grimsthorpe Castle, Lincolnshire (his father’s sale, Mr. Christie, London, 9 May 1829, no. 38 [through Henry Bone to Sir John Neeld for £110.50]).
- Sir John Neeld (1805–91), 1st Baronet Neeld, Grittleton House, Wiltshire; by descent to his son Sir Audley Dallas Neeld (1849–1941), 3rd Baronet Neeld, Grittleton House, Wiltshire [to Thomas Agnew and Sons].



- [Thomas Agnew and Sons, London, by 1915.]
- Edward William Edwards (1874–1956), Cincinnati, by 1930; by descent to his grandson Thomas Edwards Davidson (1928–94), Cincinnati (sale, Christie's, London, 21 May 1976, no. 80, for £12,000).
- Private collection, Cologne, Germany (sale, Sotheby's, London, 20 April 2004, no. 238, as by Rembrandt School, for £33,600).
- Private collection, England [to Fergus Hall Ltd.].
- [Fergus Hall Ltd., London, 2020.]
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2021.

Exhibition History

- London, Royal Academy of Arts, “Exhibition of Works by Rembrandt: Winter Exhibition, Thirtieth Year,” 1899, no. 11 [lent by Sir Algernon William Needl].
- Detroit, Institute of Arts, “The Thirteenth Loan Exhibition of Old Masters: Paintings by Rembrandt,” 2–31 May 1930, no. 44 [lent by Edward William Edwards].
- 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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- Valentiner, Wilhelm Reinhold and Adolf Rosenberg. *Rembrandt des Meister Gemälde in 643 Abbildungen*. 3rd ed. Stuttgart, 1908, 362.
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- Hofstede de Groot, Cornelis. *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith*. Edited and translated by Edward G. Hawke. London, 1916, 6: 215–16, no. 395; 379, no. 819.
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- Nogrady, Elizabeth. “Rembrandt van Rijn, *Bust of a Young Man with Curly Hair*.” In *Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time*. Edited by Elizabeth Nogrady et al., 77, ill. Exh. cat. Amsterdam, H'ART Museum; West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art. Zwolle, 2025. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]
- Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. “Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time.” In *Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time*. Edited by Elizabeth Nogrady et al., 18, fig 4. Exh. cat. Amsterdam, H'ART Museum; West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art. Zwolle, 2025. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]

Technical Summary

The support of this arched panel painting is a relatively thick oak board that originated from the Baltic/Polish regions.^[1] The wood derives from a tree felled in the 1650s. Based on the number of identified growth rings, a creation date for the painting is plausible as early as 1656.^[2] The panel is beveled along the left, bottom, and right edges but not along its arched top. The character of the beveling indicates that the completed panel was cut at the top and right at some point in the painting's history.^[3] The panel's right edge was also likely trimmed, although probably by no more than a few centimeters. The bevel along this edge is narrower than on the left, and the color of the wood is also lighter. This difference in color indicates that this edge has not been exposed to air as long as that on the opposite side.^[4]

The panel verso has the remains of two paper strips, one in the upper left, with a handwritten number “4,” and the other in the upper center with the remains of a printed number, probably “12-.” The imprint of a wax



seal is found in the lower center of the verso. The surface of the verso is rather roughhewn and has not been thinned or cradled.

In 2004, Libby Sheldon at University College London performed a technical examination on the painting. She took cross-sections of the paint layers and analyzed the painting with polarizing light microscopy and energy dispersive X-rays (EDX).^[5] Sheldon identified two priming layers, a simple layer of white chalk covering the support and an imprimatura layer containing chalk, lead white, and some earth tones, including red, brown, and yellow ochre, as well as umber. She also identified plant black, azurite, crimson lake, smalt, and an iron-rich yellow pigment, all of which are commonly found in Rembrandt's work. The complex makeup of the paint includes a wide range of bright pigments, even in the lights of the figure's cheek and the browns in the background. Sheldon noted that Rembrandt used the blunt end of the brush to scratch through the wet paint to create highlights by exposing the underlying imprimatura layer, as with the sitter's hair at the edge of his forehead.

Michel van de Laar restored the painting in 2020. With the exception of small damages found at the edges of the painting, particularly along the arched top, and areas of minor abrasion in the dark paint on the man's left shoulder and sleeve, Van de Laar found the painting to be in good condition.^[6] He identified two layers of paint in the modeling of the flesh tones on the man's face: a smooth layer followed by a thicker layer with impasto around the eyes and nose. In the area of the moustache, however, Rembrandt left the imprimatura layer largely exposed because of its ochre tonalities. With quickly applied diagonal strokes, the artist then suggestively indicated the moustache's hairs. Utilizing his varied and broad range of painting techniques, Rembrandt toned down the shaded part of the sitter's face with a brownish scumble.

During his restoration, Van de Laer discovered a significant pentimento near the figure's left shoulder that had been hidden by residues of old repaint.^[7] He also found drips in the paint, broken brush hairs embedded in the sitter's coat, and fingerprints imprinted in wet paint along the panel's bottom and right edges. Van de Laar also noticed that the signature, "Rembrandt f," was integral to the paint surface, and that Rembrandt had applied it while the paint was still wet.^[8]

The painting has undergone major renovations over its history. It was radically transformed at an early date, presumably in the late eighteenth century (see entry). At that time, the image was repainted to provide the sitter with a broad-brimmed black hat and a black jacket with two white tassels (see fig 3). This repainting was removed sometime in the late twentieth century.

– Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., 2021

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The panel is approximately 1.27 cm thick along the left edge and approximately 0.9 cm thick along the right edge.
2. Peter Klein's dendrochronology report indicates that the youngest heartwood ring was formed in 1639. Under the assumption of a median fifteen sapwood rings and two years for seasoning, Klein concluded



that the panel would have been available for the artist's use by 1656. Peter Klein, report, 9 July 2007, The Leiden Collection archives.

3. Paint losses along the arched top also indicate that the paint had already dried when the panel was cut.
4. This assessment of the alterations made to the oak panel was greatly aided by the astute observations of Bret Headley of Headley Conservation Services, LLC, Philadelphia, in conversations we had in front of the panel on 2 March 2021.
5. See Libby Sheldon, technical examination report, October 2004, The Leiden Collection archives.
6. These damages were likely due to old restorations.
7. Michel van de Laar, restoration report, 14 December 2020, The Leiden Collection archives.
8. Raking-light photographs make it clear that the painting was signed wet-in-wet. In his report, Van de Laar suggested that below the signature were remnants of a date: "165 . . ." However, there is no visual evidence of these numbers. Michel van de Laar, restoration report, 14 December 2020, The Leiden Collection archives.