



Bust of an Old Woman

Circle of Rembrandt van Rijn

ca. early 1630s

oil on panel

14 x 11.7 cm

signed and dated in dark paint along upper right:

“Cp 16(??)” (“C” and “p” in monogram)

RR-122



How to cite

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This haunting image of an old woman wearing a black, hooded garment that drapes over her shoulders is remarkably similar in appearance to an etching Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69) made in 1628 of an aged woman with profoundly wrinkled skin wearing a similar hooded cape that likewise casts a shadow over her eyes (**fig 1**). In both the etching and the painting the woman stares directly out at the viewer in a manner that emphasizes her deep-set eyes and the straight lines of her nose and mouth. Rembrandt's model traditionally has been identified as his mother. This identification going back to the 1679 inventory of the Amsterdam print and map dealer Clement de Jonghe (1624/5–77), in which an etching of this elderly woman, dated 1631, is listed as "Rembrandt's Mother."^[1] This same woman appears in a number of other prints, drawings and paintings by Rembrandt and other artists associated with him in Leiden during the late 1620s and early 1630s.

It is highly likely that the identification of the model in this etching as Rembrandt's mother is correct. Not only did Clement de Jonghe know the artist personally, but he was also a passionate collector of Rembrandt's etchings and would have known much about them. Rembrandt's mother, Neeltgen Willemsdr, was born around 1568, which means that she would have been about 60 years old in the late 1620s, an appropriate age for the sitter in these images. Nevertheless, despite the close similarities between Rembrandt's etching of 1628 and the Leiden Collection painting, it is not certain that the same individual is depicted in both works. In the painting the woman has a more elongated face, more pronounced cheek bones, and a stronger jaw line than those of "Rembrandt's mother."

Despite these physiological differences, the compositional similarities between Rembrandt's etching of 1628 and this painting helped persuade earlier scholars that this head study was an autograph painting by Rembrandt. Strengthening that argument is the fact that these scholars mistakenly read the monogram on the painting as an R. However, in various publications from 1933 to 1966, Kurt Bauch cast doubt on that attribution, proposing instead that this work was painted by Jan Lievens (1607–74) and retouched by Rembrandt.^[2] Subsequently, Horst Gerson omitted the painting from his 1969 Rembrandt monograph. In 1982, the Rembrandt Research Project declared it a nineteenth-century imitation of Rembrandt.^[3] This assessment, however, is surely wrong, as subsequent dendrochronological analysis has determined that the panel was available in the 1630s. The thin, translucent handling of paint, moreover, is characteristic of Leiden paintings from the early 1630s. Who painted this work, however, is a question that is

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Head of an Old Woman with a Cap*, 1628, etching, state 2 of 2, 63 x 64 mm, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. RP-P-1961-1195



Fig 2. X-radiograph of *Bust of an Old Woman*, RR-122

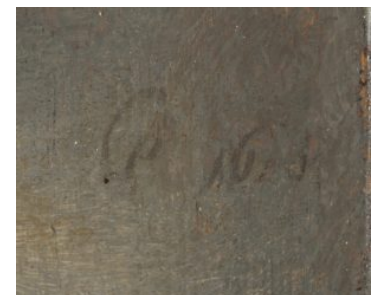


Fig 3. Detail of monogram at upper right in *Bust of an Old Woman*, RR-122 (photograph courtesy of Annette Rupprecht)

difficult to answer. Despite the close stylistic and thematic connections to Rembrandt and his workshop, the brushwork differs from that of any of the known artists working in Leiden around 1630, including Rembrandt, Lievens, and Gerrit Dou (1613–75).

The artist who executed this work changed the woman's expression during the painting process. An X-radiograph reveals that he originally portrayed the woman with parted lips, as though she was in the act of speaking, and modeled both eyes with lead white paint, indicating that they were not originally meant to be cast in shadow (**fig 2**).^[4] Why these changes were made is not known, but the result is that the woman's expression is more solemn and severe than originally conceived. Her black hooded cloak relates closely to those worn by Roman Catholic lay sisters, known as *klopjes*.^[5]

Instead of being an R the monogram appears to be a lowercase P inscribed inside a larger C (**fig 3**).^[6] This monogram links the work to an enigmatic painting in the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille, *Student Smoking a Pipe* (**fig 4**), which has a similar inscription: a large P inscribed in a C. That painting has long been attributed to Pieter Codde (1599–1678), mainly on this basis. But the astonishing aesthetic performance of this work—in composition, color, light, description, and evocation of emotion—outstrips even the finest examples of the respectably talented Amsterdam genre painter. Furthermore, Codde's typical monogram, with the C continuing the loop of the P then proceeding back and downward, differs markedly from that appearing in the Lille painting, and his authorship of that work is no longer accepted.^[7]

The similarity of the monogram in the Leiden Collection painting appears to provide strong evidence of a common but as of yet unidentified artist. Nevertheless, caution about making that association is still necessary because the appearance of these two paintings is so different.^[8] The Lille painting exhibits breathtaking coloristic sophistication, with controlled contrasts of cool and warm hues, quite different from the overall grayish cast of the Leiden Collection painting. The pulsating rhythms in the Lille painting, generated by bulky fabric forms and striking curved and angular contours, find no parallel in the stark image of *Bust of an Old Woman*, which depends more closely on Rembrandt's models. The possibility of a workshop connection between the Lille and Leiden Collection paintings—of master and pupil for instance—might explain the shared monogram, but such a hypothesis remains purely speculative.



Fig 4. Pieter Codde, *A Student Smoking a Pipe*, ca. 1630, oil on panel, 46.2 × 33.4 cm, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille, Don Antoine Brasseur, 1885, inv. P. 240



- David de Witt, 2017

Endnotes

1. See Josua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 1: 1625–1631, Stichting Foundation Rembrandt REsearch Project (The Hague, 1982), 1: 274.
2. Kurt Bauch, *Der frühe Rembrandt und seine Zeit* (Berlin, 1960), 208.
3. Josua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 1: 1625–1631, Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project (The Hague, 1982), 1: 681–84.
4. Gerbrand Korevaar asserted that the X-radiograph shows that the eyes originally were downcast, as in Rembrandt's print, but the dense patches of paint containing lead-white fall too low to read as upper eyelids, and must have represented bulging lower *orbicularis oculis* muscles, suggesting surprise.
5. For a depiction of a *klopje*, see Jan Steen, *Woman Counting Coins*, ca. 1665, in The Leiden Collection, JS-101.
6. Gerbrand Korevaar in *Rembrandts Motherly: Myth and Reality*, ed. Christiaan Vogelaar and Gerbrand Korevaar (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 2005), 91, wrongly asserts that the monogram and date are later additions.
7. See Fred Meijer, *The Collection of Dutch and Flemish Still Life Paintings Bequeathed by Daisy Linda Ward* (Zwolle, 2003), 219. The museum now ascribes the work to an anonymous follower of Rembrandt.
8. As urged by Fred Meijer in e-mail correspondence with the author, 2 November 2013.

Provenance

- Grand Duchess Maria Nikolayevna (1819–76); by descent to her daughter Elena Grigorevna Stroganov; by descent to her children.
- Mrs. Von Dehn, St. Petersburg, by 1913.
- Dr. Tobias Christ, Basel, by 1928.
- (Sale, Sotheby's, London, 29 October 1998, no. 10, as Manner of Rembrandt).
- [Salomon Lilian, Amsterdam, 2005].
- From whom purchased by the present owner.



Exhibition History

- Basel, Basel Art Association, “Ausstellung von Kunstwerken des 15. bis 18. Jahrhunderts aus basler Privatbesitz,” 15 April–28 May 1928, no. 145 [lent by Dr. Tobias Christ, Basel, as by Rembrandt].
- Basel, Fine Arts Museum, “Meisterwerke holländischer Malerei des 16. bis 18. Jahrhunderts,” 23 June–19 August 1945, no. 74 [lent by a private collection, Basel, as by Rembrandt].
- Leiden, Museum De Lakenhal, “Rembrandt als Leermeester,” 1 June–1 September 1956, no. 5 [lent by a private collection, Switzerland, as by Rembrandt].
- Leiden, Museum De Lakenhal, “Rembrandts Moeder: Mythe en werkelijkheid,” 16 December 2005–19 March 2006, no. 6 [lent by Salomon Lilian, Amsterdam, as circle of Rembrandt].

References

- Wrangel, Baron H. H. *The Legacy of Grand Duchess Maria Nikolayevna*. St. Petersburg, n.p. [ca. 1913], 56, no. 22 (as by Rembrandt).
- Von Liphart, Ernst Friedrich. “Reiseeindrücke.” *Zeitschrift für Bildende Kunst* 13 (1913): 272–73 (as by Rembrandt).
- Bauch, Kurt. *Die Kunst des jungen Rembrandt*. Heidelberg, 1933, 220 (as by Jan Lievens and Rembrandt).
- Bredius, Abraham. *Rembrandt: Schilderijen*. Utrecht, 1935, no. 65 (as by Rembrandt).
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- Bauch, Kurt. “Rembrandt und Lievens.” *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 11 (1939): 248–50, no. 169 (as by Jan Lievens and Rembrandt).
- Van Gelder, Jan Gerrit, Horst Gerson, Ary Bob de Vries, Jan Nicolas van Wessem, and Joop M. Joosten, eds. *Rembrandt als Leermeester*. Exh. cat. Leiden, Museum De Lakenhal. Leiden, 1956, 16, no. 5 (as by Rembrandt).
- Bauch, Kurt. *Der frühe Rembrandt und seine Zeit: Studien zur geschichtlichen Bedeutung seines Frühstils*. Berlin, 1960, 208 (as by Jan Lievens, retouched by Rembrandt).
- Bauch, Kurt. *Rembrandt: Gemälde*. Berlin, 1966, no. A 3 (as by Jan Lievens, retouched by Rembrandt).
- Bredius, Abraham, and Horst Gerson. *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the Paintings*. London, 1969, no. 65 (as by an unknown follower, not Lievens or Rembrandt).
- Bruyn, Josua, et al. *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*. Vol. 1: 1625–1631. Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project. The Hague, Boston, and London, 1982, 681–84,

no. C 43 (as a nineteenth-century imitation of Rembrandt).

- Korevaar, Gerbrandt, and Christian Vogelaar, eds. *Rembrandt's Mother: Myth and REality*. Exh. cat. Leiden, Museum De Lakenhal. Zwolle, 2005, 88–91, no. 6 (as circle of Rembrandt).
- Schnackenburg, Bernhard. *Jan Lievens: Friend and Rival of the Young Rembrandt*. Petersberg, 2016, 81–82, 456, no. D2, as by Dirck Lievens.
- Bijl, Martin. "Gerrit Dou as a Pupil of Rembrandt." In *Rembrandt and his Circle: Insights and Discoveries*. Edited by Stephanie S. Dickey, 176–77, no. 7.8 (as attributed to Gerrit Dou). Amsterdam, 2017.

Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular oak with a narrow wood addition along the lower edge, has been thinned, marouflaged, and cradled.^[1] The lower edge of the wood addition, extended composition, and cradle has been trimmed. The lower ends of the four fixed vertical battens have been cut at sharp bevels, and the lowest horizontal batten has been cut in half and is now secured with brads. No wax collection seals, paper labels, import stamps or panel maker's mark are along the marouflage panel or cradle.

Dendrochronology of the plank has proved inconclusive, as Peter Klein's findings in 2008 and Ian Tyers's in 2010 arrived at significantly different evaluations. Klein identifies the plank as oak from the Baltic/Polish region with a plausible first use date of 1634, whereas according to Tyers, the tree-ring sequence was not found to match eastern Baltic, western European, or other dated or undated reference data.^[2]

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied and the paint has been built up in successive layers with visible brushwork through the background and low impasto through the white shirt. The composition has been extended onto the wood addition along the lower edge.

The painting is signed with a monogram, a small P inside a large C, and dated in dark paint along the upper right. The monogram has been previously misidentified as an R. The painting was consistently listed in exhibition catalogues as being signed with "R" and dated 1627 upper right and attributed to Rembrandt. This new interpretation of the monogram as a C and P has suggested to some that the painting is by Pieter Codde.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on Ian Tyers's 2010 and Peter Klein's 2008 dendrochronology reports.
2. Peter Klein writes: "An earliest felling date can be derived for the year 1626, more plausible is



a felling date between 1629..1632....1636 + x. With a minimum of 2 years for seasoning an earliest creation of the painting is possible from 1628 upwards. Under the assumption of a median of 15 sapwood rings and 2 years for seasoning a creation is plausible from 1634 upwards.”