



Head of a Girl

Rembrandt van Rijn
(Leiden 1606 – 1669 Amsterdam)

ca. 1645
oil on panel
20.8 x 17.4 cm
RR-112



How to cite

Van Tuinen, Iona, and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. "Head of a Girl" (2017). In *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, 4th ed. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Elizabeth Nogrady with Caroline Van Cauwenberge. New York, 2023–. <https://theleidencollection.com/artwork/head-of-a-girl/> (accessed February 10, 2026).

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With a tender expression accentuated by her tilted head and slightly parted lips, the girl in this bust-length image gazes downward to the left. Strong light falling from the upper left illuminates her face and the broad, cream-colored kerchief draped loosely around her neck, while a subtle, reflected light models the shaded areas of her cheek and chin. Executed in both thick impastos and thin, translucent paints, this rapidly executed oil study has a compelling presence that belies its small scale.

Wilhelm von Bode was the first scholar in the first half of the twentieth century to publish this engaging head study as Rembrandt's.^[1] In 1948, Jacob Rosenberg argued that this sketch was Rembrandt's preliminary study for Mary in his *Holy Family*, 1645, in the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg (fig 1). Indeed, the position of Mary's head, her expression, and the character of the direct and indirect light illuminating her face are almost identical to that of the young girl in the oil study (fig 2). Since the 1960s, however, most art historians have argued that this oil study is a freely executed copy of Mary in *Holy Family* by a member of Rembrandt's workshop and not Rembrandt's preliminary study for that figure.^[2] The painting has been associated with a number of Rembrandt's students, including Carel Fabritius (1622–54), Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627–78), and Nicolaes Maes (1634–93), but none of these proposed attributions has proved to be compelling.^[3] As a consequence, the identification of the artist responsible for this engaging oil study remains an enigma.^[4]

The question of whether or not this bust is Rembrandt's preliminary study or a copy by a workshop assistant relates to a larger problem within Rembrandt scholarship. As Ernst van de Wetering has demonstrated, Rembrandt often made preparatory studies of figures for his paintings to work out patterns of light and shade.^[5] In these studies he was particularly interested in rendering light that had been reflected into shadowed areas of the face. Michiel Franken has argued, however, that Rembrandt also encouraged his students to make partial copies after his compositions, and to alter these copies so that they could pass as *tronies* in their own right.^[6] It is not always easy to tell the difference between these two types of oil sketches, and debates about their attributions are some of the most complicated issues in Rembrandt studies.

Careful comparisons of the Leiden Collection's *Head of a Girl* and the figure of Mary in *Holy Family* support Rosenberg's conclusion that this sketch is a preliminary study for the Hermitage painting and not a copy after it. For example, the strokes of white paint evident above the girl's head, which are also visible in the X-radiograph (fig 3), indicate that the artist initially provided her with a small bonnet rather than the larger headdress worn by Mary in the final composition. The X-radiograph also reveals changes in the position of the white cloth to the left of the girl's face, an unlikely

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Holy Family*, 1645, oil on canvas, 116.4 x 96.4 cm, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, inv. 741



Fig 2. Detail, Rembrandt van Rijn, *Holy Family*, 1645, oil on canvas, 116.4 x 96.4 cm, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, inv. 741



Fig 3. X-radiograph of *Head of a Girl*, RR-112

occurrence should the Leiden Collection painting be a copy. Other differences exist between the oil sketch and the final composition, including the girl's hairstyle, which is not parted in the middle as is the case with Mary. Mary leans more forward than does the girl in the oil study, a difference in pose that is evident in the position of Mary's right shoulder, which is higher than that of the girl in the oil sketch. Also revealing is the shape of the young girl's neckline. In the Hermitage painting Mary wears a straight-edged bodice, but a visible pentimento in this area reveals that her neckline was V-shaped, exactly as in the oil sketch from the Leiden Collection.^[7] Finally, the handling of paint, which includes both impastos and thin areas in the shadows that reveal the underlying other ground layer, is consistent with Rembrandt's manner and not with a copy. The subtle nuances of reflected light in the shaded portion of the girl's face are also comparable to those found on Rembrandt's other oil studies.^[8]

Nowhere in Rembrandt's oeuvre does one find so many correlations between an oil sketch and the initial appearance of one of Rembrandt's compositions as in this instance. Indeed, all of the other the oil sketches that Franken describes as workshop copies are based on one of the master's completed compositions, not on an initial stage in the creative process. Franken argues that the Leiden Collection oil study was made by a copyist who adapted his image so that it could function as "a 'tronie' in its own right," but this conclusion seems improbable since the oil study so closely reflects *Holy Family's* underlying design. Van den Boogert and Van de Wetering, recognizing this fact, maintain that *Head of a Girl* was executed by a member of Rembrandt's workshop before Rembrandt had worked out his final composition for the Hermitage painting.^[9] As evidence to support their theory, they contend that an infrared reflectogram of the girl's head reveals a fairly detailed underdrawing in black chalk or charcoal, a technique that Rembrandt is not known to have used.^[10] Their reading of the reflectogram, however, mistakenly interpreted the black lines seen in the image as underdrawings rather than strokes of carbon-containing paint used to model the girl's features. After one discounts this faulty interpretation of the reflectogram, there are, in fact, no compositional or technical reasons for questioning the attribution of this oil sketch to Rembrandt.

A fundamental question when considering the attribution is whether the work is stylistically consistent with Rembrandt's oil studies from the mid-1640s. This issue is particularly important because no Rembrandt scholar has attributed the painting to the master since 1966, when Bauch deemed the painting to be a partial copy after Rembrandt's *Holy Family*. In this respect, the historical situation related to *Head of a Girl* parallels that of a number of other oil sketches that have been considered to be partial copies by pupils, but that actually may have been preliminary studies Rembrandt made for history paintings. Van de Wetering has identified a number of



Fig 4. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Head of Christ*, ca. 1648, oil on panel, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, inv. 811C, © Foto: Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Fotograf/in: Volker-H. Schneider

these, mostly expressive head studies that demonstrate a quick and fluid touch, often boldly executed with thick impastos.^[12] Van de Wetering, however, has not reattributed *Head of a Girl* to Rembrandt, and he, like other recent Rembrandt scholars, considers it to be a copy by a member of Rembrandt's workshop.^[13]

The reason that scholars have resisted attributing this oil sketch to Rembrandt may be that the young woman is more carefully rendered than the preliminary oil sketches generally associated with Rembrandt's hand, all of which are boldly and expressively brushed. Indeed, *Head of a Girl* has the character of a figure study rather than a quick compositional sketch. In this respect it resembles the various head studies of Christ that Rembrandt and his workshop painted from a young Jewish model in the late 1640s, none of which were actually preliminary studies for paintings. A particularly close comparison to *Head of a Girl* is the *Head of Christ* from Berlin (**fig 4**). Both young models are posed looking down and to the right, their averted gazes evoking a sense of mystery and inward reflection.^[14] Their features are similarly rendered, as is the application of paint. In each instance the face has been worked up from a brown monochrome sketch, which has been left exposed in the temple and in the shaded portions of the nose and proper right eye socket. The foreheads and cheekbones of both figures have been comparably enlivened with freely brushed impastos.

Thus, in addition to its high quality, the stylistic, compositional, and technical character of this compelling head study warrant defending its attribution to Rembrandt. It is probable that the master executed this painting around 1645 as a preparatory study for the figure of Mary in *Holy Family*.^[15]

- Ilona van Tuinen, Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., 2017

Endnotes

1. Wilhelm von Bode and Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *The Complete Work of Rembrandt*, 8 vols. (Paris, 1897–1906), 5: 29, 156, no. 373, dated the painting to “about 1650.” The attribution to Rembrandt was subsequently upheld by Wilhelm Valentiner and Cornelis Hofstede de Groot. See Wilhelm R. Valentiner, *Rembrandt: beschreibendes Verzeichniss seiner Gemälde mit den heliographischen Nachbildungen: Geschichte seines Lebens und seiner Kunst* [*The Complete Work of Rembrandt, History, Description and Heliographic Reproduction of All the Master's Pictures, with a Study of His Life*], 406, 562, 576 (where he mentioned a faint date of 1653 on the panel, albeit “undeutlich und nich ganz zweifellos” a date which can no longer be detected or has since disappeared, and which does not appear to have been original); Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith*, ed. and trans. Edward G. Hawke. 8 vols. London, 1907–28, originally published as *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 10 vols. (Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28), 6: 251, no. 495. In 1935, however, Abraham Bredius, *Rembrandt: Gemälde* (Vienna, 1935), no. 375, expressed some doubts about the Rembrandt attribution.
2. Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1948), 51, 122, fig. 165 (rev. ed. [London, 1968], 91, 196, 198, fig. 163).
3. In 1966 Kurt Bauch, *Rembrandt: Gemälde* (Berlin, 1966), 48, no. 375, considered the painting to be a partial copy after *Holy Family* executed in the “manner of Fabritius,” while Werner Sumowski, “Zu einem Gemälde von Carel Fabritius,” *Pantheon* 26, no. 4 (1968): 282–83, firmly attributed it to Carel Fabritius. Subsequently, Sumowski reassessed the attribution and gave it to Nicolaes Maes before changing his mind and identifying it as a work by Samuel van Hoogstraten. See Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau, 1983–94), 3:2008, under no. 1322, as by Nicolaes Maes; 6: 3627, under no. 1322, as by Samuel van Hoogstraten. Bob van den Boogert, “Rembrandt Werkstatt: Kopf eines Mädchens (Teilkopie nach *Die Heilige Familie mit den Engeln*),” in *Rembrandt: Genie auf der Suche*, ed. Ernst van de Wetering and Jan Kelch (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (Berlin, 2006), 334–35, no. 47, argued that the work was a copy of an earlier stage of the *Holy Family*, possibly by Van Hoogstraten. In 2000, Léon Krempel listed this oil sketch among the doubtful attributions to Nicolaes Maes in his monograph on the artist, but, in 2010, he described it as “attributed to” Maes. See León Krempel, *Nicolaes Maes (1634–1693): Studien zu den datierten Gemälden* (Petersberg, 2000), 334–35, no. B 12, fig. 356; Marlene Dumas, Chris Dercon, and Léon Krempel, *Tronies: Marlene Dumas and the Old Masters* (Exh. cat. Munich, Haus der Kunst) (Düsseldorf, 2010), 36, 108. On 10 November 2010 Krempel sent an email to the Leiden Collection indicating that he attributed the painting to Maes (curatorial files, The Leiden Collection, New York).
4. Neither Horst Gerson, in Abraham Bredius and Horst Gerson, *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the*

- Paintings* (London, 1969), 541, 579, no. 375; nor Ernst van de Wetering, "Rembrandt: The Holy Family, 1645," in Ernst van de Wetering et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 5: *Small-Scale History Paintings*, Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project (Dordrecht, 2011), 5: 371–78, no. V 4, copy 1, attribute the painting to a specific artist from Rembrandt's workshop.
5. Ernst van de Wetering, "Rembrandt's Oil Studies: New Light on an Old Problem," in *Rembrandt: Quest of a Genius*, ed. Bob van den Boogert (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (Zwolle, 2006), 179–207.
 6. Michiel Franken, "Learning by Imitation: Copying Paintings in Rembrandt's Workshop," in *Rembrandt: Quest of a Genius*, ed. Bob van den Boogert (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (Zwolle, 2006), 153–77, particularly 169–70. See also Michiel Franken, "Lernen durch Nachahmung: Über das Kopieren von Gemälden in Rembrandts Werkstatt," in *Rembrandt: Genie auf der Suche*, ed. Ernst van de Wetering and Jan Kelch (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (Berlin, 2006), 145–63, particularly 156–57.
 7. The presence of the V-shaped neckline confirms that the New York painting was executed around 1645, the date of the Hermitage painting, which makes an attribution to Nicolaes Maes, who studied with Rembrandt between 1649 and 1653, implausible.
 8. See Ernst van de Wetering, "Rembrandt's Oil Studies: New Light on an Old Problem," in *Rembrandt: Quest of a Genius*, ed. Bob van den Boogert (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (Zwolle, 2006), 179–207.
 9. Bob van den Boogert, "Rembrandt Werkstatt: Kopf eines Mädchens (Teilkopie nach *Die Heilige Familie mit den Engeln*)," in *Rembrandt: Genie auf der Suche*, ed. Ernst van de Wetering and Jan Kelch (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (Berlin, 2006), 334–35, no. 47. Ernst van de Wetering et al., "Rembrandt: The Holy Family, 1645," in Ernst van de Wetering et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 5: *Small-Scale History Paintings*, Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project (Dordrecht, 2011), 371–78, no. V 4, copy 1.
 10. Bob van den Boogert, "Rembrandt Werkstatt: Kopf eines Mädchens (Teilkopie nach *Die Heilige Familie mit den Engeln*)," in *Rembrandt: Genie auf der Suche*, ed. Ernst van de Wetering and Jan Kelch (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (Berlin, 2006) 334–35, no. 47; Ernst van de Wetering, "Rembrandt: The Holy Family, 1645," in Ernst van de Wetering et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 5: *Small-Scale History Paintings*, Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project (Dordrecht, 2011), 371–78, no. V 4, copy 1, fig. 8. In this respect, their assessments follow the arguments of Michiel Franken, "Lernen durch Nachahmung: Über das Kopieren von Gemälden in Rembrandts Werkstatt," in *Rembrandt: Genie auf der Suche*, ed. Ernst van de Wetering and Jan Kelch (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (Berlin, 2006), 145–63, particularly 156–57.
 11. See Ernst van de Wetering, *Rembrandt: The Painter at Work*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam, 2000), 23–32, for a discussion of Rembrandt's use of a preliminary monochrome modeling, often with a watery medium.

We are grateful to Michiel Franken for relating his account of the discussion of underdrawing in Rembrandt's oeuvre at the technical conference at the National Gallery in London in November 2014 in conjunction with the exhibition *Rembrandt: The Late Works*.

12. See Ernst van de Wetering, "Rembrandt's Oil Studies: New Light on an Old Problem," in *Rembrandt: Quest of a Genius*, ed. Bob van den Boogert (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (Zwolle, 2006), 179–207, particularly 196–207. In this article, Van de Wetering reattributes a number of oil sketches to Rembrandt, including *Weeping Woman* in the Detroit Institute of Arts, a work that recent scholars have argued was a partial copy by a member of the workshop after the master's *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, 1644, in the National Gallery, London.
13. Ernst van de Wetering et al., "Rembrandt: The Holy Family, 1645," in Ernst van de Wetering et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 5: *Small-Scale History Paintings*, Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project (Dordrecht, 2011), 5: 371–78, no. V 4, copy 1.
14. See *Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus*, ed. Lloyd DeWitt, Blaise Ducos, and George S. Keyes (Exh. cat. Paris, Musée du Louvre; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts) (Calenzano, 2011), 62–63, cat. 35.
15. The results of dendrochronological analysis of this panel have not proved particularly helpful in dating the painting. According to Peter Klein, in a 2000 report made for Salomon Lilian, B. V., copy on file at the Leiden Collection, New York, the youngest year ring of the panel dates to 1613 and the panel comes from the same tree as Rembrandt's *Old Man in Military Costume* (ca. 1630–31, oil on panel, 66 x 55.9 cm, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, inv. 78.PB.246) and *Supper at Emmaus* (private collection). Ian Tyers, in a report dated November 2010, copy on file at The Leiden Collection, New York, states that the youngest year ring of the panel dates as early as 1567.

Provenance

- Sir Charles A. Turner, London, by 1898.
- Paul von Schwabach (1867–1938), Berlin, by 1909 until before 1942.
- Dünsing Collection, Boizenburg, by 1948 [to Frederick Mont].
- [Frederick Mont, New York, 1950.]
- Private collection, United States, by 1969 (sale, Sotheby's, New York, 28 January 1999, no. 236, as by Nicolaes Maes; [to Salomon Lilian B.V.]).
- [Salomon Lilian B.V., Amsterdam.]
- Michiel and Debbie Zwetsloot, Scotland, by 2007.
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2007, as by Samuel van Hoogstraten.

Exhibition History

- Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, “De Rembrandt Tentoonstelling te Amsterdam,” 8 September–31 October 1898, no. 82 [lent by Sir Charles A. Turner].
- London, Burlington Fine Arts Club, “Exhibition of Pictures by Dutch Masters of the Seventeenth Century,” 1900, no. 48 [lent by Sir Charles A. Turner].
- London, Whitechapel Art Gallery, “Dutch Exhibition,” 30 March–10 May 1904, no. 156 [lent by Sir Charles A. Turner].
- Amsterdam, Salomon Lilian B.V., Amsterdam, 2000, no. 10, as by Samuel van Hoogstraten.
- Amsterdam, Rembrandt House Museum, “Rembrandt, Quest of a Genius,” 1 April–2 July 2006; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 4 August–5 November 2006, no. 47, as by workshop of Rembrandt [lent by a private collection].
- Munich, Haus der Kunst, “Tronies: Marlene Dumas and the Old Masters,” 29 October 2010–6 February 2011, as attributed to Nicolaes Maes [lent by the present owner].
- Washington, D.C., The National Gallery, on loan with the permanent collection, 19 October 2016–2 February 2017 [lent by the present owner].
- Paris, Musée du Louvre, “Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection: The Age of Rembrandt,” 22 February–22 May 2017 [lent by the present owner].
- 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 from The Leiden Collection,” 28 March 2018–22 July 2018 [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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Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre. Exh. cat. Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi. London, 2019, 91–2, no. 25. [Exhibition catalogue also published in French and Arabic.]

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Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular, wedge-shaped, eastern Baltic oak derived from a tree felled after 1575, has bevels along all but the left side.^[1] The upper edge has a jagged cut and may have been trimmed slightly. The unthinned and uncradled panel has two handwritten inscriptions and an old paper label, but no hand or machine toolmarks, wax seals, stencils, import stamps or panel maker’s marks.

A light-colored, radio-opaque ground has been thinly and evenly applied followed by a brown transparent glaze. The paint has been applied thinly though the background and in a thick paste with low rounded brushmarkings through the figure’s hair, face, and neck. A gap between the background paint and flesh tones along the figure’s proper left shoulder and entire head allows a halo of the transparent brown glaze to remain visible.

No underdrawing or compositional changes are readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers.

The painting is unsigned and undated.

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

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

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on Ian Tyers’s 2010 dendrochronology report. The panel underwent dendrochronological analysis by Peter Klein in 2000.