Minerva in Her Study

Rembrandt van Rijn
(Leiden 1606 – 1669 Amsterdam)

1635
oil on canvas
138 x 116.5 cm
signed and dated in dark paint, centered along left edge: “Rembrandt. f 1635”
RR-107
How to cite


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In this imposing masterpiece, Minerva looks up from her large folio and gazes out toward the viewer as though some distraction has interrupted her quiet concentration on the text. Golden light illuminates her powerful face with wide-open eyes and alert expression, as well as the long, flowing blonde hair cascading onto her shoulder. Her regal appearance is enhanced by the laurel wreath crowning her head, her pearl necklace, and the heavily embroidered cloak draped over her shoulders. Beneath the cloak is an ample blue garment tied with a knotted blue sash over a light gray skirt and a white shirt. In the background are more volumes, a globe, a golden helmet on a draped piece of fabric, a spear, and a large shield with the Gorgon’s head hanging from a column.

As one of the main Olympian deities, Minerva had various functions and attributes. She was the virgin goddess of war, but unlike her counterparts Mars or Bellona, she was neither belligerent nor cruel. Her inventive strategy led to victory and she was therefore, paradoxically, also the goddess of peace. She was also the goddess of wisdom, art, poetry, medicine and crafts, especially those of spinning and weaving. Rembrandt van Rijn was fascinated with biblical and mythological subjects such as Minerva, and he firmly believed that depictions of them and their stories comprised the most significant of all genres of painting. This principle, shared by collectors, theorists and painters alike, lay at the very core of Dutch humanistic traditions. Throughout his career, Rembrandt’s history paintings stand apart from those of other Dutch artists because of his ability to convey human feelings and emotions to gods and goddesses, and mere mortals from the Bible and mythology. In the mid-1630s, shortly after Rembrandt moved to Amsterdam, he radically transformed the style and focus of his history paintings, executing works such as Minerva in Her Study at a scale and with a visual power unprecedented in the Netherlands. It is not certain what motivated him to paint in such an imposing manner after he left Leiden, but probably he sought to emulate and even compete with the achievements of Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1641), then universally recognized as the greatest history painter of the day.

As with Minerva, Rembrandt’s goddesses and heroines of the 1630s share her statuesque appearance and have similarly full, blushing faces with heavy eyelids. It is not surprising that they were all at some time believed to portray Saskia van Uylenburgh, whom Rembrandt married in the summer of 1634. For example, when Minerva in Her Study was was auctioned in London in 1924 it was titled Saskia as Deborah (see Provenance).
seems more probable, however, that Rembrandt here portrayed an idealized face; he used this type years before his marriage, when Saskia was still living in Friesland and therefore was unavailable to model for him extensively.

The painting has long led a secluded life, receiving relatively little attention from Rembrandt specialists and the general public until the beginning of the twenty-first century. The earliest records of its existence date to the first half of the eighteenth century, when it was in the possession of the earls of Somerville in Scotland. It remained in that family until it was auctioned in London in 1924 after the death of Lady Louisa Harriet Somerville (1835–1923).[2] It then entered various private collections in Europe and Japan (see Provenance), making only rare appearances in Rembrandt exhibitions in Amsterdam (1956), Bordeaux (1960), and Japan (1992). This relative anonymity changed in 2001 when, after its inclusion in the exhibition Greek Gods and Heroes in the Age of Rubens and Rembrandt in Athens and Dordrecht,[3] the painting was bought from its Japanese owner by Otto Naumann and Alfred Bader. After the removal of thick layers of yellowed varnish, Minerva in Her Study was presented at the Maastricht Art Fair in 2002.[4] The Leiden Collection acquired the painting in 2008.

Probably because it was so rarely on view before 2002, Minerva in Her Study played a relatively modest role in earlier publications on Rembrandt. Its attribution to Rembrandt was sometimes doubted, and it was even proposed that the painting was the result of a collaboration between Rembrandt and his pupil Ferdinand Bol (1616–80).[5] The latter suggestion was based on the existence of a faithfully drawn copy of the composition signed “F. Bol” (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) (fig 1). Although the signature is probably false, Bol likely made this copy shortly after he entered Rembrandt’s studio in 1636.[6] Comparable albeit more skillfully drawn copies attributed to Bol also exist of the Rembrandt’s Flora (Saskia van Uylenburgh in Arcadian Costume) of 1635 (National Gallery, London) (fig 2) and his Standard-Bearer of 1636 (private collection, Paris).[7] The production of drawn copies after the works of the master was a common workshop practice. Rembrandt, according to a handwritten note of ca. 1636, sold painted copies of a Flora, Abraham [’s Sacrifice], and a Standard-Bearer by Bol and two fellow pupils.[8]

Questions about the painting’s attribution ended in 1989 when the Rembrandt Research Project asserted that the painting was a “wholly autograph work from 1635.”[9] In making its determination, the Project’s
authors noted the signature, “Rembrandt. f. /1635,” is similar to those in Rembrandt’s Ganymede (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden) of the same year and the Standard-Bearer of 1636. Examination of the canvas support, moreover, confirmed that Minerva in Her Study was painted on the same bolt of linen as other paintings executed in Rembrandt’s studio in the mid-1630s. For example, the structure of the weave of its canvas and a weaving fault (about 20 cm to the left of the right edge) are identical to those of the canvas used for Belshazzar’s Feast of ca. 1635 (National Gallery, London) and a workshop version of Abraham’s Sacrifice, dated 1636 (Alte Pinakothek, Munich). Although this observation does not confirm that Minerva in Her Study was executed by Rembrandt himself, it firmly places the painting within the master’s workshop.

Stylistically, the painting relates to a group of single-figure, nearly life-size history paintings of goddesses or heroines from antiquity that Rembrandt made between 1633 and 1635, which, with the exception of Minerva in Her Study, are all in public collections. These include the war goddess Bellona, 1633 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) (fig. 3), Artemisia (or Sophonisba?), 1634 (Museo del Prado, Madrid) (fig. 4), Flora (Goddess of Spring and Flowers), 1635 (Hermitage, St. Petersburg) (fig. 5), and Flora (Saskia van Uylenburgh in Arcadian Costume), 1635 (National Gallery, London). These exceptional three-quarter-length figures show Rembrandt’s particular interest in creating strong three-dimensional effects during the mid-1630s. He achieved plasticity by contrasting a brightly illuminated figure against a dark background, by juxtaposing contrasting textures such as soft fur or hair with shiny metal or embroidery, and by opposing cool and warm colors.

The evolution of Rembrandt’s approach in these works is revealing. The figure of Bellona is somewhat formidable in appearance and shows weaknesses in execution, but it is the first instance in which Rembrandt developed this interest in strong three-dimensional effects! Flora (Saskia van Uylenburgh in Arcadian Costume) of 1635 is more successful as a work of art as Rembrandt executed it with assured brushstrokes and a subdued palette of cooler and warmer tints. Moreover, in that work he placed the brightly illuminated figure against a dark background to create a strong suggestion of depth. Most comparable to Minerva in Her Study is Artemisia of 1634. Both paintings depict an opulently dressed blonde woman seated at a table and looking up from the book she is reading. Both of these dramatically lit figures are set off against a dark background and share a similar subtle color scheme of creams and grays and a relatively
bold handling of paint.

In depicting Minerva reading in her study with her arms and armor literally cast aside, Rembrandt focused on her role as goddess of wisdom and patron of the arts.\[17\] Already in 1631 he had used this unusual iconography in a small panel painting *Minerva in Her Study* (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin) (fig 6).\[18\] Here she is likewise represented in a cloak, her blonde hair crowned with laurels, and seated at a table with attributes of erudition and music: books, a globe, and a lute. Arms and armor, a shield, and a helmet hang on the wall in the background. This painting was listed as early as 1632 in the collection of the stadholder Frederik Hendrik in The Hague.\[19\] The subject of the painting was apparently unclear to the compiler of the inventory, as he believed it to represent “Melancholy, in the form of a woman sitting on a chair at a table on which are books, a lute and other instruments.”\[20\] As in the Leiden Collection painting of 1635, the seated woman must represent Minerva because of the presence of the shield with the Gorgon’s head in the background.

Closely related, both in composition and iconography, are two works of around the same date, one by an unknown pupil (Mauritshuis, The Hague),\[21\] and one attributed to Isaac de Jouderville (ca. 1612–48) (Denver Art Museum).\[22\] It appears that Rembrandt’s painting in Berlin served as the iconographical prototype for variations made by members of his Leiden studio. When Rembrandt revisited the subject in 1635, he followed this same iconographical schema but made significant changes to the composition. First of all, he enhanced Minerva’s physical presence by depicting her close to the picture plane and greatly enhanced the painting’s monumental effect with its large scale. In the illuminated foreground he depicted embroideries and other objects in great detail compared to those in the dark background, which he executed more cursorily. Instead of a red robe, he dressed the goddess in cooler monochrome blues and grays that further enhance the strong three-dimensional effect of the image.

Minerva’s long, flowing hair points to her virgin state; the fact that she is crowned with a laurel wreath, however, is unusual. Traditionally, Minerva’s attribute was an olive branch. Laurel was the plant dedicated to her half-brother, Apollo, and laurel wreaths were generally attributes of poets (“laureates”) or victorious conquerors. It is feasible that by gracing Minerva with a laurel wreath of victory and by dressing her in rich clothing with her arms and armor cast aside Rembrandt intended to show her foremost as a goddess of erudition and peace. Only peace will provide the stability and
Rembrandt’s choice to revisit the theme of the peaceful Minerva might have been related to the political situation of the Dutch Republic at that time. In 1635, the same year that Rembrandt completed this painting, the States General, under the leadership of Frederik Hendrik, decided that the Dutch Republic should join forces with France and invade the Southern Netherlands as part of its ongoing revolt against Spain. Amsterdam regents, however, objected strongly to this military intervention, since such an invasion could have led to the reopening of the River Scheldt, which would have greatly benefited Antwerp’s economic situation at Amsterdam’s expense. It seems probable that Rembrandt’s depiction of Minerva as the goddess of war who turns away from her arms and armor to focus on peaceful and scholarly pursuits would have appealed to Amsterdam’s regents. Alternatively, Rembrandt may have had in mind as a possible buyer one of the city’s erudite regents who had founded the “Athenaeum Illustre,” or the Illustrious School, in 1632.

The general popularity of this goddess of wisdom within the circle of learned Amsterdam regents is demonstrated by the pen and wash drawing Rembrandt made of Minerva in her study in 1652 for the *album amicorum* (friendship album) of the classically cultivated connoisseur Jan Six (1618–1700) (*fig 7*). Rembrandt, who knew this merchant, poet and burgomaster as a friend and business partner, depicted Minerva seated at a desk before a window in her study, decorated with draped curtains and a bust. He represented her in the act of writing and, just as in his painting of 1635, depicted her shield with its Gorgon’s head. Her lance and helmet hang on the wall next to her desk. For the learned humanist Jan Six, thus, Rembrandt also chose to emphasize the peaceful character of Minerva.

Rembrandt’s *Minerva* places the artist decisively among those who turned to the humanist ideal. His unconventional depiction of a friendly, erudite, and peaceful Minerva can be viewed in the context of Amsterdam’s culture and politics of the 1630s, and is a powerful expression of a painter with learned ambitions.

- Volker Manuth
2017
Endnotes

1. Bredius also believed that Saskia was the model for the Minerva; Abraham Bredius, *Rembrandt Schilderijen* (Utrecht, 1935), no. 469.

2. Already in 1818 and 1819, John Southey, Lord of Somerville (1765–1819), brought the painting to auction three times without it being sold; see Provenance.


7. For the documents he signed as a witness in Dordrecht in December 1635, see Albert Blankert, *Ferdinand Bol: Rembrandt's Pupil* (Doornspijk, 1982), 17, 71. As has been remarked in Josua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 3: 1635–1642, Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project (The Hague, 1989), 3: 14, the relatively clumsy execution of the drawn copy of the Minerva is “just as one might expect from a newcomer” such as Bol.


10. See the essay on Rembrandt’s signatures of the period in Josua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 3: 1635–1642, Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research


19. Here the painting is attributed to Jan Lievens. In this inventory, however, works by Rembrandt and Lievens are often confused. For a discussion see Josua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 1: 1625–1631, Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project (The Hague, 1982), A 38, 362.


22. osua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 1: 1625–1631, Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project (The Hague, 1982), 1: C 9. The painting is dated by the authors of the Corpus to “in or soon after 1631.”


**Provenance**

- Baron Marczell von Nemes (1866–1930), Munich (his sale, Munich, Mensing & Fils, F. Muller, P. Cassirer, H. Helbing, 16–19 June 1931, no. 59 [80,000 marks to Mensing & Zoon, Amsterdam, or to an unknown American buyer]).
Minerva in Her Study

- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2008.

Exhibition History

- Tokyo, Bridgestone Art Museum (Ishibashi Foundation), 21 September 1988–21 May 2001, on loan with the permanent collection, [lent by a private collection, Japan].
- Houston, Museum of Fine Arts, 13 May 2002–15 January 2003, on loan with the permanent collection [lent by Alfred Bader and Otto Naumann Ltd.].
- Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 27 February–12 September 2004, on loan with
the permanent collection in gallery 258, [lent by Alfred Bader and Otto Naumann Ltd.].

- Stockholm, Åamells Konsthandel, 25 September–22 October 2004 [lent by Alfred Bader and Otto Naumann Ltd.].
- Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis, 15 June 2005–31 March 2006, on loan with the permanent collection [lent by Alfred Bader and Otto Naumann Ltd.].
- Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis, “Rembrandt: Quest of a Genius,” 1 April–2 July 2006; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 4 August–5 November 2006, no. 18 [lent by Alfred Bader and Otto Naumann Ltd.].
- Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis, November 2006–11 September 2008, on loan with the permanent collection [no number, lent by Alfred Bader and Otto Naumann Ltd.].
- New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, January 2009–March 2011, on loan with the permanent collection [lent by the present owner].
- Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, on loan with the permanent collection, April 2013–October 2014 [lent by the present owner].
- Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, on loan with the permanent collection, May 2015–April 2016 [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].

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References


• Valentiner, Wilhelm R. “Notes on Old and Modern Drawings: Drawings by Bol.” Art Quarterly 20 (Spring 1957): 48, fig. 1, 55.


• Bredius, Abraham and Horst Gerson. Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the Paintings.


- Grimm, Claus. *Rembrandt selbst: Eine Neubewertung seiner Porträtkunst*. Stuttgart and Zürich, 1991, 61, fig. 107, 63, fig. 120.


- Van de Wetering, Ernst. *Rembrandt: A Life in 180 Paintings*. Amsterdam, 2008, 89, fig. 120.


- Weller, Dennis. “Minerva in Her Study.” In *Rembrandt in America: Collecting and Connoisseurship*. Edited by George S. Keyes, Tom Rassieur, and Dennis P. Weller, 195,

- Ducos, Blaise, and Lara Yeager-Crasselt, eds. *Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden*
Versions

Drawing

1. Ferdinand Bol (attributed to), copy after Rembrandt’s *Minerva in Her Study*, ca. 1636, pen and brush in gray ink, black chalk, 257 x 202 mm, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, RP-T-1975-85.

Technical Summary

The support, a medium-weight, plain-weave, rectangular fabric, has been lined. The left tacking margins have been turned out and the composition extended and the remaining tacking margins have been removed. Cusping along the outer edges indicates the support dimensions have not been significantly altered. Paper tape, which has been toned dark, extends into the face of the painting, and two small canvas inserts are located along the lower portion of the brown tablecloth.\(^{(1)}\) There is an embossed liner stamp, one canvas stamp, five paper labels, and various numerical inscriptions, but no wax seals or stencils along the stretcher or lining reverse.

“In ca. 1989 the Rembrandt Research Project examined the painting . . . and suspected the fabric supports of Rembrandt’s *Belshazzar’s Feast* from the National Gallery in London and *Abraham’s Sacrifice* from the State Hermitage [Museum], St. Petersburg, are from the same canvas bolt.”\(^{(2)}\)

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied overall followed by paint applied smoothly in opaque layers of rich paste through the flesh tones, drapery, and open book pages and with areas of low impasto through the pearls, drapery folds, and the figure’s bodice. The paint has been thinly applied with a broad wet brush allowing the light-colored ground to show through along the upper half of the composition, including the background in the upper left quadrant, the shield along the upper right quadrant, and, to a lesser extent, the tablecloth along the lower right quadrant.

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

The painting is signed and dated in dark paint along the center of the left edge.
The painting was cleaned and restored in 2001 and remains in a good state of preservation.

**Technical Summary Endnotes**

1. Approximately 13 cm up from the lower edge, 42 cm apart.

2. According to the RR-107 research memo provided by Sara Smith, collections manager. It is possible the Thread Count Automation Project (TCAP) codirectors, C. Richard Johnson Jr. (Cornell University) and Don H. Johnson (Rice University) could determine weave matches that link the supports of the three paintings.