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Rembrandt's Mother

Studio of Rembrandt van Rijn

ca. 1628
oil on panel
35.5 x 29.1 cm
JL-106

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The 1679 inventory of the estate of Clement de Jonghe (1624/25–77), an Amsterdam print dealer who had known and sat for Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), identifies, for the first time, the sitter in one of the master's prints as "Rembrandts moeder" (Rembrandt's mother).[1] The exact etching referred to in this inventory is not known, but it was undoubtedly one of a number of images of an old woman that Rembrandt made in the late 1620s and early 1630s **(fig 1)**. The identification of this sitter as Rembrandt's mother is probably correct given the number of times that Rembrandt depicted her.[2] She also served as a model for other Leiden artists, including Jan Lievens (1607–74)[3] and apprentices in Rembrandt's studio, among them Gerrit Dou (1613–75), Isaac de Jouderville (ca. 1612–48), and the unknown artists who painted *Bust of an Old Woman* (RR-122) and this expressive *tronie*.[4]

In this painting, Rembrandt's mother wears a dark headdress that sweeps across her forehead and frames her face as it falls over her shoulders onto her dark, fur-trimmed robe. Beneath these austere coverings is a white blouse with an elaborately embroidered collar. The woman's aged skin, which glows under the strong light coming from the left, is rendered in a network of small strokes and splotchy dabs of paint, including ochre highlights and vivid red accents on her proper right eye and bottom lip. Angular marks boldly scratched into the wet paint, sometimes with the blunt end of a brush and sometimes with a reed pen, not only indicate folds and wrinkles in her face, but also the decorative patterns in her white blouse and fur trim.[5] The expressive brushwork and scratches in the paint, as well as the strong contrasts of light and dark that divide her face along the bridge of her nose, indicate that this panel was not conceived as a portrait but as a *tronie*, or character study, where the artist has captured both the inner dignity and the effects of time on the face of this aged woman.

The artist who painted this *tronie* looked carefully at Rembrandt's 1628 etching of his mother's visage **(fig 1)**, where she similarly gazes directly out at the viewer and wears the same black headdress. Rembrandt indicated the many wrinkles covering her face with delicate etched lines, and expressively modeled the image to capture effects of light and dark. The artist who made the Leiden Collection painting sought to emulate these characteristics, but exaggerated them, not only with his broad application of paint but also in the angular rhythms of the calligraphic hooked strokes of his scratched lines.[6]

Ernst van de Wetering has sought to group this *tronie* with two other paintings by an unidentified artist from Rembrandt's workshop: *A Man Seated Reading at a Table in a Lofty Room*, ca. 1628–29 (National Gallery, London) **(fig 2)** and *Travellers Resting (The Rest on the Flight into Egypt?)*, ca. 1629–30 (Mauritshuis, The Hague) **(fig 3)**.[7]

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Rembrandt's Mother*, 1628, etching, 64 x 64 mm, British Museum, London, F,6.122, 1843,0607.219, © Trustees of the British Museum



Fig 2. Circle of Rembrandt van Rijn, *A Man Seated Reading at a Table in a Lofty Room*, ca. 1628–29, oil on oak panel, 55.1 x 46.5 cm, The National Gallery, London, NG3214



Fig 3. Circle of Rembrandt van Rijn, *Travellers Resting (The Rest on the Flight into Egypt?),* oil on paper, adhered to a panel, 38 x 33.7 cm, The Hague, Mauritshuis, no. 579

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He noted that these three paintings have technical and stylistic similarities, in particular the way in which the artist scratched into the wet paint to form outlines, an approach that differs from the way Rembrandt used his scratching technique to create textural effects.[8] Aside from the use of Rembrandt's mother as a model and the superficial similarities in painting techniques, dendrochronological analysis also connects this painting to Rembrandt's studio: the panel support was cut from the same tree as that for Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait,* ca. 1628 (Indianapolis Museum of Art).[9]

X-radiographs indicate that this *tronie* was painted over another image—a soldier with a broad hat and staff (**fig 4**). The soldier's form is also visible at the right of the panel in raking light. Indeed, some of the "dead-coloring" revealed because of the scratching may be paint from this original image.



Fig 4. X-radiograph of JL-106

This expressive *tronie* is a fascinating example of a work produced in Rembrandt's workshop during his Leiden years, yet it also serves as reminder of how much is still to be learned about the character of that studio. We still do not have a firm sense of who was in the workshop in the late 1620s other than Gerrit Dou, and we do not really know how Rembrandt taught pupils about his complex painting techniques. Was a work such as this painted from life or modeled after one of the master's prints? Did he challenge his students to paint an image with strong effects of light and dark and to capture an image of age as part of his pedagogical process? Did he authorize works such as this for sale, and, if so, were they sold under his name? Works such as this *tronie* are compelling to look at and to reflect upon for their emotional qualities, but they also help us develop a richer understanding of the master who inspired them.

- Lloyd DeWitt, 2017

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Endnotes

1. D. de Hoop Scheefr and K. G. Boon, "Nogmaals de inventarislijst van Clement de Jonghe," *De Kroniek van her Rembrandthuis* 4 (1972): 126. Gerbrand Korevaar, "Rembrandt's Mother: Rise and Fall of a Myth," in *Rembrandt's Mother: Myth and Reality*, ed. Christiaan Vogelaar and Gerbrand Korevaar (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal) (Antwerp, 2005), 36.
2. Rembrandt's mother was named Neeltgen Willemsdochter van Zuytbrouck (1569–1640).
3. Lievens's images of "Rembrandt's mother" include *Old Woman Reading a Book*, ca. 1625–26 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), and two panels of her face in profile (*Rembrandt's Mother*, ca. 1613 [Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Gift of Alfred and Isabel Bader, 2005, inv. no. 48-001], and *Old Woman with a Headscarf*, ca. 1631 [The Burghley House Collection, Lincolnshire, inv. no. 214]). Lievens also made an etching of her (see Friedrich Wilhelm Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings, and Woodcuts, ca. 1450–1700*, 72 vols. [Amsterdam, 1949–], 11: no. 49) that was part of a group called the "Diverse tronikens." Lievens used this etched image as a model for Job's wife in the large canvas *Job on the Dungheap*, ca. 1631 (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa).
4. This painting was attributed to Rembrandt until 1982, when the Rembrandt Research Project deemed it to be a later imitation. See Josua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 1: 1625–1631, *Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project* (The Hague, 1986), 1: no. C42. Subsequently, Ernst van de Wetering correctly argued that the painting should be placed in Rembrandt's orbit in Leiden at the end of the 1620s. See Ernst van de Wetering, "Delimiting Rembrandt's Autograph Oeuvre: An Insoluble Problem?" in *The Mystery of the Young Rembrandt*, ed. Bernhard Schnackenburg and Ernst van de Wetering (Exh. cat. Kassel, Museum Schloss Wilhelmshöhe, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister; Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis) (Wolfratshausen, 2001), 78–79.
5. The scratched lines with a reed pen occur on her proper right cheek. Rembrandt also used a reed pen to make scratches, albeit later in his career. See Mark Tucker, Lloyd DeWitt, and Ken Sutherland, "Rembrandt's Jesus," in *Rembrandt et la figure du Christ*, ed. Lloyd DeWitt, Blaise Ducos, and George S. Keyes (Exh. cat. Paris, Musée du Louvre; Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art; Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts) (New Haven, 2011), 38.
6. For a related painting of an old woman, traditionally identified as a portrait of Rembrandt's mother, see the entry on RR-122.
7. Ernst van de Wetering in Christiaan Vogelaar and Gerbrand Korevaar, eds., *Rembrandt's Mother: Myth and Reality* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal) (Leiden, 2005), 94.
8. Bernhard Schnackenburg, however, has mentioned to the present collector (verbal communication) that he attributes the painting to Jan Lievens.
9. See the Technical Summary for this painting.

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Provenance

- Arthur Sanderson, Edinburgh, by 1897, as by Rembrandt.
- [A. Preyer, The Hague, 1908; Sedelmeyer Galleries, Paris, 1911, as by Rembrandt].
- Sir George Donaldson, London, as by Rembrandt [Cottier & Co., New York, as by Rembrandt].
- [A. Preyer, The Hague, as by Rembrandt].
- Von Bohlen und Halbach Collection, Villa Huegel, Essen, Germany, by 1916 [Johnny van Haeften, Ltd., London, 2007].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2007.

Exhibition History

- Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, "De Rembrandt Tentoonstelling te Amsterdam," 8 September–31 October 1898, no. 16, as by Rembrandt [lent by Arthur Sanderson].
- Kassel, Staatliche Museen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Schloss Wilhelmshöhe, "Der junge Rembrandt: Rätsel um seine Anfänge/The Mystery of the Young Rembrandt," 3 November 2001–27 January 2002; Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis, 20 February–26 May 2002, no. 64, as by circle of Rembrandt [lent by the Von Bohlen und Halbach Collection].
- Leiden, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal, "Rembrandt's Mother: Myth and Reality," 16 December 2005–19 March 2006, no. 8, as by circle of Rembrandt [lent by the Von Bohlen und Halbach Collection].
- Munich, Haus der Kunst München, "Tronies: Marlene Dumas und die Alten Meister/Tronies: Marlene Dumas and the Old Masters," 29 October 2010–6 February 2011, no. 34, as unknown pupil of Rembrandt [lent by the present owner].
- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, August 2015–August 2016 [lent by the present owner].
- Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, "The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection," 28 March 2018–22 July 2018 [lent by the present owner].
- St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, "The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection," 5 September 2018–13 January 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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Rijn).

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Amsterdam, 2017.

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Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular Baltic oak, has an earliest use date of 1598 and is derived from the same tree as Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait* in the Indianapolis Museum of Art. The youngest heartwood rings from both works support a date from 1581.[1] Planed through and filled worm tunnels indicate the panel reverse has been thinned. A wedge-shaped wood shim was applied to the upper panel edge reverse to compensate for the taper of the panel's only bevel before the panel was cradled. No wax seals, import stamps, stencils or panel maker's marks are visible along the cradle or panel reverse.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied. A dark gray layer below the light gray background remains visible and forms a narrow border across the upper edge and an even narrower border along the right edge. The paint has been applied with visible brushwork through the background and in a paste consistency through the figure's face. Areas of detail have been scratched into wet paint with the back of a brush and allow the underlayers to show through the face, white chemise, and fur collar and continue to the right of the figure along the underside of the hood.

The X-radiograph reveals either an earlier composition of a figure with shoulder-length hair wearing a cap with a diagonally angled upper edge or significant changes to the female figure wearing a dark hood in the final composition. In raking light, unmistakable 1 cm-wide brushwork forms a diagonal U through the plain gray background to the right of the female figure and two wide looping swirls above the angled cap. It is unclear how this brushwork relates to the earlier or final composition. Further investigation is required.

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

The painting is unsigned and undated.

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The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition in 2007 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 identification of the wood is based on Peter Klein's 2004 German dendrochronology report. Indianapolis Museum of Art, inv. no. 10063, RRP IV Corr I A 22/ Br 3.

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