



Study of a Man with Curly Hair

School of Rembrandt van Rijn

ca. 1643-45

oil on panel

16.6 x 13.8 cm

RR-123



How to cite

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This small panel depicts the bust of an old man with a beard. His torso faces the viewer but his head turns to the right, so that his face appears in three-quarter view. The light falling from the left accentuates the left cheek and ear, while the right side of his face and the eyes fall nearly completely in shadow. The man's curly hair is tousled and his short beard is unkempt. Particularly noticeable is his large, round nose, which gives the man a "rough" aspect, indicating that he comes from a low social background. The feature of the *knollnase* (bulbous nose) has been clarified by Wayne Franits in light of contemporary physiognomic theories. Especially popular were the so-called *neusboeken* (nose books) that illustrated various nasal forms accompanied by satiric commentary. A large, bulbous nose, for example, was associated with the vices of drunkenness and smoking, and was considered suitable for figures from the lower social orders.^[1] Likewise, the loose brushwork in which this nearly monochromatic brownish image is painted supports this impression: the man's whole face appears to be painted in rapid strokes of the brush, which emphasize his wrinkles as well as his lack of grooming.

As with other paintings in The Leiden Collection (RR-101, RR-109, RR-120), this *tronie* is based on a study from life.^[2] In contrast, for example, to *Study of a Woman in a White Cap* (RR-101), which should be understood primarily as a study of light, this work presents a specific facial type—a rough figure—that could be used in a larger composition. A total of four versions of this study are known, all likely after a now-lost original by Rembrandt of around 1640.^[3] The prototype probably remained in Rembrandt's studio and was copied by assistants and pupils as an exercise, or used as a model for a figure in their own paintings. The same head appears, for example, in *Parable of the Hidden Treasure* in Budapest, executed by an unknown follower, with still-life details added in a much finer hand, perhaps that of Gerrit Dou (1613–75) (**fig 1**).^[4] The farmer in this scene has the same type of face with the strikingly large nose, although he appears in mirror image and is rendered with a smoother handling of paint. The same figural type also appears in *The Beheading of John the Baptist* in the Rijksmuseum (**fig 2**). In both cases, Rembrandt's prototype served as a model for a figure of low social standing—the farmer in the depiction of the parable and the executioner in the Rijksmuseum painting, still holding his sword.

It is not possible to date the present study with any precision, although dendrochronological analysis by Ian Tyers has demonstrated that the tree from which the panel was taken was felled around 1636, which indicates an earliest date of use around 1643.^[5]

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Workshop of Rembrandt van Rijn, possibly Gerrit Dou and Govaert Flinck, *Parable of the Hidden Treasure*, ca. 1630, Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest, inv. 342



Fig 2. Rembrandt School, *The Beheading of John the Baptist*, ca. 1645, oil on canvas, 149 x 121 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. SK-A-91



- David de Witt, 2017



Endnotes

1. Wayne Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting: Its Stylistic and Thematic Evolution* (New Haven, 2004), 43.
2. 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), 178–207.
3. Rembrandt School, *Study of a Head*, ca. 1645, oil on panel, 19.5 × 15.5 cm, National Gallery, Oslo, inv. no. 1363, formerly Chr. Langaard collection; Rembrandt School, *Head of an Old Man*, oil on panel, 20.9 × 17.6 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, John G. Johnson Collection, no. 476; Rembrandt School, *Study of a Head*, oil on panel, 21.5 × 18.5 cm, present location unknown, formerly Matsukata Collection, Tokyo; Rembrandt School, *Study of a Head*, oil on panel, 19.5 × 16.3 cm, present location unknown, formerly with art dealer Landry, Paris, 1952.
4. The museum attributes the work to Dou and, improbably, Rembrandt. Its landscape background draws heavily on the style of Hercules Seghers (1589/90–1633/38), whose work was owned by Rembrandt and would have been present in his studio. The theme is drawn from Matthew 13:44, and from the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas 109.
5. Ian Tyers, dendrochronology report, November 2010; this source of oak became unavailable after 1650.

Provenance

- (Sale, Tajan, Paris, 15 December 2008, no. 56 [Salomon Lilian B. V., Amsterdam, 2008]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

Versions

Versions and Copies

1. Rembrandt School, *Study of a Head*, ca. 1645, oil on panel, 19.5 x 15.5 cm, National Gallery, Oslo, inv. no. 1363; formerly Chr. Langaard collection.
2. Rembrandt School, *Head of an Old Man*, oil on panel, 20.9 x 17.6 cm, Philadelphia Museum



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Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertical, straight-grained, rectangular Eastern Baltic oak derived from a tree felled after 1636, has bevels along all four sides.^[1] The panel is unthinned and uncradled, and has machine tool marks along the left and right bevels. The panel reverse has two paper label remnants, paper tape, and a numerical inscription, but no wax seals, import stamps, stencils or panel maker's marks.

A light-colored ground has been extremely thinly and evenly applied. The paint has been applied as a thin glaze along the background, which allows the light underlayer to show through. Only the application of the darkest paint, most noticeably the eyes and nostrils but also the beard and base of the neck, is visible as slightly raised, rounded brushwork. Very few of the flesh tones and facial features are visible as radio-opaque forms in the X-radiograph, due either to the pigments employed or the X-radiograph exposure. Either way, the extreme thinness is noteworthy.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. No compositional changes are revealed in the images, in the X-radiograph, or as pentimenti. Further investigation at wavelengths that penetrate further into the infrared range may be useful.

The painting is unsigned and undated.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2009 and remains in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on Ian Tyers's 2010 dendrochronology report.