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Study of a Woman in a White Cap

Rembrandt van Rijn
(Leiden 1606 – 1669 Amsterdam)

ca. 1640
oil on panel
47.3 x 39 cm
RR-101

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This moving profile depiction of a mature woman wearing a white cap occupies an unusual place within Rembrandt van Rijn's painted oeuvre. Although clearly representing a specific individual, the master seems not to have conceived this painting as a formal portrait; instead, the woman's focused gaze and raised eyebrows make it appear as though she has been plucked from the stream of her daily responsibilities. Moreover, her flat plain collar identifies her as a servant who would have occupied a social position far beneath those who could afford to sit for Rembrandt around 1640, when he executed this work. Rembrandt seems to have concerned himself here primarily in determining how the effects of direct and reflected light affect the characterization of the figure in such a study. Light strikes the woman's head from behind while reflected light illuminates her face. Rembrandt enhanced these light effects through his different levels of finish, ranging from fully built-up paint on her cap, forehead and cheek to the more thinly and loosely executed shaded areas.

Throughout much of its history, this work had a different appearance. By the mid-nineteenth century, several areas of the painting had been reworked in an effort to recast it as a formal portrait **(fig 1)**. The plain collar had been painted out in a decisive manner by a later hand: an intervening layer of black was used to ensure it was covered completely before a more stylish fur collar was painted in its place. Notably, however, the *oorijzer*, or "ear iron," was left fully visible. This metal band was fitted inside the bonnet to hold it in place around the head and over the ear, and was normally hidden behind the earflap of the bonnet. The fact that this metal band was left visible when the repainting was done suggests that its function was not recognized and that it was believed to be characteristic of normal dress.

When this painting first entered the literature (in its altered state), it was included in the master's oeuvre without any reservations. John Smith was the first to cite it in 1836,[1] and his positive assessment was subsequently reaffirmed in the early twentieth century by Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, Max Friedländer, Hermann Voss, and Abraham Bredius.[2] Wilhelm Valentiner was particularly vigorous in his support in publications of 1921, 1930, and 1931.[3] A change in judgment occurred in 1936, when Abraham Bredius abandoned his earlier position and omitted the panel from his catalogue of Rembrandt's paintings.[4] No scholar subsequently challenged this sidelining of the painting until Ernst van de Wetering's reassessments in 2005 and 2006, subsequent to the conservation of the painting by Martin Bijl in 2003–5.[5]

Van de Wetering initially focused his discussion on the physical adjustment of the panel and later overpainting that had transformed this head study into a formal portrait. Aside from the overpainting of the color, additions had been made to the

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. *Study of a Woman in a White Cap*, RR-101, before restoration (photograph courtesy of Martin Bijl)



Fig 2. Philips Koninck, *The Young Seamstress*, 1671, oil on canvas, 25.5 × 20 cm, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, inv. 628



Fig 3. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of the Mennonite Preacher Cornelis Claesz Anslo and His Wife Aeltje Gerritsdr Schouten*, 1641, oil on canvas, 176.5 × 206.9 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, inv. 828L

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panel's original arched upper corners to create a rectangular format conventional for portraits.[6] The detail of the ear iron is further evidence of the informal nature of this work; indeed, the only other instance of its exposure in a Dutch painting is in a genre scene by Rembrandt's follower Philips Koninck **(fig 2)**. The similarity of the presentation of this feature suggests that Koninck followed Rembrandt's painting as a model, and thus may have seen it in Rembrandt's studio.

Although the conservation treatment revealed that areas of the face had been overcleaned, Van der Wetering pointed to the remarkably strong passages in the cap, ear and ear iron, as well as in the cheek and jaw, as exemplary of Rembrandt's unique ability to model forms by using a combination of loose and rhythmic paint handling. The relative softness of the shaded parts of the face, Van der Wetering rightly argued, was consistent with Rembrandt's approach to such study heads.

Rembrandt's interest in rendering this woman's face in indirect light may relate to an artistic challenge he was facing around 1640 in planning his double portrait of Cornelis Claesz Anslo and his wife of 1641 **(fig 3)**. The interaction of these two conversing figures required that one face would be cast in shadow—in this case, the man's—while the other was lit. In both works Rembrandt sought to balance a convincing rendering of the effect of strong light with a wide range of modulated shadows and reflected light. These latter effects are particularly evident in *Study of a Woman in a White Cap* in the middle tones of reflected light on the nose, cheeks, chin and forehead.

Dendrochronological analysis of the oak panel support relates this painting to three other works from Rembrandt's workshop, each of which was painted on a panel from the same tree.[7] These comprise the authentic *Self-Portrait* of 1633,[8] *Portrait of a Man* (formerly identified as Willem Burggraeff), likely not autograph,[9] and a landscape of around 1640 in the Wallace Collection, certainly by a pupil.[10] Van de Wetering has argued that the Leiden Collection painting similarly dates to around 1640. He notes not only its connection to the Berlin double portrait but also to a cluster of other works painted at this time that likewise demonstrate a combination of loose and regular handling, such as *Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl*,[11] *Hunter with a Dead Bittern*,[12] and *Landscape with a Stone Bridge*.[13]

In each of these other works of about 1640, Rembrandt extended his range of style and subject matter beyond conventional pictorial types. In the same experimental spirit he made the cap, the ear iron, and the woman's cheek the focal points of this portrait-like study, defining them with solidity and brilliance only he commanded. While this painting served Rembrandt primarily as a study, and perhaps also as a teaching demonstration of an evocative lighting scenario, he also seized the chance to suggest his subject's inner fortitude in her unfazed, slightly humored expression. It is

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also possible that this powerful image served as a demonstration to a prospective portrait client of the effective presentation of a head with the face in shadow. All of these considerations indicate the significance of *Study of a Woman in a White Cap* for Rembrandt and his oeuvre. This compelling image is also of great significance for the Leiden Collection, for it is the first painting by Rembrandt to enter this collection.

- David de Witt, 2017

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Endnotes

1. See John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish, and French Painters,* 9 vols. (London, 1829–42), 7: 172, no. 540.
2. For Hofstede de Groot's opinion, see Cornelis Hofsetede 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, 6: 328, no. 690, 8 vols. (London, 1907–28); originally published as *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten höllandischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts,* 10 vols. (Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28), 6: 328, no. 690. Those of Friedländer, Voss, and Bredius were recorded in undated expertises on the backs of photographs of the work.
3. See Wilhelm R. Valentiner, *Rembrandt: Wiedergefundene Gemälde (1910–1920) in 120 Abbildungen* (Stuttgart, 1921), xvi, 13, no. 13; 2nd ed. (Stuttgart, 1923), xxiv, 54, no. 59; Wilhelm, R. Valentiner, *The Thirteenth Loan Exhibition of Old Masters: Paintings by Rembrandt* (Exh. cat. Detroit Institute of Arts) (Detroit, 1930), no. 40; and Wilhelm R. Valentiner, *Rembrandt Paintings in America* (New York, 1931), no. 92.
4. Abraham Bredius, *The Paintings of Rembrandt* (London, 1936).
5. See Ernst van de Wetering et al., "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), 186–96, 304 no. 32.
6. The following discussion draws primarily on Ernst van de Wetering, "Rembrandt's Oil Studies: New Light on an Old Problem," in *Rembrandt: Quest of a Genius* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (Zwolle, 2006), 186–96.
7. Report by Peter Klein of 3 March 2004.
8. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait*, 1633, oil on panel, 58 x 45 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. 1745 (Josua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 2: *1631–1634,* Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project [The Hague, 1986], A 72).
9. Studio of Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of a Man (formerly identified as Willem Burggraeff)*, around 1633, 67.5 × 52.3 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden, inv. 1557 (Abraham Bredius and Horst Gerson, *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the Paintings* [London, 1969], 562, no.175; Josua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 2: *1631–1634,* Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project [The Hague, 1986], C 77.
10. Unknown artist, *Landscape*, around 1640, oil on panel, 46 × 64 cm, Wallace Collection, London, inv. P229 (Josua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 3: *1635–1642,* Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project [The Hague, 1989], C 119).

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11. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl*, around 1639, oil on panel, 134 × 144.8 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. SK-A-3981 (Josua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 3: *1635–1642,* Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project [The Hague, 1989], A 134).
12. Rembrandt van Rijn, *A Hunter with a Dead Bittern*, 1639, oil on panel, 120.7 × 88.3 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden, inv. 1561 (Josua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 3: *1635–1642,* Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project [The Hague, 1989], A 133).
13. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Landscape with a Stone Bridge*, around 1639, oil on panel, 29.5 × 42.5 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. SK-A-1935 (Josua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 3: *1635–1642,* Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project [The Hague, 1989], A 136).

Provenance

- Fürst Wenzel Anton Kaunitz-Rietburg (1711–94), Kaunitz Stadtpaleis, Dorotheergasse, Vienna; by descent to his nephew Furst Aloys Kaunitz (his sale, Artaria & Co., Vienna, 13 March 1820, no. 138 [for 250 florins to John Smith, London]).
- George John Warren Vernon, 5th Baron Vernon (1803–66), Sudbury Hall, Derby (sale, London, Christie's, 15–16 April 1831, no. 13 [unsold, 63 guineas].
- Watson, Sandford Manor, Woodley, England, by 1921.
- Eldridge R. Johnson (d. 14 November 1945), Moorestown, New Jersey, by 1930; by descent in the family [Newhouse Galleries, New York].
- Howard Walsh and Mary D. Fleming Walsh, Fort Worth, Texas, 1971; by descent.
- (Sale, Sotheby's, New York, 26 January 2006, no. 10 [Otto Naumann Ltd., New York]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

Exhibition History

- Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts, "Loan Exhibition of Paintings by Rembrandt," 2–31 May 1930, no. 40 [lent by Mr. Eldridge R. Johnson, Moorestown, New Jersey].
- Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis, "Rembrandts olieverfstudies: Nieuw licht op een oud probleem," 22 September–4 December 2005 [no number, lent by the Walsh Art Trust].
- 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. 32 [lent by the

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present owner].

- Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis, 2006–2008, on loan with the permanent collection [lent by the present owner].
- Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, “From the Private Collections of Texas: European Art, Ancient to Modern,” 22 November 2009–21 March 2010, no. 25 [lent by the present owner].
- Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis, on loan with the permanent collection, April–June 2010 [lent by the present owner].
- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, June 2010–March 2011 [lent by the present owner].
- Tokyo, National Museum of Western Art, “Rembrandt: The Quest for Chiaroscuro,” 12 March–12 June 2011; Nagoya, Nagoya City Art Museum, 25 June–4 September 2011, no. 100 [lent by the present owner].
- Raleigh, North Carolina Museum of Art, “Rembrandt in America: Collecting and Connoisseurship,” 30 October 2011–22 January 2012; Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Art, 19 February–28 May 2012; Minneapolis, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 24 June–16 September 2012, no. 26 [lent by the present owner].
- Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, 24 June 2013–June 2016 [lent by the present owner].
- Paris, Museé 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 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].
- 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].
- Antwerp, Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp, “Turning Heads: Bruegel, Rubens and Rembrandt,” 20 October 2023–24 January 2024; Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland, 24 February–26 May 2024, no. 111 [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].

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- 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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Versions
Versions and Copies

1. After Rembrandt, *Woman in a White Cap*, 50 x 35 cm, with arched top, location unknown (previously or still in a private collection in Utrecht, 1954).
2. After Rembrandt, *Woman in a White Cap*, oil on panel, 24 x 19 cm, location unknown (previously or still in the collection of L. Hofmann, Landshut, Bavaria, 1958).
3. After Rembrandt, *Woman in a White Cap*, oil on canvas, 53 x 44 cm, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.
4. After Rembrandt, *Woman in a White Cap*, location unknown (with Neumans, Paris, 1936).
5. After Rembrandt, *Woman in a White Cap*, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in., location unknown.
6. After Rembrandt, *Woman in a White Cap*, with arched top, location unknown (previously or still in the Ferrari Collection, Bergamo).

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Technical Summary

The support is a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular Eastern Baltic oak with rounded upper corners.[1] The 9.5 cm-wide center section of the upper panel edge is cut horizontally and does not form a true arch as does the period copy from a Utrecht private collection, which suggests the center of the upper panel edge has been trimmed approximately 3 cm in height.[2] The panel has no bevels and has been thinned.

Triangular wood additions square off the rounded upper corners, and narrow vertical wood additions along the left and right edges widen the format.[3] The painted composition has been extended onto the four additions, and narrow unpainted shims have been glued to the left, right, and upper edges for framing purposes. The entire composite panel has been marouflaged to a 0.6 cm-thick hardwood board with a 0.1 cm-thick vertically grained oak veneer backing. Two auction house labels have been applied to the reverse, but there are no wax seals, import stamps, stencils or panel maker's marks.

According to the January 2006 Sotheby's sale catalogue entry for this lot, a rectangular panel addition, approx. 7 cm high, had been previously adhered along the entire width of the lower edge. The composition had been extended onto this addition and an eighteenth-century stenciled cypher of Furst Wenzel Anton Kaunitz (1711–94), one of the principal figures of the Austrian Enlightenment, had been applied to the lower right corner. This addition was removed during the painting's restoration in 2002–5. Although it was apparently included as part of the lot when the painting was sold, its location is now unknown.[4]

Approximately 3 cm is missing from the original arched portion of upper edge and approximately 7 cm is missing from the lower edge. A diagram depicting the addition removed during restoration in 2002–5 is available in The Leiden Collection archive files.

Peter Klein's 2004 dendrochronology report states that "die Anstuckung der Eichenholztafel," presumably referring to the oak addition removed from the lower edge, stems from southern Germany and has an earliest fell date of 1639 with an earliest use date of 1641. However, according to Klein a more plausible fell date would be 1645, 1649, or 1654 plus x, with a more likely first use date of 1651 or after.[5]

A light, warm-colored, thinly and evenly applied ground shows through the thinly and smoothly applied passages of paint along the background, fur lining, and dark garment. The flesh tones of the figure's face, the gray hair, and the white cap have been applied in a thick paste with low brushmarkings and low impasto.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers and no compositional changes were revealed; however, restorations along the profile of the figure's face are visible.

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

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1. The characterization of the wood is based on dendrochronology reports by Peter Klein and Ian Tyers.
2. The curves of the two upper corners were extended on a Mylar template and the distance between the midpoint of the arch formed and the horizontal panel edge was measured. Unfortunately, the narrow shim glued to the edge makes it impossible to determine if the upper edge is in fact original and, if not, how or when it may have been cut.
3. Left addition is 2 cm wide; right addition is 0.5 cm wide.
4. It appears this addition may have been inadvertently left behind at Sotheby's when the lot was purchased.
5. It is not entirely clear why this early oak addition was removed and not simply framed out, or why the narrow wood shim glued to the upper panel edge was not removed and dendrochronology attempted on the upper endgrain instead.

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