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CHRONOLOGICAL PUZZLE IN ELEVEN STATES, ONE PAINTING AND TWO BLACK CHALK DRAWINGS

I am referring to the eleven states of the etched Self-portrait in a soft hat and embroidered cloak (B 7; next page, bottom left), the oval Self-portrait (Br. 17; Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum, right) and the two proofs of the etching completed in black chalk, one of which is at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (not in Benesch) and the other at the British Museum in London (Ben. 57; both next page, top right and left, respectively).

Judging by the evidence of the signature types and dates on the various states of the etching ("RHL 1631," then "Rembrandt.f"), and as the inscriptions on the drawings indicate, the genesis of B 7 probably spanned a time period between late 1631 and mid- to late 1633. This places it at the end of Rembrandt's most intensive period of etching and self-portraiture (mostly in this medium), and marks a culmination in self-absorption.

The young Rembrandt had last been seen in paint at some time in 1631 masquerading as an oriental potentate with a fondness for large poodles (Br. 16, Petit-Palais, Paris; see entries 36 and 42). His next foray into painterly self-promotion, apparently done on the threshold of his relocation to Amsterdam, took him out of his solipsistic fantasies long enough to plant him squarely in the vestimentary realities of the day: the Glasgow Self-portrait (top, right), which the artist signed "RHL-van Rijn" and dated 1632.

The etched series of the B 7 Self-portrait begins with the head. Four states alone are devoted to his moon face (half-moon, with the shading) and fluffy locks crowned with the same broad-brimmed affair that he sports in Glasgow, but inflected into a more jaunty tilt (bottom, right). Then comes the fifth state, completing the head with an upper body wrapped in the folds of a bizarre cloak out of which protrudes a clenched, gloved hand. It is graced at the top left with the classic monogramme and a date, "RHL 1631."





The drawings use proofs of the etched head as their starting point; the second state for the London drawing (left), and the fourth state for the Paris drawing (right). Both drawings feature variations of the ruff collar and a less elaborately cloaked upper body (turned at different angles); only the London drawing shows a gloved(?) hand held against the chest. Both drawings bear nearly identical inscriptions: AET. 27 (corrected to 24 in both cases), the date 1631, and the signature "Rembrandt." On the Paris drawing the date is linked to the signature with the abbreviation "f.", while on the London drawing, they are separated into a date reading "Anno .1631." and a cursive signature that looks more like an inscribed name. Finally, the London drawing has an arch shown in perspective at the top, while the Paris drawing presents an idealized space.



This brings us to what C. Perry Chapman says is the source and inspiration for this particular self-portrait: the meticulous 1630 engraving by Paulus Pontius of a Rubens Self-portrait then hanging in the same royal English collection as one of Rembrandt's own early self-portraits. Rubens had portrayed himself as a dignified cloaked-and-hatted gentleman (right) and Rembrandt followed suit—but only in the etched version.



The painted version in Glasgow, which one would assume derives logically from the combined drawings—assuming the inscribed dates are reliable—shows Rembrandt in the guise of one of his *burgerlijk* sitters, impeccably dressed, but with a tad more chiaroscuro. It is cut in an oval format and signed/dated "RHL-van Rijn/1632." So far so good.



Meanwhile, work on the etching continued: a brocade pattern adorns the cloak, the hair is lengthened, contrasts are adjusted, details added to the collar, hatching creeps into the picture, which darkens apace. By the tenth state, there was little left to do but add another signature, the original one (still slightly visible) having been covered by hatching; this time it's "Rembrandt.f" without a date at the top right. For the eleventh and last state, considered to be apocryphal, someone had the good idea of burnishing the background away, leaving only a hint of cast shadow, but obliterating the signature.

This was a hypothetical reconstitution of the possible sequence of states and versions, a task which is further complicated by the various inscriptions and signatures, especially on the two mixed-media drawings: Rembrandt was 24 in 1631, but not yet "Rembrandt," which he became in 1633, when he was indeed 27. But the dates clearly read "1631." It is as if he needed to bridge the breakthrough year 1632 backwards, to establish a continuity between Leiden and Amsterdam, between the self before and the self after his transformation from a set of initials to a first name, and then to a name of his own making.



There is never anything definitive about Rembrandt's self-portraiture: his next etched self-portrait in 1633 (B 17, see entry 42) depicts him as an even better candidate for poodle look-alike than in 1631 (Br. 16, entry 36), while the two oval self-portraits in the Louvre (Br. 18 and 19, left and right) display a sudden flush of authority. His self-portraiture transcends the usual function of portraiture, which is to fix identity, not to re-fashion it or to try different ones out for size. There is something more experimental and experiential in Rembrandt's method, something that could illustrate what the psychoanalyst C. G. Jung termed the "circumambulation of the self" necessary for psychological integration. This spiraling return to his own image, *both as evidence and source of self*, is nowhere better symbolized than in the one form that remained constant in his signature: the broad loop of the "R" that curves back to an inner center before re-emerging in one determined step forward (see entries 6, 44 and 50).



Rembrandt's haphazard, but insistent *need* to have things in writing in the years bracketing his first full year in Amsterdam, 1632, is evidenced not just by his design of a definitive signature, but by the retro-signing (and possibly over-signing) of his works, by the frequent representation of paper or posters with writing (usually illegible) in his paintings, and by unusual or dated inscriptions such as the ones on the drawings discussed above (see also entry 42). This trend culminated in the precisely dated silverpoint portrait of Saskia from June 8, 1633, which is unsigned, as if the presence of a significant other suddenly neutralized the need to assert his own presence.



ADDENDUM



Amazingly, no matter how many Rembrandts are shunted into the relative oblivion of his studio, workshop or circle, more Rembrandts keep popping out of the woodwork.

One of the most interesting cases is a Self-portrait that bears the signature "Rembrandt" and the date "1632." It was proclaimed an autograph work by Ernst van de Wetering, head of the R.R.P., in 1997. This was nothing less than a sensation. For one thing, it is one of the rare paintings bearing a signature of the "Rembrandt" type, and may even be the very first painting that Rembrandt signed with his first name. Not only that, but the pose and accoutrement have a striking similarity to those in the works—etchings and the 2 etching/drawings—discussed above, which means that this painting is part of the puzzle.

But, to quote the phrasing of the R.R.P in another context, "there are serious objections to the Rembrandt attribution." For one thing, although the likeness is very good—if a bit older-looking—the painting was much reworked and presents very problematic passages: the hand, the hat, the ruff collar. One wonders how Rembrandt, who was painting practically nothing but portraits in 1632, would have taken the trouble to produce and sign such a weak picture—on a panel measuring only 12.8 x 16.3 cm! Until the new head of the R.R.P. got into the act, this painting was unanimously rejected by Rembrandt scholars (including the first R.R.P. team). I laughed when I first saw it (reproduced in color 1:1): I thought it was a hoax!

As far as the arguments used by Van de Wetering go, they read like a recipe for a near-perfect forgery. Instead of venturing further into the fray, I prefer citing Gary Schwartz's article: "After I win the game I'll tell you what the rules were, or A new Rembrandt from 1632" (1997), published on his website in 2005 (<http://www.garyschwartzarthistorian.nl>). In this article, you will learn what the impact of the R.R.P.'s decisions and revisions on family fortunes can be.

Whether by Rembrandt or one of his students—and if it is not a near-perfect forgery—this painting, and especially its signature, raise interesting questions. Was this Rembrandt's own idea of a joke?

