

This modest reference points to a painting at the Musée du Louvre that, until solidly proven otherwise, I will assume to be the work of Rembrandt. It has been my object of art-historical study, philosophical meditation and aesthetic delectation for over a quarter of a century.

Variouly titled *Philosophe en méditation*, *Meditating philosopher*, *Scholar* or *Old Man in an Interior with a Winding Stair*, it made its first documented appearance in Parisian auction catalogues in the 1730s and then the rounds of the great aristocratic collections before entering the Louvre in 1784. It is signed and dated "RHL- van Rijn 163*" at lower left in light-colored paint traced with a fine brush on a dark background (impossible to photograph). The asterisk here denotes a tiny glob of paint that cannot be made out as a numeral, but that, considering its size and placing, must be either a "0," a "1" or a "2." Because of the form of the signature, I assumed the date to be 1632 (see endnote).

Neither explicitly genre, nor exactly history painting, its closest iconographic relative is the Old Testament story of Tobit and Anna (here by Gerrit Dou) and more distantly the genre subject of the Alchemist, which often combines two figures, one consulting a book, the other stoking a fire: philosophers were usually not depicted in female company or in a kitchen. Painted on an oak panel measuring only 28 x 33 cm—about the size of a computer screen—it is a work of great pictorial intelligence and craftsmanship, a real "manifesto chiaroscuro" and one of young Rembrandt's seminal masterpieces.

My fascination with it began during my postgraduate years in Paris (1975-78) and led me to study it first via a homemade approach that combined art history, psychology and philosophy. I ended up devoting my entire career to its study, on the assumption that the workings of art (and art history) as a whole will be implicit in any of its elementary particles. It was my luck to have chosen this particular picture, my good fortune that it was painted by Rembrandt, and a further stroke of luck that it was painted around 1631-32, a key year in his life.



As it happened, it was disattributed in 1986 by the Rembrandt Research Project in volume II of its Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings 1632-34. Not knowing what else to do with it, the RRP relegated it to the limbo of Rembrandt's circle and dated it around 1632 or the late 1630s—the later the better, for only two Rembrandt pupils are known before 1632, Dou and Jouderville. Since the RRP produces no new objective or scientific evidence to support its case, its judgment must be regarded as a minority opinion.

The work of objecting to and rejecting the traditionally unanimous attribution to Rembrandt takes only a few lines (p. 642)—so few that you have to read between them. The real stakes for the RRP in this move can be deduced from the following quote on the same page(with my underlining): "In the later part of the 18th century the painting enjoyed a great reputation in France as '*Le philosophe en contemplation*' and it helped to determine the image of Rembrandt's work to an unwarranted extent."

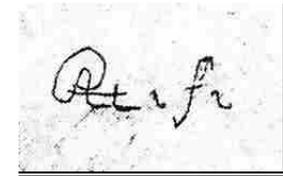
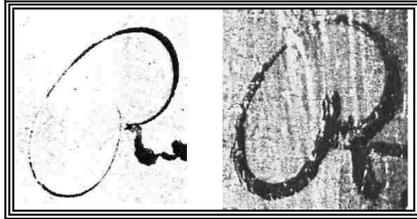
A critical reading of the RRP's article (under C 51) and of the Corpus in general was enough to induce doubts about their doubts, and to suggest that their method may have run amok. Chief Curator for Flemish and Netherlandish Painting at the Louvre, Jacques Foucart (right), asked me to write an article for the *Revue du Louvre*. I embarked on a new, more "scientific" tack, examining the painting out of the frame and in good lighting (in sunlight, at the restoration workshop, and finally in the laboratory), and examining as many other paintings from the years 1625-35 as I could get my hands on or see.

Since the objective information given by the signature and date inscribed on the painting was what was being called into question, I also began studying the issue of the signatures—a quixotic task (see entries 20, 21 and 50). That was when I started making interesting discoveries, or should I say "seeing things." Things like letters of the alphabet in a dead man's navel from 1632 (see entry 51), and the shape of Rembrandt's initial in the painting referred to here as Br. 431 and presumably *signed* in 1632—the year in which he devoted the most attention to his name and signature.



Indeed, the letter "R" drawn in Rembrandt's cursive style arches very neatly to encompass the composition of Br. 431 in a grand curve that is resolved in the gesture of the woman tending the fire (compare with penned and painted signatures from 1631, left). The curved form that Rembrandt gave to the "R" in his monogram as early as 1629 is rare among painters' monograms and initials (see entry 44). In addition to being aesthetically pleasing, it has the obvious advantage of being traceable in a single gesture. Rembrandt's initial stem, which is usually done vertically and straight ("R"), is curved at the bottom and prolonged clockwise by a loop that sometimes curls into a smaller inner loop before "emerging" as the end stroke. The whole defines a roughly centered space with an inside and an outside. That Rembrandt had a detailed awareness of the spatial design and form of his signatures can also be seen in the fact that he clearly separated the different parts of the inscriptions with dots or a wavy dash, and distinguished between the "R" of "Rembrandt" and that of "van Rijn" (see entries 50 and 51).

It made sense to me that the painting in which Rembrandt achieved the best integration of figures in an interior—domestic—setting, Br. 431, should also bear the stamp recapitulating his identity. It also fits in with Rembrandt's lifelong concern to create unified compositions. This "R" can be read as a unitive symbol of the painter's activity: creating a contemplative inner space mediated by the eye (the small central loop), connected to the outside by the hand and brush. Like the staircase, it connects what is visible and what is not visible (anymore): the doing of the thing. For the more imaginative, the "R" can even suggest the form of a palette or beret. It just happened to be Rembrandt's good fortune at birth to have been given the letter "R" to play with.





The question is not "how did Rembrandt get his "R" into the picture," but "how did he get his picture into the R?" And it can best be answered by considering the compositions that lead up to it and how the same patterns keep cropping up: the 1626 Jesus and the moneychangers (Br. 532, left), the 1626 Balaam and the Ass (Br. 487, right), the 1627-28 Hannah and Simeon (Br. 535, next page, top right), the 1628 Christ at Emmaus (Br. 539, top left), the 1628 Samson and Delilah (Br. 489, middle left), the 1629 Judas repenting (Br.-Gerson 539A, middle right) the 1630 Jeremiah (Br. 602, bottom left). All of these pictures are characterized by a play of oppositions, curves and countercurves, that create a continuity between the foreground and background figures and spaces in a spiral dynamic, often pivoting around a central vertical element formed by a cylindrical pillar or pier. Alternately, the composition will be given an arched form centered on a figure, often accentuated by a pillar again.



The composition of Br. 431 presents the same spatial complexity combining near and far spaces, but is devoid of emotional drama—unless Tobit's waiting for his son's return is to be considered one. All the drama is concentrated in the motif of the spiral staircase. The latter was simply formed by hollowing out one of those mighty pillars, which often had staircases winding around them, as in the Emmaus, Hannah, and Judas mentioned above (Gerrit Dou, his pupil from 1628-31, was to make a career out of miniature-monumental interiors with pillars and stairs). The predominance of circular forms has correspondences with the recurring scheme of a curving form or movement on the left side of certain compositions: the 1630 Jeremiah, the 1631 Christian scholar (right), the 1632 Anatomy Lesson (next page) the 1632 St. Jerome etching (bottom left), and even the 1634 Holy Family (Br. 544, bottom right).





Once he was able to evolve away from the traditional small, horizontal format for history paintings (compare his 1626 [Balaam and the Ass](#) with Peter Lastman's version), and with the help of chiaroscuro, Rembrandt created dynamic compositions with a spiral, radial, concentric design and a diagonal thrust, even adopting an arched format in certain paintings and etchings; the [St. Jerome](#) etching of 1632 being the best example in this medium (B 101, see entries 6 and 12). Thus the 1632 [Anatomy Lesson](#), compositionally speaking (here shown in the original version, without the figure on the far left), can also be seen as an update of his first critical success, the [Judas repenting](#) from 1629. This development was paralleled in his *tronies* and portraits, in which the head and shoulders provided a natural formal metaphor for the "R" (see entry 62), which fit in perfectly with the fashion for oval formats in the portraits of the 1630s.



This is not the place for a discussion of the popular and long-standing interpretation of the painting as representing a "philosopher in meditation," which explains its presence on so many websites nowadays. Suffice it to say that the spiral staircase and the highly effective formal synthesis (light/dark, curved/straight, motion/stillness, small/monumental) achieved by Rembrandt in this painting, together with its enigmatic and intimate atmosphere, are intuitively sensed by the beholder as a fitting symbol for the mind and intellectual activity (see Aldous Huxley, [Heaven and Hell](#), 1954). For the more archetypally inclined there is a wide range of symbolism to choose from, including the well-known taoist "Yin-Yang" and the astrological symbol for Rembrandt's birth sign, Cancer.





The wonderful staircase may well have been an exercise in domesticating the *figura serpentinata* (later called Line of Beauty by Hogarth), a very popular topic both among painters and calligraphers, especially since the late 16th century. Rembrandt, as we know, was a very well-writ young man.

Note: Despite the logic of the signature type, a date around 1630-31 for the Philosopher makes more sense both pictorially—old men appear very frequently in his work then—and personally: Rembrandt's father died in early 1630. The only work that identifies his father by name is a drawing (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, Ben. 56) that shows him practically in the same posture as the old man in Br. 431 (see entry 14). The signature type therefore dates the *signing* of the painting to 1632. The rounded form of the initial letter of "Rhijn" in the drawing is one of the few exceptions to the rule that Rembrandt distinguished between the initials of his first and last names. The unusual form of the patronymic, "van den Rhijn", can be seen as the result of a conflict between the documentary nature of the inscription and a signature, since Rembrandt's signature at the time was a monogram: with an R followed by an H. He began by writing his father's name in block letters probably to distinguish the inscription from a signature. A further argument for its authenticity is the fact that we have five pen and ink signatures from 1630-31 (see entry 44), and all are written in a two-line format, as here.



ADDENDUM

Sometime life meets me more than halfway. I suggested above that the spiral staircase in Br. 431 was invented by the "hollowing out" of a pillar of the kind that often appeared in Rembrandt's early work. These pictures, recently taken at the new entrance hall to the Louvre (2005), show a more modern version of how this can be done.

