

ACT I: FORENSICS

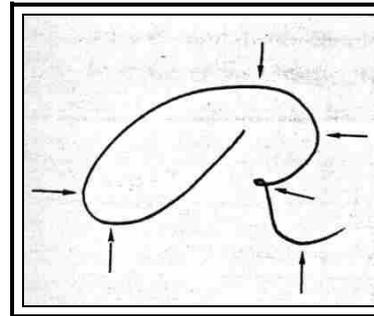
Serious students of Rembrandt signatures have an easy job in one respect: they can ignore all the literature on this subject prior to the 1980s, should they happen to find any. I am not only referring to problems of authentication, but also to information about the signatures: they are usually mentioned only in passing and often erroneously described, the classic error being in not keeping the “Rembrant” and “Rembrandt” types distinct. With the publication of the first three volumes of the Rembrandt Research Project’s Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings this field of study has been officially inaugurated: descriptions of each signature and, where possible, photographs are provided, permitting readers to see for themselves. Soon after, the first articles on this topic began to appear. I will comment on two of them published in the acts of the 28th International Art History Congress held in Berlin in 1992.

The first article resulted from a cooperation between the RRP and a team of forensic handwriting experts at the Dutch Ministry of Justice: H.J.J. Hardy, W. Froentjes and R. ter Kuile-Haller: “A Comparative Analysis of Rembrandt Signatures.” They had already published their findings separately in *Oud Holland* in 1991 (vol. 105, no. 3, pp. 185-204), and the new article was an expanded version of its English summary (which has lost much of its clarity in the process).

The task they undertook involved applying forensic techniques of handwriting analysis to *painted* signatures—assuming this was valid at all. They tested this by having people, including painters, “copy” (i.e. forge) Rembrandt’s signature with a brush. Unfortunately they give no details of this highly interesting experiment. A more conclusive—and objective—test would have been to see how consistent artists really are in reproducing their own

signatures over time. On my own initiative, I once asked a restorer friend to reproduce a Rembrandt monogram: she ended up refusing, citing an unwritten code of ethics. Which reminds me of art forger David Stein’s claim that signatures are the easiest part of the painting to “copy” (see entry 30). This is flatly disproved by the forensic handwriting experts’ own drawing of the “R.”

The next step involved clearing the greatest hurdle: which painted signature(s) can be considered 100% autograph? The correct answer is: *not a single one*. Not even



the ones allegedly done “wet in wet” (before the paint had dried). A signature is a highly vulnerable film of paint that can easily be tampered with: a lot can happen in the course of 300 years and not all restorers are as skilled or as scrupulous as my friend. In comparison, it is nearly impossible to tamper with handwritten signatures on authentic, old legal documents.

The forensic experts went on to select a group of eleven “reference” signatures out of a sample of 73 photographs from the original 123 provided by the RRP. They say they did *not* know the status of the paintings from which they came. This sample of “Rembrandt” signatures done over a span of ten years, between 1632 and 1642, was chosen “on the grounds that the writer’s hand would be reasonably consistent over a relatively short period of time.” Oddly enough, a group of 15 “RHL-van Rijn” signatures was considered “insufficient” although this form was used *only* in 1632 (see entry 50). One would expect a painter’s hand to be even more consistent during a period of one year and the chance of forgery to be reduced because of the rarity of the signature type. The signature on the

Anatomy lesson (1632), although of the "Rembrant"[sic] type, was also considered and qualified as "probably not authentic." This is also strange because in 1632 Rembrandt had only just begun signing with his first name: the "b" had a particular form then that he changed in 1633 (see entries 12 and 36). For its part, the RRP judged this oft-restored signature as probably authentic.

Finally, I am unable to explain what was effectively proven because the language of the paper is sometimes unclear. What is the real percentage of reliability when every step of the process is posited in terms of assumptions and probability? Their 88%, or, as the experts like to say, "almost 90%" reliability sounds uncritical and self-promoting. Only in the *Oud Holland* article do we learn that there were 11 controversial opinions: "8 among the 47 authentic paintings and 3 among the non-authentic ones." I quote their explanation:

"The fact that the handwriting experts reject more signatures on authentic paintings and accept more in the case of unauthentic ones than the art historian is due to the two disciplines' different kinds of knowledge about the relationship between signature and painting" (p. 204).

As far as I know, this knowledge has yet to be gained. It must be assumed that forensic experts, like artists, have their bad days (and forgers their good ones).

I have heard that the collaboration between the two research teams ended on a sour note. One reason may have been that the handwriting experts discovered two more instances of an *authentic* signature on a painting considered unauthentic, thus raising the total of pupils' works signed by Rembrandt himself from a negligible *one* to a whopping, albeit soft-pedalled *three* (see entries 8 and 24). This might explain such statements as the following (emphasis mine):

"Rembrandt's pupils may also have copied the master's signature quite legitimately, according to a hypothesis put forward by Bruyn et al [the RRP], who suggest that they may have been allowed to sign their own work with Rembrandt's

signature. To confuse matters further, Rembrandt is also widely believed to have put his own name to studio work."

To show how awesome the task of evaluating Rembrandt's signatures can be, here are nine guaranteed *autograph* pen-and-ink signatures from the years 1634-65.* The fragments are intended to highlight the variety in the shape of the initial R. Below is his 16-year-old son Titus' signature in 1657. The question is: how well can one forge one's own signature? Another question is: how conscious is one in the process?

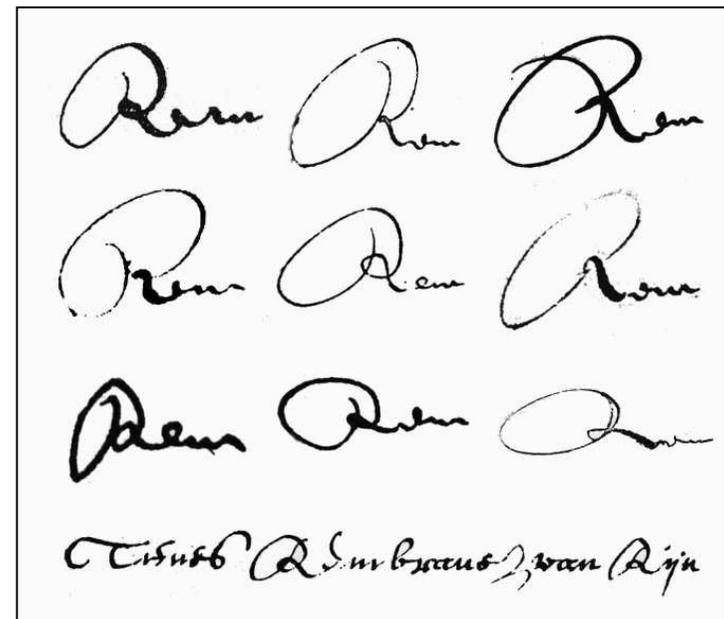


table: jmc

* Here are the references to Strauss/van der Meulen's *Rembrandt Documents* (1979): 1634/2, 1635/5, 1634/6, 1631/5, 1639/5, 1640/7, 1653/17, 1656/19, 1665/20); for Titus, 1657/5.