

ACT II: ITALICS

The second article (see entry 20) is promisingly titled Rembrandt [fecit]. The Italic Signature and the Commodification of Artistic Identity and is signed Ann Jensen Adams. As the title indicates, it is divided into two parts, the first involving the practice of placing marks on handmade products in general, and the second Rembrandt's use of a specific style in marking his products in particular.

The first part is a discussion, the gist of which is that, on the liberalized marketplace in 17th-century Holland, the painter's mark no longer guaranteed material, but immaterial (i.e. aesthetic) qualities or values instead. Guild rules varied from city to city, but generally did not require a mark or signature, yet, in Utrecht, for example, students could not sign works done in the master's studio with their own names, much less paint in a different style. As far as we know, nothing prevented Rembrandt from signing student work or a student from appending the authorized signature on his own work. This relativizes the concept of authenticity, but people were paying only a few guilders for a Rembrandt-type painting back then, while today, they are fetching the highest returns in human history, prices in tens of millions of dollars. This makes the question of authenticity not just absolute, but critical, and it doesn't make things any clearer to say that our concern with authenticity might be anachronistic, as the RRP advanced. The question is: authentication—what for?

Well for the sake of commodification, of course. But commodification is just one side of the coin, the material one. The other side is no less gratuitous for being immaterial, because it also involves the fetishization of things like individuality and artistic identity.

The guild system as a whole was less concerned with giving credit than with controlling trades and markets, and so the

appearance of full-name signatures replacing monogrammed logos heralded a revolution in values that stressed the power of the individual over and against that of traditional institutions; not just the individual artist, but also his individual buyer. And it worked, because there were not just economic and aesthetic forces at play, but also philosophical and psychological ones. This cultural paradigm shift culminated in the 20th century in the successive phenomena of the retiring artist in spite of himself à-la-Marcel Duchamp—for the highbrows, i.e. expensive (see entry 72)—and the spectacular, but anonymous urban graffiti artist—for the lowbrows, i.e. free of charge (see entry 54).



But I am straying from the article. The second part involves the social and cultural information contained in the script types that

Rembrandt used in his definitive signature (on his artwork). Specifically, he used rounded Italics for all the letters except for the "b," which he consistently gave a cursive Gothic form called (Dutch) *Civilité* by Adams. In this way, Rembrandt displayed his knowledge of calligraphic script styles; that is, his humanistic education, as well as his rugged individuality in going cursive.

This is not much, but it is a start on the way to seeing simple forms as media for culturally encoded or personally formulated meaning. Adams, however, does not tell us how the marketplace really functioned, but makes assumptions about it that culminate in two questionable statements about how artists "exploited" the new system. And she does not tell us what "artistic identity" involved. As for the word "commodification," my Webster's 10th dates its first use to 1982 and defines the verb form in this way: "to turn (as an intrinsic value or a work of art) into a commodity." A commodity is "an economic good." Does that help?

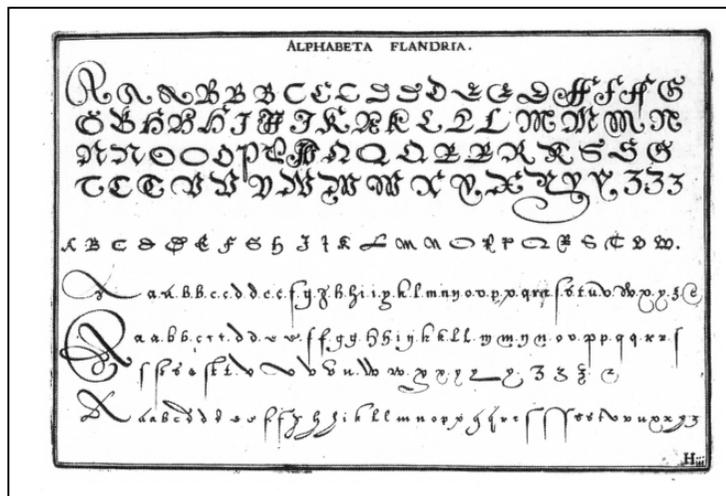
At this point I would quote Adams' concluding remarks:

“To return to the question posed at the beginning of this paper, if Rembrandt’s signature and style could be copied by students, what of the individual does the signature sign? In much the same way that the gold- and silversmith’s mark commodified materials in the traditional system, it signs the individual behind the product, self-consciously commodifying an artistic identity—by giving it a name—and was thus as much of a player in the creation of aesthetic value as the material object on which it was located” (emphasis mine, p. 587).

The underlined formulations suggest an academic *impersonality* that is incongruous and somewhat in contradiction to the subjects being considered: art and identity, which ultimately involves the ego. I find it odd that the complexity of a painting and the meaning of a signature can be reduced to purely aesthetic values; especially when the whole thing is supposed to boil down to commodification, that is, economics. It is as if painters painted paintings—and their clients bought them—solely for aesthetic or economic reasons. What is aesthetic about individuality? The question posed by Ann J. Adams at the beginning of her paper was “...how personal was the signature in 17th-century Holland?” I would suggest that this question cannot be answered by an impersonal discourse that does not clarify *or* indulge more openly in its own philosophical and psychological biases.

PS:

Although there is a certain—pardon the expression—bitchiness to this entry, I cannot resolve myself to delete it. I feel I've got hold of a loose thread that, if followed or pulled on, might lead me out of a labyrinth or help me find the structure of a certain fabric. At stake is the art-historical discussion of the awareness of self in the 17th century. What A.J. Adams does is to show how Rembrandt's signature partook of the cultural meanings governing script and print styles in 17th-century Holland in a general way. What she does not show is what his signature expresses about his personality or the creative self. Maybe this would require help from colleagues in the Department of Psychology. Of course, retrospective psychological interpretations are a risky business, but it might be enough to look for the traces or effects of psychological processes in works of art.



Opposite: a plate of Gothic Netherlandish scripts printed by Theodor de Bry in 1596 in Frankfurt