

**C 78 – an oversight**

Also known as Br. 196 (Hermitage Museum), this portrait of a dashing Amsterdamer blade, although relegated to the limbo of studio works (the "C" category) by the RRP, has earned a belated place of honor in the rogues' gallery of Rembrandt scholarship because of its signature. This otherwise innocuous signature, "Rembrandt.f.1634," happens to be the one and only signature recognized together by the RRP and the forensic handwriting experts of the Dutch Ministry of Justice as having the highest probability of having been appended by the hand of the self-same master: that would make it an autograph signature on a non-autograph painting.

The fact that such a signature exists raises the spectre of Rembrandt's having perhaps recidivated. The handwriting experts, using all due caution, have advanced two more signatures of this type, while the RRP successfully swept another one under the rug (Br. 148, alias C 24, see entries 8 and 20). The question is: did Rembrandt forge his own signature as often, more often or less often than his students did? The image of an authoritative and proprietary Rembrandt signing studio works—as guild regulations permitted—is much more plausible than that of an aloof Rembrandt who delegated this very personal and decisive gesture to the hands of less competent others. The latter Rembrandt is consistent with the RRP's "surprising" observation that all autograph works ("A" category) were done entirely by his hand; there being only one example of a collaborative effort (C 81).

The most remarkable thing about the C 78 affair is that the significance of this tell-tale signature is buried in a footnote to the general discussion of the signatures in volume II of the Corpus (n. 14, p. 105). In the body of their article on the portrait itself, apart from a descriptive note, there is no mention whatsoever of the signature! The descriptive note reads as follows:

"In dark, probably a very dark brown, paint on the right in the background alongside the shoulder "Rembrandt.ft.1634". Makes the impression of having been written firmly and coherently."

Was this an oversight?

