

WHAT THE CORPUS SAYS

I mean the Rembrandt Research Project's Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings, of course. This project is ironically prefigured in Rembrandt's famous 1632 portrait of a group of self-styled scientists hovering above the luminous *corpus* of a freshly-executed petty thief from Leiden, marked, as we have seen (or not), with the artist's trademark in the navel (see entry 51). This vision is not as far-fetched as it sounds, because the "corpse" that is being dissected by the Dutch team is in fact the catalogue of paintings assigned to Rembrandt published in 1935 by their countryman Dr. Abraham Bredius (his catalogue can be seen at the feet of the corpse). Thus, as in Rembrandt's painting, except for a symbolic cut, this corpus will remain forever whole—proof, if need be, that **@embran[d]t™** is just as much a product as a producer of art history.



The RRP's handling of the signatures warrants close consideration because it recapitulates the conundrum of their "undertaking" as a whole.

First, the title of their catalogue, A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings, turns a proper noun into an adjective, that is into a characteristic or quality. This quality is then extended—generously enough—to all of the paintings in the Corpus, whether they are considered autograph (category A), up in the air (category B) or non-autograph (category C), thus preserving Dr. Bredius' posthumous integrity and keeping **@embran[d]t™** a pure Dutch product. This shift in logical types, here from a class of one (a name) to a class of many, is what is known as pulling a fast one. But guess who started... This can have tragic consequences—"What's in a name?" asked Juliet (see entry 47)—or it can trigger an epiphany: "Good is a noun," concludes Robert Pirsig in his last novel Lila (1991). Fateful shifts

may be the stock in trade of the writer and artist, but they should be the bane of the scientist in pursuit of clarity.

Secondly, in its analysis of the paintings, the RRP liberally applies the concept of "pictorial handwriting" and "autograph" in connection with Rembrandt's brushwork. At the same time, they confess their lack of competence when it comes to evaluating the autograph nature of the painted signatures. *Is a signature really that more complex a feat of brushwork than a complete painting?*

Needless to say, without the name "Rembrandt," without the many "Rembrandt" signatures here, there and everywhere, without the thousands of books, articles and exhibitions with the "Rembrandt" trademark in their titles, none of this would ever have happened. Profitable fetishism aside, it is understandable that a certain skepticism should arise concerning these signatures. But there is more than skepticism in the Corpus; there is a sort of timidity, or an embarrassment of sorts, if not nervousness, irritation, inhibition, or a block. It is as if the occultation of the self required for scientific study permitted the scholar to be drawn into the orbit of prominent egos on the one hand, while eclipsing direct evidence of self on the other. And so, just when the RRP comes the closest to the graphic (in both senses of the word) evidence of Rembrandt's personality—his signature—they briskly wash their hands of the whole mess and conclude, with audible relief:

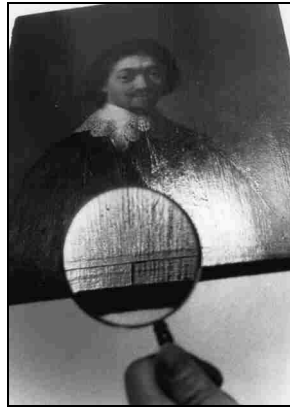


"But luckily paintings are more important than signatures."
(Vol. II, p. 56).

This is what is meant by taking a name in vain. And logically it had to happen when what started out as an honest attempt to deflate the "Rembrandt" myth turned into an unacknowledged quest to purify it to the hilt. You try telling the proud private collector or your colleague the

curator that his painting is *virtually* a Rembrandt. Scholars like to avoid stepping on egos, especially if they happen to be influential.

The fast one having been pulled at the start, everything is possible. In the first three volumes of the Corpus, the fate of the signatures parallels the fate of the paintings. All the paintings accepted as autograph are considered to be 100% by Rembrandt, who, in turn, seems not to have laid a brush on his students' work (well, maybe just once). Meanwhile, all of the signatures on the rejected paintings also happen to be rejected (with one exception not really worth mentioning; see entries 8 and 24). The RRP expressed genuine surprise at this



outcome. And well they might, for, by their own admission, the appending of the master's signature (or brush) on studio works, or the replication of his signature by a student, was accepted, if not standard practice in 17th-century studios, guild-regulated or not. That the RRP team also dismisses a goodly number of signatures on paintings accepted as autograph is no great feat in light of the short shrift they give to the signatures as a whole.

The circularity does not stop there. Quite openly, the RRP admits:

"In those cases where we voice our opinion that a signature is reliable, this is scarcely more than an impression—one that is, moreover, influenced by our assessment of the painting." (Vol. II, p. 99).

Note the psychologically, or, if you prefer, subjectively-tinged wording. The descriptions of the signatures are laced with such terms as "impression," "reliable," "confidence-inspiring," "trustworthy," while outright negative expressions are avoided. Will impressions never cease? The quick answer is: yes, when they fail to satisfy an obsession. And so we finally come to this:

"The important question here remains, whether our obsessions with problems of authenticity ought not to be regarded as anachronistic." (Vol. II, p. 60).

In this way the psychological baby is cast out with the nostalgic bathwater, causing a short-circuit just when it might have become luminously clear that the responsibility for these problems of paternity lies nowhere else than in the lap of those whom John C. Van Dyke back in 1923 called the Rembrandt "doctors" (see entry 69)*.



"Don't discover any more Rembrandts!" Cartoon by Albert Hahn, 1906

all B+W photos: jmc

*Gary Schwartz has drawn my attention to the fact that the appellation "Rembrandt doctors" was coined by Alfred von Wurzbach to spoof experts like Wilhelm von Bode who were awarded honorary doctorates on the occasion of the 1906 Rembrandt commemorative.