

MERDE

The French word for "shit." It was noticed by the British art historian Christopher Wright on a Georges de La Tour Fortune Teller of unknown provenance acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1960 for three million dollars. On the basis of this painted inscription (worked into the embroidery of a collar) and arguments of a stylistic and historical nature, Wright, a former student of Anthony Blunt at the Courtauld Institute, initially rejected the picture, all the while publishing it as authentic in the La Tour catalogue that he co-authored with Benedict Nicolson in 1974. In an equally enlightening and confusing book published ten years later (The Art of the Forger), Wright detailed his quixotic campaign to substantiate and gain recognition for his claims.

Although many scholars and curators at first refused to see this "MERDE," the author's perseverance and media pressure turned the tide to the point that the Met acknowledged the presence of the (apocryphal) inscription and duly "restored" it out of existence, yet without calling the picture's authenticity into question. Wright suspects that it was placed on the forgery by a vindictive French restorer with a wry sense of humor. The power of restorers to repair, improve or otherwise modify the pictorial surface behind the scenes, is rivalled only by the stalwart efforts of plastic surgeons in their own field and should neither be ignored, nor underestimated.

The resistance of orthodox art historians to unorthodox or unaccountable details in works of art is counterbalanced by the persistence of the hapless scholars who notice or "discover" them and the appeal they exert on the general public. Who determines what is visible in a painting and what was seen or not seen by the artist himself? Shall this be resolved by an appeal to cultural or to statistical analysis? Edmund Hillary could explain that he climbed Mt. Everest "because it was there." Who will stake their reputation on what others say is *not there*, be it an R-shaped navel or a **Rembrandt** painting?

The lore of subliminal and not-so-subliminal imagery or "imbeds" is as old as the imagination and, like overtones in music, may well be an integral part of the visual arts experience. Freud gave it a semblance of scientific recognition in his reading of Leonardo's Virgin and Child with St. Anne, and although art historians like Meyer Shapiro have since pointed out that the bird mentioned in Leonardo's childhood memory ("*nibbid*") was a type of hawk and not a vulture, they never called the veracity, or plausibility, of Leonardo's very bizarre account into question: *a bird putting its tail into his mouth as a baby and shaking it*. Art historians like texts because, for one thing, the word is their main conceptual tool and medium of expression, and for another, old texts are so scarce. Yet why should any text be granted credibility and authority simply because it is old?

Revelations of "subliminal" imagery or "latent" signatures (see entry 56) in Rembrandt's paintings and etchings are occasionally encountered in non-academic publications. The

most sensational instance I know of—apart from my omphalic "R" and graphological reading of Br. 431 (see entries 9, 11 and 51)—is the book Rembrandts within Rembrandts, written by Dr. Janoš Plesch in 1956, a Hungarian physician who claimed to see faces systematically embedded in the backgrounds of Rembrandt paintings. He explained their presence as a symptom of tertiary syphilis (hallucinations), a diagnosis that he confirmed by his observation of the gradual deterioration of Rembrandt's nose in his late self-portraits. Inevitably, it seems, the rational feeds on the irrational.

Below: Rembrandt's comment on the whole thing (called A Satire on art criticism, Ben. A 35, around 1644).

Note:

In the course of rewriting, I have learned that imbeds or insets have a modern name on the Web: "easter eggs." They are often laid by software programmers as hidden signatures or in various media just for the fun of it. In theory they can be found in any medium, past or present, but in order to be officially considered as easter eggs, they have to have been placed deliberately: www.eeggs.com.

Since rewriting this entry, I have also come across a book written by my former professor, Daniel Arasse, that deals with the question of details in paintings, especially details revealing the effects of the artist's self-awareness in his works: Le Détail: pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture, Flammarion, Paris 1992.



