

## REMBRANDT FT. 1631

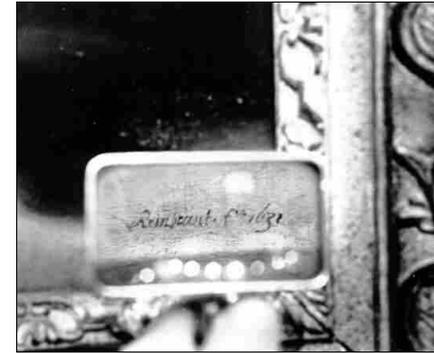
*Horribile dictu*, there at least two paintings with the signature "Rembrandt ft. 1631." These are the Old man reading in an interior in Stockholm (Br. 430) and the Portrait of the artist in an oriental costume with a poodle in Paris (Br. 16; see next page). The reader familiar with the fairly tidy evolution of Rembrandt's signature (entry 50) will immediately have noticed the discrepancy between this signature and this date. It is a 17th-century anachronism.

Or it could be an honest mistake; the work of a well-intentioned, but ill-informed, person who wanted to give credit where it was due. Or were the pictures signed at a later date—in 1632 or 1633—using the new first-name signature type but mentioning the actual date of execution? Or was it an oversight on Rembrandt's part? Or a very first try and false start with a radically new signature in 1631?

At least one antedated inscription is generally accepted as plausibly autograph, the "RHL-1628" on the Berlin Samson and Delilah (Br. 489). It is interpreted as an attempt on Rembrandt's part to rewrite history by establishing precedence over Lievens for a composition done when he was not yet using the "RHL" monogram in his paintings.

The picture at the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm of an old man reading in a vaulted interior (Br. 430), which I have not seen in the original, has all the formal and stylistic characteristics of a Rembrandt composition from 1631, and is closely related to the Paris Philosopher in meditation (so-called, Br. 431, see entry 11), which may also bear an antedated signature (see entry 6). The unusual placing of the window on the right in the Stockholm picture could be seen as a pictorial innovation or as evidence of Rembrandt's active involvement with etching at the time: the picture may have been intended for an engraving (it was later reproduced by Pieter de Bailliu). Whether this painting is actually from Rembrandt's hand or not (the RRP believes it is not), it is clearly based on a Rembrandt prototype, while the form of the signature—"Rembrandt ft. 1631"—is too rare to be an improvisation. But if it is an improvisation, *Bravo!*

The second painting, usually called Portrait of the artist in an oriental costume, is fast becoming a sentimental favorite of mine. It is the only self-portrait that shows the artist in full-length, or, to put it another way, with his head prolonged by his body. The signature



is also in full length, that is, Rembrandt prolonged his "R" with his full first name, which confirms my impression of the "R" also being the symbol of a head (see entry 62). The subject measures the psychological and artistic distance covered in just three short years, since the Painter in his studio (Br. 419) in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, which is unsigned in its present, cropped state and generally dated around 1628. The composition there, which was cut down from a vertical format, casts the artist—whoever he may be—in a quixotic role, dwarfed, but undaunted, by his showdown with the Great Work. The panel on the easel is immoderately large, both in light of the fact that it is made of wood and that, according to Huygens' eyewitness testimony in 1628, Rembrandt was painting on small formats at the time—unlike Lievens (see entries 25 and 26). There is not a little inflation of the artistic ego here.

Both paintings, originally meant to impress, have taken on a humorous tinge with age. It will be noted that the arrangement and spatial progression is the same in both, despite the slight difference in scale: a table with objects in the left background, a full-length figure next to it, and a third element in the right foreground (easel here, poodle there). However, from one painting to the next, the proportions of the figures in relation to the foreground elements have been inverted (the panel had more bark than bite). The two works are separated by at least two years, or four years at the outside, between 1628-33 (if we allow for a two-stage elaboration of the picture with the poodle). Again, except for a drawing dated around 1655 (Ben. 1171), this is the only full-length portrait we have of Rembrandt. The metaphorical progression since the Studio is from challenge to mastery, even if in a quaintly exotic mode. *Next stop, Amsterdam!*

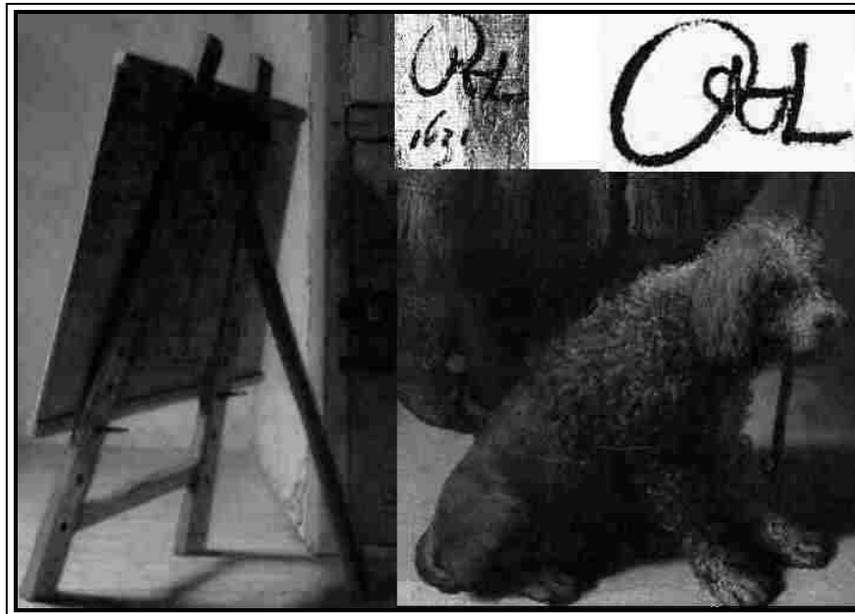
For the imaginatively inclined, I will mention in passing that the form of the easel with its shadow offers a pictorial transposition of the RHL monogram and is echoed by the emblematic poodle mentioned above (see also entry 42). It was in 1628 that Rembrandt first formulated this three-part monogram (see entries 44 and 50).

As for the signature on Br. 16 (see fig. at the beginning of this entry), it was drawn with a fine brush, unlike the standard RHL monogram in 1631. It presents more similarities (especially the forms of the "R" and "b") than differences with the other existing "Rembrant" signatures from 1632 (on the Paris Portrait of a man, Br. 165; the Anatomy lesson of Dr. Tulp; the Ottawa Bathsheba, Br. 494; and the St. Jerome etching, B 101, see fig. entry 12). It is on a slightly darker ground than the surrounding paint, as



if this spot had been less vigorously cleaned. It would not be surprising if it was painted over by the artist an earlier signature with the classic monogram.

The discrepancy between signature-type and date on the Self-portrait with a poodle is usually explained in the literature as recording different stages of execution: begun in 1631 and finished in 1632-33 (after the presumed addition of the poodle). This version of the story is supported by the existence of a copy of the Self-portrait without a poodle, presumed to be the work of Isaack Jouderville, one of Rembrandt's pupils in 1630-31. Since there is a dilemma of the same kind with the contemporaneous etching Self-portrait in an embroidered cloak, which went through 11 states that display signatures from 1631 and 1633 (B 7, see entry 3), one gets the impression of a Rembrandt working overtime to keep up with himself, revising and editing his image as he went and letting history take care of itself.



NB: it is important to note that both paintings display a contrast in scale: between easel and painter, figure and poodle. This play with scale has a metaphorical dimension, as in becoming great by doing great things or possessing the signs of power and wealth. Attention to or awareness of scale can be extended to the signature, which begins with a capital letter, and which, as a pattern, can subvert the form of a composition or motif (see entries 11 and 18).