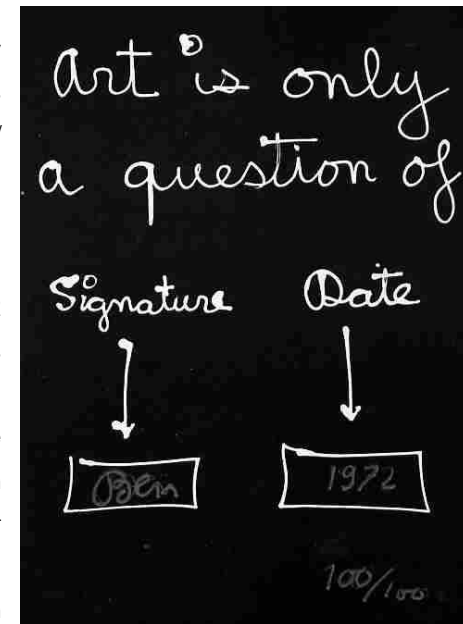


HOW ABOUT A DATE?

Art historians are dazzled, even blinded by dates: what would they do without them? Dates have that crisp ring of scientific precision—there is indeed safety in numbers—and they sustain the comforting illusion that artists operate like art historians. Or even cooperate, as some do when they have achieved enough fame (like Picasso, who often indicated the day/month/year), fallen prey to neurosis (like Picasso), or gotten wise to the system (like Picasso).

Although a date, say 1632, looks like an exact increment of time within an ordered numerical sequence, it functions in fact like a boundary, according to a principle of exclusion: not before, not after. Of course it is very vulnerable to effects of scale. To be sure, 1632 means after 1631 and before 1633, but what does it mean on the scale of a single year? This can be a long or a short time in an artist's career, depending on his production, life span and attending conditions. Given a painting signed and dated 1632, Rembrandt may well have begun it in the course of 1631 or before, laid it aside for a few weeks or months to dry, then put on the finishing touches in 1632 and signed it with his latest signature. On the other hand, he might have begun the same work at some time in 1632, finished it in 1633 or even later, and nostalgically or accurately retrodated it, while still using his latest signature (as on Br. 16 and possibly Br. 431; see entries 11 and 36). This means that any particular date is potentially bracketed by a minimum span of three years. This discrepancy becomes critical when we consider works in the light of events whose exact date is known, such as the funeral of the artist's father on April 27, 1630. This was precisely at a time when figures of old men abounded in his drawings, paintings and etchings.

In point of fact, we know next to nothing about the practices, particular or general, of artists when it came to signing and dating their works, but we can be fairly sure that they were approximate at best, and more idiosyncratic than systematic. This is still the case today, although professional artists tend to work more and more like art historians, documenting their own works as diligently as curators, even thematizing this state of affairs, like Ben (above, right) or On Kawara and his "date paintings" (below). The date, in any case, has always been secondary to the signature, for it is seldom found alone. In the absence of corroborating evidence, an inscribed date is a curiosity to be taken purely on faith. It is a mean(s), not an end.



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