

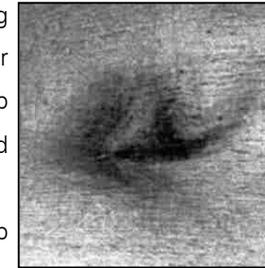
"R" YOU READY FOR THIS?

I had not been researching Rembrandt's name and signatures for very long in Paris in 1987 when I made a startling discovery: I was looking at a color reproduction of a detail of Rembrandt's 1632 Anatomy Lesson showing Dr. Tulp looming above the belly of the corpse with his forceps, when I suddenly noticed that the navel seemed to be shaped like a capital "R" (see entry 9).

I was lucid enough to realize that I had just taken an irrevocable step beyond the pale of orthodoxy and into the limbo of eccentrics and well-meaning-cranks-who-see-things-in-paintings (as if painting had never had anything to do with illusionism). Had I known about Christopher Wright's own experiences in this area (see entry 34), I would have yelled "Merde!"

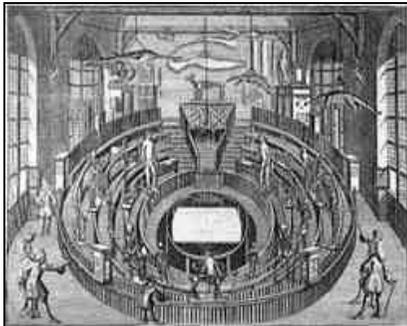
As it was, I kept my wits about me and, over a period of four years, submitted a variety of willing subjects to the informal test of "what do you make of this navel here?" Unfortunately, I usually did this spontaneously and so kept no statistics. This may have been because most people tended to see this "R," even if it sometimes took some prompting and orientation ("look along the axis of the ribcage," "imagine a graphic shape, a letter of the alphabet," etc.). On the other hand, those who never saw it tended to be art historians (no joke). The main difficulty involved making the perceptual shift from the 3-D illusionistic mode of painting to the 2-D graphic mode of writing.

Although frowned upon by scholars who like artists to behave as sensibly as they do, the use of visual puns and self-portrait "imbeds" as signatures goes back at least as far as manuscript illumination (see entry 62). Appropriately enough, the 12th-century monk Ruffilus painted his self-image in an ornamental initial "R" (right). Later we have, for example, the reflection of Jan van Eyck's image in St. George's armor in the Van der Pael Madonna, Holbein's anamorphic skull in the double-portrait of The Ambassadors, Michelangelo's flayed skin in the Sistine Chapel Last Judgment, Raphael's cameo appearance in the School of Athens, etc. and so on. Closer to Rembrandt, there is Pieter Claesz's self-portrait at the easel reflected in a sphere in his 1625 Vanitas Still-life, today in Nuremberg (left). The young Rembrandt himself is supposed by most scholars



to have indulged in cameo appearances in his earliest history compositions. The appearance *in assistenza* is an old trick of the trade from the Renaissance and is thought to have been a form of "signature" for the illiterate (see entry 57).

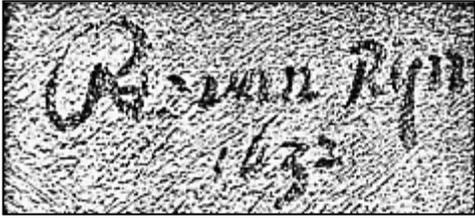
This Anatomy Lesson was a key work in a key year at a key time in Rembrandt's life and career. In 1632 Rembrandt had just split from Lievens and Leiden, was still trying his luck at the court in The Hague, establishing himself in Amsterdam and going into the art business with Hendrick Uylenburgh. His personal and artistic identity must have been an acute concern. That his self-referral in the Anatomy Lesson took such a graphic form could be explained by the fact that he was too busy painting other peoples' portraits to paint his own (only one sure self-portrait is dated 1632, after the dozen that spanned the years 1629-31), or to etch it (he was still stuck on the self-portrait B 7 that went through at least 10 states between 1631 and 1633; see entry 3). Finally, according to Hecksher (1958) and Schupbach (1982), the moral of Anatomy lessons and public dissections in the 17th-century Netherlands was precisely to "Know thyself." What better symbol of self-exploration and self-conception than the navel? Such were the factors that may have informed this particular manifestation of his authorship.



This shift in vision is not much different from considering the radial and densely tiered arrangement of spectators in Rembrandt's Anatomy lesson as a transposition of the concentric, eyelike form of the *theatrum anatomicum* that he had surely known in Leiden.

I am not necessarily saying that Rembrandt painted this R-like artefact deliberately (consciously), as a macabre *clin d'oeil* to the peanut gallery or because of some undocumented disgruntlement, but then again I am not ruling out the possibility (he was only human, after all). The unusual shape that he gave to this particular navel—assuming that it has not been tampered with by an equally human art restorer—may simply have seemed fitting, as it does to most beholders who never notice anything strange about it. Yet the curious fact that this navel looks unlike any other navel in Rembrandt's work—or anywhere else—obliges us to account for it. And how we deal with it will tell us more about ourselves, our methods and our biases than about Rembrandt.





Now the astute reader might object that this "R" does not exhibit the looped form that characterizes Rembrandt's signatures and that I keep harping on (see entry 44). My explanation is that, in 1631-32, in his full-name signatures, he distinguished between the shape he gave his own initial and that of his father, who had died in 1630 (left; see entries 44 and 50). Thus within one year we have one painting informed by the matrix-like "R" of his first name, the misnamed Philosopher in meditation (see entry 11), and another marked with the stiff "R" referring to his defunct father, the Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp. In the first case, a personal synthesis expressed in domestic terms, in the other, a shocking conversation piece with the human body in its long-standing role as a blind spot. Art and Science render the body visible: in the former as a commodified illusion, in the latter, as a corpse.

In any case, this tell-tale navel forcibly brings psychology into play. Even its detractors will resort to a psychological rationale to explain why a significant portion of the public sees an "R" when the navel is brought to its attention. These spoil-sports will have to opine that those who see it, do so because *they want* to see it. An explanation that implies its converse: namely, that those who don't see it, don't do so because *they don't want* to see it. One group sees its presence, the other sees its absence: at this interface, neither see eye to eye. Rembrandt may not have seen this "R" either, because a blind spot is the best condition for its genesis.

It is worth noting that the dissection of corpses traditionally began with an incision known as the *incipit* ("it begins"), a Latin term that also refers to the first words of manuscripts or incunabula. For obvious practical reasons this cut was made in the abdomen—sometimes even at the navel. If the self-conscious, moralizing anatomists of Rembrandt's day made this incision at the navel, the curiosity of his painted navel might be further evidence that the artist attended the dissection of the body of his less fortunate fellow Leidener, Adriaen Adriaensz. (alias "*het Kint*," the kid). This might explain the symbolic character and medical anomaly in Rembrandt's depiction of the scene: it shows the abdomen of the corpse still intact, while Tulp begins his dissection with the arm and hand, the part that links his art to Rembrandt's. This gives the corpse an off-beat focus, in the same way that the corpse was the focus of the ghoulish anatomical spectacle.

If I may quote a contemporary Amsterdam daily (see entry 9): *Waarheen wijst de tang van dokter Tulp?* ("What are Dr. Tulp's forceps pointing at?").

