

This expression can be translated as "staircase wit," whereby "wit" can mean both intelligence and humor. Figuratively, it means wit with hindsight. It suggests the image of someone descending the stairs after leaving a spirited company and finally thinking of what they could have retorted during the repartee. Some descents are so long that you could write an entire book.



By way of an example, and with all due respect, permit me to cite a letter from Dr. Prof. Josua Bruyn, then director of the Rijksmuseum and spokesman for the Rembrandt Research Project (1987). On the strength of my ten years of research on a painting that had just been disattributed by the RRP, the Philosopher in meditation (Br. 431, see entry 11), I sent him a letter with my comments and questions. I did receive a response, but no answers to my questions. It was a rhetorical apology ending with these words: "I am not sure to what extent humble art historians could profit from so ambitious a project as the psychology of art." I had not made any claims for such a project, but only brought his attention to a 1980 article of mine published in a journal with the word "psychology" in the name. Until volume II of the Corpus (1986) it was the only scholarly article of any length on the Philosopher in meditation, a key work in Rembrandt's early oeuvre.

Dr. Bruyn was surely in a good position to speak of ambitious projects at the time. Anyway, had I been more humble myself and quicker on the uptake, I would have replied with something like: "Psychology might tell us why humble art historians need to ironize," and would probably just as soon have wished I'd quoted T.S. Eliot instead: "*Humility is endless*".

In 2003, I belatedly sent a copy of another article of mine on this same painting published in the Revue du Louvre (1990/3) to Dr. Ernst van de Wetering, the new spokesman, in the hopes that the RRP would reconsider its disattribution in time for the publication of Volume IV of their Corpus. A year and a half later, I am still waiting for a response.

*PS: in October 2005, I happened to meet Dr. van de Wetering at the Frankfurt Book Fair for the presentation of the fourth volume of the Corpus. He apologized for not having responded to my article and conceded that the former RRP team may have been too "harsh" in its judgments. Still, there was no corrigendum in the new volume. The matter of the Philosopher will be taken up at a colloquium at the Louvre in December 2005.*