The latest turn of the screw in the art-expertise business is called Digital Verification Technology, a spin-off of biomedical imaging provided by a certain Veritus A.G., formerly based at the World Trade Center and recently sold to an Asian consortium. Its "Brushstroke Pattern Recognition" and "Colour Palette Analysis" software promises objective (statistical) results with a precision that would make old-fashioned connoisseurs blush, were it not so coldbloodedly speculative.

According to this firm, even the very best experts of the past achieved an accuracy rate of less than 20% in their attributions of authorship; a score that the newcomers to the field find surprisingly high, considering the lack of scientific techniques in the old days. This figure only has a statistical value, as do those of the forensic handwriting experts (see entry 20), but it is clearly meant to impress. Having no vested interest in defending pre-21st-century expertise, but a cutting edge product to sell, Veritus A.G. can afford to be very frank in its criticism of the "self-styled experts" of yore. All the more so as company policy dictates absolute secrecy: for the sake of neutrality, no names of their own experts are divulged. The firm has created several teams of experts—including a "Rembrandt Research Committee"—to examine Old Master paintings with their technology. For Rembrandt they provide a sparse catalogue raisonné (out of chronological order) with pictures that seem to have been scanned out of the 1906 Klassiker der Kunst edition. There is also a biography of the artist in which we learn that, because most folks couldn't read back then, the Renaissance and Italian masters took to signing their paintings with cameo self-portraits. As literacy improved, monograms and then signatures were used. When I asked for their source for this information, I was directed to their sparse bibliography.

 www.veritus.org
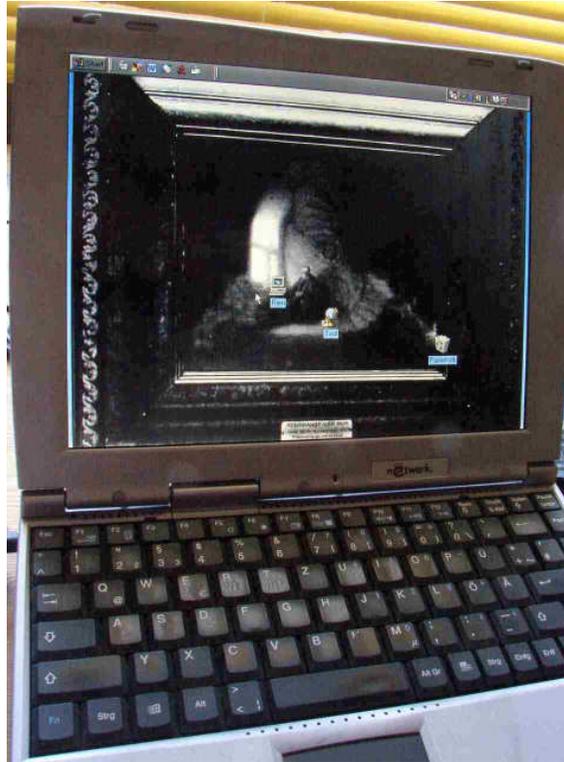
Quite a while after writing this concession to post-modernity, I came across an article predictably titled "The Rembrandt Code" which is about a mathematician's crusade to let the real Rembrandts at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art stand up and finally unmask the unreal ones. This visionary professor named Dan Rockmore uses high-definition photography and of course computers to arrive at a statistical portrait of each work. Since it has been shown that drawings lend themselves well to this wonderfully objective approach, he wondered why it couldn't be applied to paintings as well. The resulting project sounds seductive, but there is quite a difference between the graphic information contained in a drawing and that contained in a painting, which is built up by layers and overlapping strokes, not to mention the interference from the analog and digital media at the scale of the brushstroke, smear, spot or whatever. Still, a characteristic handwriting should be detectable, at least in probabilistic terms. The word "probability" being where my knowledge in this area begins and ends, I should probably keep my mouth shut. (Good luck!)

http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/13.12/rembrandt.html?pg=1&topic=rembrandt&topic_set=