

PAUL REMBRANDT & CO.

Rembrandt scholarship can lead to strange (re)discoveries and correspondences. For example, on the back of a drawing at the Custodia Foundation in Paris, I ran into the following inscription (in German) "Original drawing by Paul Rembrandt van Rhyn." This reminded me that the French writer Aloysius Bertrand had referred to a "Paul Rembrandt" in his book of fantastic tales titled *Gaspard de la nuit* (1842). A few years later, examining the 1627 Simeon in the Temple (Br. 535) at the Hamburg Kunsthalle, I found an old label on the back of the panel with the inscription "Paul Rembrand." Nor was that the end of it, for soon thereafter I acquired at a Parisian fleamarket the first issue of a rear-guard art magazine called *La Peinture* (1923) that featured not only a Rembrandt reproduction on the cover (and, relic-like, one of his letters in the centerfold), but also a blurb written in the most exalted terms and giving the master's name as "Paul Rembrandt von Ryn"!



I sensed that I was on to something, but wasn't sure what. I proceeded to check it out. Sure enough, in volume XXXV of Michaud's *Biographie universelle ancienne et moderne* (new ed.), a late 19th-century French biographical dictionary, there is an entry for a "REMBRANDT (Paul), dit Van Ryn." Then, in a French monogram dictionary from around 1886 (see next page), I found two Rembrandt-like monograms: the first, an approximation of the etched "RHL" form was ascribed to one "**Paul**

Rembrandt Harmens van Ryn, famous Dutch painter-engraver of the XVIIth century"; the second, similar to the "RHL v Ryn" signature that appears on the B 73 etching of 1632, is said to have belonged to "**Paul Rembrandt van Ryn**, born in 1606, died in 1669." On the same page, in between these two monograms, was yet another set of initials that looked like a pre-1629 Rembrandt signature, "R t," supposed to have been used by one "**Rembrandt van Ryn**, painter-engraver, born in 1606, died in 1669." Although this dictionary provided cross-references, there was no indication that these three artists were related, much less one and the same.

I felt I was onto something big, not the least of which was an unexpected confirmation in Rembrandt's late Self-portrait as St. Paul (1661, see entry 64). Then, one day, I happened to consult John Smith's 1836 catalogue raisonné with Rembrandt's biography (part VII, p. X) and read this note: "The baptismal name of Paul has been, by some writers, added to Rembrandt, but by what authority, the Writer is entirely ignorant, as he has in no instance found it on his pictures." Of course, who didn't know that?

Apparently a lot of people, for, in his 1843 Rembrandt biography, Dr. G.K. Nagler had this to say (trans. and emphasis mine): "Rembrandt also kept this last name [v. Ryn]; but he probably never used the Christian name Paul, although a number of writers (Eberlin, Füssly, Burtin, Claussin, Bartsch, etc.) have given him this name." The author went on to explain that this misunderstanding was probably due to a misinterpretation of the "RHL" monogram—as I had already suspected. This state of affairs that had been commented upon previously by Van Eynden and Van der Willigen. Eduard Kolloff re-

issued this correction in 1854, but insisted on reading the "RHL" monogram as "Rt" (a contraction of "Rembrandt"), as had Gersaint in his pioneer catalogue of the engravings (1751-57). Kolloff explained the "RHL" form as a posthumous manipulation, while Gersaint even read one signature as "Klaas van Ryn."

Cornelis [Carel] Vosmaer, a spirited debunker writing in Paris in the 1860s, found himself obliged to devote a long digression to make it clear to foreign readers that "Rembrandt" was a first name, and not a last name, something that still tends to be ignored today. This misunderstanding probably also contributed to the addition of the name Paul. Clearly peeved, he added: "It is as absurd as saying Guillaume Raphaël or Théophile Voltaire!"

His efforts seem not to have been in vain, for less than a century later Seymour Slive could write: "To be sure, we no longer find it necessary to debate whether or not Rembrandt van Rijn was ever christened Paul" (Rembrandt and his critics, 1953).

That would have been the end of that, had I not recently happened upon a *website* on the history of Berlin street names in which Rembrandt is still given the first name Paul, but with a correction in parentheses: "*eigentl.* [actually] Harmensz van Rijn." This a sobering lesson in the persistence of scholarly errors and it is further evidence of the many ways in which great artists are co-created by Posterity.

