

IV 4 'Self-portrait'

LEIPZIG, MUSEUM DER BILDENDEN KÜNSTE, INV. NO. 347

[c. 1645]

HDG 548; BR. 40; BAUCH –; GERSON –; TÜMPEL –

Fig. 1. Panel 25.8 x 21.3 cm. For a colour reproduction of a detail (1:1) showing the face see Chapter III fig. 257



Fig. 2. X-Ray



1. Introduction and description

Since 1916 the consensus has grown that this work cannot be an autograph Rembrandt. We devote a catalogue entry to it because the questions relating to the place of such a painting within the production of Rembrandt's workshop (where it undoubtedly originated, as will become apparent) are at least as compelling as those to do with a possible attribution to any other artist.

Rembrandt is shown frontally, chest length. His curling, brown hair reaches to his ears. He has a fair moustache and a tuft of hair under the lower lip and wears a black doublet, open at the neck, over a red *hemdrock* (waistcoat) and a white shirt with the collar turned down over the doublet. On his head he wears a black cap or bonnet floppy at the edge.

The figure is set against a light background. The light comes from the top left so that the bonnet casts a shadow over the eyes and the left half of the face. A brown zone with an oblique edge on the left above Rembrandt's shoulder probably represents a shadow thrown by a wall with a window to Rembrandt's left, or by a closed lower shutter of that window through which the light falls onto the back wall. The partly horizontal edge of this dark zone suggests the back of a chair, a wainscot or some other object with a straight top behind Rembrandt.

Working conditions

Examined 12 May 1970 (B.H., E.v.d.W.), and again on 21 January 1998 (M.F., E.v.d.W.) in good light, out of the frame, with the aid of UV light and a print of the X-radiograph covering the whole painting. Varnish: The painting has been partially cleaned, specifically in the light areas of the image. A good deal of old varnish remains on the background, on the clothing and on shadowed parts of the face.

Support

Oak panel, grain vertical, 25.8 x 21.3 cm. Thickness app. 6-7 mm. Single plank. The dendrochronological investigation, carried out by K. Bauch and P. Klein, Hamburg, showed that the wood originates from the Netherlands. Using the master chronology of that region the rings were dated as follows: 234 growth rings (of which 17 were sapwood annual rings) 1410-1643. In view of the sapwood statistic for the region, the earliest felling date is 1643. With a minimum seasoning time of two years, the earliest date for the painting of the work is *c.* 1645. The panel is from the same tree as the panel of the *Head of Christ* in Berlin (Br. 622; fig. 3).

There is slight bevelling at the bottom and top and (seen from the back) on the right on the sapwood side approximately 1 cm wide. At the bottom left (seen from the front) a broken corner of the panel has been replaced by a piece of wood. This damage no doubt is related to the fact that the strip of sapwood mentioned above is on that side of the panel. On the back of the panel there is reddish paint bearing traces of an inscription in light paint (see *Radiography*). There is a large knot near the

right edge (seen from the front).

Ground

The fact that the grain of the wood is visible in the background of the painting does not mean that the panel was entirely unprimed. A chalk-like substance can be seen locally filling the grain. The possibility that a thicker ground may have been selectively removed from the background can be ruled out because the traces of the grain are also visible in open spaces between the brushstrokes, such as on the left and right at the collar.

Paint layer

Condition: In general the condition is satisfactory, though there are numerous small discoloured retouchings to do with wear and the grain of the wood. There are scratches in the paint along the top and bottom edges.

Craquelure: Mainly horizontal in the thick paint; vertical craquelure chiefly in the collar.

The work is painted with a sketchy, very open technique, with impasto used in the light passages in the face and the collar. The execution is not as *alla prima* as appears at first sight. An initial design was done in transparent brown paint. Traces of this phase show through or lie uncovered on the surface, in the doublet and at various points in the face. In the cap too traces of the initial layout in brown are visible in several places. The cap has been painted over this first lay-in with broad strokes of more or less transparently applied black. The transparent or semi-transparent passages along the outlines of the head covering look as if they are due to wear, but this is largely the effect of the speed with which this cap was painted in broad sweeps. Its front edge is indicated in thick black. The paint relief in this part is evidently intended to strengthen the effect of depth in the undulating edge of the cap.

Locally, the shaded part of the face is painted in opaque grey over a brown, apparently smooth, layer that probably belongs to the initial design. Here and there reflections are suggested in opaque paint, in particular on the cheekbone and beside the nose and mouth. Differences in transparency that have become more marked with time give the shaded part of the face a blotchy appearance. Moreover, the forms in this passage are disturbed by discoloured retouches which generally run vertically, for example over the cheek on the right, in the forehead and (most distractingly) above the eye on the left; because of these retouches this eye appears larger than intended. The eyes give the impression of having been done in one go because of the symmetrical positioning of the indications of the upper eyelids, the dark marks below them delineating the irises, and the greyish paint used to depict the whites of the eyes. The final tone of the shadowed part of the face seems to have been determined after the lit part had been done. The light, impastoed strokes in this passage are partly overlapped by transparent dark paint at the transition from light to shadow, evidently with the intention of altering its course. This is particularly marked at the cheekbone be-

low the eye on the left, where the light paint continues so far that one can speak of a pentimento. This observation is supported by the X-radiograph, which shows radio-absorbent paint continuing further upwards.

In the lit passages in the face there is a quite striking colourfulness: dark pink in the rosy cheek, a paler pink to the left of and under the nose, a brick-red glow below the lit nostril. Yellowish ochre is used in the impasto indicating the moustache, and a greenish yellow above the upper lip, under the mouth and on the inside of the lit part of the collar. Cooler hues tending towards blue are used in the lit areas of the nose, chin and neck. A feature which seems odd at first sight is an orange-like patch with a grey mark on it at the lit collar, where it disappears behind the neck. This may be intended to suggest light reflected by the neck.

Besides the pentimento at the cheekbone described above, there is another produced by the toning down of the background to the left of the cheek. Here dark grey paint has been added over thickly applied lighter paint; evidently with the intention of increasing the contrast between the light cheek and the background.

Radiography

The paint containing lead white that is visible on the surface shows up light in the X-radiograph. The thickness of this paint determines how light it appears: thus the fact that the broad strokes in the background to the right above the shoulder show up relatively light does not mean that this passage was originally lighter. The area showing up light at the transition from the lit part of the face to the shadow cast by the cap originally extended, as discussed under *Paint layer*, further above the cheekbone than the visible image suggests.

The area showing up light on the right in and beside the cap has to do with the knot in the wood at that point. The two light brush lines above and to the left of it belong to an inscription on the back of the panel. The light and dark traces along the left edge are for the most part explained by the fact that the strip with 17 (weak) sapwood growth rings, mentioned under *Support* is situated here and has been locally reprimed. The piece of wood added at the bottom left corner appears as a dark rectangle.

Signature

None.

2. Comments

It has never been doubted that it is Rembrandt portrayed on this small panel. Even though only a small part of the face is lit and there is hardly any details in the much larger part in shadow, this is a good likeness. The suggestion of the chin, the double chin and the neck, the cheek and the tip of the nose, the mouth with the moustache on the upper lip and the goatee – and all this caught within the silhouette of the figure with the distinctive tufts of hair on either side – are enough to characterise Rembrandt convincingly, despite the fact that the manner of painting is

sketchy and the forms are not precisely defined. Accordingly, the painting was long regarded as a self-portrait, and hence as an autograph work by Rembrandt; all the more so because the adventurous lighting, one of its more distinctive aspects, corresponds to the accepted view of Rembrandt as 'the painter of light'.

While the identity of the sitter has never been doubted, the painting's authorship was questioned as long ago as 1916. In that year Schmidt-Degener was the first to attribute the work to Carel Fabritius.¹ Since then this artist's name has cropped up repeatedly, although others, for example Van Regteren Altena, have persisted in regarding Rembrandt as the author. He argued: 'Even where the use of colour is of the same level [as that of Fabritius], as in the *Portrait of Rembrandt* in Leipzig (Br. 40), one can equally point to parallels in Rembrandt's own work which strongly reinforce the argument that this is a self-portrait. Fabritius' style, after all, emerged from that of Rembrandt.'² In the most recent discussion of the painting's attribution, during an international colloquium in 1996 in Leipzig, none of the specialists present defended the idea that Rembrandt might be the painter, and there was a general inclination to accept Fabritius as the most likely alternative.³ However, this view is not unanimous. Blankert, in particular, argued at the colloquium in favour of an attribution to the 'circle of Carel Fabritius'. Christopher Brown, the author of a monograph on Carel Fabritius who did not participate in the Leipzig discussions, catalogued the painting among the 'rejected attributions' in his oeuvre catalogue of the artist's works and continues to rule out Fabritius as a possible candidate.⁴ Sumowski too saw no justification for an attribution to Fabritius (or to Rembrandt).⁵

The doubt as to Rembrandt's authorship is understandable. The work stands conspicuously alone among the other self-portraits from Rembrandt's later period because of its unusual colourfulness and its rough, if not chaotic brushwork. Moreover, it does not accord with what was for long the prevailing view of his production of self-portraits as documents driven by 'self-analysis and self-contemplation',⁶ especially in the second half of his career.

Whoever painted this work, we can be sure that it originated in Rembrandt's workshop, and this is a crucial factor in the question of the genesis of this image of Rembrandt's face. Analysis of the dendrochronological data (see *Support*) revealed that the panel came from the same tree as the panel used for the Berlin *Head of Christ* (Br. 622; fig. 3). This tree could have been cut no earlier than 1643, and the panel painted no earlier than 1645 (see *Support*). While complex problems of authenticity surround the series of extant Rembrandtesque heads of Christ (Br. 620-627),⁷ it is fair to say that the Berlin example is the most likely to be an autograph work by Rembrandt. In style and pictorial quality it approaches his works from the second half of the 1640s. It also displays a feature that appears to be characteristic of Rembrandt, a tendency to shift the eye in the averted half of the face 'outwards' in heads seen in three-quarters profile; compare, for instance, the Virgin in the St

Fig. 3. Rembrandt, *Head of Christ*, panel 24.9 x 21.6 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie (Br. 622)



Petersburg *Holy Family* (Br. 570), the Asnath in the Kassel *Jacob's blessing* (Br. 525) and the woman in the Amsterdam *Jewish Bride* (Br. 416).

Given that the making of one of the group of related heads of Christ, that in Detroit (Br. 621), is linked to a history piece by Rembrandt, the Paris *Christ at Emmaus* (Br. 578) of 1648, one could postulate that this group – and hence the Berlin head – was painted in or around that year. This would be an argument for dating the Leipzig painting to between c. 1645 and 1650. This date is also supported by the stylistic character of the work. It is fair to say that the Venetian-oriented style, which was to dominate the rest of Rembrandt's career, is first seen in 1645. This break, which need not be considered at length here, is so sharp that we can say with confidence that the present painting cannot possibly predate 1645. Establishing this *terminus post quem*, confirmed by the dendrochronological evidence, raises a curious problem. Rembrandt's features in this painting, and particularly their alteration through ageing, can be dated only with difficulty to 1645 or later. If our dating of the painting in Karlsruhe (IV 5) in or after 1645 is correct, then Rembrandt's features had already changed markedly around that time. The lower half of the face has become much heavier, the jowls are now pronounced and the whole head seems to be broader. This description of the changes in Rembrandt's face applies in any event to the etching *Rembrandt drawing at a window* dated 1648 (B.22; fig. 6; see also Chapter II fig. 17). The head in the Leipzig painting, on the other hand, is thinner in the lower half and corresponds in the degree of ageing to the self-portraits dating from the early 1640s. Most striking are the resemblances to the '*Self-portrait*', formerly in

Weimar (IV 3), which we believe to be a painting by one of the members of Rembrandt's workshop, possibly Ferdinand Bol, painted around 1640 (figs. 4 and 5).

It was Schmidt-Degener who pointed out that the close resemblances between the two works suggest that the present painting may have been based on the work just referred to (see note 1). This is a highly attractive theory. Not only is there a striking resemblance in physiognomy, but there are other shared characteristics that argue strongly in favour of Schmidt-Degener's hypothesis. The most persuasive aspect is that these two paintings are the only two prior to the Washington *Self-portrait* of 1659 (IV 18) in which both head and torso are turned to the left – in these two cases to exactly the same slight degree. For obvious reasons, in the case of a right-handed painter working in front of a mirror the head and torso are normally turned a little to the right in the direction of the panel or canvas standing next to the mirror. This position of the head also accords with light falling from the left, which is desirable when working with the right hand. The fact that the ex-Weimar painting and the one in Leipzig are exceptions to this rule, together with the close resemblances in physiognomy described above and the fact that these are the only two paintings to depict Rembrandt with an open shirt collar turned down in this particular way, make Schmidt-Degener's contention that there is a close relation between the two works compelling. It remains an attractive thesis even though, compared with the rough brushwork of the present painting, the ex-Weimar work is smoothly executed, and despite the fact that the lighting – although the direction of the light is the same – is radically altered in the Leipzig work because the larger cap casts a heavy shadow over the face.

We believe that the explanation for both the striking resemblances and the significant differences between the two paintings lies in an aspect of Rembrandt's workshop practice that is considered in detail in Vol. V, Chapter II, namely the production of more or less altered copies or variants by his pupils and other assistants. As a rule such 'satellite paintings' seem to be have been done shortly after the prototype, known in 17th-century Dutch as the *principael*, or were even begun while the *principael* was still being painted. Examples of this are the Washington *Joseph accused by Potiphar's wife* (Br. 523) after the Berlin 'principael' (Br. 524), and the London *Birth of Christ* (Br. 575) after the Munich prototype (Br. 574). However, there are also examples of 'satellite paintings' that must have been produced in Rembrandt's workshop later, sometimes much later, based either on Rembrandt's *principael* or possibly on a copy of this prototype made before it left the workshop. In the case of the *Descent from the Cross* of c. 1650 in Washington (II C 49, copy 2 fig. 8, Br. 584), the 'satellite painting' was based on a putative workshop variant of 1634 (Br. 551) after Rembrandt's prototype of 1633 (Br. 550). An example that is closer to the explanation proposed here is the free copy in Antwerp after the Kassel *Saskia* of 1633/34-1642 (II A 85, copy 4 fig. 10). This too is a case of a variant done in the 'rough manner', around 1650, based on a smoothly

Fig. 4. Rembrandt workshop, 'Self-portrait', IV 3, detail



Fig. 5. Rembrandt workshop, 'Self-portrait', IV 4, detail



executed prototype. Even in the case of the radical changes to the lighting in the Leipzig painting compared with the ex-Weimar work (or its putative prototype), a parallel can be found in Rembrandt's workshop practice which – if our dating of the Leipzig painting to around 1648 is correct – can be located in the same period. This is the nocturnal variant in Copenhagen (Br. 579) of *The Supper at Emmaus* in Paris (Br. 578), which itself is set in daylight. This example leads to the conclusion that before having a pupil make a variant of his *principael*, Rembrandt may have instructed him to change the lighting of the scene in the free variation after his prototype.

The question of the authorship of a variant like the present painting becomes less pressing when it is clear how much the artist relied on a prototype. The fact that we can see here an aspect of Rembrandt's workshop practice is in our view much more important. Nonetheless, in a case such as this, where the attribution has been debated for so long, and where the painting is of such quality, special attention must be given to this issue.

The suggestion, frequently made, that Carel Fabritius may have been the author of the Leipzig painting is not hard to understand. In the few paintings of his hand that have survived Rembrandt's most gifted pupil usually placed his figures (and his *Goldfinch*)⁸ against a light background in a way that recalls the present work.

Carel Fabritius is thought to have been a pupil of Rembrandt from 1641 until 1643, when he returned to the Beemster, and may have remained in touch with Rembrandt until 1645. By that date at the latest he had set up as an independent master. His name crops up again in Delft documents from 1650. In 1652 he became a member of the Delft Guild of St Luke. He was killed when a gunpowder magazine exploded in Delft in 1654.⁹

If Carel Fabritius was the author of the present work, and if our dating between 1645 (the earliest possible date

given the dendrochronological data) and 1650 is right, then it must have been painted after he left Rembrandt's workshop, or very shortly before at the earliest, since the evidence that he left in 1643 – or 1645 at the latest – is compelling. So to test the attribution, therefore, this painting must be compared with Fabritius's earliest known works. The first that is dated is the *Portrait of Abraham de Potter* of 1648 in Amsterdam,¹⁰ and it is entirely different from the present painting. Other works thought to be early (e.g. the *Raising of Lazarus* in Warsaw and the *Mercury and Argus* in Los Angeles)¹¹ differ from each other as much as from the Leipzig painting. The dating problems with Fabritius are considerable. When Sumowski was trying to date the Rotterdam *Self-portrait*, one of Fabritius's most Rembrandtesque works, to somewhere between 1645 and 1654, he came to the conclusion that 'der Künstler stilwechselnd in rembrandtesker und individueller Manier experimentiert hat' (the artist experimented in varying styles, alternating between a Rembrandtesque and his own manner).¹²

The difference in style between the present painting and any work bearing the signature of Carel Fabritius is so fundamental, however, that on reflection an attribution to him is not really defensible. The 'graphic' element, i.e. a certain stylisation in the brushwork which is characteristic of Fabritius, is missing. On the other hand, the use of coarse 'blotches' characterizes the painting technique of the author of this work, but these blotches lack the specific 'autonomy' normally found in Fabritius. The prevailing argument at the Leipzig colloquium, that the work must have been painted by a highly gifted artist and that therefore Carel Fabritius was virtually the only candidate, is less persuasive now that there is a strong possibility that it is a (free) copy, as suggested above. This made it possible for the author to capture the peculiarities of the physiognomy relatively easily.

The execution lacks the brilliance and sureness of the

Fig. 6. Rembrandt, *Self-portrait drawing at a window*, 1648, etching (B. 22¹), detail



paintings that can safely be regarded as by Fabritius. This, together with the 'Fabritius-like' formula with the light background, is what must have led Sumowski to speculate on a Fabritius influence that continued to play a role in Rembrandt's workshop after he had left for the Beemster. It can equally well be argued, however, that what we see as 'Fabritius-like' can be traced back to Rembrandt's own style; after all, Fabritius himself must have been decisively influenced by Rembrandt. Using a light background was certainly not the preserve of Carel Fabritius. This was in fact an old formula – one only need think of the Kassel family portrait by Maerten van Heemskerck¹³ and of course Rembrandt's own works in which it was employed, in Leiden (I A 14, A 19, IV *Addendum* 3) but also, later, in the *Self-portrait* in Kenwood House (IV 26).

Sumowski linked this painting to a group of *tronies* and tentatively attributed them all to the same hand. To this group could possibly be added a painting that was identified by us as a freely executed (and possibly later cut into a tilted oval) partial copy now in Bayonne (Br. 372) of Rembrandt's *Susanna and the Elders* in Berlin (Br. 516), al-

though the brushstrokes in it are broader than in the present work. What is certain is that between c. 1645 and 1650 *tronies* were made – some obvious partial copies by pupils or workshop assistants (Br. 366 after Br. 566; Br. 375 after Br. 570; Br. 376 after the lost prototype of the *Circumcision*, preserved as a copy in Braunschweig) which are comparable to this painting in various ways.

For further discussion of this painting see Chapter III, p. 255.

3. Documents and sources

None.

4. Graphic reproductions

None.

5. Copies

None.

6. Provenance

- Coll. Ernst Peter Otto, Leipzig.
- By descent coll. Gustav Moritz Clauß, Leipzig.
- Donated to the museum in 1861 as part of the Clauß'schen Stiftung.

NOTES

1. F. Schmidt-Degener, *Catalogus van schilderijen en teekeningen tentoongesteld in het Museum Boymans te Rotterdam*, Rotterdam 1916, p. 29.
2. J.Q. van Regteren Altena, '[review of] Kurt Bauch, Rembrandt Gemälde, 1966', *O.H.* 82 (1967), pp. 69-71, esp. 70.
3. Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig. *Internationales Kolloquium zu Gemälden der Niedersächsischen Sammlung 7.-9. November 1996*, Leipzig 1998, pp. 20-23; see also W.R. Valentiner, 'Carel and Barent Fabritius', *Art Bull.* 14 (1932), p. 213; Bauch 1966, p. 47; Br.-Gerson, p. 550.
4. C. Brown, *Carel Fabritius*, Oxford 1981, Rejected Attributions 5.
5. Sumowski *Gemälde* IV, pp. 2876-77.
6. J. Rosenberg, *Rembrandt. Life & work*, London 1964, p. 37.
7. S. Slive, 'An unpublished Head of Christ by Rembrandt', *Art Bull.* 47 (1965), pp. 407-417.
8. Sumowski *Gemälde* II, no. 610.
9. Brown, op. cit.⁴, pp. 147-152.
10. Sumowski *Gemälde* II, no. 602.
11. Sumowski *Gemälde* V, no. 2072, resp. II, no. 601.
12. Sumowski *Gemälde* II, p. 980.
13. M. van Heemskerck, *Pieter Jan Foppeszoon and his family*, panel 118.7 x 140.2 cm. Staatliche Museen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, GK 33.