



NEWSGRAM

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The Kress Program in Paintings Conservation: A Rembrandt Revealed



Figure 1. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait/Tronie of a Young Woman* (1632), Allentown Art Museum. Left: before Treatment. Right: after treatment.

IN THE PAST YEAR A NUMBER OF IMPORTANT PAINTINGS HAVE come to the Conservation Center: a grand, early work by Canaletto; two magnificent canvases by Sebastiano Ricci; a portable triptych by Lippo di Benivieni; and two works by Vittore Carpaccio. Also arriving was a painting attributed to Rembrandt from the Allentown Art Museum, which was treated and studied by Shan Kuang, Assistant Conservator of the Kress Program in Paintings Conservation. Technical examination provided fresh insights into the painting's execution and, crucially, corrected some prior misinterpretations regarding the facture of this work. When the two-year project was completed enough evidence and opinions had been gathered to support the attribution to Rembrandt himself, rather than a follower. The announcement created a clamor in the media.

The painting is an early work, one of a number of images by the artist once referred to as "Rembrandt's sister." It is painted on an oval oak panel and is fully signed and dated. Rather than a portrait, it is a fanciful sketch, known as a *tronie*. The elaborate, all-star cast of costume elements is in stark contrast to the carefree approach the outfit was assembled. The lower collar completely askew, the end of the looped chain hanging free, the untidy curled edges of the lace... these all point to pieces of clothing and accessories being piled onto the studio model in a whimsical manner—and intentionally so.

Its provenance includes the collections of the Duc d'Orléans in France and Petworth House in England. Despite the fact that the painting had been accepted in the past by all major scholars as Rembrandt, its autograph status was first questioned in the late 1920s by Alan



Figure 2. Kress paintings in the studio. Pictured works from left to right: Sebastiano Ricci, *The Finding of Moses*, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art; Canaletto, *The Grand Canal from the Campo San Vio*, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art; Vittore Carpaccio, *Temperance and Prudence*, High Museum of Art

Burroughs based on an x-radiograph, which he felt revealed that the flesh tones lacked the *pastose* handling typical of the artist. In 1969, two members of the Rembrandt Research Project examined it and concluded that it was by a member of the artist's studio. Their primary criticism, which they based on the early Burroughs x-ray, was the absence of distinct brushwork in the face, and they noted a lack of clarity in the handling of the costume. They also found the inscription—nearby the sitter's proper left shoulder—suspect. This was still the consensus when the painting arrived at the Conservation Center.

The Burroughs x-radiograph was made with traditional film, which made it difficult to obtain a high-contrast, in-focus exposure with

the cradle also interfering with the final image. The image had even density, but owing to the thick secondary support rather than paint modelling. Digital x-radiography does not have this limitation. In a new x-radiograph, taken in 2019 after the cradle was removed, there is a clear difference in the distribution of light and dark in the face compared to Burroughs' dense shadowgraph. Distinct brushwork—whose absence was lamented in the previous image—is clearly evident throughout. Other features visible in the new x-radiograph include the loose brushwork of the proper right sleeve and a much lower initial positioning of the proper right shoulder. Furthermore, the areas where the brownish orange color of the oak panel was left intentionally exposed by the artist were clearly evident.



Figure 3. Left: Alan Burrough's shadowgraph taken in the late 1920s, and analyzed by the Rembrandt Research Project. Right: New digital x-radiograph taken at the Conservation Center in 2019, without the interference of the dense cradle

A further impediment to the proper evaluation of the painting was the exceptionally thick coating of natural resin varnishes, applied in 1930 shortly after the panel's acquisition by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation. As former students of the Kress program will appreciate, the varnish was not applied with the typical layering of brush coats of dammar and shellac usually employed by the Kress restorer, Stephen Pichetto, but had been literally poured onto the picture. In UV light, characteristic tide lines were clearly visible. The thickness of coating obliterated the majority of subtle brushwork textures. The portrait might have displayed the prized "golden glow" associated with late Rembrandts. However, the brown varnish was rather ill-suited to show off the skilled use of alternating warm and cool hues evident in

his early works. After cleaning, the delicate hues and subtle variations of the flesh tones could be appreciated. It also became apparent that the signature is genuine and integral with the pictorial layer.

For Rembrandt, especially in this early period in Amsterdam, signatures matter. The inscription 'RHL- van Rijn'—found on the Allentown picture—was only employed during a brief transitional period moving from using the monogram 'RHL' to his full name 'Rembrandt.' Writing about another work of this period, Ernst van der Wetering observed: "Such 'RHL van Rijn' signatures are found only in paintings dated 1632. This alone reduces the chance that it was added by a later hand, since a knowledge of the transformations that Rembrandt's signature underwent and the correlation between the various types and the



Figure 4. Detail of UV photo, before treatment, with select horizontal varnish tidelines indicated by arrows.

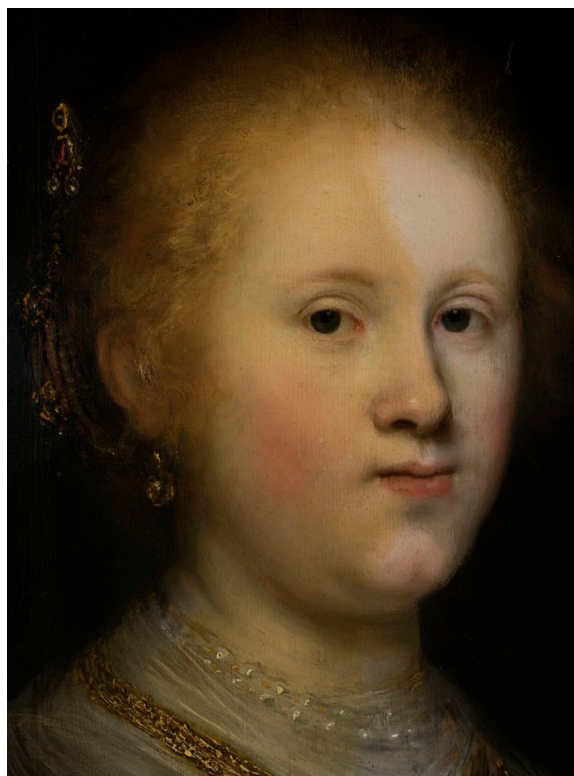


Figure 5. During varnish removal, showing the dulling and darkening effect of degraded varnish on the left side.

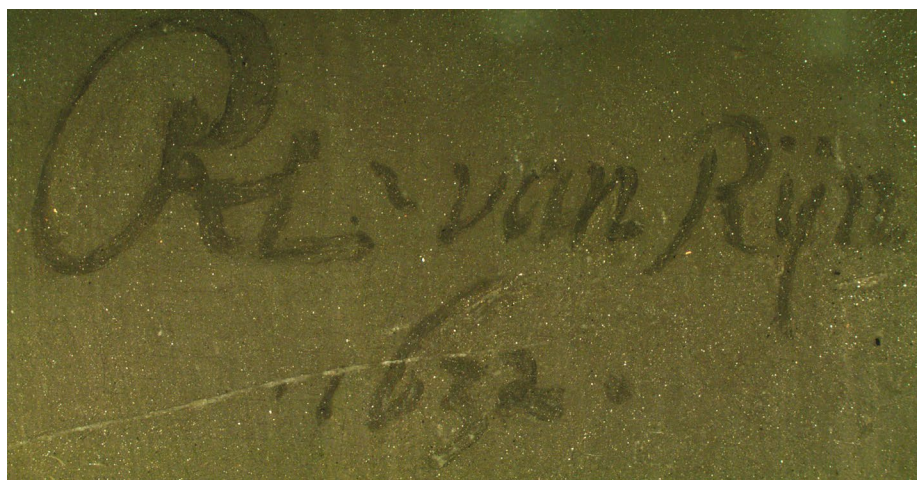


Figure 6. Detail of inscription on *Portrait of a Young Woman*, located in the right background.

relevant styles can scarcely be expected of later imitators or forgers of signatures.¹ In other words, Rembrandt definitely had something to do with this painting.

Examination of the paint layers points to this painting being a sketch—rather than a worked-up portrait—but executed by a sure and competent hand. The preparation of the panel is translucent and thinly applied, allowing the orange-brown color of the panel to show through. This tone is exploited by the artist to create warm shadows in many passages, such as the jawline, the back of the neck, around the eyes, adjusting it with thin scumbles that blend seamlessly with the highlights.

The head of the sitter with its nimbus of reddish-blond hair is nearly pristine. The model is lit frontally and slightly from above. The soft cast shadows of the nose and chin and the illumination of the lace are consistent with this light source from which the contours of the face,

hairpiece and shoulders gently recede. The hair ornament is identical with those in other portraits of this group, and the gold chain is painted in reserve.

Dorothy Mahon '80, Paintings Conservator, Metropolitan Museum of Art, who has worked on and studied numerous paintings by Rembrandt, kindly agreed to consult. While she was impressed by the quality of the head, parts of the costume did not seem characteristic. Other scholars who looked at the painting during treatment were also enthusiastic about the head, but, like Dorothy, were disturbed by certain elements of the costume.

As Shan began to investigate the passages of the costume that didn't make sense, she realized that, although most of the painting was beautifully preserved, the black passages of the lower part of the costume had been toned and repainted. Many months of analysis and research confirmed the extent of this early intervention and the dull

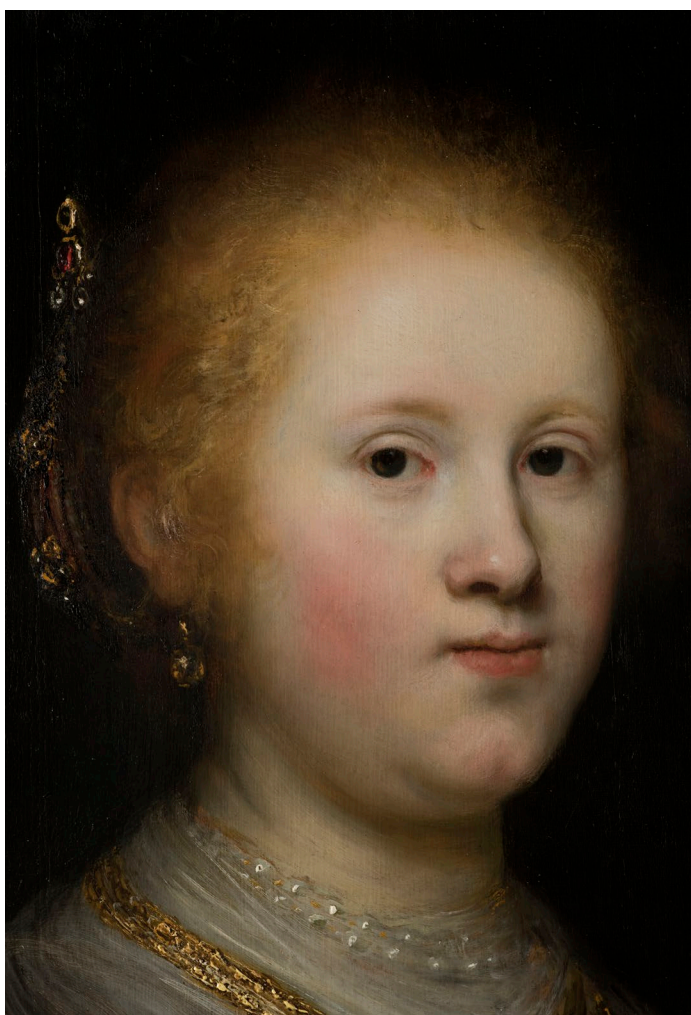


Figure 7. Detail of *Portrait of a Young Woman*, after treatment.

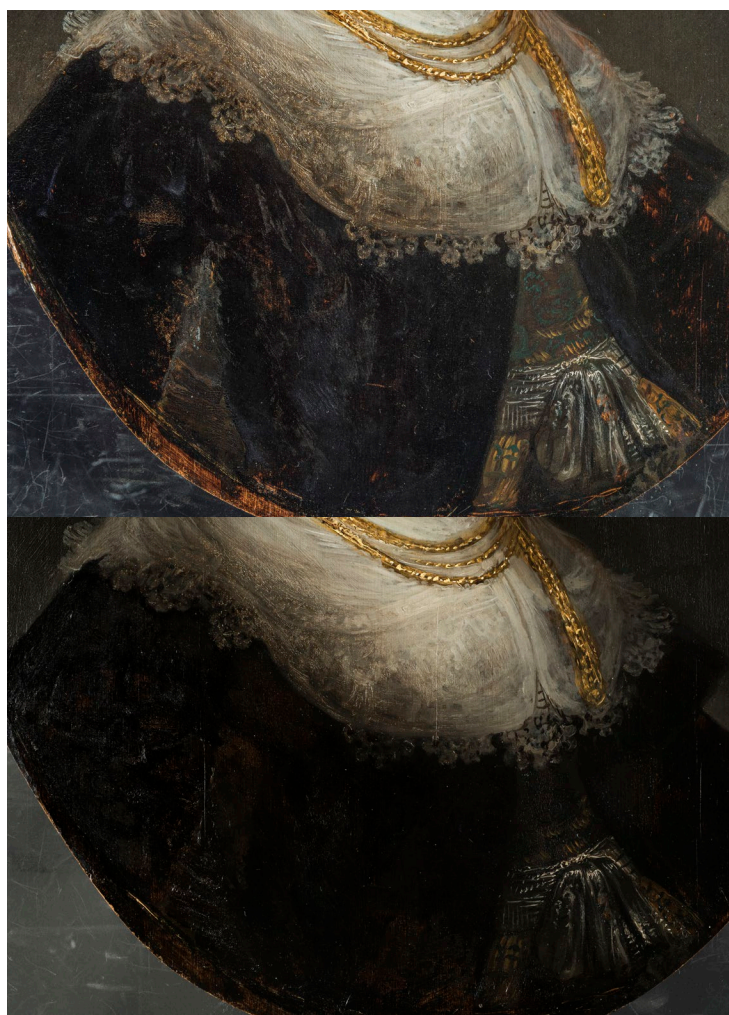


Figure 8. Detail of *Portrait of a Young Woman*, before and after overpaint removal in the costume.

¹ Ernst van de Wetering. "A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings IV, The Self-Portraits." Springer, 2005. pp 634.

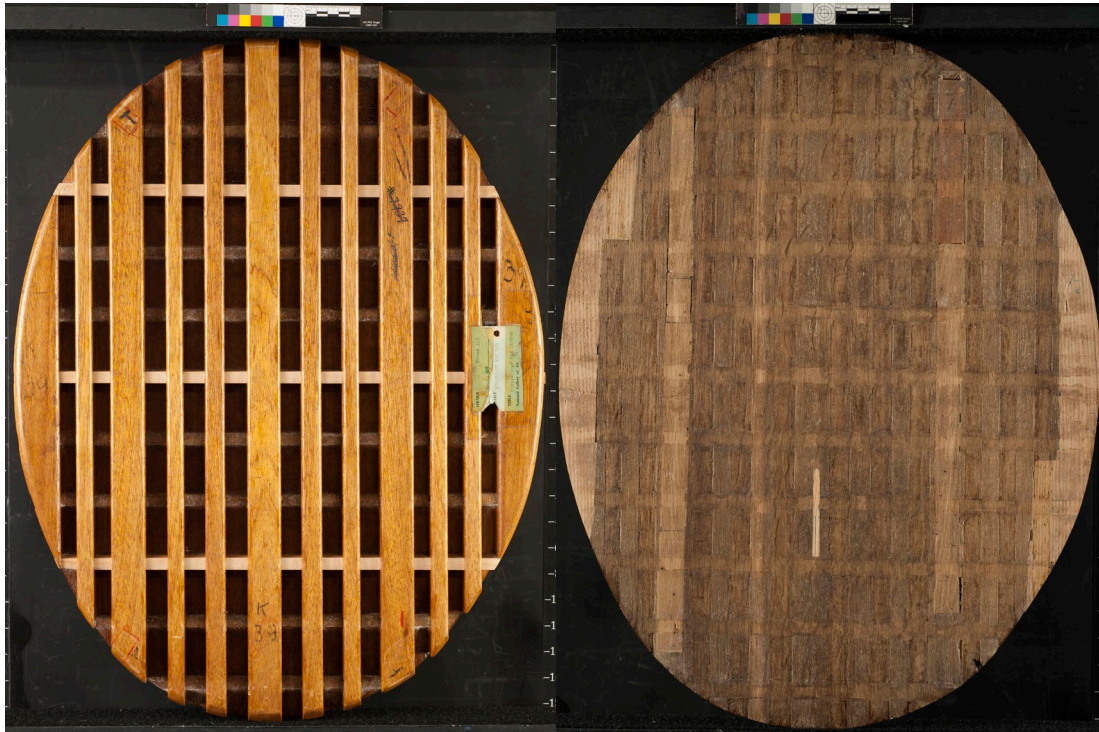


Figure 9. Verso of *Portrait of a Young Woman*, after treatment. Left: before treatment. Right: after treatment.

overpaint was removed. The original paint consists of thin glazes of bone black mixed with red lake, which created a black incredibly rich in quality and warm in color. Although the costume was somewhat abraded, it was possible to close the losses with minimal retouching.

The heavy Kress cradle on the reverse had begun to create problems for the thin oak panel. After much discussion, Alan Miller of the Department of Paintings Conservation at the Metropolitan removed the cradle. The original panel was structurally sound, and it wasn't necessary to add a secondary support. The reproduction 18th-century French gold frame was unsuitable both in style and period. We contacted Timothy Newbery, independent frame maker and historian, to create an octagonal black frame more in keeping with a 17th-century Dutch portrait.

As a result of the study and research undertaken during the restoration—and the opinions of scholars who examined the work this past year—the Allentown Art Museum felt that they could reassert the traditional attribution of the painting. They are not alone in making this choice: other museums have acknowledged judgements reached by the Rembrandt Research Project while still adhering to their own attributions of paintings. Rembrandt scholarship is complex and constantly evolving. Differing opinions continue to exist, especially given the uncertainties about how the workshop functioned 1631-1635. It is in this spirit that the Allentown Art Museum will present the painting this June in their exhibition *Rembrandt Revealed*, which will “offer a deep dive into the conservation process” and “explore the complexities and uncertainties of the attribution process and invite the public to participate in that conversation.”

Shan Kuang and Dianne Modestini

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