

## Rembrandt in Kassel: The Relativity of Eighteenth-Century Connoisseurship

Gregor J. M. Weber

The aesthetic appreciation of the artist's hand is inextricably linked to the demonstrable originality of a work of art. Only then does the connoisseur experience the specific handling of the work of art as the personal and individual accomplishment of a given artist, in other words as an authentic piece. However, what is considered to be autograph and what is considered not to be autograph, and in how far the concept of originality extends to an artist's entire workshop, has been a matter of debate since the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> Determining what constituted an *original* work by an artist was no easy matter for eighteenth-century collectors. In order to help these collectors a number of guidebooks on connoisseurship were written, for example Jonathan Richardson's *Essay on the Whole Art of Criticism*, published in 1719.<sup>2</sup> The book aimed to provide educated laymen and non-artists with the concrete criteria necessary to make the evaluation of art understandable to everyone. He thus divided his treatise into three sections: Part 1: "On the Goodness of a Picture"; Part 2: "Of the Knowledge of Hands"; Part 3: "Of Originals and Copies". It is especially in the second section that the artist's hand is discussed: for Richardson arguments for attributions had to be based on the work itself (provenance, for example, played no role), that is to say individual style and such tangible features as facture, brushwork or the working out of particular details.

Wilhelm VIII (1682–1760), Landgrave of Hessen-Kassel, can be put forward here as an example of a noble collector who, like a number of other eighteenth-century Baroque rulers, was responsible for the creation of a large picture gallery in Germany (in addition to Kassel, one thinks of the galleries in Dresden, Brunswick, Munich, Karlsruhe, Pommersfelden etc.).<sup>3</sup> The character of Wilhelm's gallery was primarily informed by its rich holdings of Dutch paintings—in fact, he spent about 18 years of his life in the United Provinces, where, thanks to his godfather Willem III of Orange-Nassau, he held a variety of military posts, such as governor of Breda, Tilburg and Maastricht. Upon his return to Kassel in 1730, he could draw on his own abilities as a connoisseur to build up his collection, as well as the advice of various Dutch art agents, painters and dealers.<sup>4</sup> Wilhelm's connoisseurship, his enthusiasm and his critical faculties are abundantly clear from his correspondence. For example, the eight works by Rembrandt, which were among the 64 paintings he acquired in 1750 from the Röver collection in Delft, were characterized by him as "of all kinds and of the master's best manners, in part they are rough, thickly applied paintings, while others are hardly less finely executed than works by Gerard Dou and Mieris". Both manners of painting, already characterized by Giorgio Vasari and Karel van Mander as contrasting, but equally valid ways of handling the brush, were thus well known to Wilhelm, who was also able to appreciate both of them.<sup>5</sup>

All told, the inventory of Wilhelm VIII's collection lists Rembrandt as the author of 34 paintings, a truly impressive number! According to modern criteria only 14 are still considered originals, the rest having been attributed in the meantime to other painters, such as Ferdinand Bol, Willem Drost, Nicolaes Maes and Roelant Roghman, or recognized



Fig. 1 Rembrandt (workshop), *Portrait of Rembrandt with Shaded Eyes*, oil on panel, 23.6 x 17.4 cm, Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel.



Fig. 2 Jan van Vliet, *Portrait of Rembrandt as a Young Man*, 1634, etching and engraving, 225 x 190 mm, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

to be copies after Rembrandt, the work of anonymous pupils or workshop assistants.<sup>6</sup> Nowadays, attributions—the recognition of a painter’s hand—are made with recourse to incomparably more works of art and illustrations of works of art than back then, permitting an exhaustive comparison of copies, versions and imitations. Wilhelm and his advisors only had reproductive engravings at their disposal. With these means at hand, the Landgrave acquired the *Portrait of Rembrandt with Shaded Eyes*, the composition of which is recorded in a 1634 engraving by Jan van Vliet with the inscription “RHL inventor” (figs. 1–2).<sup>7</sup> Because of this monogram, Rembrandt’s authorship of the painting went unquestioned for centuries, that is until a second version of the painting surfaced in 1959. The latter work is now recognized to be the original reproduced in the engraving and the Kassel painting has been demoted to the status of a copy.<sup>8</sup> The artist’s “handwriting”, in the literal sense of the word, can be perceived in this work, as Rembrandt scratched into the surface of this painting with a sharp object (probably the butt end of a brush) in order to indicate the curls of his hair. The painter of the copy in Kassel imitated this technique as best he could, but used a thicker instrument and placed the lines more randomly next to each other. The same “RHL” monogram and 1630 date appears on another painting in Kassel, the *Bust of an Old Man Wearing a Cross* (fig. 3).<sup>9</sup> This old man’s physiognomy and beret are also found in an engraving by Rembrandt—in this case as well, a print seems to support an attribution that appears all the more certain because of a monogram. However, this octagonal painting was judged by the Rembrandt Research Project in 1982 to be a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century imitation, and the Gallery in Kassel itself now considers it the product of Rembrandt’s workshop.<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 3 Rembrandt (workshop), *Bust of an Old Man Wearing a Cross*, ca. 1630–1632, oil on panel, 67.4 x 55.9 cm, Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel.



Fig. 4 Copy after Govert Flinck, *Portrait of an Old Man with Two Golden Chains*, oil on canvas on panel, 68 x 56.3 cm, Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel.

To such eighteenth-century criteria as signatures and reproductive engravings can of course be added stylistic similarities, like the characteristic *impasto* application of the skin tones in imitation of wrinkles and creases, or, as mentioned above, scratching into the wet paint with the butt end of the brush in order to indicate hair. A second painting representing a physiognomically similar old man, in this case wearing two gold chains, was attributed to Rembrandt even though it does not carry the artist's signature (fig. 4).<sup>11</sup> By way of endorsement, the original rectangular canvas was transformed sometime before 1749 into an octagonal panel painting so that it would have the same format and support as the other *Old Man*, which became its pendant. For eighteenth-century collectors this sort of homogenizing operation supported the attribution; nowadays the painting is considered a copy after a work by the Rembrandt pupil Govert Flinck.

The painterly texture of this painting matches that of a larger painting, *Seated Man with a Fur and Cane* (fig. 5), that is now considered to be a copy after a painting by Samuel van Hoogstraten.<sup>12</sup> It served in the Gallery as the pendant to a painting of similar size, considered at the time to be the portrait of an architect (fig. 6).<sup>13</sup> Now identified as a work by Nicolaes Maes, *The Apostle Thomas* carried a false Rembrandt signature. Wilhelm acquired it in 1732 at the auction of the renowned collection of Lambert Hermansz ten Kate in Amsterdam as an authentic Rembrandt. Maes's original signature had been removed, leaving only the date "A 1656" behind. The large, signed and dated history piece by Rembrandt in Kassel, *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph*, is from the same year (fig. 7).<sup>14</sup> As if to confirm the attribution to Rembrandt of *The Apostle Thomas*, the two paintings are similar in colouring, as well as the handling of the fur and the grey beards. The collection in Kassel contained a multitude of potential cross-references that could be put to such ends; one attribution corroborated the other and that attribution supported the next one etc., etc.



Fig. 5 Copy after Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Seated Man with a Fur and Cane*, oil on canvas, 124.5 x 99.5 cm, Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel.

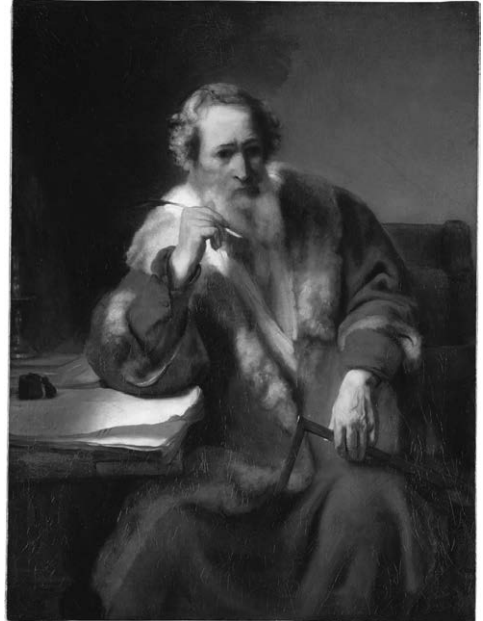


Fig. 6 Nicolaes Maes, *The Apostle Thomas*, 1656, oil on canvas, 119.5 x 91 cm, Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel.



Fig. 7 Rembrandt, *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph*, 1656, oil on canvas, 175.2 x 210.5 cm, Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel.



Fig. 8 Imitator of Rembrandt, *Pastiche of Two Kassel Paintings*, oil on panel, 62.8 x 48.5 cm, present location unknown.

Similarities in style and use of motifs, signatures and reproductions, preferably even the authority provided by an impeccable provenance and the advice of experts led to a web of arguments for assigning a picture to Rembrandt. A coherent system of references was in place in Kassel. Indirectly, the proximity of these pictures to one another was reinforced by an odd painting by an unknown painter, who augmented the interwoven character of the Kassel collection of Rembrandts with an innovative pastiche (fig. 8).<sup>15</sup> The painter fused the head from the *Self-Portrait with Helmet* to the shoulders and gorget of the *Standard-Bearer*. Both pictures belong since the mid-eighteenth century to the 34 exhibited works attributed to Rembrandt in Kassel.<sup>16</sup>

The attribution of this and numerous other paintings to Rembrandt signifies on the other hand a lack of knowledge of the actual creator, pupil or follower of Rembrandt. An example is Ferdinand Bol, who had fully mastered Rembrandt's style during his apprenticeship, but gained fame for his independent later works executed for such public buildings in Amsterdam in the 1650s and 1660s as the City Hall, the Lepers' Asylum, the Admiralty etc.<sup>17</sup> Bol's early work executed in Rembrandt's style did not accord with the perception of later connoisseurs of his art, with the result that three of Bol's paintings in Kassel were thought to be by Rembrandt. On the other hand, a life-size standing female nude that is, in fact, stylistically reminiscent of Bol was attributed to him.<sup>18</sup>

The paintings that figured as Rembrandts in Kassel do indeed exemplify—as Landgrave Wilhelm wrote—both the “rough” and the “fine” manners of painting; the former style, for example, is evident in some of the study heads and the masterpiece of the Kassel Gallery, the 1656 *Jacob blessing the Sons of Joseph*; the latter, “fine” style, is apparent in the *Noli me tangere* (now in Buckingham Palace) and *The Holy Family with Painted Frame and Curtain*.<sup>19</sup> Side by side with the Landgrave's appreciation of these variations of the artist's facture

was another aesthetic principle at play in Wilhelm's Baroque Gallery, to which the individual work of art was subordinated, namely an all-encompassing decorative effect and a completely wall-filling hanging.<sup>20</sup> Wilhelm had the paintings arranged in his Gallery in Kassel as far as possible in symmetrical fashion. His most important model was the Dresden Gallery of August III, King of Poland and Elector of Saxony. There the paintings hung frame to frame on walls that were approximately 30 metres long and 9 metres high, with groups of about 10 pictures forming symmetrical compartments, which were symmetrically related to other compartments.<sup>21</sup> In Wilhelm's Gallery there was in principle only a symmetrical axis in the middle of the long gallery wall where the pictures were hung in pairs, while there were also related groups of works within the fields. This arrangement clarifies why so much emphasis was placed in these picture galleries on pendants, and why, for example, an octagonal painting of an old man was so radically altered in order to make it conform to the format of another depiction of an old man (figs. 3–4). That this resulted in a less authentic experience of the works of art was apparently of little concern.

Changes in format were amongst the most common interventions, occurring everywhere and throughout the ages. Even Rembrandt's *Night Watch* did not escape this fate, and was cut down to accommodate its new location in the Amsterdam City Hall, where it was moved in 1715. In order to fit it into its allocated space between two doors, a strip of canvas measuring about 50 cm was removed from the left side, resulting in the loss of two figures. But this is only one of many examples of a change made to the format of a Rembrandt painting. For example, *The Blinding of Samson*, a large painting on canvas, was made about 26 cm larger in order to make it fit into a symmetrical hanging; this addition has since been folded over the stretcher and hidden under the frame.<sup>22</sup> Another example is an oval picture of a *Young Woman in Fantasy Costume*, which at an unknown point in time was made rectangular. An oval the size of the Rembrandt picture was sawed out of a rectangular panel painting by Maerten van Cleve and the Rembrandt painting was subsequently set into it. The corners of the van Cleve composition that remained visible were painted dark brown and the background of Rembrandt's painting was adjusted accordingly.<sup>23</sup>

In Kassel, the pictures appear more than anything else to have been enlarged. The Gallery inspectors, all of whom were professional painters, simply extended the representations over the added pieces of canvas or panel. The most striking example of this are four paintings by Jacob Jordaens of varying sizes that Wilhelm placed in the ballroom of his palace. All four works were altered so that they had the same format, namely a large cartouche form with curvilinear edges (ca. 215 x 165 cm).<sup>24</sup> For decorative reasons, paintings such as Jordaens's *Family Portrait* (116.3 x 148.2 cm) had been enlarged in height by about one metre (fig. 9)! This only worked because the composition had also been enlarged in a very imaginative way. After Napoleon made his triumphal entry into Kassel some fifty years later, he had hundreds of paintings sent from there to Paris around 1806/1807, including some by Jordaens. In Paris, the paintings were changed back to their original rectangular format. There, in the Musée Napoleon, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Baroque decorative principles of presentation no longer held sway, but were replaced by new art historical criteria.

Vivant Denon, the director of the Musée Napoleon, himself made the selection of paintings that were removed from Kassel to Paris. Based on his highly developed connoisseurship, the best Rembrandt paintings from the Kassel Gallery were transported to Paris, where they remained until they were reclaimed after the fall of Napoleon in 1815. Like the works by Jordaens, one of Kassel's most famous paintings, Rembrandt's portrait



Fig. 9 Jacob Jordaens, *Self-Portrait with the Artist's Family and His Father-in-law Adam van Noort*, ca. 1616, oil on canvas, 116.3 x 148.2 cm, Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel.

of his wife Saskia Uylenburgh came back in a modified form. When Wilhelm VIII acquired it, the painting had an arched top and measured 122.5 x 102 cm, but after its restitution it was rectangular in form and measured only 99.5 x 78.5 cm; the Parisian restorers had recognized that part of the painting was a later addition made by someone other than Rembrandt and removed it (fig. 10).<sup>25</sup>

The life-size, full-length portrait of a man, first recorded in the Kassel inventory of 1775 and then in the printed catalogue of 1783 as a work by Rembrandt and characterized as being 'very dark' and with the figure dressed 'in black clothing' (canvas, ca. 225 x 149 cm) is a mysterious case.<sup>26</sup> Denon chose it for the Musée Napoleon and it was placed on the shipping list. Nevertheless, it did not return to Kassel after 1815, nor—as was the case with other missing paintings—did anyone attempt to trace it. An excellent painting by Rembrandt did, however, come back from Paris in 1815 that, according to the shipping list, had oddly enough never been taken there in the first place. The painting in question is the *Portrait of Nicolaes Bruyningh*, which Wilhelm VIII had acquired in 1750 and was recorded in his inventory of that year (107 x 91.5 cm; fig. 11).<sup>27</sup> It does not appear in the following inventory of 1775, nor in the printed catalogues of 1783 and 1799. Might it be the case that the painting was altered so much that it was recorded from 1775 onwards as a large, full-length portrait, replete with new measurements and a new inventory number? That painting hung in the Kassel Gallery next to the similarly sized, large *Portrait of Andries de Graeff* by Rembrandt (fig. 12),<sup>28</sup> which is an excellent prototype for a portrait of a standing man: Andries de Graeff is shown in this work in a relaxed standing pose in front of a pedestal, on which his right arm rests. Nicolaes Bruyningh appears to be seated with his torso and head turned to the side towards where a table is indicated. The depiction is so hazy in this section of the painting that Bruyningh, in the enlarged version, may readily have been resting his arm on a pedestal.<sup>29</sup> Only the top right part of the chair back is visible, indicating that he is sitting in a chair.<sup>30</sup> It would have been quite simple to transform this



Fig. 10 Rembrandt, *Saskia Uylenburgh in Profile with Fantasy Costume*, oil on panel, 99.5 x 78.5 cm, Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel.



Fig. 11 Rembrandt, *Portrait of Nicolaes Bruyningh*, 1652, oil on canvas, 106.8 x 91.5 cm, Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel.



Fig. 12 Rembrandt, *Portrait of Andries de Graeff*, 1639, oil on canvas, 199 x 123.4 cm, Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel.



painting into a standing, full-length portrait therefore. Like the other enlarged paintings, this one may have been stripped of its additions while in the Musée Napoleon; at any rate, the reproduction of the portrait in the 1814 Paris catalogue shows it as it now is.

Be this as it may, the appreciation of the artist's hand as evidenced in the Kassel Gallery was part and parcel of Wilhelm VIII's personal enjoyment of art. At the same time, there was the belief that one could do with the objects as one pleased, even if this meant interfering with their original, authentic properties.

## Notes

Translated from the German by Jonathan Bikker.

1 Anna Tummers, *The Fingerprint of an Old Master. On Connoisseurship of Seventeenth-Century Dutch and Flemish Paintings: Recent Debates and Seventeenth-Century Insights*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 2009.

2 Irene Haberland, *Jonathan Richardson (1666–1745): Die Begründung der Kunstkennerschaft*, Hamburg and Münster, 1991.

3 Wolf von Both and Hans Vogel, *Landgraf Wilhelm VIII. von Hessen Kassel: Ein Fürst der Rokokozeit*, Marburg, 1964.

4 Everhard Korthals Altes, *De verovering van de internationale kunstmarkt door de zeventiende-eeuwse schilderkunst: Enkele studies over de verspreiding van Hollandse schilderijen in de eerste helft van de achttiende eeuw*, Leiden, 2003.

5 Bernhard Schnackenburg, "Die 'rauhe Manier' des jungen Rembrandt: Ein Malstil und seine Herkunft," Ernst van de Wetering and Bernhard Schnackenburg (ed.), exh. cat. *Der junge Rembrandt: Rätsel um seine Anfänge*, Staatliche Museen Kassel and Museum Het Rembrandthuis Amsterdam, 2001–2002, pp. 92–121, esp. pp. 92, 94.

6 Michael Eissenhauer (ed.), *Rembrandt-Bilder: Die historische Sammlung der Kasseler Gemäldegalerie*, Staatliche Museen Kassel, Munich, 2006.

7 Inv. no. GK 229; see Julia Gierse in Eissenhauer, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 180–184, no. 23.

8 Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, inv. no. SK-A-4691. Josua Bruyn *et al.* (ed.), *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 1, The Hague, Boston and London 1982, pp. 169–176, no. A 14.

9 Inv. no. GK 231; see Gregor J. M. Weber in Eissenhauer, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 85–89, no. 3.

10 Bruyn, *op. cit.* (note 8), pp. 598–602, no. C 26.

11 Inv. no. GK 1112; see Gregor J. M. Weber in Eissenhauer, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 90–93.

12 Inv. no. GK 253; see Gregor J. M. Weber in Eissenhauer, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 117–121, no. 10.

13 Inv. no. GK 246; see Gregor J. M. Weber in Eissenhauer, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 96–102, no. 6.

14 Inv. no. GK 249; see Gregor J. M. Weber in Eissenhauer, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 213–219, no. 30.

15 Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 volumes, Landau and Pfalz, 1983ff.,

vol. 1 (1983), pp. 85, 88, note 87; Gregor J. M. Weber, "Der Kontext der Bilder: Die Gemälde Rembrandts und seiner Schule aus der Sammlung von Landgraf Wilhelm VIII.," Eissenhauer, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 47–64, 57–58, fig. 10.

16 Cf. Eissenhauer, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 156–161, no. 18; pp. 233–237, no. 34.

17 Albert Blankert, *Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680): Rembrandt's Pupil*, Doornspijk, 1982.

18 Inv. no. GK 1233, canvas c. 214 x 184 cm. See Julia Gierse and Gregor J. M. Weber in Eissenhauer, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 243–244, no. B 11, illustrated in colour (as follower of Jacob van Loo).

19 Cf. Eissenhauer, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 142–148, no. 16; pp. 207–213, no. 29.

20 Justus Lange, "Auf dem Weg zu einer musealen Hängung: Die Kasseler Gemäldegalerie von Landgraf Wilhelm VIII. von Hessen-Kassel (1682–1760)," Alexis Joachimides *et al.* (ed.), *Auf dem Weg zum Museum: Sammlung und Präsentation antiker Kunst an den deutschen Fürstenhöfen des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Kassel, 2016, pp. 127–150.

21 Gregor J. M. Weber, "The Gallery as Work of Art: The Installation of the Italian Paintings in 1754," Harald Marx and Gregor J. M. Weber (ed.), exh. cat. *Dresden in the Ages of Splendor and Enlightenment: Eighteenth-Century Paintings from the Old Master Picture Gallery*, Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus 1999, pp. 183–197.

22 Canvas 206 x 276 cm (original); 235.5 x 302 cm (enlarged). Städelsches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie, Frankfurt/Main, inv. no. 1383. Josua Bruyn *et al.* (ed.), *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 3, Dordrecht, Boston and London 1989, pp. 183–195, no. A 116; Toshiharu Nakamura, "Rembrandt's Blinding of Samson: A Work for Artistic Emulation with Rubens?," Akira Kofuku (ed.), *Rembrandt and Dutch History Painting in the 17th Century*, Tokyo, 2004, pp. 123–138.

23 Gregor J. M. Weber, "Rembrandt untertan," Friso Lammertse and Jaap van der Veen (ed.), *Een kroniek voor Jeroen Giltaij (Kroniek van het Rembrandthuis)*, 2012, pp. 70–75, esp. pp. 70–73.

24 Lange, *op. cit.* (note 20), pp. 130–132, fig. 3.

25 Inv. no. GK 236; see Gregor J. M. Weber in Eissenhauer, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 148–155, no. 17.

26 Julia Gierse and Gregor J. M. Weber in Eissenhauer, *op. cit.* (note 6), p. 251.

27 Inv. no. GK 243; see Gregor J. M. Weber in Eissenhauer, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 167–172, no. 20; for the shipping list see p. 172, note 8; p. 251.

28 Inv. no. GK 239; see Gregor J. M. Weber in Eissenhauer, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 195–201, no. 27.

29 The canvas was lined in Paris between 1807 and 1815; examination of the edges does not rule out an addition. The lower half of the picture as also the background exhibits numerous darkened overpaintings. The severely discoloured varnish makes it difficult to adequately understand the painting.

30 The signature here, "Rembrandt f. 1652", is partially covered by the chair stile.

## Photo Credits and Sources

Figs. 1, 3–12 (Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel), fig. 2 (Rijksmuseum-Stichting, Amsterdam).