A CORPUS OF

REMBRANDT PAINTINGS

Stichting Foundation
Rembrandt Research Project

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V

SMALL-SCALE HISTORY PAINTINGS

Springer

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Rembrandt Research Project

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Frontispiece:

V 19 *A woman wading in a pond (Callisto in the wilderness)*, 1654
London, The National Gallery



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Preface

This preface can perhaps best begin by explaining the rather puzzling title of the present Volume: 'The small-scale history paintings'.

In such paintings the figures were as a rule represented full length and engaged in some kind of action in a more or less clearly defined interior or exterior spatial setting. This demanded of the painter not only insight into complex compositional problems, but also an understanding of the possibilities of light and shadow, and the skill to render the appropriate gestures and affects. He had to have a thorough knowledge of the relevant Biblical or mythological stories and the associated costumes and other accessories. Moreover, he had to be a competent painter of landscapes, architecture, still lifes and animals. In short, the painter of such works in Rembrandt's time was considered to be an all-rounder. But it was also expected of him that he would be both inventive and possessed of a powerful visual imagination. Producing a history piece, in fact, was considered the most demanding challenge that a painter could undertake.

Unlike Rubens, for example, Rembrandt seldom had occasion to paint history pieces on a life-size scale. One can in fact best get to know Rembrandt as an all-round painter through his *c.* 75 small-scale history pieces, for it would seem that he deliberately chose this type of painting in order to develop further his abilities as an artist immediately after his period of apprenticeship. By analysing these works, therefore, one gets closest to Rembrandt's ideas about a number of fundamental aspects of the art of painting.

In Volume IV, devoted to his self-portraits, we tried to understand the figure of Rembrandt in the representation of his own appearance and how he saw himself in relation to his major predecessors and among those art lovers interested in his work. In the present Volume we approach Rembrandt *as an artist* most intimately through an analysis of his many small-scale history pieces (and the small group of genre pieces which are in many respects related to them).

The compilation of an oeuvre catalogue – which was originally the ultimate objective of the Rembrandt Research Project – is not in the first place a matter of getting to know Rembrandt as man and artist but rather of ordering and describing his painted oeuvre. However, in the work on these last two Volumes of the *Corpus* the thematic approach to this oeuvre proved to have great advantages. Not only has our knowledge of hitherto often unknown aspects of his work been enormously enriched, this approach also turned out to serve the original goal of the Rembrandt Research Project in ways that were wholly unexpected.

At the project's inception it seemed obvious that one ought to deal with Rembrandt's paintings in the chronological sequence of their origin. But because of the multifaceted nature of Rembrandt's production, that meant treating very different types of paintings all mixed together. Thus a portrait could follow a landscape which in turn followed a history piece which succeeded a self-portrait and so on. And yet initially there was much to be said for the chronological way of working: both the material properties and stylistic characteristics of Rembrandt's works seemed, after all, to change only gradually and to follow a logical development. Was it therefore not best to follow that development? Our work on Volume II, which was for a large part devoted to the many portraits that Rembrandt painted between 1631 and '35, taught us however that there were specific advantages in working with a larger group of paintings, in which Rembrandt had worked from very similar pictorial starting points. For example, we learned that in his rendering of the anatomy and lighting of the face, in the treatment of the background or in his handling of contours and contrasts, Rembrandt developed certain ideas, which he then often modified, together with skills that were in part rooted in these ideas. The insights thus gained also allowed us to avoid confusing Rembrandt's works with those of pupils or other associates involved in the production of portraits, or with later fakes or imitations. That, after all, was the aim which the Rembrandt Research Project had set as its priority.

This experience with the early portraits was one of the main reasons, following a methodological reappraisal of the whole project between 1989 and '93, for changing to a thematic approach.[1] It gradually became clear to us that with this thematic way of working we could get closer to Rembrandt's way of thinking and working in the face of specific artistic challenges. Initially we thought that these insights were no more than an interesting spin-off from our research on authenticity, but this spin-off became increasingly important as an additional tool in the ordering and sifting of the relevant part of Rembrandt's oeuvre.

On a more limited scale we had already had this experience in working on the first three volumes. Thus, work on Volume I produced insights into Rembrandt's use of materials, painting technique and workshop practice. In the Volumes II and III our insight developed into Rembrandt's teaching and the workshop production linked to it. But with the thematic way of working in Volumes IV and V there opened up much wider vistas that needed to be explored if we were to get a grasp on the relevant field of Rembrandt's activities. In the work on the self-portraits, for example, this led to the realization that we also needed to include in our investigation the etchings and drawings that Rembrandt had produced before the mirror if we wanted to understand Rembrandt's exceptional production of self-portraits and the great variety of functions of these works in their full compass. It was only through this integral approach that the realization dawned that others in Rembrandt's workshop were also producing 'self-portraits' of Rembrandt, an advance in our understanding in which a key role was played by research methods of the physical sciences to identify the relevant works.

What then are the fruits in the present Volume of our investigation of the small-scale history pieces?

The cataloguing of the oeuvre, naturally, had to take precedence in this Volume too. The second half of the book comprises 30 often very extensive catalogue texts

1 A detailed account of this reorientation can be found in the Preface of Vol. IV and on www.rembrandtresearchproject.org

V 20 Rembrandt (with later additions), The Polish Rider* *c.* 1655

NEW YORK, N.Y. THE FRICK COLLECTION, INV. NO. 10.1.98

HDG 268; BR. 279; BAUCH 211; GERSON 287; TÜMPEL 123

1. Introduction and description

The *Polish Rider* has always stirred the imagination because of its intriguing subject; but in recent decades, the question of its attribution has also attracted wide attention. Ever since Bruyn cautiously suggested in a book review in 1984 that the *Polish Rider* might possibly be by Willem Drost, controversy has surrounded this famous work.[1] The unusual nature of the subject contributes in no small measure to the difficulties of interpreting both the iconography and function of the painting, and its attribution. The condition of the work, especially in the background and the terrain in the foreground, moreover, makes it hard to assess the painting properly. In this entry the attribution of this unfinished painting to Rembrandt will be defended. Certain areas, however, may have been completed by another hand.

A heavily armed rider on a grey horse stands out against an uneven landscape with a steep hill topped by a huge edifice. In the course of the debate about the identity of the rider, a great deal of research has been done into the nature of his costume and his arms, which can be identified as Polish. This debate will be summarised under *Comments* below. Here it will suffice to describe his arms and dress which, thanks to Żygulski, could be identified in its detail as distinctly Polish (see note 9).

The rider wears a long coat, the so-called *żupan*, which is closed down to the waist at the front by numerous small buttons, with a sash round the waist. A split in the side makes it possible to spread out the coat-tail on the horse's back. The colour of the coat is hard to determine given that the low light shining on the rider from behind gives the fabric a yellow glow, while on the chest and on the parts of the sleeves turned away from the light greyish and yellowish reflections predominate. The strong reflections on the right sleeve show that the painter intended to depict a shiny, satin-like fabric. Where the *żupan* is turned back below it reveals a brown lining. It has a small standing collar, while the loose-fitting sleeves are gathered at the wrist. The rider wears red breeches and yellowish-brown calf-length boots. On his head he has a red, fur-lined cap (*kuczma*), with the flaps turned up on both sides. Long, curling hair hangs from under the cap almost to the shoulders.

On the right of the saddle with its high pommel hangs a sabre in a scabbard over which the rider has thrown his leg and the side of his *żupan*. At his left hip can be seen the hilt of a second sabre. In the hand at his side he holds a war hammer (*nadziak*). Lastly, he has a bow, which hangs on his left side, and a quiver full of arrows at his right hip. Three of these, their shafts partly red, are thrust into the front pocket of the gleaming, black leather quiver. The bottom of the quiver reflects the red of the breeches.

The motion of the walking horse is suggested by the swinging of a long tassel of whitish horsehair (*buntchuk*) which is attached to the bridle. The tassel is held by a pomegranate-shaped boss with decorative strings terminating in knobs. The bridle and reins are made of narrow, red straps. The horse has a metal bit in its open mouth, with a copper-coloured knob at the side. It is a lean horse with cropped ears and a tail either docked or tied up. A spotted animal skin serves as the saddlecloth, its two forelegs held together by a ring on the horses' breast.

The terrain, the landscape and the architecture will be described in *Paint layer*, since these elements, in part because of the painting's complicated condition, are not easily legible.

Working conditions

Examined 21 April 1969 (J.B., B.H.) out of the frame by strong artificial light with the aid of X-radiographs of the entire painting; again in December 1989 (E.H.B., E.v.d.W.) and in November 1994 (M.F., E.v.d.W.); and again in May 1996 and on many other occasions (E.v.d.W.): in the frame on the gallerywall using a ladder and under artificial light.

Support

Canvas, lined, 117.1 x 134.8 cm (measured along the stretcher); a single piece with a strip from 10 (left) to 9 cm (right) wide added later along the bottom, evidently to replace a lost strip of the painting. Along the top edge the original canvas has been drawn over the edge of the stretcher. Here cusping is clearly visible in the X-radiograph extending up to *c.* 12 cm into the weave. This cusping is so marked as to lead to the conclusion that little or nothing of the original canvas is missing along the top edge. At *c.* 5 cm from the present top edge there is a row of irregularly spaced nail holes, indicating that the canvas was once turned over here. This might explain a reference to the painting from 1795 which gives the height as *c.* 7 cm less than now (see *6. Provenance*). Along the lower edge of the original canvas, which runs just under the horse's raised hooves, faint cusping can be seen. Comparing this with the deformation along the top edge it can be concluded that *c.* 10 cm of the original canvas is missing from the bottom. Because of interference between the wood grain of the stretcher and the weave in the X-radiograph, the cusping on the left and right cannot be traced exactly; on both sides a pattern of waves seems to show up in the canvas. Like the top edge, the right-hand side bears traces of a line of nail holes. The canvas has been roughly cut along this line such that only towards the top are a few intact holes left. Here there is a strip of filler measuring *c.* 1.5 cm up to the present edge. The signature is now cut off by the present right edge (see *Signature*), indicating that at least 8 to 10 cm of the original canvas are missing on the right.

In conclusion, it can be said that the height of the painting in its present form, including the added strip below, is more or less original. Only the width has been reduced, which offers an explanation for the painting's somewhat square format.

Thread count: 17.32 vertical threads/cm (15.5-22); 17.84 horizontal threads/cm (15.5-19). The smaller spread of the number of horizontal threads and a weaving flaw at the lower right edge below the centre (X-ray film no. 9 shows that three horizontal threads have been woven together), indicate that the warp runs horizontally. The added piece has a weave density of 12.9 vertical threads/cm (11.5-14); 12.9 horizontal threads/cm (12.5-

Fig. 1. Canvas 117.1 x 134.8 cm

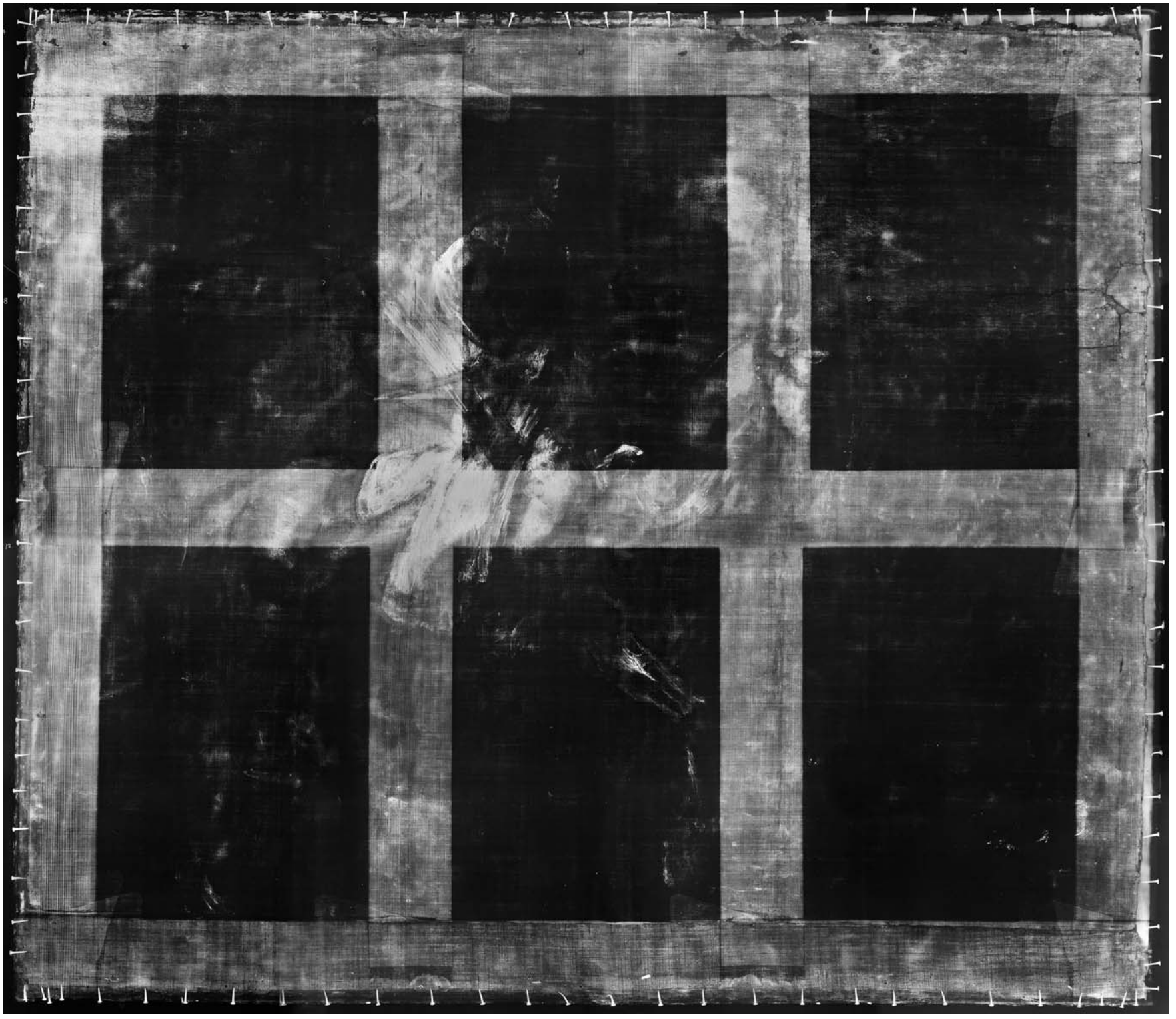


13.5). This strip, whose warp also runs horizontally, is not sewn onto the original canvas but glued to the lining canvas. It must be regarded as a relatively late replacement of a section of the original canvas which for unknown reasons (possibly as a result of rising damp) could not be preserved. The presence of cusping in the addition indicates that a piece of canvas from another old painting was used for this purpose. This would accord with normal restoration methods in the past, in which old painted canvas was used to fill up gaps (see, for example, the strip added after 1723 to the *Anatomy lesson of Dr Deyman*, Br. 414, and the fillings in the *Night watch*, III A 146, for example in Van Ruytenburgh's boot).

Ground

A thin greyish brown layer in which the texture of the canvas is clearly visible has been left visible in various sections: in the horse's legs and head, in the spotted animal skin and

Fig. 2. X-Ray



locally in the landscape. A similar greyish brown layer lies exposed at many points in the landscape, especially on the right. Since the grey layer in these places shows lively brushstrokes, it is most unlikely that it is also simply exposed ground but is rather part of the paint layer.

Paint layer

Condition: The painting was cleaned and restored by William Suhr in 1950 (see fig. 3). The 1968 catalogue of the Frick Collection says of the condition of the *Polish Rider*, probably on his authority: 'Despite damage in limited areas, the general condition is good.' The initial examination by the RRP established that the impasto was slightly flattened and that there were repaired tears in the canvas in the rock on the left, below the stirrup and in the sky near the right edge. In addition, retouched paint losses were found in the horse's tail, behind its right hind leg and in front of its right foreleg. There was also some wearing

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