

GIFT OF GENIUS:

A REMBRANDT for Kingston



AGNES ETHERINGTON ART CENTRE 26.10.2003 18.01.2004

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Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn

Leiden 1606 – 1669 Amsterdam

Head of an Old Man in a Cap

Around 1630

Oil on panel

24.3 × 20.3 cm

Monogrammed upper right, in ligature: RHL

Provenance

Vicenza, Prince Gonzaga;

(Amsterdam, Van Diemen, in 1931);

New York, D. Bingham (in 1933);

(London, Charles Duits Ltd.);

Wassenaar, Sidney J. van den Bergh (London, Christie's, 30 March 1979, lot 127);

Milwaukee, Drs Alfred and Isabel Bader (1979-2003)

Exhibitions

Delft, Museum het Prinsenhof, *Nederlandse Meesters uit Particulier Bezit*, 1952-1953, no. 59

Laren, Singer Museum, *Kunstschatten. Twee Nederlandse Collecties Schilderijen*, 1959, no. 67

Leiden, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal, *17de eeuwse Meesters uit Nederlands Particulier Bezit*, 1965, no. 35

Kingston, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, *Pictures from the Age of Rembrandt*, cat. David McTavish, 1984, pp. 17-19, no. 8

New York, Otto Naumann Gallery, *Inaugural Exhibition of Old Master Paintings*, cat. Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, 1995, pp. 68-71, no. 13

Amsterdam, Museum het Rembrandthuis, *Rembrandt & Van Vliet. A Collaboration on Copper*, 1996, pp. 60-61, no. 10b

Victoria, National Gallery of Victoria, *Rembrandt: A Genius and his Impact*, ed. Albert Blankert, 1997, pp. 96-98, no. 4

Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardiner Museum, *Rembrandt Creates Rembrandt. Art and Ambition in Leiden 1629-1631*, ed. Alan Chong, 2000, pp. 117-120, no. 16

Amsterdam, Museum het Rembrandthuis and Kassel, Staatliche Museen Kassel, *The Mystery of the Young Rembrandt*, ed. Ernst van de Wetering, 2001-2002, pp. 370-373, no. 80

Kyoto, Kyoto National Museum, and Frankfurt, Städtisches Kunstinstitut, *Rembrandt Rembrandt*, 2002-2003, pp. 66-68, no. 10

Literature

Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century*, vol. 6, London, 1916, p. 472 note 115

Abraham Bredius, *The Paintings of Rembrandt*, 2nd ed., London, 1937, p. 27, no. 633 (ill.)

Kurt Bauch, *Der frühe Rembrandt und seine Zeit*, Berlin, 1960, p. 261, note 130

A. B. de Vries, "Old Masters in the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Sidney van den Bergh," *Apollo*, vol. 80, 1964, p. 357; ill. fig. 11

Kurt Bauch, *Rembrandt Gemälde*, Berlin, 1966, no. 343

A.B. de Vries, *Verzameling Sidney J. van den Bergh*, 1968, p. 84

Horst Gerson, *Rembrandt Paintings*, New York, 1968, pp. 18, 23 (ill.) 194, 489, no. 29, p. 195

Abraham Bredius, *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the Paintings*, revised Horst Gerson, London, 1969, p. 616, no. 633; ill. p. 122

Josua Bruyn, ed., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, The Hague, 1982ff., vol. 1, pp. 43-44, 576-580, no. C22 (as not by Rembrandt, with Ernst van de Wetering dissenting)

Peter Schatborn, review of Josua Bruyn, ed., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 1, in: *Oud Holland*, vol. 100, 1985, p. 62

Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, "The State of Research in Northern Baroque Art," *Art Bulletin*, vol. 69, 1987, p. 516

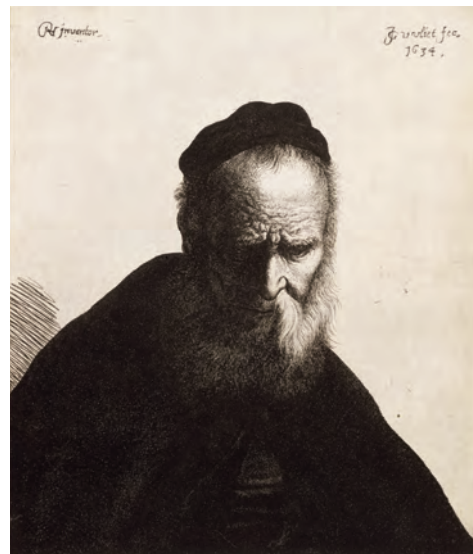
Julius Held, "Notes to the 1969 Edition," *Rembrandt Studies*, Princeton, 1991, p. 188

F.W.H. Hollstein, Christiane Schuckman and D. de Hoop Scheffer, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts ca. 1450 - 1700*, vol. 41, Rotterdam, 1992, p. 166, with no. 23

Christian Tümpel, *Rembrandt*, Antwerp and New York, 1993, pp. 57 (ill.), 405-6, no. 128

Walter Liedtke, "Review of Melbourne exhibition *Rembrandt, A Genius and his Impact*," in: *Simiolus*, vol. 26, 1998, p. 313

For over two decades, this evocative, diminutive panel depicting a pensive old man has counted among the highlights of the stellar collection of 17th-century Dutch paintings belonging to Drs Alfred and Isabel Bader of Milwaukee. Alfred Bader acquired it at auction as a work by an unidentified follower of Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn (1606-1669); his conviction that it was painted by the master himself has been vindicated by recent scholarship. The panel has since appeared in several exhibitions devoted to Rembrandt, from New York to Amsterdam to Kyoto. Earlier this year, the Baders generously donated it to the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, as part of their vision to eventually bring their entire collection together at Queen's University, Alfred Bader's *alma mater*. It is only the fourth Rembrandt painting to enter a Canadian public collection, and the first in almost fifty years.



CATALOGUE 5

Head of an Old Man in a Cap, painted around 1630 when the artist was in his early twenties, illustrates Rembrandt's emergent genius for evoking emotional expression, a gift for which he would become famous. Indeed, one contemporary, the secretary to the Prince of Orange, Constantijn Huygens, himself a noteworthy connoisseur and poet, praised Rembrandt's talent in precisely this area, referring to the artist's great *Judas Returning the Thirty Pieces of Silver* of 1629, now in an English private collection. Similarly, in his *Head of an Old Man in a Cap*, Rembrandt keenly observes the psychology of sadness, posing his subject's head with an abject tilt forward. The wrinkled brow, squinting eyes and pinched cheeks further suggest his troubled state. The dark cap, contrasted to his white eyebrows and flowing beard draw our attention to this remarkable interpretation of Baroque *tristesse*, evoked with drama and vigour. Characteristically, Rembrandt casts his figure in a hard light, yielding a strong *chiaroscuro*, or contrast of light and shadow. He adopted this strategy from the Dutch followers of the influential Italian painter Caravaggio and like him, orchestrates his medium to present strong emotion with uncompromising force.

At the time he painted *Head of an Old Man in a Cap*, Rembrandt was forging a career in Leiden, his birthplace, then a flourishing textile and university town. While at first glance it appears to be a kind of private study sketch from life – small, loosely painted – this panel was part of the artist's concerted effort to establish his reputation. The subject is probably imaginary, loosely resembling a figure appearing in various guises in other paintings and prints by Rembrandt from the same period. The panel was intended as a finished painting for the market, as indicated by the artist's signature, an interlaced monogram, at the upper right.

Such anonymous character heads were, in fact, innovative for Dutch painters at the time, and seem to have been first employed a few years earlier by Jan Lievens, another Leiden painter, and a kind of mentor to Rembrandt there. Although both had studied with the Amsterdam painter Pieter Lastman, Lievens was much influenced by two great Flemish contemporaries, Rubens and Van Dyck, whose work he apparently encountered during a trip to Antwerp in 1621. He likely knew their practice of painting separate head studies in preparation for larger, complex compositions, but took it further by creating his own as finished works for the marketplace. Such works – which quickly became known as *tronies* – were likely intended for connoisseurs able to appreciate such demonstrations of artistic prowess in depicting human emotion, surely one of the great artistic challenges (fig. 1).



FIGURE 1. Jan Lievens, *A Man Singing*, around 1625, oil on panel, 90.2 × 76.3 cm (Kingston, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, gift of Drs Alfred and Isabel Bader, 1989)

As Huygens observed at the time, Rembrandt quickly surpassed Lievens in this new arena, a facility achieved through intense and comprehensive study. Starting around 1626, he made numerous prints and drawings of expressive heads, as well as several paintings, signed as finished works (fig. 2). The strength and variety of emotions they depict distinguish them from the *tronies* by Lievens that had inspired them.



FIGURE 2. Rembrandt, *Head of a Laughing Man in a Gorget*, around 1634, oil on copper, 15.4 × 12.2 cm (The Hague, Mauritshuis)

Their incontestable contribution to Rembrandt's mastery of expression in later, more ambitious works notwithstanding, these early works were themselves intended for the public, to generate income and to disseminate knowledge of his talent. Rembrandt's conscious efforts to cultivate his reputation through these strategies is particularly evident in his enthusiasm for etching, a medium he would master to become the greatest printmaker of his generation (cat. 6).

In Leiden, Rembrandt entered into an arrangement with the printmaker Jan Gillisz. van Vliet (c.1610-1668), to produce etched copies of his paintings (cat. 7), or of figures in them. While the results do not measure well against Rembrandt's own achievements in the medium, Van Vliet's efforts are nonetheless impressive, often demonstrating velvety black areas and meticulous craftsmanship, as in his interpretation of *Head of an Old Man in a Cap* (cat. 5), an etching recently acquired by the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, one of a series of six such prints (see cats. 2-5). Arguably, they owe their success to the originals and to Rembrandt's own involvement in their creation, for they are superior to Van Vliet's later etchings, produced in Leiden following Rembrandt's departure for Amsterdam. By then, Van Vliet evolved an entirely different etching style, and focussed on scenes of everyday life. His best-known efforts of this type are two series, one depicting Beggars (cat. 10), the other various Trades and Professions (cat. 12). These owe little to Rembrandt in quality and conception, and suggest that during their association, Rembrandt, through guidance and correction, pushed Van Vliet to accomplish what he was later unable to achieve independently.



CATALOGUE 7



CATALOGUE 12

Rembrandt's and Van Vliet's close, if brief, collaboration was fully understood only recently, in an exhibition that presented critical evidence linking their early practices, including a study of watermarks showing that they used paper from the same source, far more than coincidence could explain. This revelation is important for *Head of an Old Man in a Cap*. When acquired by Dr. Bader in 1979, its authorship had been dismissed by the Rembrandt Research Project, a team of scholars devoted to redefining the artist's corpus of works. Despite the evidence of Van Vliet's print, where Rembrandt's authorship of the original is clearly indicated by an inscription, they deemed the painting's vigorous handling inconsistent with Rembrandt's early work, and the inscription incorrect. In light of secure evidence confirming the artists' working relationship, more recent scholarship has restored Rembrandt's authorship of the painting, which has indeed proven key to a renewed understanding of the range of handling – from rough to smooth – in his early work.

Rembrandt would continue to explore the candid and unflinching portrayal of human emotion throughout his long career, whether in portraits, or biblical and historical subjects. His later works lean towards an exterior calm, through which shines a breathtaking range of inner thoughts and feelings. *Head of an Old Man in a Cap*, a modest, brash, vibrant work by a young man intent on pushing his talent beyond the conventions of his time, heralds the career of a painter deeply attuned to the human condition.

David de Witt
Bader Curator of European Art,
with the assistance of Angela Roberts

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

1. Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn,

Head of an Old Man in a Cap, around 1630, oil on panel, 24.3 × 20.3 cm, monogrammed upper right, in ligature: RHL, Kingston, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, gift of Drs Alfred and Isabel Bader, 2003

2. Jan Gillisz. van Vliet, after Rembrandt,

Head of Rembrandt (Bartsch 19), 1634, etching, 22.5 × 19 cm, Amsterdam, Museum het Rembrandthuis

3. Jan Gillisz. van Vliet, after Rembrandt,

Head of a Laughing Man in a Gorget (Bartsch 21), 1634, etching, 22.5 × 19 cm, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Muriel and Philip Berman Gift, acquired from the John S. Phillips bequest of 1876 to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, with funds contributed by Muriel and Philip Berman, gifts (by exchange) of Lisa Norris Elkins, Bryant W. Langston, Samuel S. White 3rd and Vera White, with additional funds contributed by John Howard McFadden, Jr., Thomas Skelton Harrison, and the Philip H. and A.S.W. Rosenbach Foundation

4. Jan Gillisz. van Vliet, after Rembrandt,

Head of a Man Grieving (Bartsch 22), 1634, etching, 22.5 × 18.9 cm, Amsterdam, Museum het Rembrandthuis

5. Jan Gillisz. van Vliet, after Rembrandt,

Head of an Old Man in a Cap (Bartsch 23), 1634, etching, 22.4 × 18.8 cm, Kingston, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, gift of Ned and Daphne Franks, 2002

6. Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn,

Self-portrait in Velvet Cap with a Plume (Bartsch 20), 1638, etching, 14.4 × 10.9 cm, Kingston, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Segsworth Bequest, 1944

7. Jan Gillisz. van Vliet, after Rembrandt,

The Baptism of the Eunuch (Bartsch 12), 1631, etching and burin, 59.2 × 49.1 cm, Kingston, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, purchased with the assistance of the George Taylor Richardson Memorial Fund and Francis K. Smith, 2003

8. Jan Gillisz. van Vliet, after Rembrandt,

St. Jerome Kneeling in Prayer (Bartsch 13), 1631, etching, 34.8 × 28.5 cm, private collection

9. Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn,

Beggar in a High Cap (Bartsch 162), around 1630, etching, 15.7 × 12.2 cm, Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, gift of Dr. and Mrs. Marvin Kosoy, 1992

10. Jan Gillisz. van Vliet, *Seated Beggar*

(Bartsch 77), around 1632, etching and burin, 9.4 × 6.8 cm; posthumously published: London, J. McCreery, 1816, Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, Gift of John M. Lyle, 1942

11. Jan Gillisz. van Vliet, *Rat Poison Seller*

(Bartsch 55), around 1631, etching and burin, 9.5 × 6.5 cm, posthumously published: London, J. McCreery, 1816, Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, Gift of John M. Lyle, 1942

12. Jan Gillisz. van Vliet, *The Carpenter,*

from *The Trades* series (Bartsch 36), around 1635, etching, 21.4 × 16.8 cm, Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, purchased 1990

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