

[ Background Conversations ]

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>> Dr Stephanie Dickey: Our next presentation is by two scholars who have joined us from Leiden University, Jef Schaeps and Mart van Duijn. Jef Schaeps studied art history at the universities of Groningen and Leiden and is presently curator of prints and drawings at Leiden University Libraries. And Mart van Duijn has an education in history and archival science and holds a PhD in the field of medieval book history. He's currently curator of Western manuscripts and archives at Leiden University Libraries. Leiden incidentally was founded in 1585, it's the oldest -- that's the right date is it? 1575, sorry about that, I am numerically challenged. In any case, the oldest university in the Netherlands, similarly Queen's is one of the oldest in Canada. So we're very grateful to welcome them here. For probably the last century or more scholars have been combing the archives in the Netherlands looking for something new about Rembrandt and you would think that after all this time it would be impossible to find anything new. But believe it or not these two gentlemen have done so and we're going to hear from them about that now. They're going to speak to us in tandem and I believe Jef will go first.

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>> Dr. Mart van Duijn: So let's see. Actually I'm Mart van Duijn so I'm going first, Jef will be second. First of all I would like to thank Jacquelyn Coutre although she isn't here for the invitation to speak at this special Rembrandt event. And also much thanks to Max Valsamas, and also Stephanie Dickey for the excellent preparations and the warm welcome. We've been treated yesterday to a tour at the special collections here and a dinner even, so thank you very much. Together with Jef I will be discussing the education of the genius Rembrandt and particularly his time at Leiden University. And it is well-known that Rembrandt first enrolled at university on the 20th of May 1620, it's a well-known fact. And the register containing this matriculation is kept in the university archives at Leiden University library and it's the oldest document that directly relates to Rembrandt himself. Earlier this year Jef and I went through the university archives preparing for an exhibition on 444 years of Leiden University, so university was founded in 1575, the 8th of February. And we wondered whether also Rembrandt might be found in our so-called recension lists. These are the registrations of students for every following year in order to continue their studies. And these are documents that are not so well-known as our matriculation registers. And on the recension list for 1622, which is actually the only one we have for the period of 1608 to 1648, we discovered Rembrandt's rematriculation so to speak which is now in fact the second oldest existing document relating to Rembrandt. So we have the two first documents related, we are very proud of it you can understand. It proves that Rembrandt must have studied at Leiden in 1622 as well and

probably also the year before. We made our discovery known to the public through a small publication which is available here this afternoon, and obviously through the website of Leiden University. And it was quickly picked up by the Dutch press de Volkskrant over here. You probably don't read Dutch but the second -- it's also internationally, it made an impact here. You'll see a tweet by Simon Schama saying wow this makes perfect sense, he's sometimes thought as a virtuoso of feeling. And he compares Rembrandt to Velazquez, Rubens and Michelangelo. Rembrandt's rematriculation is a new fact in the biography of the young Rembrandt and it opens up possibilities for speculating about his education, and it might actually even provide a new perspective. The question is what does Rembrandt's time, extended time at university mean for our understanding of him as a painter? Can we see this reflected in his paintings? And we hope to provide a very modest insight into that matter today. We will in fact be subsequently discussing Rembrandt as a Leiden student, that's my part, and Rembrandt as a painter, Jef's part. So until recently we only had this, the only known document regarding Rembrandt's education, the register with his matriculation of the 20th of May 1620. And at the time the rector magnificus, the principal himself, was responsible for the registration of students. And in 1620 this was Reinerus Bontius professor of medicine at Leiden University. And the act itself took place at the academy building which is still in use today and here it's marked on a bird's-eye view map by Peter Bost from 1600. And it's an interesting map because you can see the buildings very well but it's also the map that comes most close to Leiden looking as it looked around Rembrandt's birth. And I must say the map of the Agnes, the digital map looks even better so if you have a chance to take a look it's in the exhibition as well but you can also take a look at home on your own computer. The rector, the principal had his office in the academy building and that's where he would receive students. And he asked the students for his name, study of choice, the name of his landlord or landlady, and his address and he wrote this down in this matriculation register which you can see here. Also Rembrandt in 1620 gave his name Rembrandus Hermanni Leydensis and then his preferred study of choice, studiosus litterarum so he wanted to study arts, artes in that time. Annorum veertien so he gave 14 as his age which is a false age actually if we keep on his birthdate as 15 of July 1606, he was actually 13 at that time. And he might have given a false age because he wanted to avoid any inconveniences because the rector earlier had barred younger boys younger than 14 from studying at Leiden University. And it was also known that upcoming students would have to swear an oath and you were only allowed to swear this oath if you were 14 years or older or else you would have to come back later to still swear the oath. So it could very well be that Rembrandt only two months from his birthday just said to the rector okay I'm 14 years old. And it also states where he lived with his parents which was actually at the Weddesteeg where his father also had his windmill. And the original houses at the Weddesteeg have been demolished, there are now I believe terrible apartment buildings from

the 70's or 80's so there's nothing to be seen of Rembrandt's original birth house. But the city archives of Leiden made this digital reconstruction and it's worth to pay their website a visit, they're called E-L-O-E-L-O not the band but the Erfgoed Leiden en onstreken. And there you can really walk through Rembrandt's birth house. And on this picture at the right it's actually the house with the cart in front. So this is what the Weddesteege looked like around Rembrandt's birth. At matriculation Rembrandt had to pay 15 Stivers, in those days a considerable amount but no obstacle for Rembrandt's father he had a successful business, he was a miller, and he had also inherited half the street you see here. In exchange for the 15 Stivers Rembrandt was allowed to attend lectures and possibly also make use of the university's library. But matriculation also gave other benefits which are also well-known and play an important role of our understanding of Rembrandt as student. Students were exempt from taxes on beer and wine, they didn't have to pay toll in the province of Holland, they didn't have to serve in the city's watch. And as a young boy you can imagine that is very important not to have to serve in the city's watch. And students fell under the jurisdiction of an academic court which was prone to punish students mildly. And the fact that for a long time we only had this first matriculation and the benefits involved obviously led to the assumption that Rembrandt didn't really study at Leiden University.

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Furthermore his matriculation might have followed from his time at the Latin School in Leiden shown here and where pupils mostly aged 13 or 14 in their last year of school were automatically enrolled at university. And this building as you can see still exists today. Another source on Rembrandt's education is the description by Jan Jarsz. Orlers of the city of Leiden and its famous inhabitants first published in 1614 and obviously Rembrandt isn't in there yet because he was probably seven or eight at that time, still very much an ordinary Leiden school boy. And in the second edition, the edition of 1641, Rembrandt already lived in Amsterdam and had already painted several masterpieces. And in this second edition Orlers devotes almost...almost a full page to Rembrandt. And it's actually the first Rembrandt biography and it turned out to be an important source for almost all later Rembrandt biographies. And regarding Rembrandt's education Orlers mentions that Rembrandt didn't want to go to school but rather drew and painted. And for that reason, and this is in Dutch.

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So according to Orlers his parents took him out of school to be apprenticed to a painter, the painter Jacob van Swanenburgh. So this information combining with only the first matriculation of 1620 has marked Rembrandt as a university dropout. But now we have Rembrandt's rematriculation in recension list of 1622. Whereas first year students could enrol throughout the year, rematriculation was only

possible in February of each year. And the names of all known students were recorded beforehand, arranged alphabetically on first name. So when a student came to the rector's office, the principal's office the principal only had to look up the student's name and put a mark in front of it to say okay this student is ready for another year of studies. And here you see Rembrandt's rematriculation with his first name Rembrandus which is visually much more pleasing than the first matriculation as you can imagine because this has his full name, it's quite large in the original as well, so Rembrandus. Then some additional information such as his age which you can see just right from the asterisk, 14 crossed out and changed to 15. So probably when Rembrandt came to the rector and the rector asked after his age and he probably said oh you're 14 boy? No I'm 15 sir, the principal changed it to 15. And actually this age is 15 if we keep 15th of July 1606 as his actual birthday makes sense it would actually be 15 in February of 1622. And it also states his last name Hermanni and then bij zijn ouders so he still lived at his parents at the Weddesteeg. And the little asterisk in the front, the mark most to the left, is actually the most important because this indicates that Rembrandt actually did rematriculate, he did want to have another year of studies. So here we have proof Rembrandt did not only matriculate for the first year but also for subsequent years and that means at least three years of studies, 1620, 1621 but we don't have the recension list for that year, and 1622. Did he study hard? We don't know but his rematriculation urges us to reconsider our understanding or our view of Rembrandt as student and it undermines the idea of Rembrandt as dropout. And one of the most important arguments for that theory was that for a long time we only had this first matriculation but now we have a new document, actually a new fact. And although Orlers describes Rembrandt's parents taking him out of school, he doesn't mention which school and he doesn't mention when. So the question that remains, does this new fact also offer a new perspective? Did it influence Rembrandt as a painter? And this is where I leave the stage and give the work to my colleague Jef.

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>> Dr. Jef Schaeps: Yes, thank you Mart and indeed the question now is what is this new information about Rembrandt, this detail from his biography what does it mean and what does it imply and does it tell us something about his artistic career later on? Is it possible to see from his art in later years that he had an academic training? Well it's difficult to give an answer to these questions I can tell you right away. There's a lot of things we do not know, we do know that he matriculated and that he rematriculated two years later and probably also in the year in between. But did this imply that he was a diligent student, that he was industrious? Did he go to class every day or at least every week? Did he mingle with other students? Did he talk to scholars, to professors? Did he read books or not? These

are all things we do not know and I could end my story here and leave and that's it. But I will try to at least tell you a few things I think are quite certain. Once a Dutch author, well famous in Holland but not so much elsewhere, Gerrit Komrij. He wrote about the study of art history and he sold well. Doubt and uncertainty that's like the essence of art history and indeed we do a lot of attributions and use the word perhaps and maybe and we hope and it could have been. Still I hope -- well maybe we should be a little bit more precise and more concrete, so I will try to do that a little bit today. Well what we do know for sure is that Rembrandt spent a few years at university and before that a few years at the Latin school. Well Latin schools had a purpose first of all to learn Latin. So it is quite sure that Rembrandt must have known Latin otherwise he would not have been admitted to the university. And what we also know for sure is that he was used to the use of books which is well quite normal you might say but not every boy of his age in Leiden was using books. So he knew Latin, he must have read some of the authors they used to like for example Ovid or Virgil or Horace, they did not read these books from cover to cover but at least they read a few chapters from books like that, and Rembrandt must have done that as well. We don't know exactly what professors he met at the university but these are some of the candidates he might have met. These were professors who were active in the years that Rembrandt attended university. At the left you see Burgersdijck, mathematician, in the middle Erpenius, professor of oriental languages and an important printer as well, and on the right Vossius who was a classicist so a philologist studied Greek and Latin. These might have been the people Rembrandt talked to or from whom he received classes. And Leiden there was very much the spirit life of this man, this is Scaliger and Scaliger was in his days one of the most famous scholars in Europe but he had passed away in 1609. He was French by origin but was in Leiden for a few years at invitation of the Leiden University. But he was still his spirit was very much alive and this is a print where you see the library in Leiden in the days of Rembrandt. And at the right you see a bookcase which contains the legacy, the bequest of Scaliger. So even if he didn't meet Scaliger anymore himself because he had passed away, he could still see that Scaliger was a very important scholar since his books were still there in the library to consult. Well we don't know of course if Rembrandt went to the library a lot but the library was not even that much open to students because well there were thefts as we know. Books in those days were chained to the shelves but still books disappeared and so there was a period that students were not permitted to the university library. But well perhaps he visited sometimes. But he really studied a lot, we just don't know I'm afraid. This is a wonderful painting by Rembrandt which was painted around 1630-31, it's not dated but this is the art historical date that's set to it.

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It's part of the collection of the museum in Berlin but at this moment it's hanging in Leiden on an exhibition called Young Rembrandt, Rising Star in Museum De Lakenhal. And it's a mythological scene and

represents Pluto abducting Prosperina. And you see Prosperina and Pluto in the middle in the centre of the scene and Pluto has grabbed her. And well she's about to be dragged to the underworld and well she's not very fond of that so she's resisting ferociously and scratching his face. In the front you see the horses who draw the carriage but at the back you see there are several women trying to keep Prosperina on the earth. And one of them at least should represent Diana because you can see the crescent on her head which is a way to identify Diana. In the top you see this wonderful blue which is really shiny almost if you see the painting. But this is a story which can be found in Ovid. And we know for sure that he had read of it like all the boys in the Latin School. You didn't have to go to university to read Ovid so he knew that already. But this is one of the paintings which has been described by an American scholar Amy Golahny who has written about the library and the books of Rembrandt, Rembrandt's Reading. I don't know exactly again when the book was published but I think it was around the year 2000, maybe even just before 2000. And she has written about first, well what books did Rembrandt own and secondly, can we see in the paintings Rembrandt made a bit about the books he must have read. And then she writes about this painting and of course she says yeah Ovid is one of the main sources for this painting. There's another source and that's the Roman poet Claudian. Claudian had written a poem especially about this mythological event. And the women who are grabbing the clothes of Prosperina only figure in the poem by Claudian and not in Ovid. So she says he must have combined these two stories. I'll just get a glass of water.

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So but Claudian like Ovid was an author you could have read at the Latin school but then Amy Golahny says well actually there's still a third author which maybe has been consulted by Rembrandt and that's Scaliger. Not the Scaliger you just saw who was a professor in Leiden but his father who was called Julius Caesar Scaliger, a French scholar who wrote a book called -- what's it called again? Poetices libri septem and that's like a comparative mythological handbook. He compares various mythological sources and writes about them. And according to Golahny that's the book that Rembrandt must have used. Of course that's not something that can be proven but if he did then that's something he must have learnt at university because Scaliger was definitely not read at the Latin School, that's too difficult, well too highbrow literature for boys in the Latin School. So that might be here a sign that oh Rembrandt did do some serious studying at Leiden University. The point is that of everything that Scaliger writes about this myth Amy Golahny singles out only the things that Ovid and Claudian wrote about the myth. And that's actually something he didn't need Scaliger for he could have learnt that already in Latin school. So there's still quite a lot of uncertainty. And this is a painting which was in the possession of the stadtholder of the republic. Jonathan mentioned him already Frederik Hendrik who is like

the governor of the Netherlands. And there was a mediator because the governor did not come, Frederik Hendrik did not come to the workshop but he had Constantijn Huygens, his secretary who came to his workshop. And Constantijn Huygens was a very scholarly man and he might also have been someone who talks about this myth with Rembrandt and gave hints to what the iconography should have been. So in this case this is one of the paintings which Amy Golahny uses and said well this might be an indication that he receives higher study, that he did some serious studying at Leiden University. But I'm afraid I do not agree completely because I think first of all this already -- well it contains knowledge that he could have gathered already on the Latin School and besides that he had some external help. Well what about the other paintings he made in his Leiden period? Okay this is a very famous series, actually the first paintings we can connect to Rembrandt dated 1624, maybe already 1625 three scenes from the five senses. The one in the middle is in Leiden, the other two are in New York in the Leiden collection. Is there anything in these scenes which looks academic to you? Probably not would be my guess. Then this scene, this is a painting from a little bit later 1626, I think it's usually dated in the Leiden museum, De Lakenhal, well it has always been a bit unclear what the scene is exactly. Quite recently like two weeks ago an article was published in a Dutch newspaper by a woman Helda von Helm [assumed spelling]. She has said -- because there have been multiple identifications of what the story represents. None has been ever satisfactory and now this Helda von Helm comes and says well I now finally know what it means and it's a story of a scene from the story of Joseph and Jacob. The person we see standing there with his sceptre that's actually Joseph. Well I don't know if she's right but it's an interesting option but of course the story of Joseph and Jacob well you didn't need an academic training for that you could just grab the Bible and everyone had a Bible at home. So this is another painting, this is dated 1626 in Museum Lyon and that's like a pendant painting to the one we just saw. This has always been identified as a stoning of Stephen but this Helda von Helm says also this is not Stephen this is Joseph we see with his brothers stoning him. Well I don't know if that's exactly true I leave that to other people but I still think these are not paintings that prove that Rembrandt had an academic training. So these are two of his earliest etchings, the one on right is often considered the first etching Rembrandt made, the one on the left the second. There's still a lot of issues here, you can see that he's well not yet mastered the art of etching. There are strange things in the anatomy of the figures and in the spacing of the figures. But these of course are biblical scenes so whatever Rembrandt did as an academic training it did not reflect immediately in his art. Now you have -- maybe you've heard of the well what you would call a topos maybe, pictor doctus, a pictor doctus that's the scholarly painter you might say. And well if Rembrandt went to university for a few years you might think well maybe Rembrandt is a pictor doctus because well most painters did not have an academic training. And well you might say the archetype of

the pictor doctus that's Rubens, he's always named pictor doctus. You know Rubens he had breakfast with scholarly humanists that's something Rembrandt never did as far as we know. But this is a late, late self-portrait by Rembrandt, the Kenwood self-portrait in the Kenwood House in London. It's somewhere from 66 to 69 in that period and it's one of the few self-portraits in which he identifies himself as an artist because most self-portraits he does not hold brushes or anything like that but here he does. So he's immediately recognizable as an artist. And in the background, you see two semi-circles, it's not exactly clear what this is.

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But this is well if there ever has been a painting in Rembrandt's oeuvre which has been described or interpreted as a painting which proves that Rembrandt was a bit of an intellectual artist, very self-conscious about his profession then it is I think this painting. But still well we don't know exactly about the meaning of the circles has never been untangled, there's no definite interpretation for that. And does it mean that Rembrandt really portrayed himself as a scholarly artist? I don't think so. So well one more painting that this is Minerva. If you go and see the exhibition you will see that there's also a Minerva in the exhibition not by Rembrandt but by one of his first pupils de Jouderville. And well Minerva is also of course she's like the mark or the logo of Leiden University. This was painted while he was still living in Leiden around 1630. Well does this mean that he had a special affiliation to the university, did he paint Minerva because of that? I don't know. To wind up, what does it mean that Rembrandt spent a longer period at university and was he indeed a serious student? It's difficult to say. I don't see that his biography will change immediately because of that. Of course it's a new fact in his biography, he did spend three years. And had he died say in 1623 then he would have been remembered like a student of Leiden University like we had many students at Leiden University. But it's of course his career after that that always drew the most attention. But we do not see at least in my view in his painting or in his other artworks we see something of an academic training. Well this is Leiden University where all these documents are kept, you see the small self-portrait which is also in the exhibition has been blown up to a giant screen. A few weeks ago Mart and I held this same lecture in Dutch for an audience in Leiden and after it a man came up to us and said well, I'm so happy now to know that well Rembrandt spent a few years at university. But I'm a bit disappointed about the outcome and that it didn't mean that much in his career. Well unfortunately we cannot make it into much more at this moment. I hope you have not been disappointed and I thank you for your attention [applause].

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