

Gary Schwartz

A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings as a Test Case for Connoisseurship

Seldom has an exercise in connoisseurship had more going for it than the world-famous Rembrandt Research Project, the RRP. This group of connoisseurs set out in 1968 to establish a corpus of Rembrandt paintings in which doubt concerning attributions to the master was to be reduced to a minimum. In the present enquiry, I examine the main lessons that can be learned about connoisseurship in general from the first three volumes of the project. My remarks are limited to two central issues: the methodology of the RRP and its concept of authorship.

Concerning methodology, I arrive at the conclusion that the persistent application of classical connoisseurship by the RRP, attended by a look at scientific examination techniques, shows that connoisseurship, while opening our eyes to some features of a work of art, closes them to others, at the risk of generating false impressions and incorrect judgments. As for the concept of authorship, I will show that the early RRP entertained an anachronistic and fatally puristic notion of what constitutes authorship in a Dutch painting of the seventeenth century, which skewed nearly all of its attributions.

These negative judgments could lead one to blame the RRP for doing an inferior job. But they can also be read in another way. If the members of the RRP were no worse than other connoisseurs, then the failure of their enterprise shows that connoisseurship was unable to deliver the advertised goods. I subscribe to the latter conviction. This paper therefore ends with a proposal for the enrichment of Rembrandt studies after the age of connoisseurship.

The advantages enjoyed by the RRP were considerable:

The objects of study were well known, and many of them had been published extensively, including the results of scientific examination.

The members of the team were enabled to examine at first hand nearly all the paintings in question.

The connoisseurship of Rembrandt paintings has a long and distinguished history, on which the group could draw.

The RRP had a long period of gestation, in which plans for the project could be refined and perfected.

The individual scholars in the RRP were excellent art historians and connoisseurs, including academics and museum people.

The project enjoyed heavy funding from the Dutch state, covering research, travel and documentation, and extending to the translation, editing and producing of *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, in which the RRP published its results.

No time limit was set on the accomplishment of the task.

With great self-confidence, in the 1980s the RRP brought out three volumes of its *Corpus*. They covered about half of Rembrandt's production as a painter, from his start in 1625 through the *Night Watch* of 1642. The impact of the RRP during this period was considerable. In 1988, when the National Gallery in London held a landmark exhibition on its 20 paintings by or formerly attributed to Rembrandt, under the title *Art in the Making*, the deputy keeper for Dutch paintings, Christopher Brown, was asked if the exhibition was a reaction to the Rembrandt Research Project. His answer could have been uttered by all of us in the field: "In a way, all Rembrandt studies nowadays are a reaction to the Rembrandt Research Project. No Old Master has ever been given such concentrated attention¹."

Yet, four years after the appearance of vol. 3 in 1989, a quarter of a century into the project, the group fell apart. In 1993, four of the five members quit the project, leaving it in the hands of the youngest member, Ernst van de Wetering. In an interview with the Dutch weekly *De Groene* in April 2005, van de Wetering said of the events of the early 1990s: "It was clear that the project had failed. It really was a failure, for me as well. It was no good. The first three volumes actually should have been done all over again²."

The two statements by Christopher Brown and Ernst van de Wetering substantiate the starting point of the present paper. If no Old Master has ever been given such concentrated attention as was bestowed on Rembrandt in the first three volumes of *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, and if that effort was seen even by a main actor as a failure, then we are justified – even called upon – to consider the experience of the Rembrandt Research Project as a test case for connoisseurship in general. This discussion is not new. Van de Wetering was not the first one to question the foundations on which the RRP was built. Before looking at the criticism, however, let me sketch the history of the RRP for those who may not be familiar with it.

The idea for a project to determine the authorship of all paintings attributed to Rembrandt originated in 1956 in the mind of Bob Haak when he was an assistant curator at the Rijksmuseum. In that year exhibitions of Rembrandt paintings, drawings and etchings were held in the Rijksmuseum and in the Boymans-Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam to celebrate the 350th anniversary of the artist's birth in 1606. As Haak has told the story, "The paintings poured in, and we tried to put them in chronological order. . . I was faced with many paintings said to have been painted by Rembrandt at the same period, and it struck me that one man could not have created so many different sorts of pictures at one time. Many, surely, were not by Rembrandt³."

1. Anthony Bailey, *Responses to Rembrandt*, New York, Timken Publishers, 1994, p. 14.

2. Koen Kleijn, «Hier ben ik, stenig mij maar: interview: Ernst van de Wetering, Rembrandt onderzoeker», *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 22 April 2005. Available on Internet at <http://www.groene.nl/2005/16/hier-ben-ik-stenig-mij-maar> (accessed 11 June 2013).

3. A. Bailey 1994, *op. cit.* note 1, p. 7.

Haak had excellent training in connoisseurship in the art trade and the Rijksmuseum. Feeling the need for heavier academic input in the project, he turned to his friend Josua Bruyn, on his way to becoming chairman of the department of art history of the University of Amsterdam. They put together a team of the best Dutch academics and museum curators in the field and began to work out a plan. Initially, the group intended to complete its work by 1969, when the 300th anniversary of Rembrandt's death would be celebrated. However, it was not until 1968 that funding was granted by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific and Scholarly Research (then ZWO, now NWO) and real work could be started. Between 1982 and 1989, the Rembrandt Research Project published three volumes of *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*. The RRP has always insisted on the indefinite article in the title of their monumental books. By calling it "A Corpus" and not simply "Corpus," they wished to express the thought that their project did not claim finality. In the early years they even called it a "momentary take" (*momentopname*) on the painted oeuvre of Rembrandt, but as the decades rolled by, this phrase was dropped.

Initially, the Project was intended to cover all 620 paintings that Abraham Bredius had included in his summary catalogue of Rembrandt paintings of 1935-42. However, the compilation of the dossiers and the writing of the entries proved to be so time-consuming that from vol. 2 on the sample was reduced. From then on, it was limited to the 420 paintings that were still given to Rembrandt by Horst Gerson in his book *Rembrandt Paintings* of 1968. In the 1930s, Gerson had been the editorial and research assistant to Bredius. (Disclosure: In the latter 1960s, for Gerson's book on Rembrandt paintings, I served as his assistant.)

The first three volumes of the *Corpus* contain entries on 280 paintings. Each entry is broken down into nine sections:

- Summarized opinion
- Description of subject
- Observations and technical information
- Comments
- Documents and sources
- Graphic reproductions
- Copies
- Provenance
- Summary

More important was the division of the paintings into three categories:

A: Paintings by Rembrandt (146)

B: Paintings Rembrandt's authorship of which cannot be positively either accepted or rejected (12)

C: Paintings Rembrandt's authorship of which cannot be accepted (122)

Vols. 4 and 5, in which all the entries were written by Ernst van de Wetering, have a completely different structure. I leave them out of consideration for that reason and also because van de Wetering shifted the ground of the *Corpus* in other major ways as well. The entire presentation of vols. 1-3 gives weight – literally,

in volumes weighing some five kilos – to classical connoisseurship categories such as authentic, autograph, accepted, rejected. Note too a point that has been stressed by critics: although there is disagreement among specialists concerning the attribution of about half of the paintings concerned, the RRP admits of doubt concerning only five percent.

The grant application submitted by the RRP in 1968, which was not made public until 1991, was an irreproachably scholarly question: “What judgments can be arrived at concerning the authenticity and autograph status of paintings attributed to Rembrandt on the basis of material structure and stylistic features, iconological interpretation and documentary facts⁴?” With the appearance of vol. 1 of the *Corpus*, it was clear that the grant proposal was not being followed, although no outsider was aware of this. The RRP was not interested at all in answering the research question as posed. It was out for hard attributions. Instead of the admirably clear statement of purpose in the grant application, the published volumes contain pages of muddy explanation. I quote one of them, from the remarks on method in vol. 1: “Our purpose has been to link Rembrandt’s paintings done during his Leiden years on the grounds of their points of agreement, and to separate the non-authentic from the authentic where the differences exceed the borderline of what may plausibly be considered the work of one artist.” Statements like these I consider smokescreens obscuring the non-scientific nature of the methodology employed, with all options kept open for the researchers.

Of the four criteria specified in the application – material properties, style, iconography and documentation – the only one that the RRP took seriously was style. The primacy of style over material comes out plainly in this passage from “Some reflections on method” in the preface to vol. 1: “Even if all Rembrandts were to be subjected to thorough scientific investigation, a decision on their authenticity would rest mainly on considerations of a very different kind.”

Of the nine rubrics in each entry, iconography is not one. “Documents and sources” and “Provenance” are given slots, but the information they contain, which is irregular, is hardly ever taken into consideration when it comes to the attribution itself. In this I was personally disappointed, since in 1978, four years before the appearance of vol. 1, I had published in the *Revue de l’Art* an article demonstrating that there was a positive correlation between the acceptance of Rembrandt paintings by connoisseurs and two other variables: the date of their first documented appearance and the status of their earliest known owners⁵. However, since these facts are not physically implanted in the object itself, to the RRP they were without value.

The imperative of arriving at an unequivocal attribution went so far that the RRP did not see in any of the paintings in its A section any passages he might have left to an assistant. Of the 146 paintings that are accepted as authentic Rembrandts in vols. 1-3, not a single one is said to include passages that were executed by another hand than Rembrandt’s, not even the vast *Night Watch*. Although the RRP looked

4. Herman Colenbrander, Letter to the Editor of *NRC Handelsblad*, 24 January 1992: “Welke uitspraken kunnen worden gedaan aangaande de authenticiteit en eigenhandigheid van de aan Rembrandt toegeschreven schilderijen op grond van onderzoek van materiële structuur en stilistische kenmerken, van iconologische interpretatie en documentaire gegevens.”

5. Gary Schwartz, “Rembrandt: ‘Connoisseurship’ et érudition,” *Revue de l’Art* 42, 1978, p. 100-06. Available on Internet at <http://schwartzlist.com/2011/07/28/rembrandt-connoisseurship-et-erudition/> (accessed 12 June 2013).

more closely than its predecessors into the operation of the Rembrandt workshop, it did so in order to separate hands rather than look for evidence of the kind of collaboration that we know was the rule in early modern studios.

This led to a rather bizarre situation with regard to the documentary reconstruction of the studio. In vol. 2 of the *Corpus*, on Rembrandt's early Amsterdam period, 32 rejected paintings, mostly portraits, are said to have been made in Rembrandt's workshop. Of these, only six are attributed to a known assistant, attributions that have not met with general approval. This leaves at least 26 paintings that the RRP supposes to have been made in Rembrandt's studio, with no name attached to them. The RRP found itself forced to hypothesize that the young Rembrandt was surrounded by a sizeable group of assistants producing very good Rembrandt-like paintings who have left no trace whatever of themselves in the documentary record. When it comes to a discrepancy between the eye of the connoisseur and the documentary record, there is no contest. The RRP left it to others to supply names for all these near-Rembrandts.

This situation points up another unintended negative consequence of the kind of connoisseurship practiced by the RRP. The effort to unify and purify the oeuvre of that one master was attended by a relaxation of standards applied to other artists to whom they assigned rejected Rembrandts. And so it could come to pass that a group that found it inconceivable that one hand could be responsible for these two paintings (fig. 1 & 2) had no problem attributing these two to one and the same artist, Isaac de Jouderville (fig. 3 & 4).

Viewing outcomes of this kind, one cannot escape the conclusion that the RRP, having once decided that a painting was or was not by Rembrandt, expected as a matter of course that all properties of the work necessarily were in alignment with that judgment. Contrary indications were either not perceived or were explained away.

This quirk was commented upon with regard to signatures by a team of forensic experts who were called in, for vol. 3, to study the painted signatures on Rembrandt's paintings. When they looked at the judgments on this important issue in vols. 1 and 2, they made a discovery that went against everything they knew about statistical likelihood. Of the 41 accepted paintings that bore a signature or monogram, the RRP accepted the authenticity of all signatures but one. Of the 26 signatures on rejected paintings, all were considered inauthentic by the RRP, or too vague to be judgeable. The experts wrote, in diplomatic language: "These statistically unlikely high scores of authenticity are explainable if in a number of cases the investigators allowed themselves to be led more by the convincing authenticity of the painting than by handwriting arguments⁶."

The same self-serving reasoning is stated in plain words by the RRP concerning the material buildup of paintings: "Technical features have, of course, to fit stylistic indications in order to converge with them towards an opinion; but only rarely are they of decisive importance⁷." In this way, the RRP downgraded contrary

6. W. Froentjes, H.J.J. Hardy & R. ter Kuile-Haller, «Een schriftkundig onderzoek van Rembrandt signaturen», *Oud Holland* 105, 1991, p. 185-204 (with extensive English summary).

7. Josua Bruyn *et al.*, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 1-3, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1982, p. XIII, XIV.

indications to its attributions and let itself in for self-deception by a variety of well-known psychological effects. The resulting firm attributions, it must be said, were a godsend to the art trade and the auction houses. Finally, they had authoritative, bankable judgments concerning very expensive paintings that before then had been notoriously difficult to authenticate. For all these shortcomings, I would not say that the Rembrandt Research Project represents a deficient form of connoisseurship. On the contrary, I would say that it is exemplary for classical connoisseurship, in which most of the issues raised here also present themselves and are dealt with in comparable ways. What distinguishes the RRP from everyday connoisseurship is its large scope, its systematic approach and its persistence.

To conclude this discussion of the methodology of the RRP, I would therefore say that one lesson that it teaches us is that while connoisseurship enables us to see some things more sharply, it blinds us to other things. The firm belief that a given painting is by the master prevents the connoisseur from taking proper account of divergent evidence. The net result is a skewing of the conclusion. The attributions and especially the de-attributions in vols. 1-3 of the *Corpus* are today fairly useless and continue to create confusion – all the greater for the lingering prestige of the RRP.

The methodology of vols. 1-3 of the *Corpus* is closely linked to its understanding of the concept of authorship in the seventeenth century. The Project felt obliged to claim that its insistence that all of its A-paintings were executed entirely by the master was not anachronistic and that seventeenth-century connoisseurs shared the same values as the Rembrandt Research Project. Ernst van de Wetering put the matter very decidedly in a lecture at the 28th CIHA congress in Berlin in 1992. His talk was titled “The search for the master’s hand: an anachronism?” Phrasing the issue in the strongest possible terms, he said that “if seventeenth-century viewers regarded all products of a given studio as works by the master who headed the studio, even if they were carried out by others, then ‘the idea at the basis of the Rembrandt Research Project, namely that there is a need to isolate works of Rembrandt’s hand from that of his pupils and assistants, would be a complete anachronism, a wrongly applied projection of the nineteenth-century cult of genius to everyday seventeenth-century workshop practice⁸.’” In an article in *NRC Handelsblad* of a few weeks before, on 3 January 1992, he wrote: “There are sufficient indications that the concept of authenticity in Rembrandt’s time hardly differed from that of the Rembrandt Research Project.”

This subject has now been studied intensively by Anna Tummers of the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, in a doctoral dissertation published in a trade edition under the title *The Eye of the Connoisseur: Authenticating Paintings by Rembrandt and his Contemporaries*. Tummers arrives at a markedly different conclusion than van de Wetering’s. She shows that the concept of autographness in the seventeenth century was far more diffuse than that maintained by the Rembrandt Research Project. She reviewed the relevant terminology not only in notarial documents but also in a wide assortment of published treatises on art from the seventeenth and

8. Anna Tummers, “‘By his hand’: the paradox of seventeenth-century connoisseurship,” in A. Tummers and K. Jonckheere, *Art Market and Connoisseurship: A Closer Look at Paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens and Their Contemporaries*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2008, p. 33.

eighteenth centuries. What she found is that it was taken for granted by all concerned that studio assistants would work even on paintings called originals or which were said by the master to have been executed by his own hand. Connoisseurs would judge authorship on the basis of the defining passages of a work. I quote from her book:

“I suspect that an awareness of contemporary studio practice made knowledgeable connoisseurs focus all the more on masterly aspects, that is, more on the main elements and the difficult and resolute brushwork than on the subsidiary sections (*bywerk*) and subordinate passages. . . As we have seen, a picture was worthy of carrying the master’s name if it was made under his supervision and was of sufficiently high quality to pass muster⁹.”

The fact that the RRP failed to see this in its attributions, that it regularly rejected Rembrandt’s authorship of paintings based on the inferiority of secondary elements such as lace and costume, and that it regarded originals as totally autograph productions, shows that its concept of authenticity was not virtually identical to but differed drastically from that which was current in Rembrandt’s time.

Tummers’s argument is backed up definitively by the findings of Koenraad Jonckheere in his study of the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century auction catalogues issued by the leading Dutch expert of the time, Jan Pietersz. Zomer (1641-1724). In search of “any nuances concerning the attributions he may have made,” Jonckheere arrived at results: “As clear as they were surprising. . . Jan Pietersz. Zomer always attributed the painting to the ‘master,’ without bothering with any fine tuning. . . Zomer referred to just two paintings as ‘copies after’ out of a total of 1226, namely one after Rubens and one after Rembrandt. . . These stunning facts illustrate that the practising connoisseurs like Zomer, at the end of the seventeenth century, did not distinguish between an original, a studio copy, or a work by a student.”

Van de Wetering’s question as to whether the RRP’s search for the master’s hand is an anachronism is thereby answered, in the opposite sense to his¹⁰. Once again, I would say that the concept of authenticity maintained by the RRP is not idiosyncratic or very different from that prevailing in connoisseurship in general. The lesson to be learned is this: if we apply anachronistic criteria in our judgment of authorship, our conclusions will inevitably fail to jibe with historical likelihoods.

In 1993 I wrote an article with the title “Rembrandt Studies after the Age of Connoisseurship¹¹.” The text is on Internet, and I will not review the contents here. However, in closing, I wish to repeat what I wrote then: “It is time to face up to the fact that we have no general definition for authorship and no general standards for quality in art. Paying lip service to these statements is easier than sanctioning their consequences. These imply that no amount of effort, with whatever intelligence, artistic sensitivity and methodological rigor applied, can possibly resolve, without

9. A. Tummers, *The Eye of Connoisseur: Authenticating Paintings by Rembrandt and His Contemporaries*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2011, p. 105, 106.

10. Koenraad Jonckheere, “Supply and demand: some notes on the economy of seventeenth-century connoisseurship,” in A. Tummers & K. Jonckheere, *op. cit.* note 8, p. 76, 77.

11. G. Schwartz, “Rembrandt Studies after the Age of Connoisseurship,” *Annals of Scholarship* 10, 1993 (published in spring 1995), nr. 3/4, p. 313-335. Available on Internet at <http://loeklist.files.wordpress.com/2010/09/1993annalsofscholarship10.pdf> (accessed on 12 June 2013).

the prior setting of arbitrary parameters, the question posed by the Rembrandt connoisseur.

In the case at hand, adopting a post-connoisseurship solution means abandoning the very idea that there is such a thing as 'a' corpus of Rembrandt paintings. The paintings in the RRP *Corpus* (and many other objects and images not in it) partake in varying measure of various qualities of 'Rembrandtness.' Not only does no single object have a full complement of all those qualities, but the combinations come in a dizzying number of forms. There are traditional sets such as iconographic and thematic groupings, groupings by medium and format, execution and treatment, stylistic and qualitative coherence or disjunctiveness, value and rarity, but also sets of paintings that can be ranked by such qualities as function, condition, fame, iconicity, ownership, gender awareness, relation to the cultural and natural environment and many more. All of these qualities have their bearing on 'Rembrandtness.'

Rembrandtness itself, for that matter, is another set of such composites. The historical personality of the documents and the legends attached to it are two; the sum of all paintings that have ever been taken seriously as Rembrandts and the 250 paintings of the RRP are another two.

This view reveals the age of connoisseurship to have been characterized by the forced union of incompatible quantities. The set of features that an A-Rembrandt was presumed to possess – demonstrably thought up and executed entirely by the master and fitting transparently into his artistic development, consisting of enough original material of a kind consistent with other undoubted Rembrandts and with little enough damage and restoration to justify regarding it as his – probably does not exist and may never have¹²."

No human enterprise is perfect, and the field deserves to be thankful for the existence of the Rembrandt Research Project, for elevating the level of discussion and knowledge concerning Rembrandt. Connoisseurship as the exciting and demanding practice of close observation and comparison of art works, which nearly all art historians love to do, should never be abandoned. To allow us to do this with greater probity, connoisseurship should be liberated from the expectation that it provide binding answers to problems of any predetermined kind. Those predeterminations are bound to be off base; dedicated, open-minded observation has more to offer than that.

12. G. Schwartz, *op. cit.* note 11, p. 332-33.



Fig. 1.
Rembrandt.
Portrait of Dirck Jansz. Pesser.
Signed and dated 1634.
Oil on panel.
H. 0,68; L. 0,53 m.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art,
inv. nr. M.69.16.
Corpus nr. A102: "An authentic work that
is in the main reasonably well preserved,
dating from 1634."



Fig. 2.
"Probably Rembrandt's workshop" (RRP).
Portrait of a Man in a Broad-Brimmed Hat.
Signed and dated 1634.
Oil on panel.
H. 0,70; L. 0,53 m.
Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. nr. 93.1475.
Corpus nr. C72: "A quite heavily restored
painting that despite a general similarity
to Rembrandt's work differs from it so much
stylistically that it cannot be regarded as
autograph."



Fig. 3.
Isaac de Jouderville.
Bust of a Young Man.
Signed.
Oil on panel.
H. 0,48; L. 0,37 m.
Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland, NDI. 433.
Corpus, vol. 2, p. 81-83: "I. Jouderville."



Fig. 4.
"Rembrandt's immediate circle" (RRP).
Bust of a Young Man in a Turban.
Monogrammed and dated 1631.
Oil on panel.
H. 0,65; L. 0,51 m.
Windsor Castle, Royal Collection, CW 159.
Corpus nr. C54: "A fairly well preserved work
from Rembrandt's immediate circle in the
early Amsterdam years, attributable to Isack
Jouderville."