

## Editorial

### The Rembrandt research project

A VOCAL trend in art history today concerns itself more with social history than with *Stilkritik* and connoisseurship. Yet even the most fervent practitioner of this 'new art history' will surely welcome the appearance of the first part of a modern catalogue of a major artist, in this instance the paintings of Rembrandt.\* Those still committed to the old fashioned discipline, when presented with the results of such intensive research, will require no such apologia. While addressing itself principally to *Rembrandtistes*, the new publication raises a number of issues of wider interest to do with methods of connoisseurship in general, and in particular with the writing of a catalogue raisonné.

Connoisseurship of the works of a great artist is rarely easy. In view of the particular problems that have beset previous attempts to define Rembrandt's painted *œuvre*, such as the work of pupils and the number of recorded contemporary copies and later imitations, an initial decision was made to produce the catalogue as the work of a scholarly team rather than a single hand. The finished product is therefore the work of no less than five authors (two further collaborators having died before this volume was completed). Like Frederick Henry's Five Provinces, they aimed at essentially democratic decision making, here recorded in intimate detail, as the authors paired off to study individual pictures around the world. But as with the Dutch provinces some members were clearly more equal than others and Professor Joos Bruyn and Mr E. van de Wetering undoubtedly played leading rôles. If committees are thought to produce cautious decisions, their internal discussions can also lead to more uncomprising conclusions.

The first attempt to establish Rembrandt's painted *œuvre* was completed in 1836 with the appearance of the seventh volume of John Smith's catalogue raisonné. Since then there have been several others, notably Hofstede de Groot's catalogue of 1916 with its emphasis on accurate and detailed provenances, followed in 1935 by Bredius's volume, generally accepted as establishing the canon for the next thirty years. Since the last war, studies of a more critical bent have been produced by Kurt Bauch [1966] and, most significantly for a modern conception of the artist, by Gerson in his revision of Bredius [1969], as well as in his own volume of the previous year. Yet, valuable as these publications are in their various ways, none of them provides a full scale catalogue raisonné offering extended discussion of authorship, date, subject, style and provenance. This is precisely what the authors of the new catalogue have set out to accomplish, drawing on at least twenty years' research.

\**A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, Vol. I (1625-1631). Published by Martinus Nijhof, The Hague, Boston and London. By J. Bruyn, B. Haak, S. H. Levie, P. J. J. van Thiel and E. van de Wetering, with the collaboration of L. Peese Binckhorst-Hoffscholte; translated by D. Cook-Radmore.

The scale of the project is apparent from the fact that the first volume gets no further than Rembrandt's departure for Amsterdam in 1631; we can presumably expect another four or five volumes before the task is completed.

The thoroughness of the scholarship is remarkable, even down to such details as deciding the type of house and the position within it of the room which appears in the *Boston Artist in his studio* (the conclusion being that it may very well represent Rembrandt's own studio). But in providing this monumental display of information and discussion, the authors have written a daunting number of words. Each entry is so extensive—that devoted to the Los Angeles *Raising of Lazarus* runs to approximately 9,300 words, much of it description in small print, and all closely written in a deliberately down-to-earth style—that it has been found necessary to provide a summarised opinion at the beginning and end of each entry. The size of the volume is the result of the honourable intention that the reader should be able to participate fully in the discussion of all the evidence which contributed to each entry; but when accompanied by such extensive and excellent illustrations, much of the description of subject-matter is superfluous. Moreover, the equally long accounts of paint surface must, as the authors admit, vary greatly in dependability according to whether the picture was studied in laboratory conditions or seen with the aid of a torch in a dark country-house in mid-winter. More illustrations and less description would undoubtedly make the reader's task easier. The price to be paid for providing so much is an uncomfortably heavy volume. Those who find a catalogue entry or two excellent preparation for a night's rest should be warned against reading the book in bed, particularly if they share their life or at least their bed with a partner.

In spite of this wealth of information, there are one or two areas in which more would have been welcome. In the cases of disputed attribution, it would have been helpful had the authors invariably summarised previous critical opinion. If no sale records are available, approximate dates of ownership, where possible, would be of use. In the case of the *Samson betrayed by Delilah*, here attributed to Lievens, whose 'attribution to Rembrandt has found scant support' since its discovery in 1956, we are not told when it was acquired by the Rijksmuseum, nor under what name.

The authors have set about their task with the avowed aim of proving that even from his earliest days Rembrandt was a much more consistent artist both in style and technique than has usually been considered the case. In their own words, they want to establish 'a logical evolution'. If convincing, such a view would play a fundamental rôle in deciding questions of authenticity, since if a particular work did not readily fit into the precisely defined pattern of artistic behaviour, then it could not be by Rembrandt. Their conception of the artist is set out in two introductory essays, one devoted to style and the other to technique. (The two other essays usefully discuss the evidential value of reproductive prints and the varying forms of signature). Whether or not one agrees with the premises, they offer a clear and rational approach. If on the other hand Rembrandt is seen as



1. *The artist in oriental costume with a poodle at his feet*, now attributed to Rembrandt. 66.5 by 52 cm. (Musée du Petit Palais, Paris). See p.662.



being more varied and less consistent than the present volume allows, then final decisions rest on much more subjective bases; even the most logical of artists cannot be totally pinned down, and, as the authors are aware, they cannot always define Rembrandt's progression as rigidly as they would like. In some cases where a freer conception of the artist would give rise to no problems, the present assumptions occasionally condemn the authors to a painful internal argument before they can accept the particular work as belonging to their scheme of things.

Although such a clearly argued solution to the problem is welcome, one sometimes feels that the authors are inexorably led by their own logic to decisions which do not necessarily accord with the way an artist in fact behaves. As they themselves admit in a discussion of a group of several studies of heads, 'Rembrandt must initially have reacted in a number of different ways to the difficulties this subject-matter brought with it, especially in a large format'. That an artist, especially in his early years, may not have followed a completely logical path is in Rembrandt's case not entirely a matter for speculation, since we possess a number of signed and dated etchings, which display considerable diversity in style and purpose, and suggest that a similar variation may have been present in his painting.

In establishing a logical evolution the authors in several cases became sufficiently convinced of the correctness of their very precise chronology to override evidence of a historical or factual nature. In the case of the Windsor Castle *Old Woman* (to be unfavourably reassessed in the next volume), they prefer to date the picture to 1630/31, despite the historical evidence which suggests that it was more likely to have been brought back to England in 1629. The dates of 1628 and 1632 on the Berlin *Samson and Delilah* and the Cleveland *Bust of an old woman* are here argued to be neither genuine nor records of a genuine date, and the paintings are redated to 1629/30 and 1629 respectively. And in trying to settle the complicated question of the various representations of the *Raising of Lazarus* by Rembrandt and Lievens, they dispose of the inconvenient date of 1630 on the British Museum drawing by arguing that if it was dated by Rembrandt at all this was done only later and then incorrectly. The drawing itself provides no support for this conclusion. In such instances, it is perhaps fair to detect something of the effects of group psychology. As the preface revealingly says: 'A closely knit group tends to feel less doubts or hesitations than an individual. The dilemmas of a team member were occasionally washed away by the cogency of the others'.

A commendable feature of the catalogue is the degree to which scientific evidence has been used. The authors are of course not the first to do so and in this respect Bauch's dendrochronological studies are rightly mentioned. Apart from dendrochronology, which if the truth be told does not take one very far, the present catalogue produces an exhaustive examination of X-rays (almost always reproduced) and of the preparation and structure of grounds and paint. The ultimate purpose is to determine the artist's pattern of working. At the time of the Chicago symposium in 1969, Richard Buck, in a discussion of Rembrandt's grounds, suggested that 'each paint-

ing may have been a technical creation as well as a pictorial one'. Buck's hypothesis of such a method of working, here disparagingly referred to as 'technical whimsicality', accords with the generally accepted understanding of Rembrandt's practice. As a corrective, the present authors set out to try and prove that Rembrandt was not only consistent in his painting techniques, but also followed conventional procedures. And on the evidence presented they have so far made a good case, although we must await the reaction of those with more scientific knowledge. This understanding of the artist's procedure here becomes a major factor in determining authenticity. It provides, for example, the reason for rejecting the National Gallery *Man in a lofty room*, before unanimously accepted as genuine. But taken as a strict rule of thumb, it does pose some awkward problems, such as the question of the three pictures of the same dimensions painted on gold ground on copper. After much agonising, the Salzburg *Old woman at prayer* is accepted, whereas the Stockholm *Artist in a cap* and the Hague *Bust of a laughing man* remain in the inelegantly titled limbo of 'Paintings Rembrandt's authorship of which cannot be positively either accepted or rejected', technique arguing in favour of the attribution, style against.

Despite their clear conception of the artist, the authors have not invariably found it easy to make up their minds. Apart from reservations expressed in a number of instances, they reveal something of their uncertainty by arranging the catalogue in three parts. Forty-two pictures, including the only discovery made since Gerson-Bredius, the Utrecht *Baptism of the eunuch*, are classed as genuine; eight are placed in the undecided category already mentioned; and forty-four are rejected. For the last section, the authors have curiously taken as their guideline Bredius's list, which merely represented a consensus of the mid-1930s. This means that a number of pictures, not seriously considered as the work of Rembrandt since the last war, are still included. These do not deserve the full panoply of scholarship accorded them here, even if in one case it allows a useful discussion of the works of that elusive figure, Isaac de Jouderville.

The Bredius view of Rembrandt as a painter was rudely shattered in the year of the tercentenary of the artist's death, when Gerson's new edition of Bredius was published. It became a particularly hot topic at the Chicago symposium, provoking a clash between the old and new perceptions of the artist. Others besides Gerson had expressed critical opinions about a number of well known paintings, but he was undoubtedly responsible for consolidating and expanding a new approach. Since then we have come to accept this different view of the artist with a certain equanimity, if not always complete agreement. The present authors had by this time already started work and although they can be seen as part of the same trend, they by no means invariably agree with Gerson about either authenticity or quality. They reinstate, for example, the *Self-portrait with a poodle*, in the Petit Palais, Paris, which had been rejected by Gerson, and the Turin *Old man asleep*, about which he had reservations. A number of decisions in the new catalogue will undoubtedly be challenged, but it is fair to say that overall the volume presents no great surprise. Rembrandt, leaving aside the chronological niceties, essentially

remains the same painter. Yet given the fact that eleven previously unchallenged works, approximately twenty per cent of the artist's accepted *œuvre*, are here rejected, we shall—if we eventually agree with the authors' conclusions—have to get used to an artist of diminished activity, though not basically of narrower range.

In the meantime scholars will want, in the light of research presented here, to reexamine the new deletions from the *œuvre*, among them the Tours *Flight into Egypt*,

the Ottawa *Tribute money* and the Stockholm *Scholar in a study*. (The little painting of the *Good Samaritan*, in the Wallace Collection, whose recent cleaning revealed a signature and date of 1630, is ominously omitted altogether from discussion). It will be interesting to see if future research confirms that we have here reached the point of an irreducible minimum of acceptable works by Rembrandt. If so, the present catalogue will, quite apart from its other undoubted merits, have performed signal service.

CHRISTOPHER BROWN

## Jan Lievens in Leiden and London\*

IN 1783 Thomas Pennant published *The Journey from Chester to London* in the belief that 'the ground which is described in the following sheets, has been for some centuries passed over by the incurious Traveller; and has had the hard fortune of being constantly execrated for its dullness'.<sup>1</sup> In the course of his journey, Pennant stopped at Combe Abbey, near Coventry, the seat of 'a jovial English baron', Lord Craven. Looking at the paintings hanging in the house, Pennant singled out for praise full-length portraits of the Winter King and Queen, Frederik V Elector Palatine and his wife, Elizabeth, the daughter of James I. The full-length of the Winter Queen was presumably the portrait of her by Honthorst, painted in 1642, now in the National Portrait Gallery (on loan from the National Gallery).<sup>2</sup> 'The young Craven', he noted,

'was among her warmest devotees, and continued the attachment to the last moment of her life; possessed her deserved confidence, directed all her affairs, and gave a most distinguishing proof of his esteem, by building for her use, at his estate in Berkshire, a magnificent palace'. Pennant went on to admire the collection of 'portraits of men of eminence in Germany [which] were brought over by the Queen of Bohemia, and by her bequeathed by will to Lord Craven'. The last two paintings which caught Pennant's eye at Combe were: 'Two fine paintings by Rembrandt, of two philosophers; each with a noble pupil: one in Turkish dress; the other in an ermine robe. These young figures are called Prince Rupert and Prince Maurice. The time of the residence of their mother [the Winter Queen] in Holland, agrees entirely with that of Rembrandt in Amsterdam, which makes the conjecture probable'.<sup>3</sup>

These two paintings (Figs.2 and 3) were among the twenty-eight paintings attributed to Rembrandt included in the 'Paintings by Ancient Masters' section of the Manchester Art-Treasures Exhibition of 1857. Their identification as sons of the Winter Queen, which was presumably traditional in the Craven family, had by then been dropped in favour of *Eli and Samuel* (Fig.2) and *Jacob Kats and the Prince of Orange* (Fig.3).<sup>4</sup> Almost a cen-

\*This article is a development of ideas first published in my review of the exhibition *Jan Lievens: ein Maler im Schatten Rembrandts* (Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig, September to November 1979) which appeared in this Magazine, Vol. CXXI [1979], pp.741-6. They were subsequently presented in 1981-82 in lectures at the Courtauld Institute, at Leiden University and at the Lakenhal Museum in Leiden. I am greatly indebted to the catalogue of the Braunschweig exhibition and to discussions with two of its authors, Rüdiger Klessman and Sabine Jacob. I would also like to record my thanks to Sir Oliver Millar (whose identification of Prince Charles Louis of the Palatinate is at the very heart of my argument), Frederik van Kretschmar, Marieke Spliethoff, Willemijn Fock, Maarten Wurfbaun and Sarah Kelly.

<sup>1</sup> T. PENNANT: *The Journey from Chester to London*, Dublin [1783], p.i.

<sup>2</sup> Inv. No.6362. Oil on canvas, 205.1 by 130.8 cm. Signed and dated 1642. Bequeathed by Cornelia, Countess of Craven, 1965.

<sup>3</sup> PENNANT, *op.cit.*, pp.181-89.

<sup>4</sup> *Catalogue of the Manchester Art-Treasures Exhibition*, Manchester [1857], Nos 666, 667, p.53.