Figure 4. Willem Drost?, *The Man with the Golden Helmet,* circa 1653. 67 x 54 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Preußischer Kulturbesitz Gemäldegalerie. Photo: Jörg P. Anders.

Rembrandt's paint

BENJAMIN BINSTOCK

> Hang this painting in a strong light and so that one may look at it from a distance.
>
> The smell of the paint would make you sick.
>
> *Rembrandt*[1]

Rembrandt's paint plays a crucial role in the history of his reception, which has ranged from disapproval among his contemporaries, to superlative praise in the Romantic period, to more ambivalent accounts in our own time. Already in his own time, as in ours, commentators tended to reify Rembrandt's paint as a thing *(res),* as tactile material touched or smelled from up close, and to neglect its visual effect on the viewer from a distance. Rembrandt himself sought to counter this tendency. Aloïs Riegl was the first art historian to explain Rembrandt's distinctive application of paint as a means to approximate the viewer's optical perception of bodies and objects in space, as opposed to their haptic volume or tactile quality.[2] According to this view, Rembrandt employs material paint for immaterial effects.

Understanding Rembrandt's paint is also crucial for distinguishing between his works and those of his students. Confusion about this issue has led commentators to question Rembrandt's individuality or our ability to recognize his work. The problem, in my view, stems from the later reception of Rembrandt. His students simplified his manner of rendering and conceptions, yet their works were, and in some cases still are, celebrated as his own because of our economic, cultural, and institutional investments in him. The time has now come to devote more attention to paintings by Rembrandt's students. Here I focus on works by Rembrandt's student Willem Drost that have been deattributed from or are still attributed to Rembrandt. This approach is also a precondition for recognizing Rembrandt's own works, or their mistaken deattribution.

The origins of Rembrandt's distinctive approach to paint are evident in his earliest works. These anticipated elements of his later paintings, served as sources for both his early and later followers, and provide the necessary foundation for a rigorous account of Rembrandt's oeuvre. At the outset of his career, Rembrandt transformed conventional approaches to rendering and composition, the head study, history painting, and ultimately himself as an artistic personality. We must, however, resist the tendency to treat Rembrandt's works as autobiographical or as a reflection of his person. Rather, through his paint, Rembrandt lends his immaterial genius material form.

I. Rembrandt's modernism: an untouchable stroke

> One must have died several times to paint like that. . . . Rembrandt is truly called *magician.*
>
> *Van Gogh on Rembrandt's* Jewish Bride *(fig. 1)*[3]

The changing interpretations of Rembrandt's paint reflect the history of art itself. His paintings are consistently measured against art from the periods of his interpreters. These circumstances reflect Rembrandt's continued relevance and have given rise to both insights and misunderstandings. As noted above, commentators often err on the side of a reductive materiality, emphasizing paint as tactile substance, whereas others stress its immaterial functions. Here I side primarily with the latter group and, accordingly, argue for Rembrandt's "untouchable" stroke, in the sense of both its optical, rather than tactile effect, and its incomparable, inimitable character. The debates are also of interest in that the reception of Rembrandt tells us something about our own changing values and the status of modernism itself. Rembrandt does not so much prefigure modern artists in his use of paint as the latter echo, less powerfully, his own concerns.

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1. S. Slive, *Rembrandt and His Critics 1630–1730* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1988), pp. 22, 185 (this and all following translations are my own).

2. A. Riegl, "Excerpts from *The Dutch Group Portrait,*" trans. B. Binstock, *October* 74 (1995):3–35, includes the passages on Rembrandt's group portraits. On Riegl's relevance for art history today, see B. Binstock, "I've Got You Under My Skin: Rembrandt, Riegl, and the Will of Art History," in *Framing Formalism: Riegl's Work,* ed. R. Woodfield, forthcoming.

3. *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh* (Boston, 1991), vol. 2, p. 417.

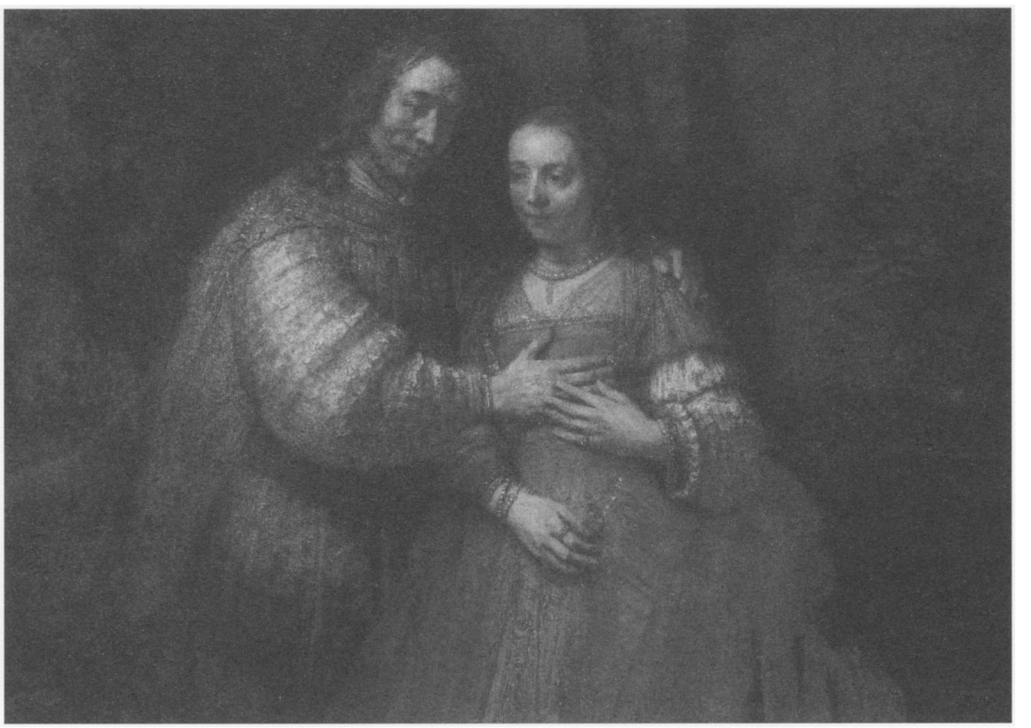

Figure 1. Rembrandt, *The Jewish Bride,* circa 1660. 121.5 x 166.5 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

The first written accounts of Rembrandt's paintings are negative polemics published after his death by his contemporaries, who rejected his example as anathema to their own academic, classicist ideals. The artist-theoretician Gerard de Lairesse warned against the manner of Rembrandt and his colleague Jan Lievens, "whose paint runs down the work like dung *[drek].*"[4] The art biographer Arnold Houbraken similarly claimed that Rembrandt's paint was "smeared on as with a rough house-painter's brush" or "a brick layer's trowel," and that he "once painted a picture in which the paint was so thick that you could lift it up from the floor by its nose."[5] Houbraken further connected Rembrandt's rough paint with his filthy habits and "fraternization" with the lower classes.

Rembrandt appears to respond to classicist criticism in his drawing called "Satire of Art Criticism" (fig. 2). A critic seated on an empty barrel, with a snake slithering up his arm and donkey ears growing out of his hat, expounds on paintings for an attentive audience. A man in the right foreground turns out to us and conveys his (or Rembrandt's) view of the proceedings by defecating and wiping his behind. Rembrandt added inscriptions below the critic, *"Dees quack van de Kunst is Jockich gunst"* (this quack of art finds foolish favor), and at the bottom of the sheet, "The date 16_4."[6] In my opinion, the critic portrays the playwright Joost van den Vondel, an ardent proponent of classicism, champion of many of

4. Slive (see note 1), p. 163
5. Ibid., pp. 179, 184–185.

6. O. Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt* (London: Phaidon Press, 1954), vol. 4, p. 232, no. A 35a, attributed the drawing to an unknown pupil and read the date in the lower inscription as 1644. J. Emmens, *Rembrandt en de Regels van de Kunst* (Utrecht: Haentjens Decker and Gumbert, 1968), pp. 152–153, attributed the drawing to Rembrandt, deciphered the inscriptions below the critic, and connected his donkey ears with the slandering judge in Mantegna's drawing of *The Calumny of Apelles,* which Rembrandt copied in a drawing dated circa 1656. Emmens rejects Slive's reading of the critic as Karel van Mander and the date as 1604, because the figure is depicted as an ignorant amateur, although this factor also speaks

Figure 2. Rembrandt, "Satire of Art Criticism," circa 1657. 15.6 x 20 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Ben. A35a.

Rembrandt's former students, and a frequent critic of Rembrandt's art. In 1653 the Amsterdam painter's guild celebrated Vondel with a feast dedicated to Apelles and Apollo, or painting and poetry, which was attended by several of Rembrandt's former students, but not by Rembrandt. Vondel was also present at a similar feast the following year, dedicated to the brotherhood of painting and sculpture, and devoted a poem to the event in which he rhymes *"kunst"* with *"gunst,"* as in Rembrandt's inscription.[7] The year in the lower inscription on Rembrandt's drawing, which indicates the date of the depicted event rather than the drawing, appears to be 1654.

Vondel responded in kind in a poem from 1662 with an indirect reference to Rembrandt's night-scene of *The Oath of the Batavians,* which was commissioned for the new town hall of Amsterdam in that year but was ultimately rejected:

against Emmens's identification of the critic as Franciscus Junius, who wrote in Latin on antique art. W. Liedtke et al., *Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Aspects of Connoisseurship* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), vol. 1, pp. 164–166, attribute the drawing to Rembrandt and read the date as 1604 or 1644.

7. ". . . Zo volgt de Schilderkunst, /Uit angebore gunst,/ Onsteken van een heilig vuur/ De schoonheid van Natuur." J. van den Vondel, *Inwijding der Schilderkunste, op Sint Lukasfeest. 1654,* in *Vondel: Volledige dichtwerken en oorspronkelijke proza,* ed. A. Verwey (Amsterdam: H. J. W. Becht, 1986), p. 944. On the guild celebrations, see H. Postma and M. Blok, "Duidelijkheid over de Amsterdamse St. Lukasfeesten in 1653 en 1654," *Oud Holland* 105 (1991):36–37. Emmens (see note 6), p. 153, observed that the figure at the center wearing a chain of medallions appears to be "a sort of guild servant." M. Roscam Abbing, "De ezelsoren in Rembrandts satire op de kunstkritiek," *Kroniek van het Rembrandthuis* (1993):20–21, identifies the critic as a writer, because of the pen behind his right ear, and relates the theme to a text by Rembrandt's former student Samuel van Hoogstraten published in 1657, which involves ignorant judgments about Vondel's poems. Rembrandt presumably made his drawing partly in response to this text, about the time he copied Mantegna's drawing, and accordingly addresses Vondel's ignorant judgments about paintings and "calumny" of himself. S. Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 92, proposes that Rembrandt's drawing was "a joke against those who compared Rembrandt's painting to dung," yet de Lairesse's critique was published long after Rembrandt's death. Rather, Rembrandt implies that Vondel himself is "full of shit."

> No connoisseur values the art of the crazy painter who pointlessly besmears his nut-house with paint. Compare Rubens's art and paintings in this regard: drawing and paint, from top to bottom, as if in competition with nature herself for a commission; Where shall the night-owl hide himself from the day in his shadows of spider-webs and trash? The masters will hardly keep themselves from laughing.[8]

Vondel's polemic anticipates and probably influenced Houbraken's accusation that Rembrandt smeared his paint and his association of Rembrandt with filth. Rembrandt had the "last laugh" in this exchange in his late and particularly boldly painted *Self-Portrait as Zeuxis,* the ancient Greek painter who is said to have died laughing while painting an ugly old woman.

Rembrandt's reputation was later rehabilitated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in keeping with Romanticism's reaction against academic classicism. The conflict is reflected in the *querelle des ancienes et modernes* illustrated in Daumier's satirical print in which a republican realist painter armed with Houbraken's house-painter's brush and a garbage-can lid as shield is pitted against a Trojan-helmeted classicist wielding a maul stick as a spear. The impressionists further advanced the modernist cause in their emphasis on spontaneous application of paint in their attempts to capture the optical impression formed on the eye of the beholder. Admiration for Rembrandt's use of paint reaches its zenith with Van Gogh.

The most important art historian from this period writing on Rembrandt was Aloïs Riegl. Profoundly influenced by painting in his time, Riegl recognized that Rembrandt's application of paint served to break down or to eliminate the sense of tactile surface and volume in order to emphasize the viewer's optical sense of bodies moving in space:

> He wanted to divest this objective form of the sharpness that provoked the sense of touch. . . . This approach also lies at the basis of our modern subjectivist view of art. . . . It is an optical, spatial composition, which was meant to lend to the figures, depicted moving in deep space, the calm impression of the plane, of being beside one another without depth, created by a distant view. . . . The exaggerated chiaroscuro is abandoned for this reason and local colors regain their own autonomous value, although without functioning in a polychromatic, isolating sense that would disturb the mood [*Stimmung,* also "harmony," "atmosphere"] connecting the figures and the air.[9]

Recent scholars have returned to an emphasis on the tactile materiality of Rembrandt's paint. Ernst van de Wetering explains Rembrandt's thick paint as a means to convey "the impression of nearness" and "a mimetic representation of the materials depicted."[10] Conversely, Svetlana Alpers invokes Rembrandt's tendency to "obfuscate the world seen" and his approach to paint as "something worked as with bare hands—a material to grasp."[11] She later identified Rembrandt as a "would-be sculptor" in relation to the prominent hands in his paintings, emphasizing "the master's touch." [12] Just as Riegl's reading was inspired by the impressionists, the emphasis in these cases on "paint itself" was likely influenced by modern artists' concern with the tactile materiality of paint, particularly Clement Greenberg's understanding of modernism as stressing the purity of the medium.[13]

Rembrandt undeniably calls attention to his distinctive handling of paint and thereby anticipates modernist reflection on medium and process. Jean Genet long ago characterized the groom's sleeve in *The Jewish Bride* as an abstract painting.[14] Yet a distinction

8. J. van den Vondel, *Bespiegelingen van God en Godsdienst* (1662) in *Vondel: Volledige dichtwerken en oorspronkelijke proza,* ed. A. Verwey (Amsterdam: H. J. W. Becht, 1986), p. 1080. The allusion to Rembrandt was first recognized by F. Schmidt-Degener, "Rembrandt en Vondel" (1919), in *Rembrandt* (Amsterdam: J. M. Meulenhoff, 1950), p. 71, who suggests that Vondel plays on "nut-house" *(dolhuis)* and "Town Hall" *(stadhuis).* Rembrandt had also recently moved, following his bankruptcy, to modest lodgings on the rosengracht across from the *doolhof,* an amusement park or "fool's court."

9. Riegl (see note 2), pp. 30–31, 32.

10. E. van de Wetering, *Rembrandt: The Painter at Work* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1997), pp. 162, 185, 190, also argues that Rembrandt sought to imitate Titian's mature works on the basis of accounts provided by Vasari and Van Mander. These authors explained Titian's mature paintings as a function of his age or failing eyesight, interpretations that are unlikely to have inspired Rembrandt. Rather, Titian and Rembrandt sought to achieve similar optical effects.

11. S. Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 224–226.

12. Alpers (see note 7), pp. 14–33.

13. C. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism,* ed. J. O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), vol. 4, pp. 85–93. See also B. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October* 30 (1984):83–120. According to the Russian constructivist Tatlin, "the eye should be put under the control of touch" (p. 87).

14. J. Genet, *"Le secret de Rembrandt"* (1961) reprinted in *Rembrandt* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 33.

can be made, both in Rembrandt and in later artists, between "paint itself" and its visual effects. Rembrandt did not create a sculpture of the sleeve or a mimetic representation of its materials seen from nearby. Rather, his thick paint serves precisely to break down the sense of tactile surface and volume in order to suggest our optical impression from the distance, and the play of shimmering, intangible light. Van Gogh rightly characterized Rembrandt as a magician, using material paint for inimitable, immaterial effects. In *The Jewish Bride,* Rembrandt does not obfuscate so much as transfigure the world seen, in keeping with his subject, a contemporary bridal couple in the guise of the biblical Isaac and Rebecca.

The young Rembrandt himself advised his early supporter Constantijn Huygens in a letter that one of his paintings should be hung "so that one may look at it from the distance." Houbraken reports that the mature Rembrandt "pulled back people who came to his studio and wanted to see his paintings from up close, saying 'the smell of the paint will make you sick.'" [15] Rembrandt was all too familiar with the smell of paint. Yet any such remark was likely intended along the lines of his earlier advice, to exhort his audience to stop focusing on the material paint and to appreciate instead the optical effect of his paintings from the distance, advice most modern commentators can still use.

This recalcitrant problem is evident in interpretations of Rembrandt's *Portrait of Jan Six* of 1654 (fig. 3). Eddie de Jongh first explained the broad strokes of paint indicating Six's gloves and the fastenings of his coat as an illustration of *sprezzatura,* or "effortlessness," as formulated in Baldesare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier,* and in keeping with Six's social and literary aspirations.[16] Conversely, Alpers explains Rembrandt's approach as a response to Six's hasty departure, due to his irritation about the money Rembrandt owed him, anticipating the immanent break in their relations.[17] Both of these contradictory interpretations emphasize Rembrandt's application of the paint, its effortlessness or quickness, rather than its visual effect.

As with the thick paint of the sleeve in *The Jewish Bride,* the broad strokes rendering Six's gloves and coat convey the beholder's optical impression from the distance of a figure moving in space. Rembrandt portrays Six with his coat slung over his shoulder, pulling on his gloves as an elegant "man about town" with things to do and perhaps as a symbolic illustration of their parting. His emphatically bold approach is the contrary of *sprezzatura,* which disguises the work of the artist behind a courtly facade of effortless perfection.[18] The latter strategy was emulated by the Dutch classicist painters whom Vondel celebrated at the feast of the Amsterdam painter's guild at precisely this time, including Rembrandt's former students, one of whom was chosen to paint the portrait of Six's new wife. Six later penned a Latin poem on his portrait: "This is the face I, Jan Six, had, I, who since childhood have worshipped the Muses."[19] David Smith observed that Six specifically refers to himself as Janus, the two-faced God of the threshold. In Smith's view, this was a reference to Six's private and public selves.[20] Janus also looks both forward and back, to the future and to the past, just as Six in his portrait looks at Rembrandt but will soon turn his back on him, and in his poem, looks back on his childhood and his connection with Rembrandt, now something of the past. Six was privately attracted to the avant-garde innovations of Rembrandt's art, yet the demands of his public social milieu ultimately forced him to abandon Rembrandt in favor of artists working in the more conservative, courtly, classicist style.

The most-recent accounts of Rembrandt's paint take the materialist tendency in an extreme direction. Mieke Bal cites Alpers's gloss of Rembrandt's late *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Deijman* and *Slaughtered Ox* in the

15. Slive (see note 1), pp. 22, 185. Houbraken specifically claims that Rembrandt sought by this means to hide the fact that his paintings were unfinished.

16. E. de Jongh, review of *Hollandse schilders in de Gouden Eeuw,* by B. Haak, *Simiolus* 15 (1985):67. This interpretation is embraced by van de Wetering (see note 10), p. 161, among others.

17. Alpers (see note 7), p. 93. Alpers's scenario recalls the traditional anecdote (based on the same misunderstanding) that Rembrandt's etching of the so-called "Six's bridge" was executed in the time needed for a servant to fetch a pot of mustard from a neighboring village.

18. B. Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier,* trans. C. Singleton (New York: Doubleday, 1959), p. 43, refers to "a certain *sprezzatura,* so as to conceal all art and make whatever is done or said appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it."

19. Six's Latin poem indicates the date of the unsigned, undated portrait. The connection was first recognized by Six's descendent, the art historian Jan Six. See W. Strauss and M. van der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents* (New York: Abaris Books, 1979), p. 322.

20. D. Smith, "'I Janus': Privacy and the Gentlemanly Ideal in Rembrandt's Portraits of Jan Six," *Art History* 11 (1988):43, 46.

Figure 3. Rembrandt, *Portrait of Jan Six,* 1654. 112 x 102 cm. Amsterdam, Sixhuis.

Louvre as related to death and decay, but shifts the emphasis to "the putrifying smell of paint."[21] James Elkins similarly describes the rough surface of Rembrandt's self-portrait of 1659 as "scar tissue . . . as if the nose were smeared with phlegm or mucus."[22] These provocatively (and reductively) materialist readings uncannily echo the earliest published accounts of Rembrandt's paint as smeared dung and picking up paintings by the nose, except that what was once criticized is now celebrated. This reversal is again due to the influence of modern artists, specifically expressionist painters such as Chaim Soutine, whose version of Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox* exaggerates his thick paint and the abject quality of the ox carcass, or Soutine's postmodern successors, who employ abject materials (for example, dead animals or elephant dung).

What is lost in the translation is precisely the visual effects of Rembrandt's paint. Through his optical approach, Rembrandt is able to portray human and animal corpses and the human face in their complex, nonidealized materiality. Jean Genet interprets Rembrandt's portraits along these lines in a more sympathetically modernist fashion:

> Under Hendrickje's skirts, under the fur-edged coats, under the painter's extravagant robe, the bodies are performing their functions: they digest, they are warm, they are heavy, they smell, they shit. However delicate her face and serious

21. Alpers (see note 7), p. 81; M. Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 385–386.

22. J. Elkins, *What Painting Is* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 114.

her expression, *The Jewish Bride* has an ass. You can tell. She can raise her skirts at any moment.[23]

A similar point is made by Marcel Duchamp's graffito on a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa:* "L.H.O.O.Q" (she has a hot ass). Genet and Duchamp do not debunk the artworks themselves, but rather the idealizing (kitsch) outlooks of later interpreters. Genet specifically insists on Rembrandt's realism as a peculiar form of materialism, illustrating that which we cannot see (or touch). The groom in *The Jewish Bride* not only feels his bride's dress or breasts but also feels her breathe and her heart beat, whereas she senses his reaction with her left hand and holds her right hand at the level of her genitals.

Genet significantly called his essay "What was left of a Rembrandt torn into regular little square pieces and tossed into the toilet."[24] The point of his provocative title, in my view, as with Duchamp's quip about using a Rembrandt painting as an ironing board, was to challenge a reductively materialist view of art, itself evident in the emphasis on Rembrandt's material paint. There is something immaterial in Rembrandt's paintings, yet this can only be articulated through commentary and scholarship, which are themselves bound up with questions of value and, ultimately, money. These problems become particularly vexed in relation to works by Rembrandt's students, to which we must now turn.

II. Rembrandt and Willem Drost: all that glitters is not gold

Every painter takes himself for Rembrandt.

Picasso[25]

A crucial problem in the interpretation of Rembrandt's paint and Rembrandt studies as a whole involves the increasing recognition that many paintings now attributed to the master were painted by his students, and the difficulty commentators have had in identifying these. As Picasso suggests, every painter takes himself for Rembrandt, and his students were the first to do so, at least while they were working in his studio. More disturbing, later commentators, in turn, mistook the students' works for Rembrandt's. These circumstances have led recent commentators to question Rembrandt's individuality or even our access to his work. In my view, the present predicament is a function of our own greedy and careless reception of Rembrandt's students' paintings as a kind of "false gold." Yet we also possess the capacity to recognize this and to recognize the distinctiveness of Rembrandt's art.

By far, the most significant attempt to interpret the problem of attribution is put forward by Svetlana Alpers. Alpers claims that Rembrandt invented "the master's touch" as an "individuality effect" for his students to imitate in order to "corner the market." She emphasizes her point by illustrating paintings recently deattributed from Rembrandt's oeuvre above the label "Rembrandt" in quotes (figs. 4, 6, 7, 11): "His authority (and his uniqueness) seem to be slipping in by the back door!"[26] In my view, Alpers's argument is primarily relevant to the later reception of Rembrandt's work and the present state of Rembrandt studies, specifically the tendency to err on the side of attributing paintings to him and the reluctance to address the work of his students. Hence the failure to distinguish between what Alpers calls "the master's touch," encompassing misattributed works by Rembrandt's students, and what I have called his "untouchable" stroke and his unique approach to his subjects.

Alpers's fundamental assumption is partly correct insofar as Rembrandt's students emulated his example, and their works could legally be sold as his own. Houbraken informs us that Rembrandt's student Govaert Flinck, in particular, "became accustomed to [Rembrandt's] handling of paint and manner of painting, which in this short time he learned to imitate to the extent that several of his works were seen and sold as works by Rembrandt *[echte penceelwerken van Rembrant]*."[27] Yet these works earned Rembrandt

23. J. Genet, "Something Which Seemed to Resemble Decay," trans. B. Frechtman, *Antaeus* 20 (1982):113.

24. "Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt déchiré en petits carrés bien réguliers, et foutu aux chiottes," reprinted in Genet (see note 14), pp. 67–69. (The English title of the excerpted passages cited in the previous note is the invention of the translator.)

25. F. Gilot and C. Lake, *Life with Picasso* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 49.

26. Alpers (see note 7), p. 11. In the introductory and concluding paragraphs of her book, Alpers cites eleven paintings with the label "Rembrandt," including *The Man with the Golden Helmet, The Centurion Cornelius,* the *David and Saul* in The Hague, and *The "Polish Rider."* In none of these cases does she address who de-attributed these paintings or why, or their possible authors. I address all these works, the history of their attribution, and their authors below.

27. Slive (see note 1), p. 184. None of these examples has ever been identified.

relatively little income.[28] He certainly did not "corner the market" in his time. His former students progressively abandoned their attempts to emulate his example in order to adopt a facile and profitable classicism favored by the regent elite, whereas Rembrandt himself went bankrupt in 1656.

The phenomenon addressed by Alpers dates from a later time, after Rembrandt's rehabilitation and the accompanying rise in the cultural and monetary value of his work. These circumstances resulted in a fantastic inflation in both the number of paintings attributed to him and their critical estimation, a situation that has persisted up to our own time. Ironically, the belated appreciation of Rembrandt's distinctive handling of paint and his conceptions ultimately lead to the misrecognition of these qualities in his students' works. This process involves what Marx first described as a shift from the "use-value" of a material object to its abstract or imaginary "exchange-value" as a commodity or fetish.[29] The art world vividly illustrates the fetishistic nature of commodities insofar as work by Rembrandt's students can assume the abstract exchange-value of a Rembrandt painting.

Alpers exemplifies a late-twentieth-century reaction against the Romantic construct of the artist-genius, only she misdirects her critique at Rembrandt rather than at the Romantic construct and its consequences for Rembrandt scholarship. Alpers begins and ends her study by invoking *The Man with the Golden Helmet* in Berlin (fig. 4), which was deattributed from Rembrandt's oeuvre in the 1970s after the painting was cleaned but was never convincingly attributed to another artist.[30] According to Alpers:

> Rembrandt displays and extends his authority in a manner that calls authenticity into question. This despite the fact that authenticity as a marketing feature was laid down in his own practice. . . . It is no wonder that *The Man with the Golden Helmet* has been taken to be an essential or canonical Rembrandt. And it is nonetheless so if its authenticity is in question. The painting may not be by his hand, but the old man is an individual of the tribe of Rembrandt—an artist whose enterprise is not reducible to his autographic oeuvre.[31]

"Authenticity" was surely not a "marketing feature" for *The Man with the Golden Helmet,* a minor student work produced in Rembrandt's studio. This issue was only raised later, precisely because paintings were falsely being attributed to the master. Responsibility for questions about "authenticity" and for the quotation marks around the name "Rembrandt" in Alpers's text, or as she puts it, for the display and extension of Rembrandt's authority in a manner that calls authenticity into question, lies not with Rembrandt, but with the later reception of his work and with Rembrandt scholarship.

The Man with the Golden Helmet was first purchased for the Berlin museum at the turn of the nineteenth century by its founder, Wilhelm von Bode, who put the painting forward as an essential or canonical Rembrandt, which it can hardly be called today.[32]

28. The only extant record of the relatively low prices paid for paintings by Rembrandt's students are his own notes made on the back of a drawing: "his standard bearer brought 15—and flora sold for 6—Sold work by Ferdinand, and another work of his the abraham, a flora. Leendert's flora was sold for 5—." Benesch (see note 6), vol. 2, p. 102. "Ferdinand" and "Leendert" have been identified as Rembrandt's students Ferdinand Bol and Leendert van Beyeren. The unnamed student mentioned at the beginning of the note was, in my opinion, Flinck, who studied with Rembrandt at the same time as the others. Flinck's "standard bearer" and "flora" can be identified with *The Standard Bearer* of the Rothschild Collection, Paris, and the *Flora* in the National Gallery, London, which were based primarily on Rembrandt's early *tronie* (head) of a soldier and his *Saskia as Flora* in St. Petersburg, respectively.

29. K. Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader.* Vol. 1, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy,* ed. R Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 303, 321: "The existence of things qua commodities, and the value-relation between the products of labor which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. . . . This I call Fetishism."

30. B. Rifkin, "Rembrandt and his Circle, I," *Art News* 68 (1969):27, followed by H. Adams, "If Not Rembrandt, Then His Cousin?" *Art Bulletin* 66 (1984):438, first reattributed the painting to Karel van der Pluym. J. Moffitt, "Who is The Old Man in a Golden Helmet," *Art Bulletin* 66 (1984):418, proposed an attribution to Carel Fabritius. C. Grimm, "Handschrift, schildertechniek en beeldstructuur. Bijdrage tot het onderzoek naar toeschrijvingen, I, de helmen van Rembrandt," *Tableau* 5 (1983):250, suggested Herman Dullaert as the author. J. Kelch, *Der Mann mit dem Goldhelm* (Berlin: 1986), pp. 21–27, rejects these proposals, because none of these artists produced comparable works. W. Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler* (Landau, Germany: Edition PVA, 1983–1990), vol. 4, p. 2886 n. 62, illustrates the painting without catalogue number among the "comparisons" for "anonymous Rembrandt school." As Alpers (see note 7), p. 2, puts it: "the painting is by a Rembrandt student, assistant, or follower whose name is unknown. . . . It is hard to value a painting which is not the product of a particular artist's hand."

31. Alpers (see note 7), pp. 121–122.

32. The painting served as the frontispiece for Bode's magnum opus, *Great Masters of Dutch and Flemish Painting,* trans. M. L. Clarke (1909; reprint, Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1967).

Bode's high estimation of the painting reflected growing admiration in the second half of the nineteenth century for Rembrandt, whose paintings had also come to exemplify a new appreciation of Northern art as an alternative to the dominance of the classical tradition, with "Northern" often identified as "Germanic." These tendencies are evident in Riegl's writings, and of obvious relevance for the newly founded museum of Germany's capital. Bode specifically identified the model in the painting as Rembrandt's second eldest brother, Adriaen, literally a member of Rembrandt's "tribe," although this connection is unlikely since Adriaen lived with his own family in Leiden and died in 1652.[33] Earlier commentators identified the old man as Rembrandt's father or Rembrandt himself, and at one point, he was amusingly referred to as Rembrandt's *Doppelgänger.*[34]

A particularly fascinating instance of this broader tendency was Julius Langbehn's wildly popular *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (Rembrandt as Educator), published anonymously in 1890 as the work of "a German." Langbehn's book was an extended meditation on the unique character and destiny of the German people, anticipating elements of Nazi ideology. He specifically praised the simplicity and suffering in the face of the old man in the golden helmet, whom he identified as a low-German farmer—another sense of Rembrandt's "tribe"—in keeping with his theme of a *volkisch* art of the people.[35] According to Fritz Stern, *Rembrandt als Erzieher* had "precious little to do with the real, historical Rembrandt. . . . Langbehn's Rembrandt was the personification of a cultural ideal."[36] In my view, Langbehn's text must be understood, in part, as a function of Rembrandt scholarship, including the mistaken attribution to Rembrandt of his students' paintings. Conversely, Rembrandt scholarship itself must be understood in the context of changing cultural ideals.

In my opinion, the painter of *The Man with the Golden Helmet* was Willem Drost, who studied with Rembrandt in the first half of the 1650s.[37] In Drost's painting in Kassel of a three-quarter-length view of a man dressed in a suit of armor, identified as Mars, the metal is depicted with a glossy sheen reflecting bright light, similar to the helmet in *The Man with the Golden Helmet,* including the same decorative curls (fig. 5).[38] As in the Berlin painting, the carefully described costume contrasts with the thinly modeled, gaunt face of the figure, looking down in apparent melancholy, located before a dark background. *The Man with the Golden Helmet* was possibly also intended as Mars.[39] Drost painted several other comparable half- or three-quarter-length views of historical and mythological figures.[40]

Drost's strategy in the Berlin painting is in keeping with Rembrandt's studio practice, developed at the outset of his career, of painting *tronies* (heads) as a way to build up a vocabulary of faces, costumes, and characters for history paintings. Rembrandt took over this practice from Jan Lievens, yet he also reinvented the *tronie,* portraying specific individuals in costumes suited to their distinct personalities, transforming studio models in costume into inhabitants of a remote historical world (fig. 14). *The Man with the Golden Helmet* combines an attempt to emulate the young

33. W. von Bode, "Das Bildnis von Rembrandts Brüder Adriaen im Mauritshuis," *Oud Holland* 9 (1891):1–6. A. Bredius, *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the Paintings* (1935), ed. H. Gerson (New York: Phaidon, 1969), already rejected this identification, labeling this and other studies of the same model "the so-called Rembrandt's brother." The known facts about Adriaen are cited in Strauss and van der Meulen (see note 19), p. 76.

34. *Kunstwerken aus dem Besitz des Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum-Vereins* (Berlin: 1966), p. 17.

35. [J. Langbehn] *Rembrandt Als Erzieher, von einem Deutschen* (1890; reprint, Leipzig, 1929), p. 29.

36. F. Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), p. 117.

37. Drost's earliest signed and dated work is an etched self-portrait from 1652, based on Rembrandt's etched self-portrait of 1648. Documents attest to his presence in Venice in 1657 and his return to Holland by 1663. Sumowski (see note 30), vol. 1, pp. 609–610.

38. The painting was first attributed to Drost in 1924. Sumowski (see note 30), vol. 1, p. 614, dates the work ca. 1655.

39. W. Schöne, "Rembrandts Mann mit dem Goldhelm," *Jahrbuch der Akademie der Wissenschaft in Göttingen* (1972):99, identified the figure as the exhausted Mars, in allusion to the peace of Westphalia. Moffitt (see note 30), pp. 419–423, identifies him as Saturn and reads the relief on the helmet as a Triton flanked by roses encircled by serpents devouring their tails. This "microcosmic iconographic program" designed by a Dutch humanist ostensibly illustrates how "transience, which afflicts us in relation to Time and Eternity, can be overcome by Fame in the Liberal Arts, which may last to Eternity," or (more relevant to the painting and its author) "Just as our lives are transient in relation to Eternity, so too is Fame transient in relation to Eternity." Moffitt appears to read anything he wants into the helmet, just as others project the qualities of genius onto the painting.

40. Examples include Drost's *Sibyl* in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, and his *Bathsheba* in the Louvre, signed and dated 1654, identified by Sumowski as "Drost's absolute masterpiece." Sumowski (see note 30), vol. 1, p. 608.

Figure 5. Drost, *"Mars,"* circa 1654. 116 x 94.5 cm. Kassel, Gemäldegalerie.

Rembrandt's compositional approach with an imitation of the mature Rembrandt's application of paint. The result is precisely the contrary of Rembrandt's unique synthesis. The exaggerated plasticity and lighting of the glittering "golden" helmet (presumably intended as bronze) present a bombastic contrast with the lack of definition, both facial and psychological, of the old man. Drost, not Rembrandt, was the "would-be sculptor"; he was unable to achieve Rembrandt's optical effect, so he literally built up the helmet from tactile paint, the "dross" of Rembrandt's magical alchemy.

In connection with the later misattribution of the painting, precisely these qualities came to constitute, in Alpers's words, an "individuality effect" and even a kind of "marketing strategy."[41] Admittedly, Rembrandt is partly responsible for this problem insofar as he provided concrete examples for his students to emulate. Drost is

41. See, for example, J. Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: Life and Work* (1948; reprint, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 106: "A few words cannot do justice to this masterpiece, which modern critics have especially praised for the boldness of Rembrandt's technique in the powerful impasto of the helmet. It would be difficult to find anywhere a more emphatic glorification of the beauty of gold and of old craftsmanship in this precious metal. . . . This phenomenon of pictorial beauty is placed in a mysterious and even tragic setting." Alpers (see note 7), pp. 2–3, cites this passage in full, yet she does not specify whether she embraces or rejects Rosenberg's account (she, too, identifies the helmet as gold).

Figure 6. Drost, *Centurion Cornelius,* circa 1654. 177 x 216 cm. London, Wallace Collection.

also responsible, because in simplifying, exaggerating, and caricaturing aspects of Rembrandt's approach and ideas, he (like Soutine after him) arguably made them more accessible than they were in his master's own works. Whether the painting manifests Drost's own genius is open to debate. In any case, we must first disentangle the work from Rembrandt's oeuvre and from later questions of "authenticity," and then re-evaluate it in relation to Drost's own oeuvre, a concern that would not have occurred to Rembrandt's contemporaries.

Like Rembrandt's other students, Drost gradually forged his own independent approach to history painting. His *Centurion Cornelius Dispatching Soldiers to Arrest St. Peter* in the Wallace Collection, London, includes a soldier wearing the same Renaissance helmet as in the Berlin painting, adorned with a similar plume of multicolored feathers (fig. 6). Here, too, the emphatic costumes contrast with the thinly modeled, gaunt faces and dark background. The *Centurion Cornelius* was likewise once attributed Rembrandt, and even considered "a quintessential Rembrandt, exemplifying all the warmth, majesty and humanity associated with that name."[42] The painting was first reattributed to Drost in 1929 by Abraham Bredius in the context of his public debate with Cornelis Hofstede de Groot over the latter's grossly inflated catalogue of about 1,000 Rembrandt paintings.[43] Bredius later went on to compile what is now the standard catalogue of 640 Rembrandt paintings.

42. J. Ingamells, *Rembrandt 1892. Twelve Paintings: A Century of Changing Perceptions* (London: Trustees of the Wallace Collection, 1992), p. 39.

43. A. Bredius, "Rembrandt of Drost?" *Oud Holland* 46 (1929):41. W. Sumowski, *Drawings of the Rembrandt School* (New York: Abaris Books, 1979–1985), vol. 3, p. 1236, cites a preparatory sketch for the composition by Drost in the Rijksmuseum but identifies it as "The Parable of the Wicked [Unmerciful] Servant" (Mathew 18:23–25) and claims it is a copy after Rembrandt. He identifies the painting as "a joint effort of several students. . . . However it safe to say that Drost participated." Sumowski (see note 30), vol. 4, p. 2883 n. 23, includes the painting among the "comparisons" for "anonymous Rembrandt school" as "teamwork ca. 1650, with Drost's participation, from whom the design may also have originated." J. Bruyn, review of *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler,* by Sumowski, *Oud Holland* 98

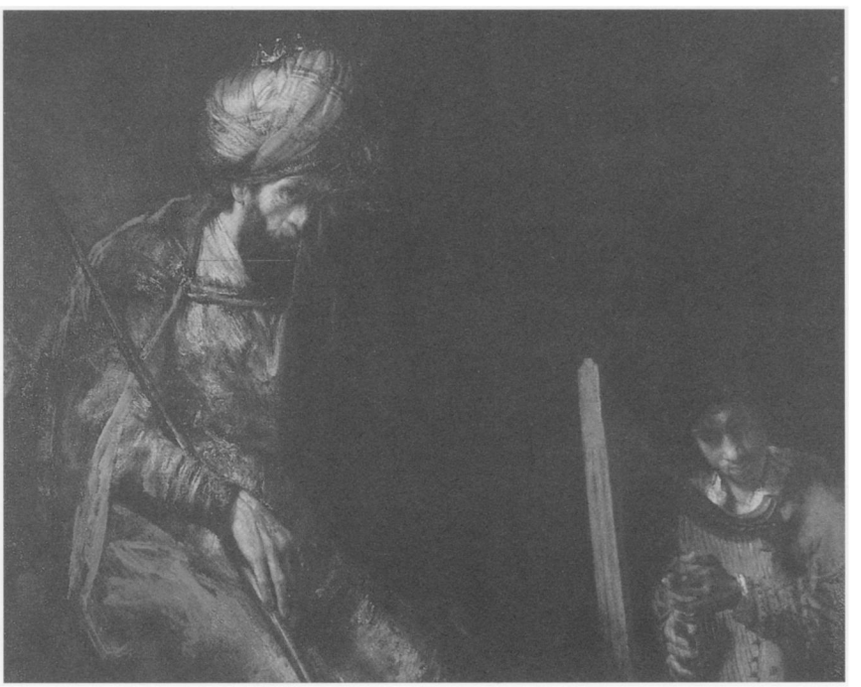

Figure 7. Drost?, *David Playing the Harp before Saul,* circa 1654. 130 x 164.3 cm. The Hague, Mauritshuis.

In his article, Bredius significantly goes on to ask: "where are all the other paintings by Drost, who must have painted dozens of works besides the six *recognized* works?"[44] Ironically, one possible answer to his question is *David Playing the Harp before Saul* in the Mauritshuis, The Hague (fig. 7). The attribution of this painting to Rembrandt had already been questioned in the second half of the nineteenth century, yet Bredius silenced further doubts when he purchased the work in 1899 and later donated it to the museum.[45] Horst Gerson first excised the work from his 1969 edition of Bredius's catalogue (with 420 paintings) on the basis of the "superficial and inconsistent" execution and the fact that the canvas was vertically cut in half and sewn together with a different piece of canvas at the upper right. Gerson also cited a preparatory sketch for the composition that, following earlier commentators, he identified as a copy after a lost drawing by Rembrandt (fig. 8).[46] Yet he never attempted to identify the author of the sketch or the painting in The Hague. Most recently, Ben Broos proposed attributing the painting to Drost, although he continues to refer to the drawing as a copy after Rembrandt and does not address the changes to the canvas.[47]

In my view, the sketch cited by Gerson was Drost's original preparatory study for his painting.[48] As in the

(1984):156, argues for the attribution to Drost and cites a 1672 Delft inventory listing "a very big picture of four men, three together and one, the Centurion Cornelius, seated, the work of a Rembrandt pupil twenty years ago." The most recent museum catalogue tentatively adopts the attribution to Drost but identifies the theme as "The Unmerciful Servant." Ingamells (see note 42), p. 39. Alpers (see note 7), fig. 4.34, includes the painting in her illustrations above the label "Rembrandt" in quotes, although the work has not seriously been associated with Rembrandt for over half a century.

44. Bredius (see note 43), p. 41.

45. See A. de Vries et al., *Rembrandt in the Mauritshuis: An Interdisciplinary Study* (Alphen aan den Rijn, Netherlands: Sijthoff and Noordhoff, 1978), p. 155.

46. Bredius (see note 33), p. 602. Benesch (see note 6), vol. 6, p. 388, C 76, first identified this drawing as a copy of a lost original by Rembrandt.

47. B. Broos, *Intimacies and Intrigues: History Painting in the Mauritshuis* (The Hague: Martial and Snoeck, 1993), p. 289.

48. The distribution of figures in the drawing along a two-dimensional plane, their clawlike hands, the faces turned down into

Figure 8. Drost?, sketch for *David Playing the Harp before Saul,* circa 1654. 21.2 x 17 cm. Paris. Louvre, Ben. C76.

Figure 9. Rembrandt, *David Playing the Harp before Saul,* circa 1627. 61.8 x 50.2 cm. Frankfurt, Städelsches Kunstinstitut Frankfurt.

case of *The Man with the Golden Helmet,* he based his composition on a painting by the early Rembrandt, specifically *David Playing the Harp before Saul* in Frankfurt (fig. 9). In Drost's sketch, the young David kneels on the floor on the left, as in Rembrandt's painting, whereas Saul is raised up on a platform on the right, rests one hand on his spear, and holds the other hand over his eyes, as in Drost's painting in The Hague. The sketch includes several more figures looking on from behind a curtain in the left background. Drost adapted this composition in reverse in his painting, and apparently later cut the canvas in half in order to move the protagonists closer, replacing the background figures with another piece of canvas at the upper right and covering these adjustments with the curtain wrapped around Saul's left arm.[49] Saul's pose and the way he palms his spear recall Drost's Kassel *Mars;* his turban is comparable to that worn by the centurion Cornelius; and David appears to have been based on the same model as the soldier across from the centurion. The contrast of Saul's oversized turban and his lean, thinly

shadow, and the peculiar approach to the turban have direct parallels in Drost's sketch for his *Centurion Cornelius,* as well as his preparatory studies for his paintings of *Naomi and Ruth* and *Noli Me Tangere.* In a sketch of a seated young man by Drost, the figure places his hand over his eyes in the same manner as king Saul. See Sumowski (see note 43), vol. 3, pp. 1186, 1188, 1218.

49. De Vries et al. (see note 45), p. 155, note the changes around the area of Saul's left arm and observe that the added canvas dates from the seventeenth century, but nevertheless, they date the restructuring to 1830–1869, presumably in order to underscore their attribution of the work to Rembrandt.

modeled face is closest to *The Man with the Golden Helmet.* The muted colors and dark background of the painting in The Hague echo all these works.[50]

How could a painting like this be taken for a canonical Rembrandt? Gerson proposed that enthusiasm for the work had "a lot to do with a taste for Biblical painting of a type that appealed specifically to the Dutch public of the Jozef Israëls generation."[51] He presumably meant the loose painting and David's emphatically "Jewish" face. Gerson's remark was likely also directed at his former employer Bredius, just as Bredius aimed his critique at his rival Hofstede de Groot. Gerson, in turn, embraced many mistaken attributions of paintings to Rembrandt. It is, of course, easier to see the blind spots of one's predecessor, yet it is also important to recognize the investments involved in these errors. As with Bode and *The Man with the Golden Helmet,* Bredius had a great deal at stake in the *David and Saul,* which he sold his horse and carriage to buy, and which contributed substantially to his reputation as a connoisseur. Bredius's greatest "discovery" by his own estimate was Vermeer's *Supper at Emmaus,* which was later exposed as a forgery by its author, Han van Meegeren.[52] Drost's *David and Saul* was not a fake or inauthentic, yet in both cases, relatively unknown paintings were "rediscovered" by Bredius as masterpieces.

The investments at stake are not just cultural and personal, but institutional. There continues to be reluctance among scholars to relinquish attributions of paintings to Rembrandt, or to address his students. Several commentators after Gerson have maintained or defended the attribution of the *David and Saul* in The Hague to Rembrandt.[53] Alpers likewise endorsed the traditional attribution in an earlier article, in which she contrasts the close description of the Frankfurt version with the ostensible profundity of the later work: "Psychological depth is suggested by a new kind of pictorial depth . . . suggesting things that lie beneath the surface."[54] This view is more in keeping with Alpers's earlier argument that the mature Rembrandt "obfuscates the world seen," whereas she illustrates her later argument about Rembrandt's market strategy with the *David and Saul* in The Hague above the label "Rembrandt" in quotes. She thus presents mistaken attributions of paintings to Rembrandt on the part of later scholars, including herself, as a function of Rembrandt's historical enterprise. This recalcitrant problem persists in her later book, in which several still-unrecognized paintings by Rembrandt's students are labeled Rembrandt, as opposed to "Rembrandt."

Alpers invokes the "cruel paradox that questions of authenticity are raised about the very artist whose art seems to have been displaying it as a major virtue."[55] Rather, the major virtue of Rembrandt's paintings is his skill and originality, whereas "authenticity" is a criterion for their exchange-value, and it is no paradox that the art of the greatest value has attracted the largest number of mistaken attributions. The paradox resides in the nature of commodities, that the name Rembrandt attached to a painting carries more value than its visual qualities, or that "paint itself" would be valued, regardless of its specific function, as an embodiment of genius or, as Alpers insists, money.[56] Such errors merely increase Rembrandt's artistic "capital" and provide more illustrations for monographs and specialized studies, more "masterpieces" for individual museums, more works for loan exhibitions, and so on.

The same factors are involved in the seeming paradox that an oeuvre subject to such extensive commentary and investigation remains so controversial. Alpers repeatedly cites the efforts of the Rembrandt Research

50. K. Roberts, "The Literature of Art," *Burlington Magazine* 121 (1979):125, first compared the *David and Saul* in The Hague to the *Centurion Cornelius* but did not propose an attribution for either work. Adams (see note 30), pp. 430, 438, connects both works with *The Man with the Golden Helmet,* but attributes all of them to Karel van der Pluym. Broos (see note 47), pp. 288–289, compares the Mauritshuis painting to the Wallace painting, which he calls "The Parable of the Uncharitable Servant," as works by Drost. Other parallels include Drost's *Mercury and Argus,* in which the god assumes the same pose as Saul, likewise palming his staff, serenaded on the flute by a boyish Argus in the same location as the young David.

51. Bredius (see note 33), p. 602.

52. See A. Bredius, "Nog een woord over Vermeer's *Emmausgangers," Oud Holland* 55 (1938):97–99.

53. De Vries et al. (see note 45), p. 163; Sumowski (see note 30), vol. 2, p. 1163; G. Schwartz, *Rembrandt. His Life, His Paintings* (New York: Viking, 1985), pp. 322–323.

54. S. Alpers, "Describe or Narrate? A Problem in Realistic Representation," *New Literary History* 8 (1976):24. Alpers's reading once again echoes Rosenberg (see note 41), p. 230: "The king's soul is laid open before the spectator. No longer are surfaces and materials rendered solely for the sake of pictorial refinement." Rosenberg (and possibly Alpers) misunderstood Saul's gesture as wiping away a tear, illustrating his melancholy healed by David's music as in Samuel 16: 23. Recent scholars read the gesture as indicating Saul's madness described in Samuel 18: 9–11, the same passage illustrated in the versions by Rembrandt and his other students.

55. Alpers (see note 7), p. 3.

56. Ibid., pp. 110–113.

Project, now headed by van de Wetering, which has spent the last thirty years attempting to isolate "authentic" paintings by Rembrandt through technical analysis of the paint layer.[57] Although this procedure could have helped to identify later forgeries, it has demonstrated that almost all the works in question are (authentic) seventeenth-century paintings by Rembrandt and his students.[58] The pervasive term "authentic" used by the researchers, and adopted by Alpers and others, is therefore irrelevant; the pertinent issue is distinguishing among works by Rembrandt and his individual students.[59] The same problem is evident in the researchers' decision to categorize individual paintings on a sliding scale as "A" (by Rembrandt), "B" ("Paintings Rembrandt's authorship of which cannot be positively rejected or accepted" [sic]), and "C" (works by other, unidentified artists). The magnified photographs of paint samples used to illustrate Rembrandt's application of paint are of little use in this connection, because no differences in approach among artists are visible at this microscopic level, and the samples are often taken from paintings by Rembrandt's students mistakenly attributed to him. One could therefore speak of a "cult of paint," insofar as the value of Rembrandt's art has led to a fetishization of paint, mistakenly subject to scientific (or alchemical?) testing, as if it were gold.

Without any criteria for comparison of works of Rembrandt and of his students, or indeed any attempt to compare these at all, technical examination has no meaning. The researchers' approach has encouraged, or was itself influenced by, the conscious and unconscious motives to err on the side of attributing paintings to Rembrandt. The parallels among ostensible Rembrandt paintings accordingly often involve works by the same student, whereas the tendency for Rembrandt's students to simplify, exaggerate, or caricature elements of his art has ironically made their (best) paintings more readily identifiable as essential or canonical "Rembrandts" than the master's own more complex and subtle works.[60] Hence Alpers's justified impression that Rembrandt's uniqueness seems to be "slipping in by the back door."

Bal comes closest to addressing this problem when she uses the name "Rembrandt" in quotes to refer to "a cultural text, rather than a historical reality," in keeping with "the death of the author." She observes that the discussion "cannot be seen outside the situation of power and the economy, and the investments [of] art historians," but claims that "Alpers provides answers to the authenticity problem by displacing the question, turning the very deceptivity of Rembrandt's hand into a feature of his art."[61] Rather, the misattributions originated during the Romantic period in connection with the cult of genius and the "author function." In order to overcome or deconstruct this function, or the cultural text "Rembrandt," it will be necessary first to sort out empirical problems of attribution (or authorship). The present state of Rembrandt studies reflects a lamentable polarity between object-oriented practice and "theory" in art history today as a whole.

As I have attempted to demonstrate here, the solution to confusion concerning attributions is to establish

57. J. Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff Publishers, 1982–), three vols. to date.

58. Technical analysis would have been useful in relation to signatures, but the researchers do not devote any consistent analysis to this problem. The Rembrandt signatures on paintings by his students are probably all later forgeries.

59. E. van de Wetering, "The Question of Authenticity: An Anachronism? (A Summary)," in *Rembrandt and His Pupils,* ed. G. Cavalli-Bjorkman (Stockholm: National Museum, 1993), pp. 9–10, claims that the effort "to isolate the works of Rembrandt's hand from that of his pupils and assistants" is not anachronistic, because of awareness in Rembrandt's time of what van de Wetering calls "autographness." A distinction must, however, be made between the misguided attempt precisely *to isolate* "authentic" works (from inauthentic works?) through technical examination and the legitimate concern with distinguishing between artists on the basis of visual comparisons. Yet Bruyn et al. (see note 57) do not address Rembrandt's students, whereas Sumowski's volumes on the paintings of the Rembrandt school address only their recognized, mature paintings; the misattributed works are either assigned to Rembrandt or included among (comparisons for) "anonymous Rembrandt school." A similar problem is evident in museums, as in the Wallace Collection, where paintings by Rembrandt's students have been separated by several rooms, or in the case of the *Centurion Cornelius* quarantined among eighteenth-century French decorative art, in relation to the large hall with Rembrandt's paintings. Included among the latter is a *Portrait of Titus* by Drost, although the Pellicorne double portraits deattributed by Bruyn et al. are by Rembrandt.

60. A particularly relevant example is *The Standard Bearer* in Paris, which was adopted for the recent international Rembrandt exhibition as a "standard bearer" on banners, posters, and catalogues. As proposed above, this painting was by Flinck (the work is assigned together with Flinck's London *Flora,* among other works, to the "A" category in Bruyn et al. [see note 57], vol. 2, pp. 155–157, 225–231). Flinck's handling of paint in these cases does not correspond to Rembrandt's late bold paintings or to his early fine works, but exemplifies an intermediate approach. If Drost was the "Rembrandt" par excellence of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Flinck fulfills this role in our own, more cautious era.

61. Bal (see note 21), pp. 8, 412, n. 14.

connections between a given painting and other works by the same artist on the basis of visual qualities directly evident to the naked eye, such as approach to rendering, figure, costume, theme, composition, color, and so on. The "science" of attribution must consist in a rigorous method of approach, although technology can be of use through digital scans of color reproductions, providing for myriad comparisons of groups of works.[62] Faced with a painting such as *The Man with the Golden Helmet* or *David and Saul* in The Hague, one is more likely to identify the author through visual comparison with reproductions of other works than through technical examination. This method is a means of enhancing, not a substitute for, observation of originals. It is also the necessary precondition for a rigorous account of Rembrandt's oeuvre and how his students adapted his precedent.

The ongoing relevance of such issues is evident from *The Denial of St. Peter* in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, which is often cited as one of Rembrandt's late masterpieces, although Broos has voiced doubts (fig. 10).[63] This was, in my opinion, painted by Drost. The narrative arrangement of the figures, the simplified costumes, the thinly modeled, lean faces, the exaggerated gestures, and the dull tones and dark background all have direct parallels in Drost's *Centurion Cornelius,* which illustrates an earlier moment in the same story. Peter's pose parallels Drost's Kassel *Mars,* and he bears an uncanny resemblance to *The Man in the Golden Helmet.* The juxtaposition of the androgynous maid and aged disciple with his right arm wrapped in his cloak echoes the young David and aged Saul with his left arm similarly concealed in a curtain. The view onto Christ and other figures on the right recalls the background figures in Drost's preparatory sketch for his painting in The Hague. The mistaken attribution not only distorts our understanding of Rembrandt's oeuvre but also robs Drost of one of his best paintings, although *The Man with a Golden Helmet* is arguably a better painting, precisely because it is closer to Rembrandt's precedent.

Another crucial example is Rembrandt's *"Polish Rider"* in the Frick Collection, New York (fig. 11). Joshua Bruyn, the former head of the Rembrandt Research Project, first proposed an attribution to Drost in a casual remark in a book review.[64] His sensational suggestion was likely intended to bolster flagging interest in the Rembrandt Research Project, and the choice of Drost was probably motivated by the fact that his work was relatively unknown. Yet there are no discernable connections between *The "Polish Rider"* and Drost's recognized works or those attributed to him here. Nor did Bruyn ever justify his remark with a single visual comparison. His "deattribution" of the painting was nevertheless adopted by the Rembrandt Research Project, Alpers, Bal, and the catalogue of the recent international Rembrandt exhibition.[65] I argued for the traditional attribution to Rembrandt in 1991, when Julius Held was the only other scholar to do so in print.[66] Van de Wetering has now partially reversed his earlier position, embracing the painting as mostly an autograph Rembrandt.[67] This controversy demonstrates the capricious nature of recent pronouncements on attribution and doubts about Rembrandt's uniqueness, which are primarily a function of Rembrandt scholarship.

The "Polish Rider" corresponds to Rembrandt's later paintings in the optical rendering of elements such as the horse, which contributes the impression of the figure riding past us in space, or the background landscape (attributed by van de Wetering to a student), which

62. See my web-site at www.nyu.edu/projects/rembrandt. I would like to acknowledge New York University and the Department of Art and Art Professions, School of Education, for supporting my ongoing project of "digital connoisseurship."

63. Broos (see note 47), p. 290, n. 60: "The Denial of St. Peter . . . probably also belongs in the group of former Rembrandts that was discussed by Adams."

64. Bruyn (see note 43), p. 158: ". . . the so-called *Polish Rider* in the Frick collection, which at the very least has striking affinities with Drost's early, Rembrandtesque work."

65. Alpers (see note 7), p. 1; Bal (see note 21), pp. 349–350. J. Boomgaard and R. Scheller, "A Delicate Balance: A Brief Survey of Rembrandt Criticism" in C. Brown, J. Kelch, and P. van Thiel, *Rembrandt: The Master and his Workshop. Paintings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 117, note that Bredius attributed the painting to Rembrandt moments after seeing it in a private collection, whereas "it has taken a great deal more time and effort in the past twenty years to come to the conclusion that this work is very probably not by Rembrandt at all." They do not cite Bruyn's article or provide any evidence of the time and effort that went into his claim.

66. B. Binstock, "In Defense of *The 'Polish Rider'*" (paper presented at the Frick Symposium, April 15, 1991); J. Held, *Rembrandt Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 194. See also A. Bailey, *Responses to Rembrandt: Who Painted* The Polish Rider? *A Controversy Considered* (New York: Timken Publishers, 1994).

67. Van de Wetering (see note 10), p. 205, makes no reference to the controversy or his own previous attribution of the work to Drost in lectures in Europe and America.

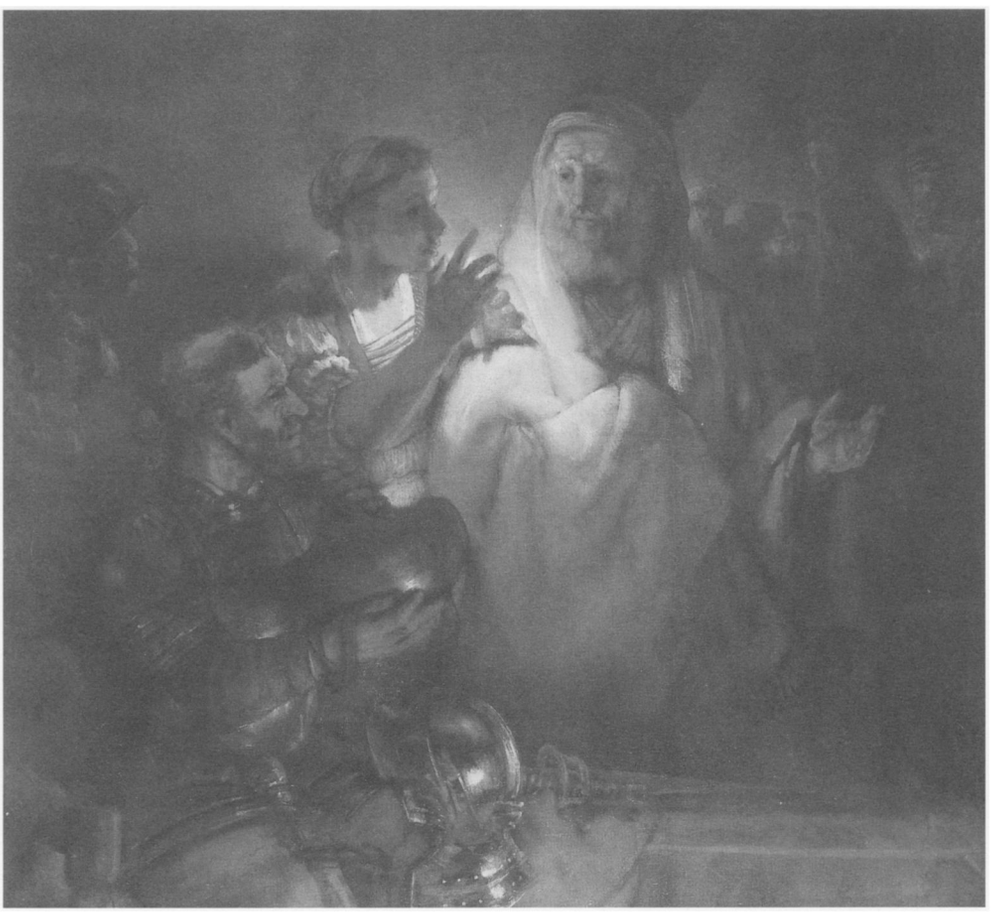

Figure 10. Drost?, *The Denial of St. Peter,* circa 1655. 154 x 169 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

evokes the transfigured Far Eastern world of the Old Testament. Parallels in the figure's costume with Rembrandt's earlier compositions, together with the temple of Jerusalem on a distant hill, indicate that he was meant to be the biblical David.[68] As with *The Jewish Bride,* the popular title "Polish Rider" derives from the impression that a contemporary figure is portrayed, because of Rembrandt's careful description of the primitive weapons, based on objects in his collection, and his inspired portrayal of the model, possibly an Amsterdam Jew, who could have influenced Rembrandt's unique conception.

The defense of the traditional attribution proposed here does not involve the name on the label or the monetary value of the painting. What is at stake is the immaterial value of Rembrandt's art, which is both personal and cultural yet, for better or worse, necessarily mediated by scholarship. We have no access to Rembrandt's work without Rembrandt scholarship, its history, motives, and errors, as well as its achievements. At the same time, Rembrandt

68. The temple was first identified by R. Haussherr, *Rembrandts Jacobssegen. Überlegungen zur Deutung des Gemäldes in der Kasseler Gallerie* (Bonn: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1976), pp. 55–56. An image of Solomon's temple is "anachronistic" in a depiction of the biblical David, yet Rembrandt includes the temple in his earlier *Reconciliation of David and Jonathan* in St. Petersburg, in which David wears a similar costume (the painting is assigned to the "C" category in Bruyn et al. [see note 57], vol. 3, pp. 533–541). The rider in the Frick painting was first identified in print as David by L. Slatkes, *Rembrandt and Persia* (New York: Abaris, 1983), pp. 60–93, although the archives of the Frick Museum contain an earlier essay from 1975 by Joseph Spiegel that proposes this argument. On the connection of the painting to Rembrandt's earliest works, see also below.

Figure 11. Rembrandt, *The "Polish Rider,"* circa 1658. 116.8 x 134.9 cm.

scholarship exists in the first place (though some commentators would have us forget) because of the distinctiveness of his art. There is no way out of this double bind; we are inevitably responsible for defining Rembrandt, but this "cultural text" is ultimately grounded on historical reality.

III. The early Rembrandt: portrait of the artist as a young man

> The personality of the artist passes into the narration itself, flowing round and round the persons and the action like a vital sea. . . . The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.
>
> —Trying to refine them also out of existence.
>
> *James Joyce,* Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man[69]

The origins of Rembrandt's distinctive application of paint and approach to composition lie in his earliest works from Leiden. Rembrandt was still unknown at this time and his work from this period continues to be overlooked by Rembrandt scholarship. Here, I propose for the first time a chronological account of Rembrandt's paintings during his first year as an independent artist in 1626. With astounding momentum, the young Rembrandt assimilates the lessons of his teacher Pieter Lastman and colleague Jan Lievens and establishes his own unique vision. As with Joyce's artist, Rembrandt's personality informs every aspect of his work. His works should not, however, be approached as autobiographical, personal confessions, or records of his person, because he ultimately remains invisible behind his paint, even when he portrays himself as a young man.

Rembrandt's earliest extant paintings are three small, unsigned genre scenes dating from 1624 or 1625, with crudely painted half-length figures in elementary compositions based on examples by Lievens.[70]

69. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York, 1983), p. 215.

70. Bruyn et al. (see note 57), vol. 1, pp. 402–415, place all three works in the "B" category.

Rembrandt's first signed and dated painting, *The Stoning of St. Stephen* of 1625, depicts smaller full-length figures in a narrative based on compositions by Lastman, presumably painted during Rembrandt's apprenticeship with Lastman in Amsterdam. He then returned to Leiden, where he painted five history paintings and a genre scene, all signed with his monogram and dated 1626. In these works, he gradually integrates his teacher's approach to history painting with greater attention to descriptive detail in faces and costumes characteristic of the genre scenes painted by Lievens, his studio-mate in Leiden. Rembrandt achieved this synthesis in part through three undated *tronies* or head studies from this year, which served as a means to develop his rendering and conceptions of faces, costumes, and types for his history paintings, and as occasions to reinvent the *tronie* itself.

Rembrandt's first two paintings of 1626, *The Expulsion from the Temple* and *The Baptism of the Eunuch,* were followed, in my opinion, by his *tronie* of a *Soldier* as his third painting of this year (fig. 12).[71] Lievens had painted several comparable head studies of specific models, as well as more freely rendered character types, such as his *Drinking Soldier.* Rembrandt combines these approaches in a careful study of a particular model in costume. His *tronie* still lags behind Lievens's examples in specific physiognomic detail and subtlety of rendering. The slashed beret and feathers appear pedantic and dry, diagonal shadows are schematically cast across his face and the wall behind, the reflected light on his gorget is crudely indicated by gobs of yellow and white paint, and local colors are not yet integrated through chiaroscuro.

In his next and fourth painting of 1626, *The Family Allegory,* Rembrandt adapts the soldier's costume and pose in reverse for his self-portrait in the guise of the harp-playing David and Prodigal Son (fig. 13).[72] The other figures have been identified as Rembrandt's mother as prophetess, his sister as singer in classical garb, and his father as oriental potentate-cellist.[73] The latter figure appears frequently in subsequent history paintings, *tronies,* and etchings by Rembrandt, Lievens, and Rembrandt's first student, Gerard Dou. He was already identified as Rembrandt's father by commentators in the first half of the twentieth century, including Bredius and Adam Bartsch, who compiled the standard catalogue of Rembrandt's etchings.[74] A more obvious candidate for Rembrandt's father is the old man who appears opposite Rembrandt's mother in his *Blind Tobit and Anna,* his seventh painting of 1626 by my

Figure 12. Rembrandt, *Soldier,* 1626. 40 x 29.4 cm. Switzerland, private collection.

71. Bruyn et al. (ibid., p. 126) date the *Soldier* circa 1626–1627.

72. On Rembrandt's costume and role in *The Family Allegory,* see E. Keiser, "Rembrandts *Musizierende Gesellschaft* von 1626 in ihrer psychologischen und historischen Bedeutung," *Die Welt als Geschichte* 9 (1943):48.

73. V. Bloch, "Musik im Hause Rembrandts," *Oud Holland* 54 (1937):49–52.

74. Bredius (see note 33), nos. 72–82; A. Bartsch, *The Illustrated Bartsch,* vol. 73 (New York: Abaris Books, 1980), nos. 263, 292, 294, 304.

Figure 13. Rembrandt, *The Family Allegory,* 1626. 63.4 x 47.6 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

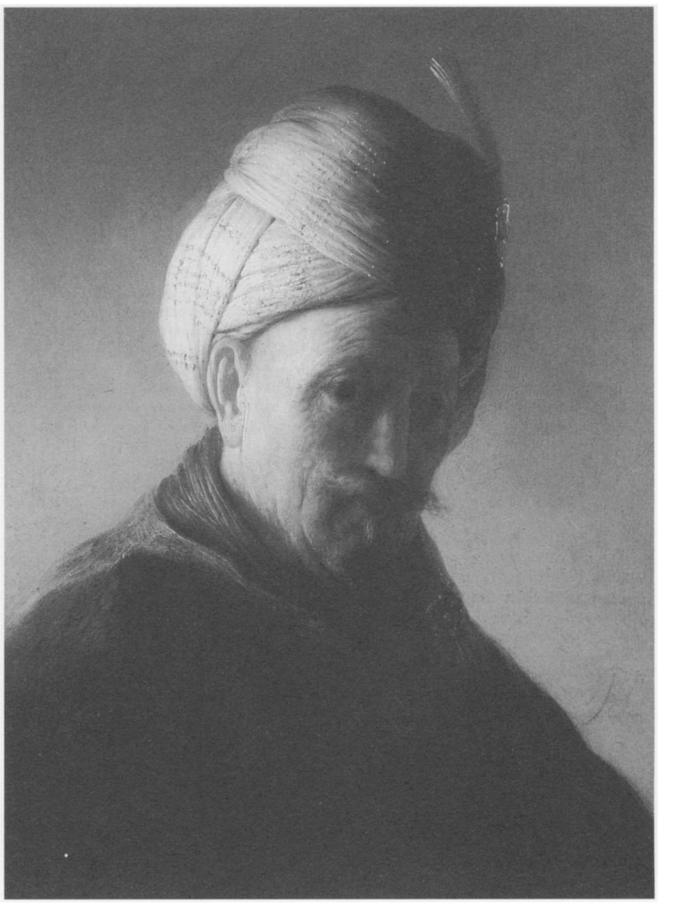

Figure 14. Rembrandt, *Man with a Turban,* 1626. 26.7 x 20 cm. Private collection.

count, and in other paintings, etchings, and drawings from Rembrandt's Leiden period. As Julius Held has proposed, Rembrandt's father appears to have gone blind at the end of his life, which would explain Rembrandt's interest in blindness as a theme, as well as this model's peculiar role in his works.[75] The middle-aged male model in *The Family Allegory* and other works was most likely Rembrandt's eldest brother, Gerrit, whose right hand was disabled in an accident in his father's mill, so that he was financially dependent on and lived with his parents until his death in 1631. Rembrandt's only surviving sister, Lijsbeth, likewise lived at home and was apparently retarded.[76]

Rembrandt's following *tronie* and fifth painting of 1626, *Man with a Turban,* was previously reattributed to Lievens, then to Rembrandt's early student Jacques des Rousseaux, and then disappeared from circulation (fig. 14).[77] I attributed the work to Rembrandt in my 1997 dissertation for the reasons summarized here. The painting resurfaced in the summer of 1998 and was reattributed to Rembrandt after cleaning revealed his monogram scratched into the wet paint at the lower

75. Held (see note 66), pp. 140–142.

76. Strauss and van der Meulen (see note 19), pp. 51, 53, 191–196.

77. K. Bauch, "Rembrandt und Lievens," *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 11 (1939):254, reattributed the work to Lievens; Gerson excised it from his 1969 edition of Bredius's catalogue; and Sumowski (see note 30), vol. 4, p. 2510, reattributed the work to des Rousseaux. The painting was not addressed in the first volume of Bruyn et al. (see note 57) encompassing Rembrandt's Leiden period.

right, although the date and function of the work have been misunderstood.[78] As with his earlier *tronie,* Rembrandt's *Man with a Turban* served partly as a means to develop a figure in his previous painting, in this case the puppetlike cellist in *The Family Allegory.* In Rembrandt's head study, the tiniest strokes of his brush convey the innumerable wrinkles of the figure's face, which reach a crescendo in his furrowed, stubbled chin hidden in the shadow below his graying goatee. The multicolored turban in the earlier work is replaced by layers of white cloth embellished with a pattern of golden thread, which follows the complex surface created by the folds. The gold pattern is constituted by drips and dashes of paint, a kind of chaos-in-control or tarrying with the materiality of the medium anticipating the thick paint of the groom's sleeve in *The Jewish Bride.*

Turbaned orientals had previously been depicted by Rubens and Lastman, yet the inspiration for Rembrandt's *tronie* could go back to the Netherlandish painters, specifically Jan van Eyck's presumed self-portrait called *Man in a Red Turban.* Van Eyck's virtuoso description of his elaborate headgear is surmounted by the inscription of his motto on the *trompe l'oeil* frame: *als ich kan,* "my humble best." Rembrandt accordingly attempts to surpass his great predecessor and challenges all future painters to equal his "untouchable" stroke. Halfway through his first year as an independent artist, Rembrandt had reached his apogee as a painter of descriptive detail. At the same time, he begins to complicate this surface description through chiaroscuro. He boldly turns the figure into the shadow, which plays across the surface wrinkles and folds, while the ruby in the clasp of the plume on the far side of the turban gleams in the darkness. The shadow also underscores the somber mood of the figure, who is focused on his own thoughts instead of turning out to us.

The young Rembrandt has already learned to subordinate his observation of detail to the overall atmosphere, or *Stimmung,* of the composition, conceiving the model together with his costume as an organic being. His subject corresponds in his fascinating ugliness to what was called *schilderachtig,* "picturesque." Rembrandt ennobles the pathetic figure of his brother through the power of his fantasy. The figure appears to have his own past or history, upon which he now reflects. We can imagine him nostalgic for his youth or the power he once possessed, an aging monarch recognizing that he is no longer the anointed prince, a dynamic corresponding to Gerrit's own fate as the "passed over" eldest son in relation to his brilliant youngest brother. Rembrandt thereby transforms the *tronie* into a complex and autonomous work of art, significantly now provided with his monogram.[79]

The closest precedent for Rembrandt's invention were the *tronies* of his studio-mate Lievens, who attempted to surpass Rembrandt's example in a huge painting, now in Potsdam, of Gerrit in extravagant oriental costume, probably from the same year (fig. 15).[80] Lievens's large composition remains two-dimensional by comparison, and he was unable to achieve Rembrandt's synthesis of model and costume. Constantijn Huygens, who visited the two painters in their studio in 1628, sensed this incongruity, and he called Lievens's painting "a supposed Turkish prince with a Dutchman's head." Huygens further observed that Lievens "breathes only that which is magnificent and lofty," whereas "Rembrandt, wrapped up in his own art, loves to devote himself to a small painting and present an effect of concentration which one would seek in vain in the largest pieces of other artists."[81] This dichotomy perfectly captures the young painters' respective approaches to the turbaned figure, the turbans themselves, and the application of paint. Yet Huygens was apparently unaware that Lievens was merely adapting Rembrandt's ideas by this point. Lievens was

78. E. van de Wetering, "'Old Man with a Turban,' An Early Rembrandt Rediscovered," in *PAN Amsterdam 1998* (Gent, 1998), p. 18, dates the work circa 1627 and identifies this as a study for the rabbi at the right in Rembrandt's *Judas Returning the Thirty Silver-Pieces* of 1629.

79. F. Schwartz, "'The Motions of the Countenance': Rembrandt's Early Portraits and the *Tronie,*" *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 17/18 (1989):95–97, argues that Rembrandt transformed the external, formal character of portraiture in his time by introducing the inward, psychological dimension of *tronies.* Rather, Rembrandt transformed the external character of the *tronie* in his time, evident in Lievens's many examples, by introducing, among other things, an inward, psychological dimension previously found only in portraiture.

80. Sumowski (see note 30), vol. 3, p. 1795, among others, assumes Lievens's painting was the precedent for comparable paintings by Rembrandt and his students and dates the work circa 1628 in relation to the date of Huygens's visit. Van de Wetering (see note 78) does not address the relation of Lievens's and Rembrandt's paintings in his essay, although his date for the latter may derive from this logic.

81. Huygens's Latin text is cited in J. Worp, "Constantijn Huygens over de schilders van zijn tijd," *Bijdragen en Mededeelingen van het historisch Genootschap* 18 (1897):106.

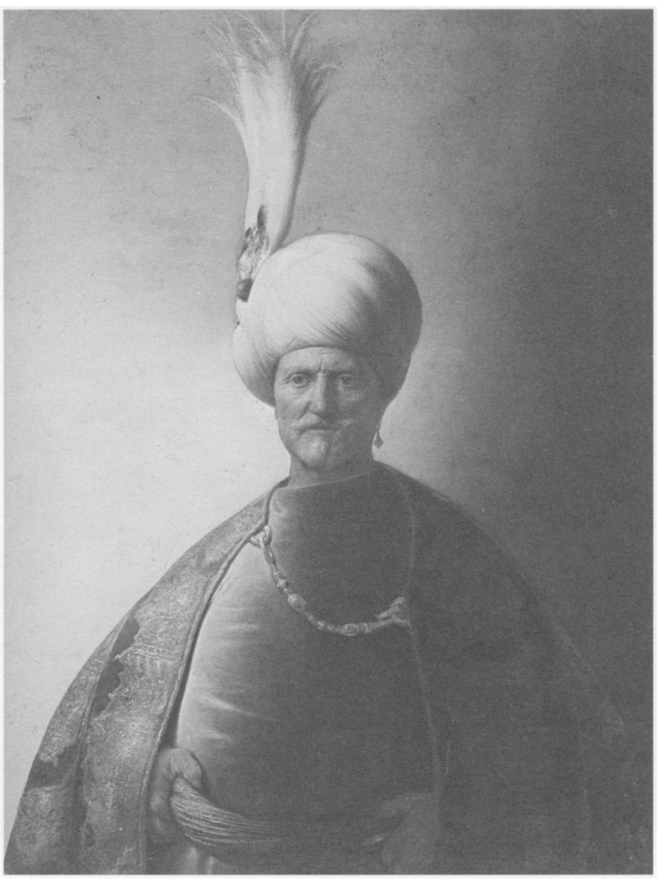

Figure 15. Jan Lievens, *Oriental,* 1626. 135 x 100.5 cm. Potsdam, Gemäldegalerie. Stiftung Preußische Schlüsser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg/Bildarchiv.

the first painter to take himself for Rembrandt, and many of his earliest works have since passed as Rembrandt's to this day. He later moved on to England and Antwerp where he emulated van Dyck, before returning to Amsterdam where he was influenced once more by Rembrandt, contributing to de Lairesse's account of their paint as dung.

Huygens's dichotomy is, in fact, equally applicable to Drost and Rembrandt. Drost's *Man with the Golden Helmet* could be seen as an attempt to translate into "magnificent and lofty" terms the concentrated focus of Rembrandt's *Man with a Turban,* which apparently remained in his possession and served as a direct example for his student. Both compositions depict an old man past his prime wearing imposing headgear and turned into the shadow, although like Lievens, Drost places greater emphasis on the costume than the figure. More uncannily, the model for Drost's composition was already identified by von Bode and others almost a century ago as Rembrandt's brother. This identification may reflect the desire for a connection with the artist or an effort to underscore the attribution to Rembrandt.[82] Yet this idea was unthinkable without Rembrandt's precedent of using familiar models for historical characters. The connection does not involve Rembrandt's market strategy, but rather his artistic enterprise or the power of his ideas, even when mediated through his followers' reductive reformulations. When Drost's *Man with the Golden Helmet* is praised as one of Rembrandt's masterpieces, the admiration has been displaced from Rembrandt's *Man with a Turban.*

As with his first *tronie,* Rembrandt elaborated on his *Man with a Turban* in his next and sixth painting of 1626, *Balaam and His Ass,* in the figure of the mounted Moabite King Balak wearing a turban in the background (fig. 16). If Rembrandt surpassed Lievens in his previous work, here he establishes an unbridgeable gulf between them. Through his complex narrative, Rembrandt also outdoes his teacher Lastman, who had painted the same theme. The oriental cellist in *The Family Allegory* already functions as an antiheroic foil for Rembrandt as prince David and prodigal son, and a similar relation is involved in Gerrit's role as the middle-aged King Balak, the persecutor of the Jews, undone by the heroic young Rembrandt-like angel, who miraculously restores the vision of the fatherlike prophet Balaam. As in the earlier painting, Rembrandt should not be identified solely with the figure who most resembles him in the composition, since his personality, in Joyce's words, "passes into the narration itself, flowing round and round the persons and the action like a vital sea."

The young Rembrandt invents a new kind of history painting, in which the biblical story is brought to life through familiar individuals, exotic in their concrete particularity. The same strategy is evident in his later paintings. There are, in fact, striking parallels between King Balak and the protagonist of Rembrandt's *"Polish Rider"* (fig. 11). Both figures turn out in our direction, rest their right hands on their hips, and hold the reins of their horses in their left hands, and in both compositions the rocky backgrounds provide a foil for the riders and

82. The former point is suggested by Kelch (see note 30), p. 16.

their mounts against a cloudy sky. Rembrandt synthesizes the roles of the oriental monarch, the youthful redeeming angel, and his own earlier self-portrait as David and Prodigal Son in the person of David in his Frick painting. Such direct connections across a span of three decades testify to the singularity and coherence of Rembrandt's vision.

Rembrandt's third *tronie* and eighth painting of 1626 was, in my opinion, his *Self-Portrait Study* in Amsterdam (fig. 17). This is consistently dated circa 1628–1629 in relation to his later painted and etched self-portraits.[83] The Amsterdam panel was, in my view, a preparatory head study for the anonymous soldiers standing in the background shadows of Rembrandt's still unidentified "History Painting," his ninth and last painting of 1626.[84] This work, in my view, depicts a scene from ancient Dutch history. Rembrandt's brother Gerrit personifies the Batavian leader Claudius Civilis, who pardons and enlists Gallic soldiers in the Batavian cause, illustrating the founding moment of the autonomous Dutch nation. The painting concludes Rembrandt's first year as an independent artist and serves to establish his own autonomy in relation to his colleague Lievens and his teacher Lastman.[85]

The early date of Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait Study* is further confirmed by its connections with his first two *tronies* from 1626. In each successive work, the heads are enlarged in relation to the pictorial field of progressively smaller panels, the costumes simplified, and the colors toned down. There is also a gradual transition from volumetric form and surface texture to an optical emphasis on the subjective, momentary perception of materials in space through the play of light and shadow, and varied brush-stroke. Rembrandt's earlobe alone consists of five or six distinct colors, and his hair is breathtaking in its complexity. Through the paint of his gray-black and creamy brown locks of hair, he scraped down to the light-brown ground of the panel

Figure 16. Rembrandt, *Balaam and His Ass,* 1626. 65 x 47 cm. Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée Cognacq-Jay.

below in order to indicate thinner curls and unruly strands of light-reflecting hair "on top." Lievens had employed scratches in his *tronies* to suggest the texture of hair or beards, as Rembrandt does in his *Soldier,* whereas the scratches in the Amsterdam panel serve an optical rather than tactile function, breaking down the outline of his dark head against the light background. As with his untouchable stroke, the scratches mediate their materiality through immaterial effects. In this case, the stroke consists precisely in the removal of paint.

Rembrandt's self-portraits have previously been interpreted as autobiographical statements and a form of "roleplaying," and the shadow over his eyes in his *Self-Portrait Study* accordingly is seen as an illustration of melancholy, although there is no evidence for this

83. Bruyn et al. (see note 57), vol. 1, p. 171; Van de Wetering (see note 78), p. 18; C. White and Q. Buvelot, eds., *Rembrandt by Himself* (London: National Gallery Publications and The Hague: Mauritshuis, 1999), p. 95.

84. The connection between Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait Study* and the figure in the center background of his history painting is evident from the scratches in the paint layer indicating his hair, unique to these paintings. This parallel is noted in White et al (see note 83), p. 95, yet they nevertheless date the head study circa 1628–1629.

85. I hope to address the theme and significance of this painting at a future time.

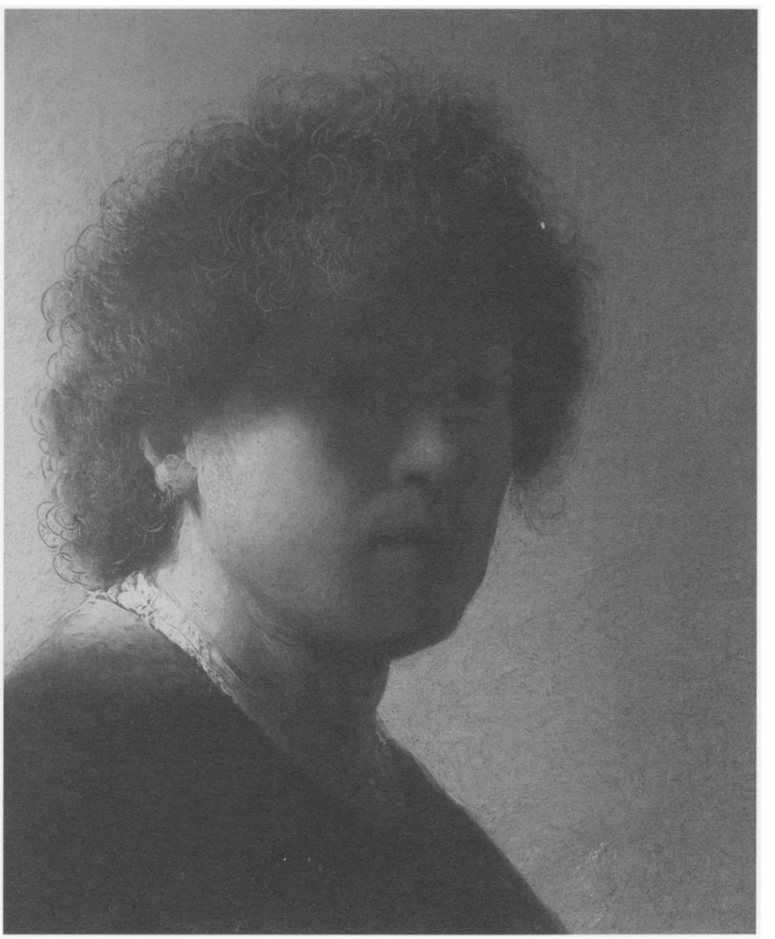

Figure 17. Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait Study,* 1626. 22.5 x 18.6. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

connection.[86] Other commentators approach his self-portraits as conventional records of his appearance in the tradition of famous artists' portraits, so that his *Self-Portrait Study* is identified simply as an anonymous *tronie.*[87] Such interpretations limit the meaning of Rembrandt's art to an ostensible message for his historical audience and, at the same time, reflect the inverted priorities of the Romantic cult of genius, which saw the artist's works as a reflection of his person.

Rather, our interest in Rembrandt is derived from and justified by the originality of his art, just as our belated appreciation of his self-portraits is based on his formal transformation or reinvention of this genre. Rembrandt's Amsterdam panel is not yet a self-portrait, or rather, redefines the terms by which the self-portrait is subsequently understood.

In contrast to Lievens, who enjoyed local fame in Leiden as an adolescent prodigy and recorded his appearance in his profile self-portrait based on Alberti's precedent, Rembrandt was still unknown at this time. He accordingly takes the same distance towards his person as with the models for his other *tronies,* portraying himself as a round-faced boy, with peach fuzz on his lip, the light picking out the clump of his

86. H. Chapman, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Identity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 24.

87. White et al. (see note 83), p. 95: "His identity is irrelevant. For a *tronie,* the choice of a model was arbitrary."

nose and kinky hair, in ordinary clothing and meek pose. The meandering, varied shadow delimits his head as an object that suddenly becomes visible in the light, and simultaneously underscores his role as subject, his eyes peering out of the darkness at himself, or at us, just as we have to peer into the darkness to see him. The shadow over his eyes serves precisely to obscure his thoughts and expression, and provides him with an autonomous space, in a dialectic with his mirror image, seeing himself seeing.

Jacques Derrida explains the self-portrait as a ruin, because the artist cannot depict and observe himself at the same time, and thereby records his own disappearance.[88] Derrida's account corresponds exactly to Rembrandt's strategy, just as the nineteenth-century self-portraits cited by Derrida were ultimately derived from Rembrandt's precedent. The more closely Rembrandt observes and records himself, the more he "disappears" as a stable material, psychological, or biographical entity—in Joyce's words, refining himself out of existence.[89] Conversely, Rembrandt's exceptional skill and bold originality serve to constitute his historical particularity as an artist. The scratches, in particular, anticipate the idiosyncratic line of his optical drawings and etchings, and function as a pictorial monogram or signature in the form of a calligraphic halo or laurel crown. At once an iconic sign of the artist's physical body, an indexical record of the movement of his hand, and a symbolic invocation of his immaterial thought or imagination, Rembrandt's scratched-in hair represents facture as process and product, painter and paint, inextricably intertwined. The painting depicts Rembrandt as "a Rembrandt," and vice versa: through his art, the nineteen-year-old Rembrandt performatively invents or gives birth to himself.[90] The young, unknown artist painted his study "for himself" and at the same time for a future audience able to recognize, understand, and appreciate his achievement. We are still involved in this unfolding and imperfect process.

The potential artistic and cultural use-value of Rembrandt's solitary, world-transforming achievement in his Amsterdam panel remains intact, despite his subsequent fame and the accompanying fetishization of his person and works, together with his students' paintings. As it turns out, before Rembrandt's Amsterdam panel was discovered in the first half of the twentieth century, a free copy after his painting by his student Flinck, now in Kassel, was the only known version and therefore identified as Rembrandt's first self-portrait. Here the face is broader and flatter, the skin more uniformly opaque, and the scratched-in hairs mechanically repeated so they cannot be read as catching light and no longer mediate the outline of the head against the plane. The shadow does not obscure but merely covers the eyes, which are more clearly delineated. It is no accident that Flinck's simplified version was the first to be recognized as Rembrandt; when Rembrandt's own painting was discovered, the eyes had similarly been painted-over to make them more easily readable. Nor was this the only instance of a student's variation on one of Rembrandt's self-portraits, which served as pedagogical tools. The "marketing" of the students' works as Rembrandt's self-portraits dates from a later period, when there was a demand for paintings combining a record of his hand and his appearance. This tendency culminates in the recent exhibition of Rembrandt's self-portraits, most of which are not by Rembrandt, ironically titled "Rembrandt by Himself."[91]

88. J. Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins,* trans. P. Brault and M. Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 69ff. There is not space here to address Derrida's idea of the *"trait,"* the stroke, mark, or feature, and its relation to withdrawal *(retrait),* which is particularly relevant to Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait Study.* Derrida's argument about blindness is also of special relevance to Rembrandt's images of his blind father.

89. In an engraving after Rembrandt's *tronie,* the lack of markers of his identity together with an exaggeration of the shadow and his frizzy hair led one publisher to label it the "Ethiopian eunuch." As cited in White et al. (see note 83), p. 96.

90. Assuming Rembrandt knew the date of his own birth, which he specified in three documents including his etched self-portrait of 1631, B. 7, he was born in July 1607, not 1606 as assumed by all commentators on the basis of Jan Orlers's biography (Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait Study* was painted near the end of 1626). See Riegl (see note 2), p. 5 n. 5 (translator's note). Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait Study* is anticipated in several respects by Van Eyck's presumed self-portrait called *Man in a Red Turban,* which bears the inscription "Jan Van Eyck made me" together with the date on the *trompe l'oeil* frame below, as if carved into wood. Van Eyck similarly plays upon the materiality/immateriality of paint, process and product, painter and painting, or the painter's artistic invention of himself.

91. E. van de Wetering, "The Multiple Functions of Rembrandt's Self-Portraits" in *Rembrandt by Himself,* eds. C. White and Q. Buvelot (London: National Gallery Publications and The Hague: Mauritshuis, 1999), pp. 8–37, explains Rembrandt's self-portraits as combining a record of both his hand and his appearance. Again, this argument is primarily relevant to the later reception of these works and the logic of the exhibition itself. The exhibition title is borrowed from a 1639

In an essay first published in the pages of *RES,* Joseph Koerner observed that the human face:

> most betrays the inadequacy of the image to capture its object fully. Of course, it is in part this very sense of "something more than meets the eye" that makes the epiphany of the face in Rembrandt the occasion for complex and often fanciful interpretations. . . . The truth of the face in Rembrandt . . . is bound up with an awareness of the fictions and conventions of representation.

In his conclusion, Koerner invokes *The Denial of St. Peter* (fig. 10) along these lines:

> The face in Rembrandt acquires its meaning only within the essential obliqueness of its message, and within the dangerous probability that this message will be believed but wholly misunderstood.[92]

Koerner's complex argument is directly relevant to my own, in two different ways. On the one hand, this can be applied in positive terms to Rembrandt, along the same lines as Derrida. In attempting to record his own likeness, Rembrandt is aware of the inadequacy of the image fully to capture its object, or of "something more than meets the eye," quite literally, because we cannot make out his eyes or his thoughts. Building on fundamental principles of Dutch portraiture, Rembrandt invented a means of representing a "lack" (or excess) in the face, onto which we project our relation to his figures. The truth of the face in Rembrandt is therefore comparable to what Harold Bloom calls Shakespeare's "invention of the human."[93]

On the other hand, a different kind of obliqueness is evident in the faces of Drost's *Denial of St. Peter,* which manifest a lack despite his attempt to portray objective emotional content. It is difficult to distinguish between the "deceitful" face of St. Peter, the "anguished" face of King Saul, and the "melancholy" face of the old man in the golden helmet.[94] Koerner further notes that "Peter's right hand is concealed by the cloak, suggesting both his posture of self-protectiveness, which causes him to lie, and the act of lying or concealment."[95] King Saul likewise conceals his left hand in a curtain, the middle servant in Drost's *Centurion Cornelius* hides his right hand in his hat, and the centurion appears to hold his right hand behind his back and under the table. In contrast to the openly communicative hands in Rembrandt's paintings, the hands of Drost's figures suggest deceit, or sleight of hand, directed away from themselves or (concealed under cloths) pointing to their hearts or heads in order to evoke an interiority missing in their faces. As with interpretations of Rembrandt's paint, the "dangerous probability" of projection in this case does not involve our relation to Drost's figures, but our relation to Rembrandt's genius, displaced onto the work of his students.[96]

In the end, we are responsible for recognizing and interpreting Rembrandt's art, as a necessarily imperfect and ongoing construction of art history. Koerner approaches commentary on Rembrandt's faces in terms of "the nineteenth-century's religion of art, in which the presiding deity is the presence of the self in the artist's work."[97] Rembrandt represents the origin of this tendency, as a contributing inventor of our idea of the self. His achievement was distorted by later collectors and commentators who fetishized his works, his paint, and Rembrandt himself (most obviously in the case of self-portraits), and who misattributed his students' paintings to him. More-recent commentators have sought to liberate themselves from these "false gods" through iconoclastic debunking of Rembrandt. Yet as Koerner points out, idolatry is inherent in the attitude of

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inventory of paintings belonging to Charles I, which lists the painting now in Liverpool as by Rembrandt, "his owne picture & done by himself" (p. 17). This painting is, in my opinion, a portrait of Rembrandt by Lievens. The inventory represents a historical antecedent of the economic phenomenon represented by the exhibition.

92. J. Koerner, "Rembrandt and the Epiphany of the Face," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 12 (1986):24, 27.

93. H. Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998). Bloom points to the way Shakespeare's characters hear themselves speaking, the literary corollary of Rembrandt seeing himself seeing.

94. See Rosenberg (see note 41), p. 226: "*The Denial of St. Peter* in Amsterdam and *Saul and David* in The Hague . . . can be compared to Rembrandt's late portraits . . . in the powerful exhibition of inner life and character. . . . The dominating impression in each scene is the profound human aspect: Rembrandt's sympathetic and powerful exposition of the chief actor's inner conflict in his hour of trial." As noted above, Rosenberg misread Saul's face as melancholy rather than angry.

95. Koerner (see note 92), p. 30. Drost is even deceptive about the narrative, collapsing two distinct moments in Luke 22:55–61: Peter's first denial to the maid, and his third denial when the cock crowed, provoking a response from the arrested Christ.

96. This idea is implicit in Koerner's lapidary conclusion cited above. In discussing his article with me when it was first published fourteen years ago, the author admitted to his own doubts about the attribution of *The Denial of St. Peter,* a conversation I still fondly remember and associate with my own origins as an art historian.

97. Koerner (see note 92), p. 23.

the worshipper rather than in the object itself, which is precisely Marx's point about the commodity as fetish. The problem with genius or the author involves the fetishistic function these concepts come to play, rather than the elusive "things in themselves." Fortunately, Rembrandt's untouchable stroke and unique conceptions ultimately resist fetishization, idolatry, and iconoclastic debunking, and we derive our justified belief in originality, in part, from him.