

Do mistakes always matter? Jakob Rosenberg's *Rembrandt Life and Work*

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When the Harvard art historian and curator Jakob Rosenberg died in April 1980, his *New York Times* obituary described his book *Rembrandt* as 'definitive'.¹ His younger colleague and co-author, Seymour Slive, was quoted as saying it was 'the most profound book that has ever been written on this topic'. In his thematically-organized monograph Rosenberg offered an eloquent interpretation of the artist as one simultaneously attentive to both surface and depth, exterior and interior worlds, whose work conveyed a kind of spiritual depth unseen in other Dutch artists of the time in Rosenberg's view.

The publication history of Rosenberg's *Rembrandt* book indicates its positive reception over time. First published by Harvard University Press in 1948, a slightly revised edition with an additional preface appeared in 1964 through the Phaidon Press.² This revised edition was republished in 1980 (with a second new preface) by Cornell University Press in collaboration with Phaidon in a series called 'Landmarks in Art History'.³ While it was later superseded in currency by monographs by Christopher White (1984) and Mariët Westermann (2000), it was the text that most Anglophone *Rembrandt* scholars first turned to for two generations.⁴

Indeed, when it first appeared, Wolfgang Stechow wrote that

Overlooking the development of research on Rembrandt's art which has taken place between, say, Adolf Rosenberg (1904) and Jakob Rosenberg (1948), one becomes somewhat optimistic about the chances of an eventual 'complete' understanding of the master so far as that can be reached independent of the idiosyncrasies of a given generation (and there is still hope, I think, for that kind of objective progress). That research, to which the author himself repeatedly contributed, has been admirably utilized in this book and blended with a

¹ 'Jacob Rosenberg, 86, Authority on Works of Rembrandt, Dead', *The New York Times*, 10 April 1980, B19.

² Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt*, 2 vols, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948; Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: life and work*, revised ed., London: Phaidon, 1964.

³ Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: life and work*, revised ed., Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press and Phaidon, 1980.

⁴ Christopher White, *Rembrandt*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1984; Mariët Westermann, *Rembrandt*, London: Phaidon, 2000.

freshness of individual approach and a skill of presentation which make it one of the outstanding monographs of our time.⁵

If one reads this landmark text today, however, one thing is striking: while the majority of works discussed and reproduced are of works of art considered to be touchstones for the master, a number of the interpretive descriptions concern paintings that are no longer generally accepted as autograph Rembrandts. What does this mean for Stechow's hope for 'objective progress' in understanding Rembrandt? Were the readers of 1948, 1964, and 1980 misled in their understanding of the artist by the mistakes in connoisseurship that can be found in Rosenberg's book?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to consider some aspects of Rosenberg's career and scholarship. Rosenberg, born in Germany in 1893, was a noted connoisseur of northern European drawings, who had also studied the painted oeuvres of German and Netherlandish artists such as Luca Cranach and Jacob van Ruisdael.⁶ He received his doctorate in Munich in 1922, working under Heinrich Wölfflin, and his advisor's comparative approach to formal analysis and interpretation left a powerful trace on Rosenberg's work, as witnessed by his discussion of pairs of drawings in his book *On quality in art*.⁷ Yet Rosenberg was at least as influenced by his museum mentor, Max J. Friedländer, with whom he worked in the Berlin Print Room. Friedländer, then at work on his multi-volume corpus of fifteenth and sixteenth century Netherlandish artists, believed that connoisseurship decisions were intuitive, a position that Rosenberg disputed in *On Quality in Art*. Instead, Rosenberg believed that there were objective criteria in excellence. Yet in practice the connoisseurship of the two men seemed more akin than different. In a remembrance of Friedländer published in 1959, Rosenberg wrote,

If I ask myself now, after a quarter of a century, what it made Friedlaender's judgement so authoritative and the answer is, I believe - apart from his extra-gifted eye, combined with clarity of mind - his direct relationship with the work of art. Never did abstract theories intervene, as they often do with more theoretically-minded art historians. Reading one of his classic monographs even now gives one the beneficial feeling of building up from first principles. If he had respect for documentation, it never influenced his interpretation. It is hard in his case to separate the three spheres of museum curator, scholar, and connoisseur.⁸

Much the same could be said of Rosenberg, despite his greater efforts to provide criteria for the successful practice of connoisseurship.

⁵ Wolfgang Stechow, review of Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: life and work*, *The Art Bulletin*, 23:3, September 1950, 255.

⁶ For Rosenberg's biography see the entry in the online Dictionary of Art Historians, <https://dictionaryofarthistorians.org/rosenbergj.htm>

⁷ Jakob Rosenberg, *On quality in art: criteria of excellence, past and present*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967.

⁸ Jakob Rosenberg, 'Friedlaender and the Berlin museums', *Burlington Magazine* 101:72, March 1959, 85.

However, Friedländer was not the only influence on the young art historian in Berlin, and for Rosenberg, even the distant experiences he had with Wilhelm von Bode, director general of the Berlin Museums when Rosenberg began his work there, were formative for his Rembrandt scholarship. In his remembrance of Friedländer published in 1959, Bode plays almost as large a role as Friedländer himself as a shadowy but authoritative presence in the Berlin museums.⁹ Bode was the internationally recognized leading scholar of Rembrandt paintings for two generations, and even if well past his prime in 1922, was still a figure who commanded respect. Bode's approach to Rembrandt scholarship was pragmatic in the extreme, based on the individual study of works of art that were seen as entwined with and reflective of the biography of the artist.¹⁰ While the pitfalls of such an approach seem obvious today, this positivist method was one that seemed scientific in the 1870s and 80s, as it ran counter to the rival socio-cultural historical approach that often had little to say about specific works of art. Bode's connoisseurship-focused scholarship was taken up by Rembrandt scholars of the next two generations, including Wilhelm R. Valentiner, who worked under Bode's supervision in the Berlin museums a quarter of a century before Rosenberg. Valentiner went much further, however, than did Bode or other Rembrandt authorities in identifying figures in Rembrandt paintings with members of Rembrandt's birth family in Leiden and later, his family in Amsterdam.¹¹

While Rosenberg would disagree with specific identifications of Valentiner's he did not object to this general approach, one that might be called the Berlin school of Rembrandt connoisseurship. When, as a victim of the Nazi purge of Jewish curators from German museums, he moved to the United States in 1937, to spend the rest of his career as a Harvard art historian and curator at the Fogg Art Museum, he by no means rejected this approach to the study of Rembrandt. If we turn to *Rembrandt: life and work*, we can see its effect most clearly in the chapter on portraiture, especially in the lengthy section on single portraits.¹² Here Rosenberg mixed discussion of commissioned portraits with works that are now called *tronies*, using a seventeenth-century Dutch word to describe a type of fantasy portrait popular in the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century. Tronies were typically head or bust-length depictions (though they could extend to half- or even full-length) of models dressed in exotic foreign or imaginary costumes. While based on life study they were not conceived of as portraits of specific individuals.¹³ It was evidently not unusual for such models to be found in the immediate orbit of an artist's family, and thus it is likely that Rembrandt may well have

⁹ Rosenberg, 'Friedlaender and the Berlin museums', 84.

¹⁰ On Bode's role as a Rembrandt scholar see Catherine B. Scallen, *Rembrandt, reputation, and the practice of connoisseurship*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004.

¹¹ On Valentiner's role in Rembrandt scholarship see Scallen, *Rembrandt, reputation, and the practice of connoisseurship*.

¹² Throughout this essay, except where noted, I use the 1980 reprint of the 1964 edition, as the version most readily available today.

¹³ A helpful discussion on the *tronie* in Rembrandt's production is Dagmar Hirschfelder, 'Training piece and sales product. On the functions of the *tronie* in Rembrandt's workshop', in Michiel Roscam Abbing, ed., *Rembrandt 2006*, vol. 1, *Essays*. Leiden: Foleor, 2006, 112-133.

used members of his family to sit for such fantasy portraits. However, the tendency of the Berlin Rembrandt school scholars to catalogue these pictures as depictions of Rembrandt's mother or father, or even his sister, brother, and sister-in-law led to problems in connoisseurship. For Rembrandt was not the only one who used certain specific models for his paintings; even in his Leiden period his first pupil of note, Gerrit Dou, depicted an old woman that has been characterized as Rembrandt's mother. As a result, when Rosenberg identified two different paintings in *Rembrandt: life and work* as 'Rembrandt's father', one painting found in The Hague in the Mauritshuis, the other in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, his connoisseurship seems to fail.¹⁴ For the painting in the Hermitage is notably weaker in execution, and is no longer accepted as an autograph Rembrandt in any recent catalogue. Rosenberg, who essentially followed in Bode's and Valentiner's footsteps in positing a close relationship between the artist's life and his artistic production, apparently accepted the Hermitage painting a priori because of the likeness of the sitter to other depictions of a man described since the nineteenth century as Rembrandt's father. Another case is particularly telling. It is surprising that in 1948 Rosenberg identified the painting in Berlin, popularly called 'The Man in the golden helmet' (Rosenberg used the term 'gilt helmet') as 'Rembrandt's brother?'.¹⁵ The identification of the sitter with Adrian van Rijn, made in the late nineteenth century by Bode, had been disputed in print at least as early as 1915 by Cornelis Hofstede de Groot. The fact that this identification was included as late as the 1980 edition indicates how thoroughly Rosenberg was indebted to the Berlin school of Rembrandt connoisseurship.

But does the inclusion of such works, such 'mistakes', ultimately affect the stylistic analysis and the thematic interpretation of Rembrandt offered by Rosenberg? That is a thornier problem, and the answer must sometimes be yes, and other times, no. As one example of how it did affect Rosenberg's analysis, here is the description of *Man with a gilt helmet (Rembrandt's brother?)*.

It would be difficult to find anywhere a more emphatic glorification of the beauty of gold and old craftsmanship in this precious metal. But Rembrandt's aim was not a still-life effect for its own sake...The spiritual content dominates despite the brilliance of the upper part of the composition. This contrast between the splendour of the helmet and the subdued tonality of the face makes one deeply conscious of both the tangible and intangible forces in Rembrandt's world, and of their inseparable inner relationship.¹⁶

This very emphasis on the 'emphatic glorification' of the helmet, of its 'still life effect', is precisely the reason that art historians began doubting the attribution of this painting to Rembrandt in the late 1960s, and the then Staatliche Museen-Dahlem repudiated the attribution

¹⁴ Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: life and work*, figs. 5 and 11.

¹⁵ Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: life and work*, fig. 93.

¹⁶ Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: life and work*, 106.

for good in the mid-1980s.¹⁷ The disjunction of style between the helmet and the face is more a pastiche of Rembrandt's styles from different decades than a sign of his balancing the tangible and intangible. Significantly, there had been voices, even in the 1890s, which had reservations about its authenticity and its state of preservation.¹⁸ Yet for more than half of the twentieth century it was widely admired by many for exactly the qualities Rosenberg cited, based primarily on Bode's original promotion of the painting.

The Berlin collections of Rembrandt paintings, prints and drawings, were and still are among the foremost in the world. They were heavily represented in *Rembrandt: life and work*, with twelve paintings and six drawings, and given their importance, this was not unreasonable; the collections in London's National Gallery and British Museum were also given their due. Yet, with the authenticity of a quarter of the twelve paintings in Berlin Rosenberg referenced in his book now disputed or dismissed, a higher percentage than for London's National Gallery or the Louvre in Paris, it seems fair to ask whether Rosenberg had to some degree romanticized his time in Berlin and its artistic riches from the vantage of his post-war years in the United States. In 1948, when *Rembrandt: life and work* was first published, the art collections of Berlin were still held by the Allies and would not go on view again in Germany until the mid 1950s, when separate collections were maintained in East and West Berlin. An unconscious nostalgia for the rich artistic past in Berlin of which Rosenberg had been a part is woven into the text of his Rembrandt book, and into his interpretation of Rembrandt. To the degree that his connoisseurship of Rembrandt paintings included mistakes, these were generally second-hand mistakes, originating with Bode himself. The *Vision of Daniel* was characterized, according to Rosenberg, by the 'tenderness of feeling expressed' akin to Rembrandt's etching familiarly called *The Hundred Guilder Print*.¹⁹ For today's Rembrandt scholars, this painting's sentimentality and weak figures are the hallmarks of workshop production.²⁰ Here, too we are justified in finding that Rosenberg's conception of Rembrandt's interpretive world view was weakened by the inclusion of such a painting as representative of Rembrandt's approach to religious art.

A similar case to the *Man in the Golden Helmet* is presented by a painting in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, published by Rosenberg as a self-portrait.²¹ Rosenberg again contrasted the depiction of the face and costume, remarking on 'Rembrandt's double disposition to romanticism and psychological penetration'.²² Technical study indicates that this painting is very likely a workshop product, which would have been made under Rembrandt's

¹⁷ A comprehensive source of information on this painting is found on the website of the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RKD) as part of the Rembrandt database: <https://rkd.nl/en/explore/images/202398>

¹⁸ See Scallen, *Rembrandt, reputation, and the practice of connoisseurship*, 141-142, 144, 166-169.

¹⁹ Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: life and work*, 202.

²⁰ See for instance the discussion in Christopher Brown, Jan Kelch and Pieter van Thiel, *Rembrandt: the master and his workshop: Paintings*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991, 386-7, where it is attributed to Willem Drost.

²¹ Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: life and work*, fig. 37.

²² Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: life and work*, 43.

supervision.²³ If the master did not want such a depiction of himself going out into the world, we would not have it today. Even if Rembrandt did not execute this painting it can still represent his art through the subject itself, and take its place in the line of images of Rembrandt, including those self-portraits of Rembrandt made by others, the subject of close analysis by Ernst van de Wetering.²⁴ The costume is now understood as less romantic than historicist in meaning, but it is in keeping with other self-portraits by Rembrandt in that guise.²⁵ Sometimes, then, it may matter less that a painting no longer considered to be an autograph Rembrandt is included in Rosenberg's text, if it corresponded to Rembrandt's approval of its production as a representative of his style and subject matter. Rosenberg could have used a different (and autograph) late Rembrandt self-portrait to stand for 'romanticism and psychological penetration' but his point would not have changed.

A signal trait of the Bode-Valentiner approach to Rembrandt connoisseurship was its expansive nature, where Rembrandt's painted oeuvre became larger from the 1880s to the 1890s, to every subsequent decade up through the 1920s. Bode had begun this trend with a significant increase from his non-illustrated catalogue of 1883, in which he accepted 350 paintings, to his massive illustrated catalogue published by the art dealer Charles Sedelmeyer from 1897 to 1906 (in the English edition) in which 595 number of Rembrandts were included (albeit some with very equivocal entries when it came to attribution).²⁶ Valentiner continued this expansion with his 1909 Rembrandt volume, including 643 paintings, followed up by the incredible claim in 1923 in the supplement volume that 122 additional Rembrandt paintings had come to light in twelve years, for a total of 765 paintings.²⁷ Rosenberg did not entirely subscribe to this expansionist viewpoint in *Rembrandt: life and work*, accepting around 630 paintings, and thus coming close to the position of Abraham Bredius, who had accepted 639 paintings in *Rembrandt Paintings*, published in 1937, than to Valentiner's.²⁸ In 1948 Rosenberg provided a full concordance to several major Rembrandt catalogues, including Bredius's and Valentiner's. In 1964, rather than provide the lengthy apparatus of such a concordance, he offered a 'Note on the Problem of Authenticity' in which he cited where he differed from Bredius's and

²³ For information on this painting see the online catalogue entry of the National Gallery of Art: <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/art-object-page.1209.html#entry>.

²⁴ Ernst van de Wetering, 'Rembrandt's self-portraits: problems of authenticity and function', 117-32, in Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project, *A corpus of Rembrandt paintings*, vol., 4, *The self-portraits*, Dordrecht: Spring, 2005, 117-32. The painting in Washington is discussed in the catalogue, 394-6.

²⁵ Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project, *A corpus of Rembrandt paintings*, 399-400.

²⁶ Wilhelm Bode, *Studien zur Geschichte der holländischen Malerei*, Braunschweig: F. Vieweg, 1883; Wilhelm Bode with Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *The complete work of Rembrandt, history, description and heliographic reproduction of all the master's pictures, with a study of his life and art*, 8 vol., Paris: Charles Sedelmeyer, 1897-1906.

²⁷ Wilhelm R. Valentiner, *Rembrandt, des Meisters Gemälde*, 3rd revised edition, (Klassiker der Kunst in Gesamtausgaben 2), Stuttgart and Leipzig: Deutsche-Verlags Anstalt, 1909; Wilhelm R. Valentiner, *Rembrandt: wiedergefundene Gemälde, 1910-1922*, revised ed., (Klassiker der Kunst in Gesamtausgaben 27), Stuttgart: Deutsche-Verlags Anstalt, 1923.

²⁸ Abraham Bredius, *The Paintings of Rembrandt*, London: Phaidon, 1937.

Valentiner's catalogues. In the case of Valentiner's catalogues, Rosenberg stated his general agreement with Bredius's rejections, and only included a list of paintings that Bredius rejected where he agreed with Valentiner instead. What is notable is how little Rosenberg's opinions changed between editions, especially in regard to Valentiner's attributions. Rosenberg rejected five more paintings from Bredius's catalogue in 1964 (and thus in 1980 as well) in his 'Note on the Problem of Authenticity' than he had in 1948, and accepted one more. When it came to Valentiner's two volumes, however, he did not change his mind on a single painting between 1948 and 1964: he accepted eighteen paintings from Valentiner's 1909 volume that Bredius had not, and fifteen of the paintings in Valentiner's supplement volume rejected by Bredius. By 1980, as Rosenberg acknowledged in his added preface for the Cornell paperback edition, the work of the Rembrandt Research Project was well underway in considering with what Rosenberg terms 'the often vexing problems of authenticity' but with the caveat that 'if a committee is ever to be more than a mere storehouse of information, it has to overcome a basic difficulty in the last resort judgement depends on the quality of perception of each individual committee member'.²⁹

It was the Berlin expansionist model of Rembrandt connoisseurship that led to a painting such as the *Old Woman Cutting Her Fingernails* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art) being widely accepted as a Rembrandt.³⁰ Jakob Rosenberg first included it in 1948 in his chapter 'Style and Technique' as an example of how Rembrandt's employment of chiaroscuro was more successful than that of his pupils and followers, comparing it to another work in the Metropolitan Museum by Nicolaes Maes.³¹ 'Through the proper placing of value accents he has created a clear succession of planes in every part of the figure, and focuses our attention on the woman's action...in the pupil's picture the three-dimensional aspect of the subject is full of weak spots'.³²

Curiously, by 1964, though the text remained unchanged, a footnote was included that stated

Recent investigation...has shown that the signature and date are not authentic, and the attribution to Rembrandt is not fully convincing. The comparative weakness of the Nicolaes Maes in regard to the spatial definition of the form remains, however, true.³³

This is a bewildering position in which to leave his readers in 1964 and later years. The painting may not be by Rembrandt, but as it is still (supposedly) superior in chiaroscuro to the Maes, it is worth including in a discussion of Rembrandt's style and technique? Here is a mistake in connoisseurship that is admitted to but not properly addressed, and which does mislead the reader, in this case not only about Rembrandt's chiaroscuro, but about the range of

²⁹ Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: life and work*, 'Preface to the Cornell paperback edition', initialed and dated 1980 by Rosenberg, ix.

³⁰ Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: life and work*, fig. 261.

³¹ Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: life and work*, fig. 262, Nicolaes Maes, *Girl Peeling Apples*.

³² Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: life and work*, 314-15.

³³ Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: life and work*, 364 n. 8b.

his subject matter. For we have no accepted Rembrandt painting with such a trivial genre subject as this one.

If in 1964 Rosenberg largely ignored the issue of new attributions of some of the paintings he discussed, he did update the information on and attributions of drawings, taking into account Otto Benesch's catalogue raisonné of Rembrandt's drawings that had appeared in the 1950s. The only illustration that was changed for the 1964/1980 edition was a drawing of a semi-nude youth; Rosenberg replaced the one in the 1948 edition from a private collection, for one in the Albertina in Vienna that he described as 'uncontested', without commenting on the authenticity of the one he replaced.³⁴ Rosenberg did not have the advantage of a new catalogue of Rembrandt paintings to draw on for the revised edition of 1964, as he did with drawings. But by 1980 he could have turned to several important new catalogues of Rembrandt paintings published in the 1960s and chose not to do so. Rosenberg was indeed a renowned connoisseur but primarily of drawings and prints; indeed, his choices of Rembrandt's works in these media stand up better than his choices of Rembrandt paintings. Perhaps, at the end, the issues surrounding the connoisseurship of Rembrandt's graphic works were more engaging to him.

In fairness to Rosenberg, his view of Rembrandt was entirely typical of his generation of historians of Dutch art. They were shaped by nineteenth-century positivism and the lingering effect of the admiration of both Realist and Romantic artists of the nineteenth century, all of which led to an interpretation of Rembrandt as a spiritually profound man of the people who immortalized his family in his art. That a Rembrandt monograph, written by a German-Jewish emigré and published in the aftermath of WWII and the Holocaust, should promote Rembrandt as an example of enduring humanism that transcended time is unsurprising. Such a conception of the artist may have rendered moot questions of connoisseurship when the pictures in question fit the model so well.

Rosenberg provided his readers with an often moving and insightful monograph that he attempted to found on factual evidence where possible. But, as he wrote in his preface to the first edition '...in addition to all that scholarship can provide, we must depend upon the less tangible faculty of artistic perception. How much or how little of this faculty an art historian has at his disposal, he can hardly judge for himself, but he has to face the fact that in his field scholarship, indispensable as it is, does not guarantee an adequate interpretation'.³⁵ For an art historian whose connoisseurship was essential to both his art-historical practice and his reputation, who would publish the book *On quality in art* three years after the second edition of his Rembrandt monograph appeared, historical judgment of *Rembrandt: life and work* must be mixed, especially in its later editions. Even artistic perception is time-bound.

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³⁴ Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: life and work*, fig. 224, *Study of a Male Nude*; 358, n. 6. In both editions he described the reproduced drawing as 'unquestionably by the master's own hand', see this citation and Rosenberg, *Rembrandt*, 1948, 153.

³⁵ Rosenberg, *Rembrandt*, 1948, x.

Men: Art Dealing and the Collecting of Experts', analyzing the extensive network of experts beyond Bernard Berenson that Joseph Duveen cultivated as authorities for his galleries from about 1900 to 1939.

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