The fingerprint of an old master: on connoisseurship of Dutch and Flemish seventeenth-century paintings: recent debates and seventeenth-century insights

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CHAPTER 1.
THE FINGERPRINTS OF DUTCH AND FLEMISH OLD MASTERS:
CONNOISSEURSHIP SINCE 1945

Introduction

Attributing old master paintings constitutes one of the most difficult tasks which art historians have taken upon themselves. Moreover, decisions in these matters tend to carry a lot of weight, especially when a painting may be by a well-known old master. The difference in price between an authentic old master painting and a work ‘in the manner’ of such a master can amount to several million dollars\(^1\), the difference in status is considerable, and a new or changing attribution can have dramatic consequences for our understanding of art history. For example, the idea that Vermeer had expressed ‘a deep religious emotion’ in the painting *Christ and his Disciples at Emmaus* became instantly obsolete when this painting was exposed as a fake in 1947.\(^2\) (fig. 1.1)

Despite the complexity and importance of attributions, however, little theory has been devoted to connoisseurship. Within academic art history, hardly any methodology has been developed to attribute Dutch and Flemish old master paintings. There is no handbook that could help train aspiring connoisseurs, and only a few connoisseurs have ever published coherent views on their working methods. Moreover, no survey exists on the developments in this field in the relatively recent past.\(^3\) This essay presents a brief overview of the insights which have been developed in the field of Dutch and Flemish painting since the end of the Second World War. It is far from exhaustive and is based only on published sources. The main questions are: How have the various experts defined and redefined the process of attributing paintings from this period? What new techniques have been developed, and how do these affect the experts’ views on the attribution process? Can this process be captured in a rational method, or does it ultimately defy definition? And what specific attribution issues have caused debate among experts in recent years?

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1 See also below, chapter 3, note 1.
2 See below, p. 2 ff.
3 Early twentieth-century connoisseurship has been thoroughly studied and beautifully described by Catherine B. Scallen. See Scallen 2004.
The Van Meegeren Scandal: A Turning Point

Almost immediately after the Second World War, art historians and laymen alike began to question the ability of experts of seventeenth-century Dutch art to attribute paintings with an unprecedented force. Their doubt was the result of a remarkable lawsuit in 1945-47, the Van Meegeren case, which marks a turning point in the history of modern connoisseurship. During this trial, the painting *Christ and his Disciples at Emmaus*, which was widely celebrated as one of Vermeer’s best paintings, turned out to be a forgery (fig. 1.1 Han van Meegeren, *Christ and his Disciples at Emmaus*, c. 1937, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen).

In 1937 the piece had been ‘rediscovered’ by the well-known art historian Abraham Bredius, and the Boijmans-van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam had been quick to purchase it (with the help of Bredius himself who donated 10,000 guilders towards the acquisition). Although Bredius had initially had some doubts about the provenance and attribution of the painting, he had concluded that it was ‘authentic’ after completing a brief background check on the seller and closely inspecting the painting in July 1937. He subsequently wrote an article about the piece for the prestigious art historical monthly *The Burlington Magazine*, in which he celebrated the painting as Vermeer’s best work. Other experts followed suit. The composition was said to be well-balanced, the colours exquisite, the still life better than any other from the period, Christ’s face ‘filled with secrecy’ (Knuttel, 1938); and the maid ‘perhaps the most beautiful one Vermeer ever painted’ (Van Thienen, 1939). Moreover, the style of the work was said to express all the great character traits of the painter himself (Hefting, 1938).

Most experts only started to voice doubts about the authenticity of the painting during the two-year long lawsuit against the master forger Han van Meegeren, which started a few weeks after the end of World War II. Initially, Van Meegeren was sued for treason. He was thought to have taken advantage of the war situation in the Netherlands in 1943 to illegitimately sell a Vermeer, *The Adulteress*, to an agent of the German marshal Hermann Göring without permission to export such an important piece of the Dutch cultural heritage (fig. 1.2). However, Van Meegeren denied the accusation, stating that he had not sold

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4 Bredius’ initial doubts were recorded in a letter by his secretary, dated 1 July 1937, which has been reproduced in full in Kraaijpoel/Van Wijnen 1996, 22; see also Blankert 2006, 47-57.

5 ‘a hitherto unknown masterpiece by a great master … the masterpiece of Johannes Vermeer van Delft’. See Bredius 1937, 121.

6 A good overview of various reactions before and after the trial, including the full texts by all authors apart from Van Dantzig can be found in Weerdenburg 1988; see also Kraaijpoel/Van Wijnen 1996, 34.
an authentic old master but a forgery by his own hand. Moreover, he declared that *The Adulteress* was not the only forgery he had created, and claimed authorship of six other paintings in the styles of Pieter de Hooch and Johannes Vermeer, including the very well-known *Christ and his Disciples at Emmaus* in the Boijmans-van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam.

It was a far-reaching statement that was hard to believe for the experts who had enthusiastically praised the Boijmans painting earlier. Bredius, who had ‘discovered’ the work, never changed his opinion about his attribution; he died in 1946 before the trial was concluded. Hannema, the director of the Boijmans Museum who purchased the painting, would continue to believe in the authenticity of the painting until his death in 1984. And even art historians who had not been directly involved in the attribution or acquisition of the painting were initially reluctant to change their mind. For example, Frederica Bremer, wrote in the introduction to the fifth edition of her survey of art history in 1945:

‘In my personal opinion I would like to state that it is completely unacceptable that this work, which has no equal in Dutch painting in its pure expression of a deep religious emotion, would have been painted by a cowardish cheater […] If this work is indeed old, Vermeer would be the only painter who could have created it. After serious consideration, we have therefore decided to keep the painting in its place for the time being.’

Such a position became increasingly difficult to maintain. To add credibility to his claim, Van Meegeren decided to create a new Vermeer forgery during the trial. Meanwhile, a variety of evidence surfaced. In Van Meegeren’s workshop in France, the police found a painting in the style of Vermeer, one in the style of Pieter de Hooch, as well as a part of the seventeenth-century stretcher on which *Christ and his Disciples at Emmaus* had been painted. (Van Meegeren claimed he had altered the width of the stretcher to fit his composition.) Also, for none of the paintings mentioned by Van Meegeren could a provenance history be established.

When a number of painting experts were consulted in court – prof. Dr. Johan Q. van Regteren Altena, dr. Hans Schneider, dr. Wiebo Froentjes, prof. Dr. Paul Coremans, Dr. Harold J. Plenderleith, mr. F. Ian G. Rawlins, and dr.

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7 ‘Als mijn persoonlijk meening zou ik willen zeggen, dat het volkomen onaanvaardbaar is, dat dit werk, dat in zuivere expressie van een diep religieuze emotie, door niets in onze Hollandsche kunst wordt overtroffen, geschilderd zou zijn door een lachen spotter en leugenaar, met het plan er een dergelijk laag bedrog mee te plegen. […] Als het schilderij werkelijk oud is, is Vermeer m.i. de eenige schilder, die het gemaakt zou kunnen hebben. Na riip beraad laten we het dus voorlopig in dit boek op zijn plaats.’ Bremer 1945, foreword; see also Van Dantzig, 1947, 61.
Angenitus M. Wild – they stated that the suspicious works did not date from the time of Vermeer and De Hoogh, and that these works could indeed have been painted by Van Meegeren.  

Interestingly, Van Regteren Altena had recognized the painting as authentic in 1938, but since then changed his mind.  

Scientific tests executed by Dr. Coremans confirmed a curious characteristic of the forger’s working method. According to his own explanation, Van Meegeren always created his forgeries on top of seventeenth-century paintings and used pigments that were consistent with those used by the old masters; however, unlike seventeenth-century painters, he did not use oil paint. Instead, he had chosen for a modern type of binding medium, ‘bakelite’ (phenol-formaldehyde), which allowed him to imitate the cracked surface of centuries old oil paintings by briefly baking the finished paintings in an oven. This binding medium had only been invented in 1907 and thus proved that the paintings could not have been made in the seventeenth-century.

For legal reasons, it was not necessary to further analyse the stylistic interpretations of *Christ and his Disciples at Emmaus*. But it was certainly curious that the Boijmans painting had been analysed in such radically different ways. Both before and immediately after the trial experts described the style of *Christ and his Disciples at Emmaus* in quite generic terms strongly infused with value judgements. Interestingly, some of the same elements that were initially used to underline the quality of the work were later seen as illustrative of the work’s deficiencies. After the trial, the composition was seen as unbalanced and rather forced, the colours too grey, Christ’s face decidedly effeminate (Kilbracken, 1967), the maid cross-eyed and bald, and her lips too thick (Van Dantzig, 1947).

This radical shift in appreciation was somewhat softened by voices who claimed that a number of scholars had recognized the Boijmans painting as a forgery long before the Van Meegeren trial had started. However, the published
opinions about the painting seemed to prove the opposite. Only two scholars, Huizinga and Bremmer, had mentioned deficiencies, but they had still praised the work as a whole.\textsuperscript{13} Even the director of the Rijksmuseum, Schmidt-Degener, who was long thought to have recognized the piece as a forgery, had in fact offered the Boijmans a deal. He had been willing to trade the piece against the Rijksmuseum’s \textit{The Love Letter} (c. 1669-1670) by Vermeer and a De Hooch (fig. 1.3).\textsuperscript{14}

In fact, only an art dealer from New York and a painter from The Hague could prove that they had recognized the Boijmans painting as a forgery before the trial. Representatives of the New York art dealer Duveen had looked at the painting when it was offered for sale in Paris and had sent a telegram to their head office, calling the work a ‘rotten fake’. The Dutch painter Louis Meys had proposed to issue a brochure about the painting in order to expose it as a forgery, witness the minutes of a meeting of the The Hague Art Society (\textit{De Haagsche Kunstkring}) on 26 September 1938.\textsuperscript{15} Unfortunately, neither the telegram nor the minutes specify which observations led to the conclusion that the Boijmans painting was a fake.

The mistaken attribution was somewhat understandable since Van Meegeren had created such a convincing pattern of cracks that even the two restorers who cleaned the painting for the Boijmans Museum failed to notice that the work did not date from the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{16} Also, Bredius’s idea that the painting was an early Vermeer meant that there was no clear framework for

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Schmidt-Degener, then director of the Rijksmuseum, had recognized the work as a fake, but Ger Luijten has since proved the opposite. See note 14.

\textsuperscript{13} ‘Het klinkt misschien te boud, wanneer ik meen, dat Vermeer juist daar, waar hij een zeer bepaald gebeuren van de hoogste wijding in beeld brengt, nl. in de Emmaus-gangers, naar mijn oordeel eigenlijk te kort schiet. Dat is niet een evangelisch gebeuren, wat hier verhaald wordt. Het onderwerp is maar een aanloop om hier zijn kleurenzin bot te vieren. Vermeer blijft met al zijn van den alghemeenen aard afwijkende kwaliteiten toch echt Hollands, doordat hij geen these, geen idee en in den strikken zin des woords geen bepaalden stijl heeft.’ Huizinga 1941, 140; Bremmer 1938. Bremmer on the righthand disciple in the \textit{Christ and his Disciples at Emmaus}: ‘Wanneer men zich afvraagt hoe de arm in die mouw geconstrueerd moet zitten, zal men wel enige kritiek op den bouw van deze armplooien kunnen hebben. Maar zoo iets bederft den indruk van het geheel niet.’

\textsuperscript{14} See Luijten 1984, , 388 and notes 207-211.

\textsuperscript{15} Telegram Duveen reproduced in Kraaijpoel/and Van Wijnen 1996, 71; and also in Blankert2006, 50. G. Isarlo mentions rumours that the work was a fake in Paris, though he does not believe these rumours himself. Isarlo 1938; about Meys, see Isarlo 1938, 79; AHK, Box nr. 253.

\textsuperscript{16} These restorers, Luytwieler and Van Bohemen, even declared in a newspaper interview of July 1945 that the work definitely dated from the seventeenth century. See Van Dantzig 1947, 63.
the attribution. The only comparable works by Vermeer, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (c. 1655, National Gallery of Scotland) and *Diana and her Companions* (c. 1655-56, Mauritshuis, The Hague), form a rather isolated group in Vermeer's oeuvre with their considerable formats and surprisingly large figures (fig. 1.4 and 1.5). Moreover, in these works Vermeer varied his style and painting technique considerably.\(^{17}\)

Nevertheless, the Van Meegeren trial denoted a serious shortcoming in connoisseurship. A large number of experts had failed to recognize the forgery as such, thus they were apparently unable to distinguish between an authentic old master and a fake. This painful conclusion not only affected the reputation of connoisseurs in the field of Dutch seventeenth-century art – more so than any previous error had done – but also heightened the awareness of the difficulty of attributing and dating paintings. As a result, some scholars became more cautious when authenticating and dating paintings while others tried to avoid connoisseurship all together. Both developments were fuelled by new impulses in the next decades.

The need for a more precise, cautious approach when attributing and dating paintings was particularly evident in Vermeer research. The Vermeer oeuvre catalogue that had been compiled in 1939 by Arie Bob de Vries originally included 43 works. After the trial the monograph was revised, and in the 1948 edition the group of works was reduced to 35 paintings, most of which are still accepted as authentic Vermeers today.\(^{18}\) ‘If I have been too severe while sorting out the paintings, this is due to the lesson that the Van Meegeren case has taught us’, De Vries wrote in his introduction.\(^{19}\) However, only one of the paintings he dismissed has since been re-attributed: the *Lady at a Virginal* was sold as an authentic Vermeer at Sotheby’s in London on 8 July 2004 (fig. 1.6).\(^{20}\)

From De Vries’ selection of authentic works, no picture has been unanimously rejected by a subsequent generation of Vermeer experts. One painting, *The Girl with the Flute* (National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.), was given the label ‘attributed to Vermeer’ in the Gallery, which is a standard formula to express doubt. Walter Liedtke, however, nonetheless included it among the

\(^{17}\) Most other scholars, however, dated *Christ and his Disciples at Emmaus* to Vermeer’s middle or late period because of the use of colours in it; see Van den Brandhof 1979, 103. On Vermeer’s early painting techniques, see Kolfin/Pottasch/Hoppe 2002.

\(^{18}\) De Vries 1939 [ed. 1948].

\(^{19}\) ‘Indien ik bij de schifting thans al te streng ben geweest, dan kan de les, die het ‘geval van Meegeren’ ons heeft geleerd, dit makkelijk verklaren’, De Vries 1939 [ed. 1948], 71.

\(^{20}\) See also Sheldon/Costaras 2006.
authentic paintings in his recent oeuvre catalogue of the master (fig. 1.7).\textsuperscript{21} The authenticity of three other paintings has been questioned by Albert Blankert, while other scholars, including Arthur Wheelock and Christopher Wright, accept them as authentic: \textit{Interior with a Woman playing the Lute} (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), \textit{Interior with a Girl Interrupted at her Music} (Frick Collection, New York) and \textit{The Girl with the Red Hat} (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) (fig. 1.8). Blankert questioned the first two because of their abraded condition and suggested that \textit{The Girl with the Red Hat} was an eighteenth-century forgery, since the momentary quality of the painting, the panel support, the position of the foreground chair, and the fairly sharp transition from light to darker areas were uncharacteristic of Vermeer, in his view. Also, the provenance of the picture before 1822 was unclear.\textsuperscript{22} Wheelock, however, objected that poor condition should not be a reason to dismiss a painting as authentic and argued that the pigments used in \textit{The Girl with the Red Hat} indicate a seventeenth-century origin. Moreover, he stated that both the pigments and the painting technique, especially the coloured highlights, are entirely consistent with those employed in accepted works by Vermeer.\textsuperscript{23}

Although the exact scope of Vermeer’s oeuvre has consequently remained the subject of some debate\textsuperscript{24}, the various arguments used in the attribution discussions have become far more nuanced compared to the general statements of the 1930s and 1940s. The Van Meegeren scandal functioned as an important catalyst in this respect. In an extra paragraph that De Vries added to the revised edition of his Vermeer monograph, he wrote that ‘every attribution must be supported by evidence, in as far as one can provide proof in the thorny field of such conclusions.’\textsuperscript{25} Nowadays, this statement seems so self-evident that one would almost forget that connoisseurs of De Vries’ generation were used to giving their opinions without much explanation. According to Vitale Bloch, connoisseurs’ opinions were even ‘inviolable’ before the Van Meegeren trial.\textsuperscript{26} In

\textsuperscript{21} See Liedtke 2008.
\textsuperscript{22} Blankert 1975, 108-110.
\textsuperscript{23} See Blankert 1975 reviewed by Christopher Brown in Brown 1977; and reviewed by Arthur Wheelock in Wheelock 1977. See also Wright 1976, 83.
\textsuperscript{24} Apart from the paintings mentioned above, a newly attributed painting has also been much contested: \textit{St. Praxiteles}. See Wheelock 1998a. The work is also reproduced in Wheelock 1995a.
\textsuperscript{25} ‘Het spreekt vanzelf, dat iedere toeschrijving door bewijzen moet worden gestaafd, voorzover men deze althans kan leveren op het doornige terrein van dergelijke conclusies.’ De Vries 1939 [ed. 1948], 71. [The chapter is called ‘On some wrong or doubtful attributions and a number of forgeries’].
\textsuperscript{26} Van den Brandhof 1976, 9.
1945 he stated that the worst consequence of the court case would be that expert attributions no longer enjoyed the same status. While this was indeed a great disadvantage to some scholars, for others it was a fairly positive development - especially for those who had always believed that rationalizing one’s opinion about a painting was a necessary step in the decision-making process.

Two Types of Connoisseurs

Two witty cartoons by Saul Steinberg seem to capture the essence of the attribution process in visual metaphors: the challenge is to recognize distinctively individual characteristics that - like fingerprints - allow one to identify the painter (figs. 1.9 and 1.10). One cartoon shows a painter at work, in the process of creating a landscape painting with Van-Gogh-like swirling patterns in the sky. His painting can also be seen as a giant fingerprint - an imprint of the artist’s unique characteristics (in this case, presumably Steinberg’s). The second cartoon depicts a landscape painting which consists of various such imprints dispersed throughout the work. Indeed, connoisseurs assume that paintings give clues as to the artist’s unique character - either in their entirety or in certain telling passages. The question is how such characteristics could and should be recognized.

For well over a century, connoisseurs have developed two opposing views. Opinions are divided as to what should have the most weight in the attribution process: the connoisseur’s intuition, that is, the sudden insight which the connoisseur experiences without fully grasping on what it is based, or rational, communicable arguments. Although both aspects seem to be a logical component of the decision-making process, their very different nature has long caused tension in both theory and practice. From a methodological point of view, the difference in emphasis is crucial. The one view implies that connoisseurship is ultimately a matter of trust in the connoisseur and in the purity of the connoisseur’s assessment, whereas the other view suggests that it is possible to check the validity of attributions and to develop a concrete method to attribute paintings.

Before the Van Meegeren scandal, it had been fairly common for well-known experts to simply refer to their intuition or feeling about a painting without further explanation. An interesting example can be found in a booklet which Cornelis Hofstede de Groot wrote in 1925 to prove another connoisseur wrong: *Echt of onecht? Oog of chemie?*27 In a court case, Professor Wilhelm Martin

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27 On Cornelis Hofstede de Groot’s distrust towards chemical evidence, see also in this chapter, ‘Rembrandt research and the integration of scientific techniques’.
had undermined Cornelis Hofstede de Groot’s attribution of a painting to Frans Hals, and dismissed the work as a later pastiche (fig. 1.11). In response, Hofstede de Groot wrote: ‘In an earlier polemic against Rembrandt researchers, Prof. Martin stated with great self-awareness that thanks to his feeling for style (stijlgevoel) he remarked certain things that his adversaries did not notice, since they did not have feeling for style or not as much as he did. I told him then in the clearest terms that what he considered feeling for style was no such thing, and I have to state here, too, that the fact that the learned gentleman does not recognize the hand of Frans Hals in every touch of the brush proves clearly that he does not have the least amount of feeling for Frans Hals’ style either.’

Thus, for Cornelis Hofstede de Groot a mistaken attribution based on a certain feeling was not a reason to dismiss ‘feelings’ as a guide in these matters, or to stress the importance of clearer criteria in matters of attribution. Instead, he merely claimed that Prof. Martin’s feeling for style was not as accurate as this expert liked to believe. (Interestingly, Van Meegeren expert Jonathan Lopez recently attributed the debated painting to this famous forger.)

After the Van Meegeren scandal an opinion like Prof. Martin’s was no longer acceptable in public attribution debates. This did not mean that all experts believed that attributions should entirely be based on rational arguments, but especially in the first decades after the war, attempts to objectify connoisseurship certainly set the tone in the published sources. Moreover, even those experts who favoured an intuitive approach acknowledged the importance of rationalizing one’s opinion.

During the war Max J. Friedländer had already argued that rational arguments could help to double check one’s intuitive impression of a painting in his book *On Art and Connoisseurship*. Comparing a connoisseur’s love for a painting to his love for a woman, he wrote: ‘one should honour naïveté, but not let oneself be ruled by it.’ Therefore he found it important to also pay heed to

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28 ‘In een vroegere polemiek tegen de Rembrandtvorschers heeft Prof. Martin met groote zelfbewustheid verklaard, dat hij door het bezit van stijlgevoel dingen opmerkte, die zijn tegenstanders moesten ontgaan omdat zij dit stijlgevoel niet of althans in mindere mate dan hij hadden. Ik heb hem toen op zeer duidelijke wijze er op gewezen, dat wat hij voor stijlgevoel hield, niets daarmede te maken had en ik moet ook hier verklaren, dat het feit, dat de hooggeleerde heer in dit schilderij niet in iederen toets de hand van Frans Hals herkent, zonnepkaar bewijst, dat hij ook voor den stijl van Frans Hals niet het allergeringste gevoel bezit.’ Hofstede de Groot 1925, 28-29, 5, and 18-19.
29 Lopez 2008, 44 ff.
30 Friedländer 1942 [ed. 1946].
31 Friedländer 1942 [ed. 1946], 173.
more objective criteria: documentary evidence, the presence of signatures and monograms (if genuine, and keeping in mind that a painting signed by a master could also have been painted by an assistant), and to noticeable formal similarities between documented works by the master and the painting to be attributed. He also emphasized the importance of technical examinations to better understand a painting’s condition. Nevertheless, he believed that attributing a painting was ultimately a matter of intuition, a sudden insight which defied exact definition, although it could be checked to a certain extent. He believed that knowledgeable connoisseurs would get the best insights if they did not lose oneself in lengthy contemplation of particular details and instead focused briefly on the painting in its entirety (better several times for 6 seconds than a whole minute on end, he explained).

Friedländer had developed his view in reaction to the most innovative connoisseur of a generation before him, the Italian expert Giovanni Morelli (1816-1891). As both Morelli and Friedländer served as reference point for late twentieth-century connoisseurs who positioned themselves on a methodological level, I will also briefly summarize Morelli’s contribution to the debate. At the end of the nineteenth century, Morelli published peppered opinions on how old master paintings could and should be attributed. Discouraged by experts, who, in his view, mistakenly relied on their intuition and a ‘general impression’, and by many attributions in public collections with which he strongly disagreed, he made a sharp plea for the careful study of formal characteristics, such as the painter’s use of colours, types of landscape and types of ears and hands. He noted that many artists have habits of execution which are particularly visible in subordinate parts of their work, and included charts with ears and hands that he regarded as

33 Friedländer 1942 [ed. 1946], 179-183.
34 Friedländer 1942 [ed. 1946], 175: ‘Intuitive judgment may be regarded as a necessary evil. It is to be believed and disbelieved. Every sudden idea, however vague, may serve as basis for a fruitful hypothesis; only one must be ready to drop it as soon as it had proved itself incapable of sustaining weight.’ See also p. 177: ‘The first impression is deeper than all subsequent ones, of different kind and of decisive importance.’
35 Friedländer 1942 [ed. 1946], 178.
36 Giovanni Morelli published under the pseudonym Ivan Lermolieff (a Russian equivalent of his name). He first expressed his ideas in a series of articles focused around Italian paintings in public collections in Rome (Lermolieff 1874-1876), then in a longer essay focused on Italian paintings in Munich, Dresden and Berlin (Lermolieff 1880); and subsequently in a series of three books, Lermolieff 1890-1893, which appeared in English as Morelli 1893.
characteristic for certain masters (fig. 1.12). The analysis of such recognizable shapes he deemed ‘objective’ and ‘scientific’, for the validity of such arguments could be checked.

For well over a century Morelli’s method has been a major source of inspiration for experts who favor a transparent, rational approach. On the other end of the spectrum, Friedländer has long counted as one of the most outspoken protagonists of an intuitive approach. In the meantime, both approaches have been further explored, as we will see. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, this has led to important new developments in either area. On the one hand computer programs have been designed to analyze and compare the characteristics of artworks in order to provide a firm basis for attributions; while on the other hand the first general overview has been published on expert intuitions or sudden insights and our understanding of these.

Pictology and the Search for Objectivity

Shortly after World War II, when the Van Meegeren trial had just ended, the Dutch artist and art critic Maurits van Dantzig published a book on the scandal titled *Johannes Vermeer, de Emmausgangers en de Critici* (Leiden, 1947). The mistaken attribution had caused him to reflect on the methodology of connoisseurship. In his opinion experts tended to trust their intuitions too much, and if they used arguments at all to support their attributions, these were far too few. He had therefore developed a method to attribute old master paintings, naming it

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37 Note, for example, this passage in the English translation of Morelli’s *Kunstkritischen Studien*: ‘Let me endeavour by an example to render my imperfectly expressed ideas more intelligible to my readers. I have observed that, after the head, the hand is the most characteristic and expressive part of the human body. Now most painters, and rightly enough, put all the strength of their art into the delineations of the features, which they endeavour to make as striking as possible, and pupils, for this part of their work, often appropriated ideas from their masters. This is rarely the case in the representation of the hands and ears; yet they also have a different form in every individual. The types of Saints and the mode of treating drapery are usually common to a school, having been transmitted through the master’s work to his pupils and imitators; while, on the other hand, every independent master has his own special conception and treatment of landscape, and what is more, of the form of the hand and ear. For every important painter has, so to speak, a type of hand and ear peculiar to himself.’ Morelli 1893, vol. I, 7.

38 Morelli stated in the introduction to the second volume of his *Kunstkritische Studien* that the intuitive method of his predecessor, Otto Mündler, which he valued highly, was more ‘accidental’ and less trustworthy than his ‘scientific’ method. Tellingly, he uses the terms ‘scientific’ and ‘experimental’ interchangeably. See Lermolieff 1890-1893, vol. II, 3 ff.
‘pictology’, which he outlined in this book. After Van Dantzig’s death, his method was explained more extensively by some of his students in *Pictology, an analytical method for the attribution and evaluation of pictures* (Leiden, 1973).\(^{39}\)

Van Dantzig’s main objective was to base attributions on rational arguments and to avoid the connoisseur’s intuition as much as possible.\(^{40}\) As a basis for solid attributions, he believed it was crucial to distil at least 100 characteristics of a painter’s style from works that could be attributed to that master with a relatively large amount of certainty (such as documented works). He paid attention to both details and more general characteristics. For Rembrandt, for example, he noted ‘more painted than drawn’ and ‘starts with the background and works towards the foreground’. (fig. 1.13)

Such a list with 100 or more characteristics served as a reference point when assessing other paintings potentially by the same master. According to Van Dantzig, the greater part of these characteristics remained constant throughout a painter’s working life (despite the artist’s increased experience, age and changing health), and he therefore believed that his lists could be applied quite rigidly. Provided the list was entirely accurate, a new painting could be attributed to the same master if it matched more than 75 of the listed characteristics. Should it match less than 50%, then it was certainly not by the same master. Interestingly, he also included an error margin. If the match was somewhere between 50% and 75%, then more research was needed to reach a firm conclusion.

Van Dantzig thus basically gave his attributions a quantitative basis. A brief description of a painter’s style or certain telling details was not sufficient in his view. He insisted on a very thorough analysis of a master’s painting style, which was to be captured in words and could thus be checked. Although some of his descriptions now seem dated (such as his emphasis on negative shapes (*restvormen*) and on ‘cold’ and ‘warm’ colours - which seem to reflect his own time more than the seventeenth century), other observations still seem remarkably astute, such as his observation that most old masters generally build up their compositions from the background to the foreground.\(^{41}\) Because Van Dantzig was so explicit in noting his observations, it is possible to evaluate their validity, and this is exactly what he intended.

Apart from his general method of attributing paintings, he had also developed a method to distinguish genuine old master paintings from copies and forgeries. In Van Dantzig’s view, every old master painting reflects a conflict

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\(^{39}\) Van Dantzig 1973.

\(^{40}\) Van Dantzig 1973, 49.

\(^{41}\) Van Dantzig 1973, 10 and 17.
between the artist’s urge to create and the difficulties of rendering an object recognizable. He believed that great artists managed to reconcile these different interests with ease, resulting in a certain spontaneity in their work, while copies and forgeries show a certain inhibition.\textsuperscript{42} A draughtsman himself, he created examples of spontaneous and copied lines to illustrate how one could recognize spontaneity and inhibition (figs. 1.14a & b) Again, this was a rational assessment that could be checked.

After Van Dantzig, several other experts have emphasized the importance of rational arguments as the very essence of the attribution process, often referring to either Van Dantzig or Morelli.\textsuperscript{43} The most innovative contribution came from the Canadian art historian Hayden Maginnis, who related connoisseurship to insights from experimental psychology. Experiments from Alfred Yarbus among others have shown that people focus on those elements in a picture which they expect to find important. While doing so, their eye movements are strikingly repetitive (see fig. 1.15). However, when subjects were asked a variety of questions while looking at a painting, their eye movements described completely different patterns (fig. 1.16).\textsuperscript{44} This shows that preconceived ideas about the importance of certain passages have a strong impact on our eye movements, while new questions will literally alter the way in which we look.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{42} Van Dantzig 1947, 58-60; Van Dantzig 1973, 5-11.
\textsuperscript{43} References to Van Dantzig can be found in Van Leeuwen 1979, 57-92; Bruyn \textit{et al.} 1982, vol. I, . XII; Groen/Hendriks 1990, 109 and 119. References to Giovanni Morelli can be found in Wind 1963, 32-51; and Maginnis 1990, 104-117.
\textsuperscript{44} Maginnis 1990, 110-113 and p. 117, notes 21, 22 and 25. Yarbus 1967, 193 ff. Earlier, Guy Buswell had done similar experiments; see Buswell 1935. Other studies cited by Maginnis include Mackworth/Brown 1970; Noton/Stark 1971a; Noton/Stark 1971b; Gould 1976; and Hochberg 1978.
\textsuperscript{45} When figures are present, subjects tend to focus on facial expressions and the position of hands. See Maginnis 1990, 110.
doing before the arrival of the visitor, (4) remember the clothes worn by the visitor, (5) remember the position of the figures and objects in the room, and (6) estimate how long the visitor had been away.)

According to Maginnis, the most important merit of connoisseurs like Morelli is that they forged the notion that careful examination of every aspect of a painting is relevant in decision-making. If a connoisseur falls back on a general impression, he is likely to conduct free examinations in which each informational input is roughly equivalent to that of a previous viewing. Moreover, Maginnis points out that these experiments demonstrate that seeing cannot be separated from thinking. He therefore strongly disagrees with the so-called ‘basta videre’ (‘it suffices to look’) school of connoisseurship, noting that it only ‘suffices to look’ if one knows what to look for. Instead, he believes that it is crucial to rationalize one’s observations in order to refine and question one’s hypotheses about a painter’s characteristic style.

Recently, the search for a transparent, logical basis for connoisseurship has also led to a radically new type of experiment. Around the world, several teams of computer scientists have been developing computer programs with the intention of facilitating the attribution process. At the end of 2004, a team from Dartmouth College (USA) developed an innovative method to analyze pen lines and brushstrokes, based on a technique which had been developed to recognize digital manipulations of photographs. With the aid of so-called ‘wavelets’, Siwei Lyu, Daniel Rockmore and Hany Farid were able to isolate pen- and brushstrokes and analyse their direction, scale and relation to surrounding strokes. They assumed that every painter or draughtsman had a unique manner of applying ink and paint to the surface, which results in a kind of virtual signature that can be recognized by a computer without analysing the subject matter. Since the subject matter is likely to affect the variability of the strokes, however, they only compared works with similar subject matter.

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46 Maginnis 1990, 113.
47 Maginnis 1990, 115. The ‘basta videre’ phrase comes from the famous connoisseur of Italian paintings Bernard Berenson.
48 Among others, dr. ing. Jan van der Lubbe from the University of Delft is working on two projects, “Authenticiteit van Rembrandts etsen bepaald met artificiële intelligentie” and “Objectherkenning”. See Van der Lubbe 2008.
49 Lyu/Farid 2005. This technique is used in American courts to check photographic evidence for possible later additions.
50 Lyu/Rockmore/Farid 2004; see also Rockmore/Lyu/Farid 2005/2006; and Rockmore/Leibon 2007.
The technique was successfully applied to high-resolution scans of thirteen landscape drawings in the style of Pieter Breughel the Elder from the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Taking eight drawings, which are considered to be authentic works by Pieter Breughel the Elder as a point of departure, the scientists were able to distil model values for the penstrokes – and confirmed a relatively great similarity between the ‘authentic’ drawings and deviant results for five drawings which are considered ‘imitations’.

Although the tool has not yet been tested on a larger group of works, the first results seem hopeful. Should it be possible to apply the technique more widely, then this would mean that certain habits of the hand - visible in pen- or brushstrokes - can provide a basis for attributions without taking the aesthetic quality of the artwork into account. Although the computer analysis used to detect such habits is advanced, the underlying principle is not new. In fact, it is reminiscent of Morelli’s method which similarly focused on revealing habits of the master’s hand without analysing the artistic quality of pictures.52

**Rembrandt Research and the Integration of Scientific Techniques**

The largest post-war research project which focuses entirely on identifying the oeuvre of one seventeenth-century painter is the Rembrandt Research Project. Founded in 1968, it set out to combine traditional connoisseurship and style analysis with the newest scientific techniques in order to purify Rembrandt’s oeuvre.53 In 1935 Abraham Bredius had attributed 611 paintings to Rembrandt and many of these attributions seemed questionable at the end of 1960s. The Rembrandt Research Project therefore decided to re-evaluate the paintings in order to distinguish the master’s hand from the hands of pupils, assistants, followers and forgers.54

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52 The technique also bears some similarities to computational approaches of determining literary authorship. See Rockmore/Lyu/Farid 2005/2006, 14. The authors refer to the following introductory article on stylometry: Holmes/Kardos 2003.

53 In their grant application, the members of the Rembrandt Research Project stated they would research the paintings ‘niet alleen met de als vanouds onontbeerlijke stijlkritische en esthetische beoordeling en iconologische inzichten en archivalische gegevens, maar ook met gebruik van natuurwetenschappelijke en technische onderzoeken’. See Grijzenhout 2007, 34.

54 After the first volume had been published, the project decided to take Gerson’s 1969 catalogue of Rembrandt paintings as their point of departure, mostly due to time constraints. See Grijzenhout 2007, 49. When the project started in 1968, Gerson’s catalogue had not yet been published.
Somewhat earlier in 1962, an even larger-scale research project had started assessing the oeuvre of Rubens. A loosely organized group of scholars from a broad range of institutions set out to discuss Rubens’s entire oeuvre of over 2500 works in a series of 27 books, the *Corpus Rubenianum*, using the notes and research files of Ludwig Burckhard. To date 19 volumes of this series have been published. Although the series aims to give a complete overview of Rubens’s multi-faceted art, it is not so much an exploration of the boundaries that define his oeuvre but rather a thorough assessment of the oeuvre and its social and artistic context. Only works that are considered to be either entirely or partly done by Rubens have been catalogued. The attributions as such and the exact extent of Rubens’s involvement have not been discussed at great length, and neither have the paintings been subjected to a systematic analysis of their material structure. For the history of connoisseurship this means that Rubens research has not been a focal point for methodological discussions about connoisseurship. Individual Rubens scholars did contribute to debates on the topic, as we will see, but mainly outside of published volumes of the *Corpus Rubenianum*. By contrast, the Rembrandt group had made sorting out the various Rembrandt-style paintings the very core of their research activities. Partly for this reason most methodological debates about connoisseurship have focused on the definition of Rembrandt’s oeuvre over the last forty years.

When the Rembrandt Research Project started, many connoisseurs were doubtful about the validity of the existing attributions to Rembrandt and his contemporaries. Horst Gerson, the director of the Netherlands Institute for Art History, noted, for example, in the introduction of his 1968 monograph on Rembrandt that he largely agreed with what British collectors tended to say about Dutch old masters, namely that ‘nearly half of the old masters are wrongly attributed and the others are not old at all.’ One year later, Gerson published a complete catalogue of Rembrandt paintings. He saw it more as a step in the right

55 For further information on the series and a complete listing of all the published volumes, see the Rubenianum’s website: http://www.rubenianum.be/
56 See Burchard *et al.* 1968–, vol. I, XI-XII.
57 For this reason, Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann stated: ‘As long as basics have not been established, interpretation of Rubens’ roles and of the subject matter and the social and artistic context of the works remains founded on a shifting base.’ See Haverkamp-Begemann 1987, 516-17.
Meanwhile, several individual studies have been dedicated to Rubens’ painting techniques, notably Van Hout 2005.
58 Gerson 1968, 160.
direction than as a definitive answer, and pointed out that no Rembrandt scholar had ever even seen all the possibly authentic Rembrandt paintings in real life.59

Compared to Gerson’s study, the Rembrandt Research Project’s endeavour was of an entirely different scale. At the instigation of Bob Haak, curator of old masters at the Amsterdam Historical Museum, the research was done not by one single expert but by a team of scholars. After a few early changes the team consisted of Josua Bruyn, professor in art history at the University of Amsterdam, Haak himself, Simon Levie, the director of the Amsterdam Historical Museum, Pieter van Thiel, curator of old master paintings at the Rijksmuseum, and Ernst van de Wetering, staff member the Central Research Laboratory for Objects of Art and Science.60 In pairs the team members travelled the world to see all the paintings that had been attributed to Rembrandt in person. They made painstakingly detailed descriptions of the work, used up-to-date scientific methods of investigation wherever possible and subsequently decided about the status of the paintings as a group. The first three volumes of their catalogue, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, were published in 1982, 1986 and 1989, and covered the first seventeen years of Rembrandt’s career from 1625-1642. The studies were particularly important for the way in which the authors had incorporated relatively new scientific research methods and for the very high degree of precision reached in the rationalization of their decisions.

Whereas Cornelis Hofstede de Groot had argued against the validity of a scientific examination of a presumed Frans Hals and in favour of his own judgement as a connoisseur in his booklet *Oog of Chemie? Echt of Onecht* of 1923, by the time the first *Corpus* volume appeared in 1982, such a line of reasoning seemed virtually unthinkable. The members of the Rembrandt Research Project, rather, signalled an excessive optimism about the possibilities of scientific examination.61 As they were the first to systematically research Rembrandt’s entire oeuvre using a variety of scientific methods of investigation (combined with observations with

59 Bredius/Gerson 1969, XII.
60 Jan Emmens and Jan van Gelder, both Professors in Art History at the University of Utrecht, were originally also members of the project. Emmens died in 1971; Van Gelder increasingly withdrew from participation from 1974 onward.
61 Bruyn et al. 1982-, vol. I, XIII ff. An example of such optimism can be found in Gerson’s monograph on Rembrandt. Gerson speculated that ‘the standards of scientific connoisseurship’ would be more universally applied in the future, once most paintings would have been absorbed into museum collections. See Gerson 1968, 166.
the naked eye), they were in a unique position to evaluate the respective use of these techniques.62

Dendrochronology proved useful in dating the oak panels Rembrandt had used. By determining the approximate year in which the tree used to make the panel was cut, the technique gave the scholars so-called 'data post quem', that is, dates after which the paintings had to have been made. Tests executed by the Ordinariat für Holzbiologie at the University of Hamburg provided interesting results, especially when applied to paintings that the Rembrandt Research Project had originally considered later imitations.63 Most of these turned out to be done on authentic seventeenth-century panels, which in combination with other observations, eventually led to the conclusion that the works did date from Rembrandt's time.

X-ray photographs proved to be valuable help in reconstructing Rembrandt's working process in terms of how he laid out his composition and worked towards completion. The X-ray images reflect specifically lead-containing pigments, and since canvases were commonly primed with a lead-containing coating, X-rays photographs also allowed the Rembrandt scholars to study the structure and density of the original canvases on which the paintings were created.64 Original canvases can hardly ever be seen with the naked eye since most seventeenth-century canvas paintings have been relined. The Rembrandt Research Project’s study of these canvases led to some interesting conclusions, especially when the works had been cut down, or a flaw in the weaving showed that several canvases derived from the same roll – in which case it seemed likely that the canvases had been bought in one batch and had all been used in Rembrandt’s studio.

Ultraviolet radiation and photographs and infrared reflectographs proved less informative. The first-mentioned technique can be helpful in identifying later retouches, though its use depends largely on the condition of the varnish, making it a rather inconsistent source of information. Infrared reflectography, which is mostly used to study carbon-containing underdrawings, did not yield a large amount of information, as no underlying drawing in an absorbent material was

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62 Before the first volume of the *Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings* appeared, the Mauritshuis published a ground-breaking study which successfully combined thorough technical analysis with art historical interpretations: De Vries et al. 1978. For example, the interpretation of the painting *Study of a Man Laughing* is remarkable in its depth and the diversity of information studied. See De Vries et al. 1978, 48-55.

63 Bruyn et al. 1982-, vol. I, XII. The tests were executed by J. Bauch, D. Eckstein and P. Klein.

64 Van de Wetering 1986.
discovered in Rembrandt paintings, and the Rembrandt Research Project therefore decided against investing in this technique.\textsuperscript{65}

Neutron activation autoradiographs yielded some interesting result about the master’s working method, but were too costly to be used on a large scale. Most significant in this respect was the investigation by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in the early 1980s, the results of which were also studied by the Rembrandt Project.\textsuperscript{66} By making several paintings radioactive and subsequently recording the radiation of the various pigments in a number of photographic plates, a clear picture emerged of the areas in which the different pigments had been used. This gave the scholars information on paint layers below the surface which could barely, at best, be detected with other techniques.

Lastly, samples of the paint and ground layers gave mixed results. Rembrandt’s pigments were found to not differ much from those of his pupils and contemporaries, or even from those used by his followers, and thus analyses of paint samples were of hardly any use when trying to identify the master’s hand. Only in rare instances in which a pigment was found to have gone in or out of use at a certain moment did a paint sample give an indication as to when a painting was made. For example, the pigment lead-tin yellow made a creation date before 1750 likely as the pigment was no longer being used afterwards.

Gradually it became evident that the different technical examinations hardly ever gave certainty as to the attributions. Only when a painting was a later imitation could technical evidence provide the scholars with a conclusive answer. The team had expected to find many such later imitations, but instead found hardly any.\textsuperscript{67} As to sorting out the attributions of seventeenth-century paintings, the techniques appeared to be much less helpful. Nonetheless, the Rembrandt Research Project’s decade-long analyses of Rembrandt’s technique greatly enhanced their understanding of Rembrandt’s working methods. It became a major incentive for further technical research of both his working methods and of those of other seventeenth-century masters.

Interestingly, technical examinations of works by some of Rembrandt’s contemporaries showed that the usefulness of the various techniques varies

\textsuperscript{65} Further research might still yield some new insights, as some information about the various paint layers can also be seen in infrared-reflectographs and increasingly refined cameras make it possible to recognize thin underdrawings which earlier models cannot distinguish. See also below.

\textsuperscript{66} Ainsworth et al. 1982. \textit{Aristotle contemplating the Bust of Homer} is one of the few undisputable Rembrandts, as its provenance can be securely traced back to its seventeenth-century Italian owner, Ruffo, who commissioned the work from Rembrandt. See also the discussion of the test results in Bruyn et al. 1982-, vol. I, eg. C68, C69.

\textsuperscript{67} Bruyn et al. 1982-, vol. I, XIV.
somewhat from one master to the next. For example, Vermeer’s use of pigments appears to have been more unique and thus more significant in attribution matters. According to Libby Sheldon and Nicola Costaras, he is the only Dutch master known to have used the very expensive blue pigment *lapis lazuli* for background colours such as the bluish-white colour of a background wall. Also, infrared reflectography yielded spectacular results when applied to paintings by one of Rembrandt’s most talented pupil, Carel Fabritius. In the context of the 2004 Fabritius exhibition, Jørgen Wadum discovered that several contested Fabritius paintings in fact carried the master’s signature, which was no longer visible to the naked eye but showed up clearly in infrared reflectographs (fig. 1.17)

While the usefulness of the various techniques continues to be explored, it is with diminished hopes of reaching (absolute) certainty. For the experience of the Rembrandt Project was particularly meaningful in that it showed that attributions to the master always remained a matter of interpretation. Despite the team members’ innovative use of scientific techniques and their effort to be as open and objective as they could, they could not avoid a certain subjectivity. In fact, especially since they had been so open about their considerations, it was evident that their conclusions were based on a number of assumptions, two of which became the subject of much debate.

Firstly, it was evident that team members expected a great coherence in Rembrandt’s early development, both in his style and in his technique. They expected Rembrandt’s development to be logical and linear, and it was for this reason that they occasionally even questioned the dates that Rembrandt had put on his own work, in particular the dates he inscribed on his *Bust of a Young Man* (A23, Cleveland Museum of Art) and his *Samson and Delilah* (A24, Gemäldegalerie Berlin) (fig. 1.18). In a larger sense, the question arose of Rembrandt being more experimental than the team allowed him to be. For example, several critics were surprised to find out that the team questioned two out of three paintings in a series done on the highly unusual support of copper topped with gold leaf (figs. 1.19–1.21). The works varied too much in style for the Rembrandt Research

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68 As many artist’s oeuvres have not yet been thoroughly researched, no definitive conclusion can be drawn as of yet.
70 See Duparc 2006 (Duparc's earlier insights into attributions to Fabritius were beautifully confirmed by these finds).
Project to accept them. Yet several reviewers of the project, among them the editor of The Burlington Magazine and Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, were not convinced by this assessment.73 (see also below, chapter 4 ‘Style and Subject’)

Secondly, the way in which the Rembrandt Research Project had classified the paintings they had studied revealed a preconceived idea about Rembrandt’s workshop practice. The team members classified paintings as entirely by Rembrandt’s own hand (category A), as not by the master’s at all (C) or they concluded that they could not reach a firm conclusion (category B). They thus apparently assumed that Rembrandt’s pupils and assistants hardly ever collaborated with the master on the same compositions. The question was if this assumption was historically correct. Also, could these categories sufficiently account for Rembrandt’s studio production, that is, would studio products — historically speaking – not also have counted as ‘Rembrandts’?74 Two portraits, in particular, that the Rembrandt Research Project had dismissed led to debate about the project’s classification method: the so-called Beresteyn portraits in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (fig. 1.22 and 1.23).

Both pendants of this somewhat abraded pair of knee-length portraits are inscribed with Rembrandt’s name and the date 1632. The team noted many similarities with works they considered to be autograph paintings by Rembrandt from this period, including the handling of light in the man’s face, the animated contours of the man’s cloak, the reticent treatment of his hands and the lively modelling of the woman’s left hand in particular. However, they also perceived many features which they deemed inconsistent with accepted Rembrandts — notably the massive size of the man’s body in relation to his head, the peculiar foreshortening of the woman’s right arm and placement of her head on her shoulders, the rather weak characterization of form in her right hand and both his hands, the fine brushstrokes in the shadow side of the man’s face which lack

73 ‘The present authors set out to try to prove that Rembrandt was not only consistent in his painting techniques, but also followed conventional procedures. And on the evidence presented they have so far made a good case…taken as a strict rule of thumb, it does pose some awkward problems, such as the question of the three pictures of the same dimensions painted on gold ground on copper. After much agonising, the Salzburg *Old woman at prayer* is accepted, whereas the Stockholm *Artist in a cap* and the Hague *Bust of a laughing man* remain in the inelegantly titled limbo of ‘Paintings Rembrandt’s authorship of which cannot be positively either accepted or rejected’, technique arguing in favour of the attribution, style against.’ ‘Editorial’ 1983, 662. See also Haverkamp-Begemann 1987, 516.

74 Ernst van de Wetering addressed this problem in Van de Wetering 1986. For a more extensive overview of the debate on this topic, see below chapter 4, “‘Without Changing his Manner’: Seventeenth-Century Views on Style’.
plasticity, the red and orange splotches of colour around his eyes and in the shaded areas of his face (which, according to the Rembrandt Research Project, indicated a preference for ‘almost coquettish’ colouristic effects), the purplish pink splotches in the woman’s nose and mouth, the underpainting with a terrace-like structure and flat intermediate tint in both faces, and the overall lack of liveliness and plasticity in the woman’s face. This led them to conclude that the portraits were presumably created and signed with Rembrandt’s name by an assistant in Rembrandt’s workshop, possibly by Isack Jouderville, in the year 1632.

The verdict caused a lot of debate. Christopher Brown, John Brealey, Manfred Kirby-Talley and Walter Liedtke in particular sharply disagreed with the Rembrandt Research Project’s analyses of the portraits’ style and quality. In their view, the portraits should be seen as so-called ‘Monday morning paintings’. Admittedly, these were not the master’s best works, but they deemed the paintings nonetheless authentic. Moreover, Kirby Talley claimed that even if Rembrandt had used assistants for some parts of these works, this was not a reason to deattribute the paintings, for such a practice would have been perfectly common in the seventeenth century.

Indeed, the possibility that Rembrandt had used an assistant for the execution of the work raised various questions. Did the inscription of Rembrandt’s name not indicate that such works counted as ‘Rembrandts’ in the seventeenth century? And if so, was it not awkward that these would now be classified in the same category as copies and later imitations?

While most of the Rembrandt Research Project’s findings and attributions met with agreement, a number of contested pictures illustrated the extreme consequences of some of the Rembrandt Research Project’s assumptions and called for reflection. Eventually some of these issues led to changes within the Rembrandt Research Project. While compiling the first three volumes, the team members had sometimes been divided and Ernst van de Wetering in particular had occasionally added a ‘minority opinion’ to the team’s analysis of particular
paintings.⁸⁰ When the older members of the team retired in 1990, Van de Wetering, who had become professor of Early Modern Art at the University of Amsterdam, took over leadership and decided to alter the team’s organization and – to some extent – its objectives.⁸¹ He gathered a group of younger assistants around him, agreed on a regular collaboration with several outside specialists, and started to supervise the production of two more Corpus volumes, assuming the role of auctor intellectualis, the project’s main writer and editor.⁸² Under his supervision, Volume IV, dedicated to Rembrandt’s self portraits, appeared in 2005. Volume V, dedicated to Rembrandt’s small-scale history paintings after 1642 is currently in preparation.

In statements published in 1993 about the change within the team, both the departing members and Ernst van Wetering emphasized that the new team would abandon the contested A-B-C-categorization and collaborate more intensively with outside specialists, museum professionals in particular.⁸³ The new team’s first published analysis (1996) subsequently placed much emphasis on technical findings and the amount of certainty these provided. In this article ‘New directions in the Rembrandt Research Project, part I: the 1642 self-portrait in the Royal Collection’ the new team re-attributed this self-portrait, which the old team had previously dismissed, largely on the basis of technical findings.⁸⁴ The presence of lead-tin yellow had undermined the RRP’s initial belief that the painting was a late eighteenth-century copy, while various paint samples made the scholars aware of the extent in which the painting had been overpainted. Moreover, the discovery of the outlines of an earlier composition (presumably a self-portrait) underneath the current self-portrait seemed consistent with the master’s studio practice and strengthened the new team’s conviction that the painting was, in fact, an authentic Rembrandt.

On a methodological level, however, the abandonment of the A-B-C categories and the new technical investigations hardly constituted the new team’s greatest innovations. While the paintings were indeed no longer classified into the A, B or C categories, an insert in Corpus IV shows all the paintings discussed in

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⁸¹ An important reason for the older members to retire after the publication of volume III in 1989 was that the next batch of paintings that they intended to catalogue proved rather resistant to clear classification. After 1642 Rembrandt’s production seemed to have collapsed for some time, which did not allow for the kind of very precise analysis of the master’s style and technique that the authors had presented in the previous volumes. See Grijzenhout 2007, 49.
⁸² The expression is taken from Grijzenhout 2007, 52.
⁸⁴ Van de Wetering/Broekhoff 1996.
the volume and highlights the authentic ones with a star (*), which hardly differs from the previous A-category. And while the new team’s technical investigations certainly led to some interesting finds – such as the realization that Rembrandt had decided to prime canvases in his studio from 1642 onwards and that these studio-made grounds were recognizable because of the sand (quartz) he used in them – they did not spark a fundamentally new approach. In fact, the openness to new methods of investigation and the thoroughness with which these were assessed were strongly reminiscent of the project’s original intention of using new technologies to refine more ‘traditional’ connoisseurship and assess Rembrandt’s oeuvre ‘with all available methods’.

More significant were Ernst van de Wetering’s growing conviction that Rembrandt had been an experimental painter and the scholar’s strong interest in reconstructing the historical context in which the master’s paintings were made. While the old team had made great efforts to recognize a logical and linear development in the master’s evolution in style and technique, Van de Wetering became increasingly convinced that the master had ‘no fixed habits’. Instead, he aimed to define the artistic problems which in his view had inspired the master’s evolution through a process of trial and error. This made it possible to accept a greater variety in style, including for example, the three contested works on copper topped with gold leaf (see above), which Van de Wetering interpreted as an attempt by Rembrandt to create a painterly equivalent of three well-known literary styles (see chapter 4, ‘Style and Subject’).

Moreover, the old and new team differed in the way in which they analysed Rembrandt’s use of colours, light and surface structure. While the old team’s analyses of Rembrandt’s style were strongly indebted to modernist concepts (such as the ‘cool’ and ‘warm’ colours we also encountered in Van Dantzig descriptions), Ernst van de Wetering helped to reconstruct the meaning of several seventeenth-century art critical terms, including ‘houding’ (that is, the balancing of colours and tones in order to create a suggestion of depth – see also chapter 6). He thus related Rembrandt’s development in style and technique to

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85 I would like to thank Judith Noorman for this observation.
87 In his 1993 letter to the editor of The Burlington Magazine, Van de Wetering stressed that the project’s ‘principal goal is still – and has always been – to define the extent of Rembrandt’s painted oeuvre using all the methods available to us.’ Van de Wetering 1993, 764.
88 See in particular: Van de Wetering 2006; and Van de Wetering 2008, 84 and 88.
89 On the first team’s assumptions about style, see also below, ‘Epilogue: A Disputed Rembrandt’.
the broader context of art theory and paved the way for a better understanding of Rembrandt’s artistic goals in historical terms.

Nevertheless, he also reflected the objectives of the old RRP in more than one way. Like the older team, he mainly aimed to distinguish Rembrandt’s autograph work from works by pupils, assistants and later imitators. Although he became convinced that Rembrandt had collaborated with assistants on some of his early portraits, he still maintained that the master otherwise had not done so. Moreover, even in the case of collaborations, he believed it was of great importance to separate the master’s input from other hands, as he explained in a 2006 pamphlet dedicated to one such collaborative work, Rembrandt’s Portrait of Anna Six-Wymer: (fig. 1.24)

‘The question is how such a product of collaboration should be described. A ‘Rembrandt’? Or a ‘Rembrandt with assistance’? Because Rembrandt was the head of the workshop it would be usual to call such a painting simply a ‘Rembrandt’. However, there is one drawback to this: the huge difference in quality between master and pupil could lead to the obscuring of our image of Rembrandt – an image which is now in the process – albeit a gradual one – of gaining greater definition and clarity. It therefore really will be essential to further refine the attribution to one or more hands.’

On a methodological level, the new Rembrandt Research Project was also reminiscent of the previous team in its definition of the decision-making process on which the attributions are based. Although the lengthy and extremely precise analyses the team members presented in their catalogue entries might give the impression that they were striving for a Morellian objectivity, they did not believe that their rational arguments formed the very essence of their judgments. Interestingly, the team members already indicated in the very first Corpus volume that ‘It is a mistake to think that even the most meticulous process of argument for or against the authenticity of a painting covers the whole of the visual experience that led to that opinion.’90 In fact, contrary to what one might expect, the team members’ method was not unlike that of Friedländer. For like this expert, they believed that connoisseurship was ultimately a matter of intuition.91 And although Van de Wetering later emphasized how much technical research has changed connoisseurship since Friedländer’s time, he too maintained that rational

90 Bruyn et al., 1982-, vol. I, XV.
91 Bruyn et al. 1982-, vol. I, XVII.
arguments never really captured all the intuitive criteria used when making up one’s mind.92

**Thinking without Thinking**

Despite the various attempts to rationalize connoisseurship after the Van Meegeren scandal, several writers maintained that the attribution process ultimately defied explanation. For example, Sir Ernst Gombrich noted in 1952 that recognizing an artist’s individuality was ultimately an intuitive process – like recognizing a voice over the telephone – something which could not be captured in clear rules.93 In his view, the key question was how much consistency one could expect in an artist’s style. Knowledge about the historical context could help answer the question, but not give absolute certainty. Therefore, he believed that the decision was ultimately based on an intuitive assumption about the variability of a painter’s style.

If a connoisseur’s judgment would indeed be merely an intuitive decision which defied rational explanation, this would mean that the validity of attributions could not be evaluated. From a methodological point view, this was a rather disconcerting idea. Indeed, several scholars doubted the validity of connoisseurship in general for precisely this reason. In particular Gary Schwartz and Hessel Miedema wondered if connoisseurship was or could be reliable and ‘academic’ in its methodology.94 And Otto Pächt stressed that if art history was ever to be a scholarly discipline at all, it had to base its statements on specified criteria. Even in what he called ‘restricted areas of enquiry’ such as attribution matters, a sudden, intuitive insight should never be enough, in his view.95

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92 For this reason, he even believed rational descriptions could be dangerous. See Van de Wetering 2005a, XIII.
94 Schwartz 1988, 265; Miedema 1989, 51. Schwartz’s comment in footnote 13 (p. 267) seems particularly telling in this respect. Whilst referring to a paper by David Erbitz, in which the latter had praised connoisseurship as an instance of irrational knowing by recognition rather than by analysis, Schwartz remarks: ‘I would not be quite as content as he seems to be to regard my scholarly work as a universal physiological process attended by rationalization after the fact.’ Schwartz also points out that the assumption that an artist leaves a recognizable ‘fingerprint’ in any work he produces has never been proven; see Schwartz 1988, 265.
95 Pächt 1986 [ed. 1999], 67.
These critics were right in that an intuitive decision without any explanation is not academic and cannot be checked. But would that make intuitive judgments also invalid? Interestingly, Pächt believed that it often happened that an object was correctly attributed but that no valid criteria of attribution were produced; one could have a true insight without being in any position to corroborate it. This raises the question how exactly these intuitive insights could be explained, and if a better understanding of these insights could help evaluate their validity.

Especially the last decades have yielded new understanding about the sudden insights of experts, especially in the fields of neuroscience and psychology. Many of these findings were engagingly discussed by Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* of 2005. By means of an introduction to the topic, Gladwell related how the art expert Federico Zeri had recognized the Getty *kouros* sculpture as a fake in a flash, long before he could rationalize his impression. His book illustrates how astute such sudden insights can be, but also warns the reader about the impact of mistaken assumptions.

While one might classify such a sudden insight as a kind of ‘feeling’ at first, recent research has demonstrated that it is rather a subconscious decision. To explain flash-insights Gladwell uses the example of a person crossing a street who suddenly jumps onto the sidewalk when he sees a car coming towards him at great speed. The decision to jump onto the sidewalk is not a conscious one. In such a situation, we realize in a flash what to do and do so without consciously thinking about it. In our daily life our brain delegates a multitude of tasks to a subconscious part of our cortex. It enables us to make decisions much more quickly than we would if we were to consciously make up our minds.

A famous experiment conducted by Antonio Damasio and his colleagues at the University of Iowa shows how much more quickly we realize something subconsciously than that we can rationally explain it or even indicate what it is that we realize. They invented a card game and asked subjects to freely pick cards from piles with either red or blue cards. Depending on the cards they picked, the subjects could either win or lose points. Now the game was set up in such a way that the red cards gave great losses and occasionally a great gain; it was impossible to win the game by only picking cards from the red piles. In contrast, the blue cards gave more modest gains and occasionally small losses. The only way to win the game was by picking cards from the blue piles.

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96 Pächt, 1986 [ed. 1999], 66.
97 Gladwell 2005, 3-17. See also Hoving 1996, 279-310; and Freedberg 2006, 35.
98 Bechara/Damasio/Tranel/Damasio 1997; Damasio 1994, 212. See also Gladwell 2005, 8-10.
The scientists’ question was how long it would take for the subjects to realize this and to explain it. On an average the subjects realized after about 50 cards that the blue piles were more advantageous than the red ones. After about 80 cards, they could explain why this was the case. This is how we learn to make decisions: we have an experience, think about it and develop a theory. However, the scientists did not measure only the conscious responses of the subjects, but also well-known stress signals such as sweating palms and slightly elevated heart rates. Interestingly, their subjects already started responding stressfully to the red piles after about 10 cards, and this influenced their behaviour; they more often choose cards from the blue piles.

This experiment demonstrates that we learn very quickly on a subconscious level. We register signals and adjust our behaviour long before we can rationally explain what happens and why we react in a certain way. Various other research projects indicate that flash-insights are not only much quicker than conscious deliberations, but that these can also be much more refined. It is not always possible to rationalize in hindsight what it is that we know, as in the case of the tennis player Vic Braden who is extremely good in predicting double-faults (two consecutive, faulty serves) but cannot figure out what his subconscious knowledge is based upon. He is still in the process of trying to reconstruct his flash-insights. There is no guarantee that this is possible, although various other attempts at analyzing flash-insights have set a hopeful example.99

However, Gladwell also warns that flash-insights are not always valid. They can be based on mistaken assumptions. He himself noticed the influence of such assumptions when he changed his hair style.100 Suddenly, he was stopped much more regularly by security guards and policemen. After having a short, conservative cut for years, he decided to grow his hair longer and have a large head of afro-style curly hair (fig. 1.25). Security guards and policemen make many rapid, subconscious decisions when executing their job and an afro-style hairdo apparently influences their response. Of course, this does not mean that their response is therefore better.

In attribution matters, such assumptions are related to what the connoisseur perceives as characteristic of a particular painter’s work. If the connoisseur’s image of the artist is based on an incorrect assumption, this can obstruct the attribution process. Aelbert Cuyp’s history painting *The Baptism of the Eunuch* seems an appropriate example in this context (Fig. 1.26). For years it was not recognized as a Cuyp even though the master signed it. The reason for this

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100 Gladwell 2005, 263-264.
was presumably that experts associated Cuyp with the idyllic landscapes and city views which earned him most of his fame and not with biblical scenes.

While attributing a painting, the connoisseur is confronted with a variety of complex questions such as: To what extent did the painter vary his style and choice of subjects? Did he work all by himself or in collaboration with others such as studio assistants? Was the painter consistent in the build-up of his works? Although such questions cannot often be answered with certainty, the connoisseur nonetheless has to form an image – consciously or subconsciously – of what he deems to be characteristic for the painter. The validity of an attribution depends on the correctness of the connoisseur’s assumptions.101

101 On a more subtle level, assumptions about who created a painting (a great master or, on the contrary, a follower or forger) may also influence the connoisseur’s judgement of the quality of a painting. As noted above, the perception of the quality of Van Meegeren’s fake changed dramatically when the painting was exposed as a fraud. In attribution matters it is often striking how differently the quality of paintings is described when their attribution changes, even when the same expert re- or de-attributes the work. Though this could be done maliciously to massage the evidence in order to convince the reader of one’s judgment, I am inclined to believe that it is not so much a conscious action but rather the effect of (altered) subconscious associations and expectations, which, as Alfred Yarbus’ experiments indicate, can truly make us look differently. It would be a fascinating subject for further research.
An Ongoing Debate

Although the shock of the Van Meegeren scandal has long fostered fears that another forgery might challenge the authority of established connoisseurs of Dutch (or Flemish) old masters, no widely celebrated painting has turned out to be a fake since then. Quite the opposite, many paintings which were expected to be eighteenth- or nineteenth-century fakes turned out to date from the seventeenth century. As a result, the attention of connoisseurs in this field has focused increasingly on sorting out the various seventeenth-century paintings: distinguishing originals from copies and the master’s work from that of his pupils, assistants and followers. New scientific techniques which were initially expected to expose many forgeries have instead greatly enhanced our understanding of the painting techniques of various old masters. Meanwhile, the connoisseur’s key question of how much consistency one can expect in the oeuvres of the different old masters continues to cause debate.

One of the most lively discussions concentrated on the Portrait of Rembrandt with Gorget (fig. 1.27). Though long regarded as an authentic self-portrait by Rembrandt, the portrait was dismissed as a copy when closely compared to Self-Portrait with Gorget in the context of the 1999 Rembrandt self-portraits exhibition (fig. 1.28). The discovery of an underdrawing in the Mauritshuis picture – a tracing of the Nuremberg painting – had confirmed its status. Yet the question remained if the picture could nonetheless be a second version by the master executed in a demonstratively different manner.

At the exhibition conference, Jørgen Wadum argued on the basis of mostly technical evidence that the picture was by another hand. Among other things, he noted that Rembrandt never used an underdrawing, and that the mechanical character of this underdrawing was nothing like known drawings by the master. Moreover, he pointed out that the painting’s undermodelling was very different from what he expected of Rembrandt in that it was less patchy and that the painting had not been built up as economically as Rembrandt usually did.102 Also, the existence of various other copies after Rembrandt self-portraits strengthened him in his conviction that this copy was, like those other works, done by a pupil in Rembrandt’s workshop.

Eric Jan Sluijter, on the other hand, defended the attribution of the portrait to Rembrandt. In his view, the unusual execution was deliberate. He believed that the master had created another version of his self-portrait to demonstrate his ability to paint in an elegant ‘neat’ manner, possibly at the request

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102 Wadum 2000.
He pointed out that the underdrawing was related to the studio practice of repeating a composition with the aid of a template and therefore not comparable to free-hand drawings by the master. Moreover, the fact that the painting was a copy was in itself not a reason to dismiss it, in his view. Especially since a ‘near’ manner of painting was popular at the time and the elegant painting style matched the more aristocratic look and hairdo of Rembrandt in this painting, he believed that this painting was evidence of the master’s exceptional ingenuity rather than a work by a pupil. Besides, none of Rembrandt’s known students of this period seemed capable of reaching this level of quality, he noted.

Both speakers published their views in the art historical quarterly *Oud Holland*, which sparked a continuation of the debate. Several experts reacted via the CODART online network of curators of Dutch art, but no consensus was reached, which illustrates the complexity of this attribution issue. For how likely was it that Rembrandt would have copied his own self-portrait and that he would have done so moreover in a distinctively different style?

As in the case of the *Portrait of Rembrandt with Gorget*, the distinction between the master and a good pupil or assistant is often problematic. Among Rubens scholars in particular the distinction between various studio products constitutes a notoriously difficult challenge. Interestingly, this led Arnout Balis to question the various categories into which paintings from the master’s workshop have been classified and to tentatively design a new typology. In his view the distinction between purely autograph works by the master on the one hand and other workshop products on the other hand result in a ‘much too coarse and virtually useless image of [Rubens’s] production’. In his view, the master’s production was very diverse. Nevertheless, certain picture types seem to have prevailed, such as autograph works by the master himself; large-scale paintings designed by the master and executed in collaboration with his workshop (and made to look like work by his hand), and paintings which he did in collaboration with other masters (such as Jan Brueghel or Frans Snyders).

The second category in particular comprises a great variety of works, according to Balis. He pointed out that much work remains to be done as to

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103 Sluijter 2000. See also below (chapter 4).
104 Interestingly, this very same painting was also the subject of a fierce debate at the beginning of the twentieth century. See Scallen 2004, introduction.
105 On these issue, see below chapter 2, ‘Original or Copy’ and ‘Variation and virtuosity’ in chapter 4.
106 ‘Het hanteren van het begrip eigenhandigheid als enig demarcatiecriterium binnen het oeuvre van Rubens geeft een veel te grof en haast onbuikbaar beeld van zijn productie.’ Balis 2007, 38. See also Balis 1993.
sorting out the way in which Rubens had organized his workshop – one of the difficulties being that a systematic technical assessment of Rubens’s oeuvre has only started recently. Up till now, there have been widely varying, even contradictory, interpretations of Rubens’s production. On the one hand, Rudolf Oldenbourg developed the theory in the early twentieth century that Rubens realized in around 1611 that he should organize his studio efficiently in order to comply with the great (and ever increasing) number of commissions he received and that he adjusted his style accordingly. According to Oldenbourg, this resulted in a style in which contours play a leading role, forms are defined through the systematic use of light and shadow, and local colours are applied in clearly defined planes – a theory which still counts as one of the most thorough and synthesizing assessments of Rubens’s oeuvre.107 (fig. 1.29) On the other hand, there has also been a counter-movement of scholars who have downplayed the share of assistants and pupils in Rubens’s workshop and maintained instead that the master produced most of his paintings single-handedly, among them Leo Van Puyvelde and Marie-Louise Hairs.108 In the case of attributions to Rubens, the question is thus not only how much consistency we can expect in the paintings by the master himself, but also, and perhaps more importantly, exactly how he produced paintings within his workshop.

Another interesting discussion was sparked by the painting *Man with a Helmet* (fig. 1.30). Though initially attributed to Carel Fabritius on the basis of its confident, rough brushwork (Fabritius was one of Rembrandt’s very best pupils), it was de-attributed because it did not seem to have a parallel in Fabritius’ oeuvre in terms of the boldness of its execution.109 In the context of the Fabritius exhibition of 2004, curator Ariane van Suchtelen argued that the painting should indeed be de-attributed, while Fabritius specialist Christopher Brown once again argued in favour of its attribution. Among other things, Van Suchtelen found the unusual execution of the face suspect: ‘In Fabritius’s *Portrait of Abraham Potter* – someone of roughly the same age as the man in the helmet – the thin, transparent skin under the eyes is suggested through a dark underpainting which is visible through the top layers, while in the *Man in a Helmet* this same area has been

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109 Christopher Brown identified the picture as one of eight unquestionable paintings by the master in his oeuvre catalogue. See Brown 1981, nr. 3, pl. 3 and p. 49, fig. 20. The picture was first de-attributed by Lyckle de Vries in De Vries 1981.
rendered with fairly opaque, overlapping brushstrokes of different colours.’ Brown on the other hand maintained that the *Man in a Helmet* was a ‘powerful’ and ‘original’ painting by Fabritius himself, thus assigning the unusual brushwork to the master’s ingenuity.\(^{111}\)

As with the other controversies, scholarly opinions about this painting remain divided to this day, which, especially in this case, is partially due to the lack of a clear frame of reference. Fabritius’s undisputed oeuvre consists of a mere twelve paintings.\(^{112}\) Moreover, the painting’s unusual execution also begs more methodological questions, such as: Does the bolder, thicker and somewhat more colourful manner of painting indeed warrant a de-attribution, or could it be a deliberate variation? And more generally, can we expect a painter such as Fabritius to use the same exact manner of painting in a commissioned portrait and in paintings of a different type, such as the *Man in a Helmet*?

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\(^{110}\) ‘Zo wordt in Fabritius’ *Portret van Abraham de Potter* – iemand van ongeveer dezelfde leeftijd als de gehelmde man – de dunne, doorschijnende huid onder de ogen mede gesuggereerd door de donkere onderlaag die in dit gebied doorschemert, terwijl in de *Man met de helm* hetzelfde gebied wordt weergegeven door op elkaar geplaatste, tamelijk pasteuze toetsen verf van verschillende kleuren.’ See catalogue entry 13 by Ariane van Suchtelen in Duparc *et al.* 2004, 147-150.

\(^{111}\) Brown, 2006, 140.

\(^{112}\) All twelve works were included in the recent Fabritius exhibition. See Duparc *et al.* 2005.