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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Citation for published version (APA):

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EPILOGUE.
A DISPUTED REMBRANDT

In his famous introduction to art history, The Story of Art, Ernst Gombrich used the painting David and Absalom (1642) from the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg to explain the essence of Rembrandt’s art (fig. 7.1). Rembrandt, wrote Gombrich, was the greatest painter of Holland and one of the greatest painters who had ever lived. He was exceptional in that he needed hardly any gestures or movements to express the inner meaning of a scene. He was never theatrical. Gombrich illustrated his point with the painting of the reconciliation between King David and his wicked son Absalom, a story from the Old Testament. According to Gombrich, the picture also gave insight into the master’s working method, and he observed:

‘When Rembrandt was reading the Old Testament, and tried to see the kings and patriarchs of the holy land in his mind’s eye, he thought of the Orientals he had seen in the busy port of Amsterdam. That is why he dressed David like an Indian or Turk with a big turban, and gave Absalom a curved oriental sword. His painter’s eye was attracted by the splendour of these costumes, and by the chance they gave him of showing the play of light on the precious fabric, and the sparkle of gold and jewellery. We can see that Rembrandt was as great a master in conjuring up the effect of these shiny textures as Rubens or Velázquez. Rembrandt used less bright colour than either of them. The first impression of many of his paintings is that of a rather dark brown. But these dark tones give even more power and force to the contrast of a few bright and brilliant colours. The result is that the light on some of Rembrandt’s pictures looks almost dazzling. But Rembrandt never used these magic effects of light and shade for their own sake. They always served to enhance the drama of the scene. What could be more moving than the gesture of the young prince in his proud array, burying his face on his father’s breast, or King David in his quiet and sorrowful acceptance of his son’s submission? Though we do not see Absalom’s face, we feel what he must feel.’

* I would like to thank Dr. Irina Sokolova, Chief Curator of Dutch Paintings at the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, for kindly allowing me to study Rembrandt’s painting both on and off the wall and in various types of light in December 2005.

1 Gombrich 1950, 316 and fig. 265.
Gombrich’s interpretation was first published in 1950, and the passage has remained unchanged in the many subsequent editions of this popular survey, including the paperback edition of 2006.² However, in 1989 the members of the Rembrandt Research Project stated that this painting was not a Rembrandt.³ In part III of their oeuvre catalogue *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings* (1989), they noted that several features of the picture did not match the character and quality they expected of an autograph Rembrandt. The brushwork seemed ‘superficial’ in certain areas, especially the thick accents in the pink cloak, which did not follow the shape of the folds and therefore did not help to define its form or the shape of the figure’s upper body underneath the cloak. Also, the spatial construction was sometimes weak, they wrote, particularly to the left of the figures, where a scarcely recognizable stone and vague trees formed an unhappy transition between the foreground and the view of a distant city. Moreover, certain colors struck them as unusual; the combination of thick pale green and pale pink paint in the protagonist’s attire was ‘almost inconceivable for Rembrandt’ in their opinion. They therefore concluded that this painting was not by Rembrandt and put it in their C-category of rejected works.

The attribution of the painting had never been questioned before the Rembrandt Research Project’s evaluation. According to its members, this was understandable, for the work shared several characteristics with undisputed Rembrandts. The composition with the brightly lit men in the foreground, silhouetted against a brown-grey background with a distant city, gave the picture an unmistakable grandeur. Also, the ‘compact grouping’ of the two men was ‘certainly one of the positive features of this painting’, and ‘the color-scheme with its striking contrast between light, broken tints in the figures and the surrounding greys and browns’ gave the painting ‘a pronounced individual character’. Moreover, there was a certain resemblance to Rembrandt’s famous *Night Watch*, especially with the figure of Ruytenburg, dressed in light yellow and similarly contrasted against a darker background (though the treatment of the clothing in particular was weaker in the Hermitage painting, they maintained) (fig. 7.2). Both the *Night Watch* and the Hermitage painting are signed and dated to the year 1642, and although the members of the Rembrandt Research Project questioned the authenticity of this last signature, they believed that the date was plausible. Therefore their hypothesis was that the painting was created by a pupil in Rembrandt’s studio, who signed it with the master’s name, possibly by Ferdinand

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² Gombrich 1950 [ed. 2006], 323 and fig. 276.
³ Bruyn et al. 1982-, vol. 3, C8, 533-541. The painting was originally examined by Josua Bruyn and Simon Levie on 27 August 1969.
Bol. However, the more successful brushwork, particularly in the subtle treatment of the older man’s face and the sparse indication of the background architecture, seemed to exceed Bol’s capabilities, according to the team members, which led them to conclude that the specific attribution of this work was still ‘something of a puzzle’.4

The discrepancy between the Rembrandt Research Project’s conviction that the work was not by the master himself and Gombrich’s interpretation of the painting underscores the importance of attribution issues for a broader art historical understanding. It raises several poignant questions. Had Gombrich recognized the essence of Rembrandt’s art in a painting that the master had not even invented? Or, instead, had the members of the Rembrandt Research Project been mistaken, and did this rejection indicate a shortcoming in their methods or assumptions? Would Gombrich have thought so, and was this why he had not changed the passage?5 Or had this particular interpretation of the Rembrandt Research Project escaped his attention? (Interestingly, to this day no-one seems to have noticed the contradiction between these particular views of Gombrich and the Rembrandt Research Project.)

The provenance history of the painting makes this attribution issue all the more interesting. The picture can be traced back with virtual certainty to the collection of Laurens van der Hem (1621-1678), as I will discuss below. Van der Hem, a contemporary of Rembrandt, was a wealthy Amsterdam lawyer with an impressive collection of maps, prints, and paintings. Surviving documents indicate that he owned paintings by Rubens, De Grebber, Gabriël Metsu, Maria van Oosterwijk, Gerard de Laïresse and Bassano, among others.6 Twenty paintings from Laurens van der Hem’s collection were sold by his daughter Agatha on 19 April 1713. The sales catalogue mentions the Hermitage painting as ‘The Meeting of David and Jonathan, by Rembrandt’ (Een ontmoeting van David en Jonathan, van Rembrandt).7 It was thus identified as a painting by Rembrandt with a somewhat different biblical subject than Gombrich suggested, namely David’s parting from

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4 Ibid. (note 3), 540: ‘the heavy application of paint in the figures and background architecture and the associated simplification of form (even in the subtle treatment of Jonathan’s face) give the impression of going of going too far beyond the bounds of Bol’s capabilities’.


Jonathan, the son of King Saul, an episode much earlier in David’s life. This interpretation implies that David is the figure in the pink cloak, not the one facing the viewer, as Gombrich believed. According to the Old Testament, David and Jonathan had become friends, and Jonathan had given David some of his own clothing, his sword, his bow and a girdle (I Samuel: 1-5). When King Saul planned to have David killed, envious as he was of David’s greater popularity among his people, Jonathan warned David and thus saved his life. Before David parted, he met Jonathan one last time near the stone Hazaël outside of the city of Jerusalem, where David had been hiding. The Bible describes how ‘They kissed each other, and cried together, however David cried more.’ (I Samuel: 20:41)

As early as 1925, Klaus Graf von Baudissin speculated that the painting might depict this particular episode from the Old Testament. The only element that he could not explain was David’s rich attire, which was not common in earlier depictions of this theme. It made David resemble a prince. In 1956 Vladimir Levinson-Lessing discovered the passage in the Bible that explains David’s rich attire as a gift from Jonathan. Moreover, he presented solid documentary evidence which confirmed Baudissin’s hypothesis, including the early description quoted above. Since then, the identification of this scene as David’s parting from Jonathan has been accepted by many Rembrandt specialists, among them Jan van Gelder, Christian Tümpel, and the members of the Rembrandt Research Project.

Levinson-Lessing’s documentary evidence was indeed compelling. At the 1713 sale the painting was bought for 105 guilders by the collector Jan van Beuningen, who subsequently sold the work with the same attribution and title to Osip Solovyov, an agent of tsar Peter the Great. The transaction took place on 13 May 1716, and the painting’s price was determined at 80 guilders. The picture was then shipped to Russia, where Peter the Great hung it in his favourite summer residence, the Monplaisir pavillion at Peterhof. In 1883 the painting was moved to the Hermitage, where it can still be seen today.

The painting’s provenance history is exceptional in that it has no gap at all, which makes the early descriptions all the more relevant. Moreover, the two earliest known owners of this painting, Van der Hem and Van Beuningen, were well-reputed collectors. Laurens van der Hem was fifteen years younger than

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8 Graf von Baudissin 1925, 192.
9 See for example François Venant, David’s Parting from Jonathan, c. 1630, Fondation Custodia, Paris
11 See also Kistemaker/Kopaneva/Overbeek (eds.) 1996, 258-259.
12 ‘David en Jonathan, h. 2 en een half v. br. 2 en een half v. [=70.8 x 70.8 cm] door dezelve [i.e. Rembrandt]’, Lught 1938-1987, vol. I, 257, no. 40; Hoet 1752, vol. I, 202.
Rembrandt and lived in the same city. Van der Hem and Rembrandt’s shared interest in the visual arts makes it likely that they knew each other personally; Van der Hem even acquired drawings by Roeland Savery which had previously been owned by Rembrandt. Moreover, Rembrandt and Van der Hem had several acquaintances in common, among them the painter and collector Lambert Doomer, Pieter Blaeu (the son of Johannes Blaeu, the famous map maker), and Prince Cosimo III de’ Medici from Florence. The latter noted in his travel journal that he visited ‘the famous painter’ Rembrandt (‘il pittor famoso’) on 29 December 1667, and that he saw Van der Hem’s cabinet on 2 January 1668, both times in the company of Pieter Blaeu. (Unfortunately, he did not describe Van der Hem’s paintings.)

Jan van Beuningen’s significance as one of the foremost late seventeenth-century connoisseurs has recently been revealed by Koen Jonckheere in his book *The Auction of King William’s Paintings* (2008). Not only was Van Beuningen responsible for the single most important sale of high-end masterpieces at the end of the Golden Age, the sale of King William’s paintings, he was also a leading collector of paintings himself. Moreover, the price he paid for the *David and Jonathan* and the price for which he sold the work confirm the painting’s attribution. Paintings’ prices fluctuated somewhat, and neither of these prices was uncommon for this master at the time, according to Jonckheere.

Although the members of the Rembrandt Research Project mentioned the earliest reference to the painting in their entry on the work, they did not discuss the implications of these descriptions. The painting’s visual characteristics were their main focus, and this was understandable. When the Rembrandt Research Project first took on the rather daunting task of sorting out the hundreds of paintings which were attributed to Rembrandt in the late 1960s, they were the first specialists that would study all these paintings in person. A small group of works that could firmly be traced back to Rembrandt himself became the starting point for subsequent attributions and de-attributions, and each work’s materials, technique and execution were studied in great depth and with a variety of techniques (see chapter 1). Little was known about the trustworthiness of early

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13 These drawings were purchased by the painter and collector Lambert Doomer at the sale of Rembrandt’s collection in 1658. Van der Hem presumably bought the Savery drawings from Doomer around 1665, the year in which Doomer made drawings for Van der Hem. See De Groot 2006, 184-185 and 222, note 35. Doomer presumably studied with Rembrandt, who purchased picture frames Doomer’s father.

14 Jonkheere 2008a, 49, 53 and 263. Koen Jonckheere kindly informed me that the price difference of 25 guilders between the two sales does not necessarily reflect a difference in appreciation, since the availability of similar paintings and the number of interested buyers present at a sale caused prices to fluctuate.
attributions, and these ascriptions therefore did not carry much weight. It was not until Ernst van de Wetering started to head the team in 1993 that its focus shifted somewhat and that the historical context (including art theory and seventeenth-century archival documents) became of much greater significance. The Hermitage painting had already been researched by then; Josua Bruyn and Simon Levie saw it as early as 1969, and the entry on the work was published in 1989, as we have seen.

Given the knowledge we now have about the painting's early owners, de-attributing the work does not seem historically justified. For in Rembrandt's time, some of the most well-reputed collectors considered the painting to be a Rembrandt. Moreover, the Rembrandt Research Project's hypothesis that the painting was created and signed by a pupil in the master's studio implies that Rembrandt himself allowed for his name to be inscribed on the painting, and thus authenticated it. Therefore, this painting offers a unique chance to reflect on late twentieth-century connoisseurship and to discuss the implications of the conclusions that I have reached in the previous chapters about seventeenth-century views on style and authenticity.\(^\text{15}\)

As we have seen, the members of the Rembrandt Research Project questioned the attribution of the painting since the work did not match the quality and the characteristics that they expected in an 'autograph' work by the master.\(^\text{16}\) Their analysis indicates that they expected the painting to be either entirely by Rembrandt's hand or, instead, by someone else's. The possibility that the work was painted by both Rembrandt and an assistant is not even considered. As we have seen in chapter 4, the assumption that one can make a sharp distinction between purely autograph works by seventeenth-century painters and other studio products has caused much debate, especially since the 1980s. Notably, Ernst van

\(^{15}\) Furthermore, Marten Jan Bok, Jaap van der Veen and Koen Jonckheere have identified three other paintings which seem to have been attributed to Rembrandt in the seventeenth century and were subsequently de-attributed in the twentieth century: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Jacob Wrestling the Angel*, c. 1660, Berlin-Dahlem, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz; style of Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Adoration of the Magi*, c. 1657, The Royal Collection of her Majesty Queen Elisabeth II.; and Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Prophetess Hannah with a Servant Boy*, 16[50], National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, on loan from the Duke of Sutherland. See Bok 1990; Jonckheere 2008a, 54 and 263; and Van der Veen 1992, 132-133, respectively. The *David and Jonathan* is unique among these works in that its provenance history has no gap.

\(^{16}\) Bruyn et al. 1982-, vol. III, 538. The authors first state that the painting's execution appears 'hardly in keeping with Rembrandt's work'. When discussing the painting's colours, the authors specify that, "The soft, pastel-like tints of almost equal tonal value that are placed side-by-side in the Leningrad painting do not occur in any autograph Rembrandt work.' (on the same page).
de Wetering asked the question if the premises of the Rembrandt Research Project were anachronistic in this respect without, however, reaching a definitive conclusion.\footnote{See chapter 3, ““By his Hand”: The Paradox of Seventeenth-Century Connoisseurship’ above, esp. the section ‘The debate: Autograph pictures, the holy grail of present-day connoisseurs?”}

As discussed in chapter 3, four documents indicate that there was some interest in purely autograph paintings in the seventeenth century. However, this evidence is not substantial enough to assume that most seventeenth-century painters created a core oeuvre of purely autograph paintings. In fact, many more documents, as well as a number of art theoretical texts, suggest that it was very common for master painters to collaborate with their pupils and assistants on one and the same composition. In Rembrandt’s case, this possibility is worth considering, since his pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten noted in his treatise on painting of 1678 that ‘all great masters’ commonly used pupils or assistants for the subsidiary work. (chapter 3, ‘Beyond The Paradox’).

Van Hoogstraten did not object to such contributions in subsidiary passages. He advocated a hierarchical way of looking, which focused on masterly elements while passing over less important areas more negligently. I believe that such a way of looking was widespread among seventeenth-century painters and knowledgeable connoisseurs. This approach harkened back to antiquity, as several seventeenth-century writers emphasized.\footnote{When the ancient painter Protogenes put his painting of a satyr on public display, he noticed that people only praised a subsidiary element, the depiction of a partridge. He was allegedly so frustrated at their ignorance that he wiped out the bird.}

In the case of the Hermitage painting, such a hierarchical way of looking would mean that the painting’s key elements receive the most attention. Interestingly, the Rembrandt Research Project’s analysis focused mainly on other parts. In particular, the depiction of a stone and some trees in the barely distinguishable, shaded middle ground play an important role in the rejection of the painting. Jonathan’s cloak and hands, which are also criticized for their weak execution, might have similarly been considered subsidiary work by Rembrandt. (Hands, in particular, have often proved problematic in Rembrandt attributions.)

In comparison, some of the painting’s key elements hardly receive any attention. The resolute and suggestive definition of Jonathan’s face is only mentioned in passing, when the authors consider a potential attribution of the painting to Ferdinand Bol. (The quality of the face would argue against such an attribution in their opinion.) The same holds true for the effective rendering of the city of Jerusalem, which, though not as crucial as Jonathan’s face, nonetheless seems an important part of the scene.
These observations and especially the contrast in quality that the authors perceive make it all the more surprising that they do not consider the possibility of collaboration. In addition, the emphasis placed on relatively poor passages and the little attention given to well-executed parts is rather uneven. It makes one wonder if the authors perhaps overemphasized their objections to counter their own doubts. Moreover, it seems inconsistent that the authors consider the possibility that Rembrandt himself described this very painting in a document dated 1659 after having rejected the painting on the basis of its style and quality. In that year, Rembrandt promised the art dealer Lodewijck van Ludick to ‘finish and deliver a small painting representing the story of Jonathan and David that he is already working on, and this about a year from this date’.19 This description could not refer to the Hermitage painting, the authors argue, since this work shows no trace of Rembrandt’s characteristic brushwork of circa 1660, and, moreover, there are no clear indications of a later reworking.20 But if the brushwork had already convincingly showed that Rembrandt was not the author, why continue to look for contrasts in style and possible later additions? Again, no mention is made of the possibility that more than one painter could have executed the work.

More generally, the composition of the painting is hardly discussed in the Rembrandt Research Project’s analysis. The authors sparingly praise the grandeur of the composition and the ‘compact grouping’ of the two protagonists but do not further elaborate on the invention or its quality. However, in the seventeenth century, Roger de Piles already emphasized that in matters of attribution one should consider not only the character of the hand but also, and more importantly, the character of the artist’s mind (see above, 'A Closer Look at Seventeenth-Century Sources: An Introduction'). In the case of David and Jonathan, the painting’s invention constitutes one of its main strengths, as Gombrich eloquently explained. The contrast between David’s rich attire and his fragile posture – his face suggestively turned away – sparks the viewer’s imagination and enhances the drama of the scene. This feature would, in fact, argue in favor of an attribution to the master, since his ability to convey the passions of the soul

20 The authors apparently assume that any later addition would have been painted in the style of Rembrandt circa 1660. See also below (this section).
(lijdingen des gemoeds), his lifelike expressions (affectuum vivacitas) and true-to-life inventions (vivida inventio) were celebrated by his contemporaries as his main strengths (see chapter 6). As we have seen, the master himself indicated in 1639 that he sought to convey ‘the most natural (e)motions’ (de natuereelste beweechglickheid) in his painting. Also, the small format and compact grouping in the Hermitage painting recall Huygens’ remark that Rembrandt ‘being totally absorbed in what he is doing, prefers to concentrate [his work] in a smaller picture and to bring about through compactness, an effect that one may seek in vain in the largest paintings by the other [Lievens].’

Moreover, the innovative depiction of David in royal garments reflects an interest in the story’s ‘eygentlickheyt’ (‘lifelikeness’), the quality so highly celebrated by Philips Angel in 1641. As we have seen, Angel praised Rembrandt in particular for infusing his biblical scenes with convincingly naturalistic details, which resulted from his careful reading of the Bible and the master’s subsequent ‘high and deep thoughts’ (booge en verre na-ghedachten). As discussed in chapter 6, Angel illustrated this quality with Rembrandt’s Wedding Feast of Samson (fig. 7.3).

In the Hermitage painting, David’s rich attire indicates that the artist had carefully read the Bible before he conceived this scene and that he used the passage about the royal garments which Jonathan had reputedly given David to

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21 Worp 1891, 125-126: ‘ille, suae se industriae involvens, in minorem tabulam conferre amat et compendio effectum dare, quod in amplissimis aliorum frustra quaeras.’ The translation is taken from Sluijter 2006, 100.

22 Angel 1642, 47-48: ‘Onder alle heb ick van Rembrant eens een Simsons-Bruyloft uyt ghebeelt ghesien, waer van wy lesen by Iudicum 14. Cap. Vers. 10. daer kond’men uyt bemercken hoe die kloekte Geest, door zijn hooge na-ghedachte die hy hier ontrent de eygentlickheyt van ’t aansitte, (of om beter te segghen, het aenlegghen) der Gasten aen Tafel waer genomen had: want de Oude ghebruuckte Beddekens daerse op laghen, en sy en saeten niet gelijckerwijs wy nu aen Tafel sitten, maer laghen op haer ellebooghe, ghelijck sulex noch in de Landen ghebruucklick is onder de Tureckent het welcke hy seer aerdelick verthoont hadd. Nu, om het onderscheyt te maecken tusschen dese Bruyloft, en andere Bruyloften, soo had’ hy Simson op de voor-gront gheestelt, met lanck hayr, tot een bewijs van datter noyt Scheer-mes op zijn hoof gheeweest en was. Ten ander: was Simson doende aen eenighe die naertich toe-luysterde met sijn Raedtsel voor te werpen, sulex konden bespreeken aen zijn handen; want met sijn rechter duym en middelste vinger had’ hy de flincke middel-vingher ghevat; een ghewoonlicke doch seer natuyrlicke acte, wanneer yemandt aen een ander wat door reden wil voorstellen, en ghelijck alle Gasten niet tot een en de selve saeck gheneghen en zijn, soo had’ hy anderen ghemaect die verheucht waren, niet luysterende naer het Raetsel, maar steekende een Fluyt met Wijn al lachende om hoogh; andere doende met kussen, in somma, het was een vroylicke Bruyloft en niet te min schoon de beweginge soo ware, als die in onze hedendaechse Feeste ghevonden werden, soo had’ hy niet te min onderscheyt genoech gemaect datmensse uyt onse Bruyd-lofs-Feeste wel onderscheyden konden. Siet, dese vrucht der eygen, natuerlicke uyt-beeldinge ontstont door de Hystorie wel gelesen en ondertast te hebben hooge en verre na-ghedachten.’
improve upon the traditional depiction of this story. Since David fled from the court with no intention to ever return, it seems likely he would take with him some of his most precious garments, which would, moreover, remind him of his loyal friend Jonathan. Besides, this attire gave the artist the opportunity to create the dramatic contrast discussed above.

The invention and composition of this painting thus reflects Rembrandt’s main qualities to a much greater extent than the Rembrandt Research Project’s brief remarks suggested. Indeed seventeenth-century views on quality and terms such as ‘eygentlickheyt’ may help explain why Van der Hem and Van Beuningen considered this painting worthy of carrying Rembrandt’s name. Furthermore, I believe that seventeenth-century views on style can help to interpret the painting’s execution.

In several instances the Rembrandt Research Project’s analysis of the Hermitage painting reveals their underlying assumptions about Rembrandt’s stylistic development. According to the authors, the ‘pastel-like’ colours of David’s and Jonathan’s garments were ‘almost unthinkable’ for Rembrandt, especially since these colours have similar tonal values. The authors therefore evidently expected a certain coherence in Rembrandt’s choice of colours and believed that he would not juxtapose colours of a similar tonal value. Furthermore, the combination of the terms ‘pastel-like’ and ‘unthinkable’ suggests that they found light pink and light green rather inappropriate for these dignified men from the Old Testament. However, in the seventeenth century such colours were quite common for men’s clothing, compare, for example, Ruytenburch’s light yellow costume in the Night Watch and the light pink attire of Andries Stilte in a portrait by Johannes Verspronck (fig. 7.4). And if these seventeenth-century dignitaries dressed in such colours, why would these tints be ‘unthinkable’ for imaginary costumes of Old Testament heroes? Also, is it logical to presume that Rembrandt would have used a more narrow range of colours than an assistant in his workshop?

In my view, these assumptions indicate that the authors analyzed colours and tones more as entities in their own right than as a means to create a desired effect. They assumed that Rembrandt had a preference for juxtaposing certain colours and tones, not unlike a twentieth-century artist may have had certain aesthetic preferences. However, as Gombrich observed, Rembrandt used the effects of light and shade consistently to enhance the drama of a scene. Moreover, he used colours and tonal contrasts to create a convincing suggestion of threedimensionality (bouwde), as Ernst van de Wetering has demonstrated. Many a

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23 On appropriate colours of clothing, see also Tummers et al. 2007, 55-56.
seventeenth-century art expert emphasized its importance, as we have seen in chapter 6, among them the German painter and art theorist Joachim von Sandrart, who had familiarized himself with Rembrandt’s work when he stayed in Amsterdam in the 1640s. Sandrart praised Rembrandt in particular for the ‘houding’ in his works, that is, ‘the mixing, breaking, and reducing the rawness of colors until everything in the painting comes close to nature’, and for the ‘power’ (kracht) which resulted from his juxtapositions of light and dark colors. 24

As a general rule, bright and pure colours tend to come forward (especially yellow and red) as do sharp tonal contrasts. These factors had to be considered when creating a convincing illusion of space. In the Hermitage painting, the choice of light, broken colours of equal tonal value for the garments of both figures places equal emphasis on each protagonist, who is indeed of equal importance in the story. Moreover, it creates a sense of unity, a single compact group that contrasts powerfully with the surrounding darkness.

From a seventeenth-century point of view, the use of colours, light and shade in this painting must have thus appeared successful, since the artist not only convincingly placed the figures in the pictorial space but also appropriately highlighted the scene’s key figures. Like the general design, this aspect links the painting to the very essence of Rembrandt’s art. In fact, Rembrandt had used a similar juxtaposition of broken light colours in a painting he completed in 1638. For in The Wedding Feast of Samson he gave both key figures, Samson and Delilah, pale blue outfits (fig. 7.3 above).

Another seventeenth-century art critical term could possibly explain the thick accents in David’s pink cloak is ‘kennelijkenheyt,’ or surface structure (chapter 6). As Ernst van de Wetering has demonstrated, Rembrandt used thick uneven accents to make highlights seem to protrude forwards. His pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten explained that such uneven blotches of paint were likely to catch light in all lighting conditions and called attention to their physical presence. (Conversely, if an object should appear to be far away, it was important to have a smooth paint surface.) In one of the very few letters by Rembrandt that have

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come down to us, the master refers to this particular effect. In 1639, he sent a large painting as a gift to his intermediary at the court, Constantijn Huygens, and added: ‘Dear Sir, Hang this painting in a stark light and in such a way that one can see it from afar, so it will best sparkle.’ Could the thick accents in David’s cloak have been similarly intended to catch light and emphasize the main protagonists? Had Joshua Bruyn and Simon Levie of the Rembrandt Research Project stepped back far enough to appreciate such an effect? Or are these brushstrokes indeed ineffective and merely ‘decorative’, as Bruyn and Levie stated?

A last assumption about Rembrandt’s stylistic development was already briefly mentioned above. When the authors discussed the possibility that this very painting was the one Rembrandt promised to finish in 1659, they argued that this was not the case, since the painting did not show Rembrandt’s characteristic brushwork of circa 1660. They thus assumed that if Rembrandt would have finished this painting around 1659, he would have done so in his style of that time rather than painting in his style of the early 1640s. This assumption implies that a painter’s style, like a fingerprint, develops steadily and inescapably over time. It intimates that a style is something which overcomes an artist rather than something he manipulates at will.

As we have seen in chapter 4, several seventeenth-century experts believed that some of the most characteristic features of a painter’s style could not be learned or taught, but resulted instead from the artist’s individual nature. However, this did not mean that they were unaware of the myriad ways in which painters manipulated and adjusted their styles. Indeed, a variety of sources showed that seventeenth-century Netherlandish painters adjusted their manners of working to the painting’s expected price, to the location of the art work, to the function and/or subject of the work, and to the style of a particular example they were trying to imitate or emulate. Moreover, they sometimes used different styles to display their virtuosity. For example, Rembrandt created an exquisite series of three small paintings done in three distinct manners around 1629. He painted a virtuous old woman in a very refined style, depicted a soldier with extremely broad brushstrokes, and complemented the series with an expressive self-portrait done in a third, fluent manner. He was thus certainly capable of choosing a style, and therefore it seems far from certain that he would not adjust his manner of working, should he decide to rework or finish a picture he started more than fifteen years earlier.

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25 See chapter 4, section ‘Style and Location’ and 6, ‘Colours, Light and Brushwork’. 
Seventeenth-century sources can thus significantly refine our questions and assumptions in this attribution issue. But what is the status of this painting? Did Rembrandt invent and paint the work, while passing over the less important parts somewhat negligently? Had he used a pupil or assistant for what he considered subsidiary work? Was the painting both invented and executed by an assistant who understood the essence of Rembrandt’s art but was still modest enough to allow his master to appropriate the work? Or had Rembrandt perhaps left the work unfinished? (A curious characteristic of the painting that hitherto has gone unnoticed is that David’s right boot has not been defined at the top; it transforms itself, as if it were, into the pants.) And if the painting was left unfinished, did Rembrandt later retouch the work himself? Or did someone else complete the painting?

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to give a definitive answer. Instead, my goal was to show how radically the insights upon which attributions are based have changed since the Van Meegeren scandal. I also wanted to explore the ways in which seventeenth-century views on style and authenticity can help to further refine the questions and assumptions upon which experts – consciously or unconsciously – base their assessments when attributing painting by Rembrandt and his contemporaries. One understanding to emerge from my inquiry, for example, is that a sharp distinction between autograph and non-autograph pictures cannot be taken for granted. In addition, many a seventeenth-century master painter consciously created paintings of different quality levels and consciously manipulated his style to best suit a particular work. And we have learned that, at the time, connoisseurs had a ‘hierarchical’ way of looking: they paid more attention to key elements, such as the figures and masterly touches of the brush, than to subsidiary work. In short, a close analysis of seventeenth-century sources revealed that seventeenth-century painters and connoisseurs had very nuanced ideas about issues of style and authenticity.

Seeing is thinking. And only the assumptions of which we are aware are open to improvement. Therefore I am grateful to all the connoisseurs discussed throughout this dissertation, and in particular to Josua Bruyn and Simon Levie, whom I discussed so extensively above, for having had the courage to convey their opinions in such great detail. Indeed, the Rembrandt Research Project’s openness in matters of attribution has set an admirable example.

An increased awareness of the historical context in which seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish paintings were made can not only help prevent mistaken assumptions but also increases our understanding of the quality of seventeenth-century paintings. In the case of Rembrandt’s *David and Jonathan*, seventeenth-century art critical terms underscored the high quality of this work.
Indirectly, these terms also emphasized the extraordinary insights of Sir Ernst Gombrich, who is rightly celebrated as one of the twentieth century’s foremost art historians. For without knowing these specific terms, Gombrich assessed Rembrandt’s painting very much like a seventeenth-century connoisseur could have done.

It is only in very rare instances that the historical context can give virtual certainty about the status of a painting among seventeenth-century connoisseurs, as in the case of *David and Jonathan*, which both Laurens van der Hem and Jan van Beuningen deemed worthy of carrying Rembrandt’s name. Nonetheless, even in this case some questions about its execution remain open to interpretation. Like most worthwhile questions in art history, these trigger answers that will always remain somewhat elusive and subjective. And that is probably for the better. It brings to mind Max Liebermann’s witty analysis of art historians. ‘They are not at all useless’, this painter reputedly exclaimed, and added: ‘If they would not exist, who else would glorify us artists after our death by claiming that our bad pictures are not authentic?’26 Ultimately, it gives us art historians the opportunity to help define the old masters we admire. And the history we write.

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26 ‘Die sind gar nicht so überflüssig. Wenn die nicht wären, wer sollte uns Künstlern wohl nach unserem Tode unsere schlechten Bilder für unecht erklären!’, as cited in Hartmann 1918, 218.