

A close-up portrait of Rembrandt, showing his face and upper torso. He is wearing a red beret and a dark red garment with a white lace collar. The background is dark and textured.

Gary Schwartz

Rembrandt in a red beret

The vanishings
and reappearances
of a self-portrait

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WBOOKS



1. Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, *Self-portrait*, signed and dated (by a later hand) *Rembrandt f. 1643*
Oil on canvas, 62.3 x 49.3 cm. Private collection. Bredius 35. *Corpus* iv 3

INTRODUCTION

On the 5th of October 1966, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed a bill solely intended to change the legal status of what were called “the German paintings.” The bill provided for the transfer to the Federal Republic of Germany, in trust for the Weimar Museum, located in the unrecognized German Democratic Republic, of three paintings that had been stolen from that museum in 1921. The signing happened after the House of Representatives and the Senate had passed unique legislation to this effect, at the urging of the State Department and the Department of Justice, with the approval of the Executive branch. The ceremonial transfer itself, on 12 January 1967, was performed by the chief justice of the Supreme Court, in the National Gallery of Art.

The paintings were a self-portrait by Rembrandt, the portrait of a shy young man in black by Gerard ter Borch and, by Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein, a picture of a young person some people call a girl and some a boy. They had become U.S. government property in 1946, when they were confiscated from a private individual in Dayton, Ohio, under the Trading with the Enemy Act (1917), and then vested in the Office of Alien Property. That office deposited the three canvases in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and paid for their restoration. When on 30 June 1966 the Office of Alien Property was disbanded, law required that its holdings be sold, the proceeds to be deposited in a War Fund. When the State Department found out that three old master paintings from a German museum were about to be divested in this way, it attempted to intervene. It “would be prejudicial to our foreign relations,” it declared, “for these paintings, which are part of the German cultural heritage, to be sold. The paintings, as valuable works of art, should go back to the German people.”¹ Moreover, as the State Department confided to Congress (in a phenomenal overstatement), “this may be of a little help in trying to cement the two Germanys.”²

The intention was not easy to carry out. Since the Trading with the Enemy Act specifically forbade the restitution to former owners of vested property, the law

2.
Moses Haughton Jr.,
John Smith (1781-1855)
Date unknown. Drawing
on ivory, 15.9 x 12.7 cm
London, British Museum
(1881,0409.1)

3.
L.J. Nieuwenhuys, *Self-portrait*
Further information lacking⁶

4.
"Notes on the paintings that my son
C.J. Nieuwenhuys had the honor to
sell on 20 April 1823 and deliver to His
Royal Highness the Hereditary Prince
of Orange," Brussels, 8 June 1823
The Hague, Royal Collections of the
Netherlands (A40-VIII-126)



Notte des Tableaux

que mon fils C.J. Nieuwenhuys a eu l'honneur
de vendre le 20 Avril 1823 vingt trois, et livré
à S. A. l'Herse Royale le Prince Héritier d'Orange

1 ^{re} un bon portrait de <u>et Van Dyck</u> représentant le peintre Maston Popin pour six mille florins d'Hollande en francs	Francs 8 12698-91
2 ^{de} le portrait de <u>Quadrant</u> peint par lui-même et provenant de la collection du Comte de Venise pour la somme de quatre mille florins d'Hollande en francs	8466-67
3 ^e un très beau van Steen représentant le Pêche	

1823-1850

A painting for a king Willem II of the Netherlands

1823

Sold twice in a single month, in Paris (John Smith to L.J. Nieuwenhuys) and Brussels (C.J. Nieuwenhuys to Willem, Prince of Orange), reproduced in a splendid lithograph

Between its emergence in 1823 until the present, the Rembrandt self-portrait was sold five times, mainly in stressful, not to say distressful situations. In April 1823, two of the foremost art dealers of the time, John Smith of London (1781-1855) and L.J. Nieuwenhuys of Brussels (Lambert Jean, also Lambertus Johannes; 1777-1862), found themselves in Paris together. There they concluded a deal that was the first known sale of our painting. Smith wrote it up thirteen years later in his catalogue of Rembrandt's paintings, the first ever published. "Sold by the Writer at Paris, to a dealer at Brussels, in 1823, for 4000 fs., 160l., and now in the collection of the Prince of Orange."⁷ The amount paid, 4,000 francs or 160 pounds, was not very high. Of the forty-three paintings Smith catalogued in 1836 as "Portraits of the artist," he provided the sales price or estimate for fourteen. All but three had higher values than 160 pounds. The average was 320 pounds, exactly twice what Smith charged Nieuwenhuys for the Rembrandt self-portrait.

From Paris the painting was taken to Brussels, where on 20 April it was sold by Nieuwenhuys's son C.J. to the Prince of Orange, the future King Willem II, for more than twice as much (fig. 4): "Second, The portrait of Rembrandt painted by himself and coming from the collection of the Comte de Vence for the sum of four thousand Dutch guilders, Francs 8,465.60."⁸ The claim by the Nieuwenhuyses that the painting came from the legendary collection of Claude-Alexandre de Villeneuve, the Count of Vence, was untrue. The catalogue of the sale of the count's collection at P. Rémy in Paris on 9-17 February 1761 does list two self-portraits by Rembrandt, but these are the paintings now in the Staatliche Kunsthalle in Karlsruhe and at Kenwood House in London.⁹ When a quarter of a century later the Smith-Nieuwenhuys painting was sold at auction for the one and only time in its history, it failed to bring in what the prince had paid for it. With other bidders in the hall at the highly prominent sale of Willem's paintings (discussed further below), it was none other than C.J.

In the early 1830s, Passavant undertook ambitious trips to visit the galleries and main private collections of England, Belgium and the Rhineland. He took extensive notes that he published in book form in 1833. His *Kunstreise durch England und Belgien* (Art travels through England and Belgium) remains a prime source for our knowledge of the collections of the period. In his preface, Passavant writes of Belgium and the Rhineland: “Because the medieval buildings as well as the paintings and sculpture of the seventeenth century in these countries have already been extensively commented on, I dedicate these reports nearly exclusively to the painting of the early Netherlandish schools [...]”³⁵

When he reached Brussels, he stuck to this plan. His first destination in Brussels was the “painting collection of the Prince of Orange. Of all the painting collections in Belgium that of the Prince of Orange, in his splendid palace in this city, is the most choice and the richest; he owns major pieces from the early Netherlandish School, into which we will here delve.”³⁶

At the close of his remarks on those works, Passavant nonetheless devotes a few words to Italian and Spanish paintings and works from the seventeenth century, noting that “Rembrandt’s own portrait is to be seen here as well; it is exquisitely beautiful, both in execution and in the charm of the colors.”³⁷

This is an especially precious appreciation, coming from an artist and future museum curator with no commercial interest in the painting. That cannot be said of the next two authors who wrote about it. The following year saw the appearance of the volume on Rembrandt – Part the Seventh – in John Smith’s groundbreaking, indispensable *Catalogue raisonné of the works of the most eminent Dutch, Flemish, and French painters*. It was in Smith’s stock that the painting first surfaced in 1823, when it passed from him through the hands of L.J. and C.J. Nieuwenhuys to Willem. Smith does not discuss the painting in his chronological introductory essay on Rembrandt’s production or give any hints as to its provenance. All he says about it can be found in this brief entry:³⁸

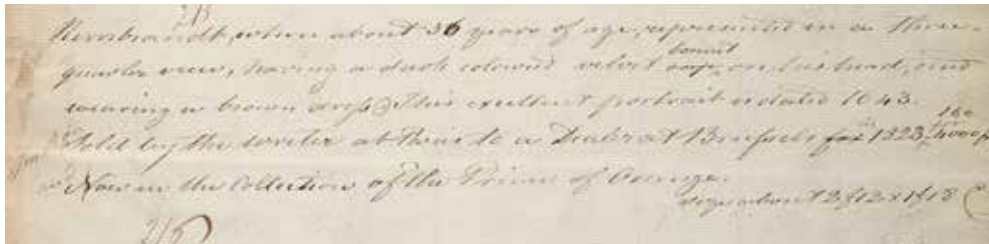
216. Rembrandt, when about thirty-six years of age, represented in a three-quarter view, having a dark-coloured velvet bonnet on his head, and wearing a brown dress. This excellent portrait is dated 1643. Sold by the Writer at Paris, to a dealer at Brussels, in 1823, for 4000 f[ranc]s, 160l. [pounds] and now in the collection of the Prince of Orange.

2 feet 2 in. by 1 ft 8 in. – C.

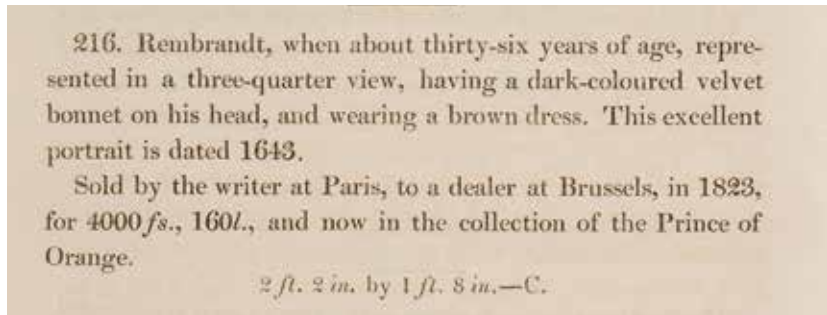
16. John Smith, *Catalogue raisonné*, volume 7, frontispiece and title page



17. Entry on the painting in the manuscript of John Smith's *Catalogue raisonné*. The Hague, RKD-Netherlands Institute for Art History



18. Entry on the painting in John Smith, *A Catalogue raisonné of the works of the most eminent Dutch, Flemish, and French painters*, Part the Seventh, 1836, p. 88



23.

Detail of fig. 24

24.

Augustus Wijnantz (1795-later than 1850),
Interior of the Gothic Hall, signed and dated
A. Wijnantz, 1846. Pen and ink, pencil, watercolor
on paper, 32.2 x 40.4 cm. Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum [RP-T-1995-4]



25.
Detail of fig. 26

26.
Augustus Wijnantz, *Sketch of a wall
in the Gothic Hall, 1846 or somewhat earlier*
Pencil and watercolor, 15.4 x 17.0 cm.
The Hague, The Hague City Archives
(kl. A 346)⁵⁰



even twice (figs. 25, 26). The canvases are numbered in pencil, with – sadly – the added numbers they were to be given in the coming auction of 1850. We see nine paintings – two large biblical paintings below, and, above, one full-length portrait and six half-length portraits. The Rembrandt is in the center of the wall, the smallest painting in the group. Of these nine paintings, seven recur on the right wall in the total view, in a different, tighter constellation, now framing two larger paintings, Rubens's *Tribute money* and Murillo's *Madonna Immacolata*. The wall shows a typically mixed selection of paintings from different countries – Spanish, Italian, Flemish, Dutch – and from different centuries. The only guiding principles for the arrangement seem to be dimensions and wall design, in rough symmetry. Five of the six half-length portraits, including Rembrandt's portrait of Titus now in the Wallace Collection, are identifiable. But the Rembrandt self-portrait is not there.

It is touching to see that Wijnantz showed special interest in the painting, however. In his preparatory sketch, he lifted the head of Rembrandt from the portrait and drew it in larger format in black chalk.

In her own testament, she had established that no works of art in her bequest could ever, under any circumstances, become the property of a public institution. (She was clearly much like her father in this respect.) Her wishes and those of Carl Alexander would surely have been honored by the long-time director of the Großherzogliche Museum, Carl Ruland (1834-1907).¹³⁹ But after Ruland's death, Wilhelm Ernst did not appoint a full successor. Instead, he assigned responsibility for the museum to two art historians of a younger generation, neither of whom was made director and neither of whom was to last long on the job. In 1907, Felix Graefe (1877-1953) was hired as "assistant to the director"¹⁴⁰ (a director who did not exist) and Hans von der Gabelentz (1872-1946) in 1908 as secretary in the grand duke's cabinet.¹⁴¹ Gabelentz accepted the appointment on the understanding that he was to be more of an art advisor than a pen-pusher. Harry Graf Kessler was still in service; Graefe and Gabelentz were mainly responsible for the old masters. In 1910, Graefe left to work in Museum Wiesbaden, and in 1911 Wilhelm Ernst appointed Gabelentz director of the Großherzogliche Museum, a function he fulfilled for only a year before he moved to Florence as director of the Kunsthistorisches Institut (German Institute for Art History).¹⁴² It was during this transitional period that Wilhelm Ernst loaned the Rembrandt self-portrait to the Großherzogliche Museum.

The museum to which the painting was now moved was not in the historic city center. It was located some blocks to the north, about halfway from the castle to the new train station. This was not the first choice of Carl Alexander, who wanted to have it built in a park south of the castle. But the Weimar government authorities and the management of the Thüringen railroad preferred the northern location, and they prevailed. They saw the building in urban planning terms as a place that would attract high-quality housing in a new part of the town. The museum's proximity to the train station and thus to the wider world was intended to appeal to tourists and enlarge the cultural scope of the locals.

Photographs of the painting galleries in the museum show a crowded, salon-style hang that might have been more suited to the galleries of a palace than in a new museum. In these interior views of the western skylight room there is no sign of the Rembrandt self-portrait. It seems likely that it was hung in one of the outer galleries, which according to the architect's plan were designed to show smaller paintings. All we know is that the self-portrait hung in the same room as Jacopo Tintoretto's portrait of Jacopo Sansovino; this measured 51 × 38 cm and was therefore somewhat smaller than the Rembrandt.



54. Josef Zitek, *Vision of the Großherzogliche Museum in its planned environment*, ca. 1868.
Weimar, Klassik Stiftung Weimar

55 / 56. Photographs taken about 1910 of the western skylight room in the Großherzogliche Museum

Gezeichnete
Seesal copy
to Dr. Wang.

Fogg Art Museum,
Harvard University
September 20, 1945.

THE AMERICAN COMMISSION FOR THE
PROTECTION AND SALVAGE OF ARTISTIC
AND HISTORIC MONUMENTS IN ITALY

Dear Mr. Sawyer,

Three pictures attributed to Rembrandt, Vermeer and Tintoretto were indeed stolen from the Writman Museum on April 18, 1922. The particular circumstances suggested that it was the work of professionals who carried out similar burglaries in other German collections about the same time. Immediately all steps were taken to locate the stolen paintings and to make it impossible for the thieves to sell them. They have never turned up anywhere as far as I know, and in case of the conclusion that they probably had been shipped to America or Australia since no European dealer would have been willing to run the risk of purchasing the paintings in view of the steps we had taken. It is very likely that the paintings were brought out of the country immediately after they had been stolen. On the same night when the burglary was carried out a stranger with a package which could have contained the paintings was seen leaving the Writman station on the Express train bound for Hamburg, but the police were unable to follow up this rather vague clue.

I have not yet received the photographs from Mr. Wang, and I doubt that I can identify with absolute confidence the paintings by Vermeer and Tintoretto after so many years. The evidence of the measurements, however, is conclusive. They should be compared with those given in the printed Catalogue of the Writman Museum which was published about the year 1908. I regret that I haven't got a copy of the book myself. The measurements of the Self-portrait by Rembrandt are identical with those which are given in such reliable books as Brodier's Paintings of Rembrandt (Phaidon Press).

With kind regards,
Very truly
Yours
Wilhelm R. W. Koehler

Like everyone else, Koehler accepted the erroneous date of the theft printed in Bredius. More remarkably, he now relays the opinion of the Weimar police that he himself had properly discredited in 1921 – that the theft was the work of a professional gang.

In a second note to Sawyer, of 25 September, Koehler lets it be known that he is not prepared, as Weng had unrealistically hoped, to provide advice on further procedures. “If you are going to take up the case at all would you be so kind as to let me know later on to what conclusions your legal experts have come in this exceedingly interesting matter.”¹⁸⁰

10 October 1945, Charles Sawyer wrote to Siegfried Weng:

Dear Weng:

Dr. Koehler has undoubtedly sent you the information contained in the enclosed letters. They seem to identify your pictures with certainty and, I should assume, constituted sufficient basis for retaining them as stolen property. I should, however, suggest consulting your museum’s counsel on this and probably also calling the matter to the attention of the local agent of the FBI. We can get in touch with FBI Headquarters here if you prefer to have us do so.

I have given copies of your correspondence to the State Department and hope to get at least an informal statement from the legal advisor regarding the policy that the Government will assume in such cases. Certainly it is a most interesting legal as well as artistic problem with which you have faced us and I congratulate you on your handling of it.¹⁸¹

The next thing anyone knew, action was taken from within the State Department. On 30 October a missive was issued by a unit called the Division of Economic Security Controls, which itself had only been established in March of that year.¹⁸² The Acting Assistant Chief, John A. Birch, with approval of the State Department Legal Adviser’s Office, sent the documentation concerning the three paintings to Mr. Lloyd L. Shaulis, Secretary of the Alien Property Custodian. That office had been instituted during the First World War, after the U.S. government had passed a law called the Trading With the Enemy Act.¹⁸³ Under the terms of the act, goods belonging to owners in countries with which

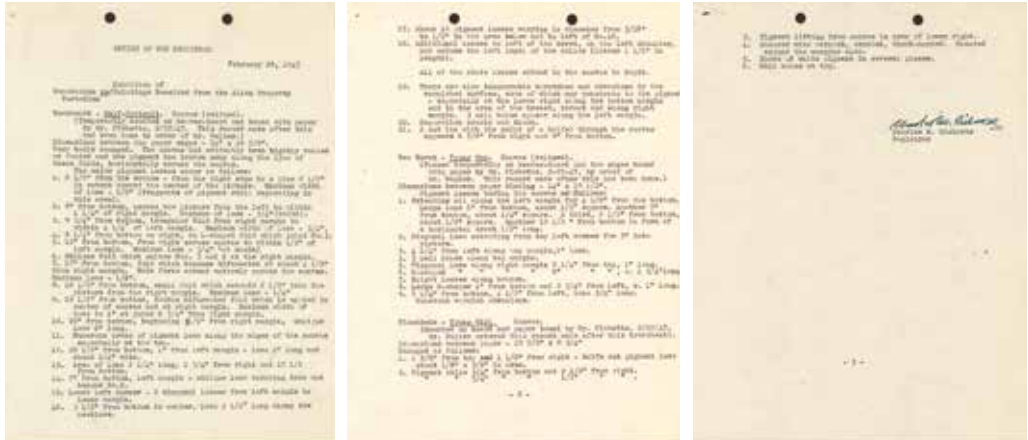
1947-1967

“Very badly damaged [...], tightly rolled or folded,” in the care of the National Gallery of Art

The shipping manifesto sent the paintings to the National Gallery of Art on the Mall in Washington. Presumably on instructions from the Justice Department, the museum went to work on the paintings immediately. On 25 February 1947, the day they arrived, chief curator John Walker (1906-95) ordered emergency repairs and a condition report; these tasks were completed within three days. As strange as it may seem, the National Gallery of Art did not have a conservation department of its own until 1972, so that Walker called on a highly expert restorer who did lots of work for the Gallery in those years, Stephen Pichetto (1887-1949).²⁰⁴ Pichetto was something of a phenomenon. In a high-rent studio on Fifth Avenue in New York, with (in 1935) eleven people on staff, rumored to be mostly related to each other, he worked for the top museums and collectors in the United States as a restorer, consultant and it is said dealer. The fact that Pichetto was at the museum the very day the three paintings arrived was probably due to his ongoing involvement with the 202 paintings from Berlin museums that had been moved to the Wiesbaden Collecting Point by the allies at the end of the war, and then toured thirteen American museums before being returned to Berlin in 1948.

Charged by the U.S. Army with the care of the paintings [from the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum], Pichetto made complete reports and x-radiographs. Before the paintings' return to Berlin in 1948, they toured 13 museums. There was a great deal of controversy about the loan agreement, and Pichetto's pronouncements on condition bore substantial weight with the exhibition's proceeding.²⁰⁵

Pichetto put the canvas of the Weimar Rembrandt down on a provisional backing and inspected it inch for inch. His condition report details the sorry state of the painting in twenty-one numbered descriptions of damage. By contrast, he only found nine instances of damage worth noting in the ter Borch and six in the Tischbein.



OFFICE OF THE REGISTRAR

February 28, 1947

Condition of
Memorandum re/Paintings Received from the Alien Property
Custodian

Rembrandt - Self-Portrait. Canvas (relined).
(Temporarily mounted on beaver-board and bound with paper
by Mr. Pichetto, 2/25/47. This record made after this
had been done by order of Mr. Walker.)
Dimensions between the paper edges - 24" x 18 7/8".
Very badly damaged. The canvas had evidently been tightly rolled
or folded and the pigment has broken away along the line of
these folds, horizontally across the canvas.
The major pigment losses occur as follows:

1. 6 1/2" from the bottom - from the right edge in a line 8 1/2"
in extent toward the center of the picture. Maximum width
of loss - 1/2" (fragments of pigment still separating in
this area).

All of the above losses extend to the canvas in depth.

19. There are also innumerable scratches and abrasions in the
varnished surface, some of which may penetrate to the pigment
- especially at the lower right along the bottom margin
and in the area of the breast, throat and along right
margin. 3 nail holes appear along the left margin.
20. Separation cracks and bloom.
21. A cut (as with the point of a knife) through the canvas
appears 6 7/8" from right and 9" from bottom.

80-82. Stephen Pichetto, *Memorandum re Condition of Paintings Received from the Alien Property Custodian*, 28 February 1967, Washington, National Gallery of Art. Copy in files of the Rembrandt Research Project, The Hague, RKD Netherlands Institute for Art History

83/84. Passages from figs. 80-82

Fig. 15. Rembrandt, *Self-portrait*, 1639 (B. 21 II), etching, detail of fig. 151 in reverse. Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet



Fig. 16. Rembrandt, *Self-portrait*, c. 1645/48, panel 68.5 x 56.5 cm, detail. Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle (IV 5)



Fig. 17. Rembrandt, *Self-portrait*, 1659, canvas 84.1 x 66 cm, detail. Washington, D.C., The National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Collection (IV 18)



Fig. 18. Rembrandt, *Large self-portrait*, 1652, canvas 112.1 x 81 cm, detail. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum (IV 8)



Fig. 19. Rembrandt workshop, *'Self-portrait'*, 1643, canvas 62.5 x 49.6 cm, detail. Germany, private collection (IV 3)



Fig. 20. Rembrandt workshop, *'Self-portrait'*, 1660, canvas 75.6 x 61.1 cm, detail. Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria (IV 21)



123. Details illustrating facial features that are asymmetrical in paintings regarded by van de Wetering as autograph self-portraits (15-18) and not in those he excludes from that category (19-20). *Corpus*, deel iv, p. 95

124. Rembrandt, *Self-portrait*, ca. 1636-38 [museum] or ca. 1639 [*Corpus* iv, 608, note 6], detail of forehead and eyes
Pasadena, Norton Simon Museum (F.1969.18.P)



125. Rembrandt, *Self-portrait*, 1640, detail of forehead and eyes.
London, National Gallery (672)



126. Rembrandt, *Self-portrait*, 1642, detail of forehead and eyes.
Royal Collection (RCIN 404120)



127. Rembrandt, *Self-portrait*, ca. 1642-43, detail of forehead and eyes.
Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza (1976.90)



128. Rembrandt, *Self-portrait*, ca. 1643, detail of forehead and eyes.
Private collection



129. Rembrandt, *Self-portrait*, ca. 1645-48, detail of forehead and eyes.
Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle (238)



Colophon

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