

Happy birthday, dear Rembrandt

Gary Schwartz

As recently as March 2005, the director of the tourist board of Graz, Austria, proposed to distinguish his city in the Mozart Year 2006 by turning it into a *Mozartfreie Zone*.¹ Of course he did not get away with this, and if you now go to the website of his service you will see how deeply he has had to humble himself before the ghost of the genius of Salzburg. “Though Mozart never visited Graz, the people of the town loved Mozart even during his lifetime. They were able to see his ‘Figaro,’ ‘Abduction’ and ‘Don Giovanni’ at the theater and, when Mozart's widow Constanze came to Graz in 1796, she discovered a town ‘where my husband, who had been torn from me all too early, is exceptionally renowned and esteemed.’” This text is followed by a roster of Mozart events, down to performances of “Eine kleine Nachtmusik” by the local Recreation Orchestra.

I know that many of you would have liked to declare your museums Rembrandt-free zones for the duration of 2006. One museum actually took this as the program for a travelling exhibition a few years ago. In 1999 and 2000 the print collection of the University of Munich was circulated to three venues under the title “Es muss nicht immer Rembrandt sein.”

Yet, I am convinced it is a mistake to try to play down Rembrandt this year, and that the museums that have embraced him and have done it right will be rewarded in various ways. I will return to this at the end of my remarks. First, though, I would like to compare the current Rembrandt Year with the previous one. By that I mean 1969, the 300th anniversary of Rembrandt's death. I cannot speak in the first person of the 350th anniversary of his birth in 1956, but I do want to commemorate the fact that in that year I took my first course in art history. As a freshman at Washington Square College of Arts and Sciences of New York University, I took the survey course under Jane Costello and Horst Janson. From Janson I had my first class on Rembrandt. The power of his teaching made me fall in love with art history.

In 1969 I found myself under the spell of another great Horst of Janson's generation, Horst Gerson. For the two preceding years I had been working with him on two major Rembrandt Year projects. In the fall of 1968 his huge book *Rembrandt paintings* appeared, of which I was editor. In 1969 his new edition of Abraham Bredius's catalogue of Rembrandt's paintings came out, the contents of which overlapped in part the catalogue in the big book. For that reason I was also involved with the Bredius catalogue, in collaboration with the editor at Phaidon Press, Keith Roberts.

The spirit of that year was defined for me by the beginning of the great controversies over the attribution of Rembrandt's paintings. Gerson's catalogue reduced the number of paintings that Bredius had accepted as autograph Rembrandts from 620 to 420. In his notes he casts doubt on forty more. On the whole, his deattributions were not controversial in themselves and have since been carried by the field. However, there was one high-profile deattribution in the batch, of a painting that was not only a favorite with the public but also had been highly praised by artists and art historians, *Saul and David* in the Mauritshuis. The basis for this opinion was highly subjective. In Gerson's conception of Rembrandt, the artist was incapable of false sentiment, and he sensed false sentiment – he called it a

¹ *Der Standard*, Vienna, 1 March 2005.

“larmoyant” interpretation of the story – in the famous painting. Once this judgment had taken hold of Gerson, he found superficialities and weaknesses of all kinds that point to atelier work. The Mauritshuis and others protested vigorously, and a controversy was born that has not been resolved to this day.

In a review of Gerson’s book in *ArtNews*, the American art historian Benjamin Rifkin dared to doubt that Rembrandt painted another sentimental masterpiece, the *Man with the golden helmet* in Berlin. This deattribution does seem to have been accepted by all.

In the corridors at the openings of exhibitions and at Rembrandt Year congresses, these developments were brought into connection with the foundation of the Rembrandt Research Project. In the face of massive shifts in the Rembrandt oeuvre and the uncertainties they brought with them, the RRP announced that it was working as a team on a systematic and scientifically accurate new *Corpus of Rembrandt paintings* that would bring unprecedented new clarity into the question. At a symposium in Chicago in October 1969, Josua Bruyn presented the newly launched RRP to the assembled colleagues. The aim of the Project, he said, was to frame “a precise definition of our observations and of the standards by which we interpret them. Only thus,” Bruyn said, “will our opinions become rational judgments.”²

Because the CODART website did not yet exist in 1969, it is hard to come up with a list of the 1969 Rembrandt exhibitions like that of the current ones. I do not think there were all that many. There were middle-large loan shows in the Rijksmuseum, including 23 paintings by Rembrandt, and in Chicago, with 21, augmented by drawings and, in Chicago, work by followers. In addition to these encyclopedic loan exhibitions, there were single-collection exhibitions at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest and others. It cannot be said that the 1969 Rembrandt Year gave rise to much new scholarship. In a way, the announcement of the RRP blocked new developments for a long time, as people waited to see what they would come up with.

2006 is a very different kettle of fish. Three volumes of the *Corpus of Rembrandt paintings* have since appeared, in 1982, 1986 and 1989, under the categorical and confident division of the paintings into A (Paintings by Rembrandt), B and C groups. In 2005 volume 4 appeared, where instead of the A, B and C categories we read a disclaimer drafted by two law firms stating that “the opinions expressed in this volume (IV), and the previously published volumes I-III... should be understood as ‘opinions’ that are meant for academic use only.”³ In its own terms, therefore, the Rembrandt Research Project has retreated to the pre-1969 situation, from rational and objective conclusions – the words are Bruyn’s – back to the opinions he wanted to leave behind.

How have museums responded in 2006 to this situation and to the expectations of their audiences? Only one exhibition is taking it upon itself to redefine Rembrandt for us for the 21st century: Ernst van de Wetering and Jan Kelch, in the Rembrandt House and the Gemäldegalerie, are mounting *The quest of a genius*, which launches the premise that the *Night watch* was an artistic failure from which Rembrandt did not recover for many years. For the most part, we are being left in peace with our 20th-century conceptions. And not even all of those. Critical theory and gender studies are missing, contextual art history is underrepresented and even the physical study of the art object has not been taken as the central focus of any Rembrandt exhibitions. The National Gallery in London is bringing out a welcome new edition of its *Art in the Making* volume on Rembrandt, but it is not holding a new version of the exhibition that gave rise to it.

² Josua Bruyn, “Problems of attribution,” in *Rembrandt after three hundred years: a symposium – Rembrandt and his followers, October 22-24, 1969*, Chicago (The Art Institute of Chicago) 1973, pp. 32-48, p. 39.

³ Ernst van de Wetering, *A corpus of Rembrandt paintings*, vol. 4: The self-portraits, Dordrecht (Springer) 2005, p. vi.

The two main types of offerings are thematic and single-collection exhibitions. Leading the thematic exhibitions is *Rembrandt-Caravaggio*, a joint production of the Rijksmuseum and the Van Gogh Museum. Rembrandt is finally confronted with the artist to whom he has forever been compared. I am also looking forward eagerly to the Uylenburgh exhibition in the Rembrandt House. Single-collection shows of great allure have been announced by Fondation Custodia, which is showing most of its 300 etchings, with a catalogue by Erik Hinterding; the Berlin Kupferstichkabinett will finally be exhibiting its Rembrandt drawings; and Kassel, by hanging all its traditional Rembrandt attributions, accepted and rejected, is doing its own version of the Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt exhibitions of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Hamburg and Bremen museums. The Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge sets forth its series of etchings exhibitions, with *Rembrandt's Christmas*. I mention this example for two reasons. One is that the Fitzwilliam treats every impression as a distinct art object, with excellent information about the printing, paper, condition and provenance of the plate. Another reason is that it publishes its very informative brochures in complete form on its website, which of course are also linked by the CODART website. An example of best practice.

What is the advantage of which I spoke at the start? Mainly this. I know from experience that anything you say about Rembrandt draws more attention than things you say about other artists. This goes for colleagues as well as for journalists and the general public. When you are dealt the Rembrandt card, you should play it for all it's worth. It will earn you profits that – if you play *those* cards right as well – you can spend later on other projects of your own choice.

There is additional benefit to all of us. The accumulated new information that is coming out last year, this year and next, especially that resulting from the close study of individual objects in single collections, will add up, in combination with other sources, to more than the sum of its parts. The CODART website at this point can only point you to this information. Before long, there will be automatic ways to assemble the information on specific prints or paintings into research dossiers. This should raise the level of Rembrandt scholarship to great new heights, because there is so much more on Rembrandt out there than any other Dutch or Flemish artist.

I hope to greet you again from those heights at the next Rembrandt year, in 2019, when we will meet to commemorate the sad 350th anniversary of the artist's death. Until then, dear Rembrandt, Happy Birthday, with many happy returns of the day.