MUSEUMS

When Dutchmen Disagree

When the Metropolitan Museum's Thomas P. F. Hoving dropped the word recently that the Met was planning to "reattribute" several of its Rembrandts, there was a gasp from museumgoers. Fake Rembrandts at the Metropolitan, of all places? It seemed altogether too shocking to be believed. But art scholars in Rembrandt's own Amsterdam, London and Paris scarcely blinked at the news. Like every other great museum, the Met is constantly in the process of re-evaluating and recataloguing the entire collection of paintings, and in fact the current examination of its 31 Rembrandt oils, one of the world's three largest collections (together with those in the Hermitage and the Louvre), is if anything somewhat overdue.

Three of the Met's Rembrandts have been labeled with a question mark since 1954. As many as three more are now getting close inspection, including such works as *Man with a Steel Gorget* and *Old Woman Cutting Her Nails*. Nor is the Met alone in giving fresh attention to Rembrandt's paintings. The National Gallery of London in 1960 demoted three of its then 21 Rembrandts to the status of "attributed to" or "school of." The National Gallery of Washington, which currently has 24 Rembrandts, two years ago relabeled its *Old Woman Plucking a Fowl* as "Rembrandt—Upper part of figure repainted by a later hand."

Some time ago, experts at the Louvre scrutinized a pair of Rembrandt canvases, each of which depicted a philosopher, subsequently decided that one had been done by the master, another by one of his pupils. In the past six months, Chicago's Art Institute has taken a deep breath and concluded that one of its three Rembrandts, *Christ Washing the Feet of the Disciples*, is in fact the work of Jan Lievens, a follower of Rembrandt.

Shrinking Output. Internationally, the wide-ranging reassessment of Rembrandt's prodigious output has resulted in a marked contraction of the number of oil paintings unquestionably attributed to the Leiden miller's gifted son. In 1923, the German art historian W. R. Valentiner listed some 700 genuine Rembrandts. In 1942, the Dutch scholar Abraham Bredius pared the total to about 620, and last year the German Kurt Bauch brought the number to 550. The end is not in sight. To be published in the U.S. in October is another, still more definitive catalogue by The Netherlands' Horst Karel Gerson. At most it accepts, without reservations, 450 Rembrandts.* Many scholars feel that de-attribution has gone too far. In his 1964 study, Harvard's Jakob Rosenberg, considered to be ultraconservative in his choices, relisted 33 Rembrandts that Bredius had disqualified. The Boston Museum of Fine Arts recently looked at a discredited *St. John the Evangelist*, concluded that only the saint's beard had been added by a later hand, erased the beard and reinstated the painting as a veritable Rembrandt.

Degrees of Real. The most important reason behind all the scholarly furor is that, with fully accredited Rembrandts costing millions apiece, the 20th century has become far more persnickety in its definition of genuineness than were the 18th and 19th centuries, or for that matter, even Rembrandt's contemporaries. When the artist began plying his trade in Amsterdam in the 1630s, he acquired—as did most successful painters of his day, most notably Rubens—a studio of between 40 and 60 "pupils," who in essence acted as artistic extensions of the master's right arm.

As commissions came pouring in, Rembrandt would direct the composition of a painting, but the pupil, who in many cases was a gifted artist in his own right, would do the work. The master touched up the results and, if the work came up to his standards, even signed the picture. The result, as one National Gallery official in Washington puts it, with a shadow of a smile, is that "there are degrees of real Rembrandts."

Moreover, before the invention of photography, line-for-line copying was not only a common method used by neophyte painters to educate themselves but also a perfectly legitimate means of reproduction. Some 18th and 19th century "copies after Rembrandt" emigrated to the U.S., and were eventually willed to U.S. museums. These, as a rule, were tactfully accepted by most museums, in order not to offend wealthy donors, but rarely hung as Rembrandts, because they were the easiest to weed out. Chemical analyses, known and used for many years, reveal differences in paints and varnishes, since in most cases latter-day copyists did not try to use 17th century materials.

Hidden Handwriting. The knottiest problems lie in distinguishing between oils by Rembrandt and those done by his disciples. Signatures are no guide: not only did Rembrandt sign studio work, but in many cases the original canvas has been cut down—and the signature cut off. Copyists often added the artist's signature for the sake of verisimilitude. Some dealers have even been known to inscribe a spurious "Rembrandt" on top of a genuine "R. H. van Rijn." Though the artist's full name was really Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, the simple "Rembrandt" with which he signed his work in later years is better known than the full signature he used as a young man. Not even documents are much help: only seven letters by Rembrandt, referring to a few paintings, survive.

Most scholars rely on their knowledge of Rembrandt's telltale way of handling a brush, as distinctive as an ordinary man's handwriting. They are convinced that they can recognize Rembrandt's, even though it changed and evolved in the course of his 40-year-career. More information can be gleaned by probing beneath the surface of an oil with X rays and infrared photographs to see how the artist progressed from preliminary sketch to finished oil. In Rembrandt's work, the early draft

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

MET'S "OLD WOMAN"

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

CHICAGO'S "CHRIST & DISCIPLES"

Far more persnickety in the definition of genuineness.

* Rembrandt is not the only artist up for reattribution. The Worcester Art Museum, of Worcester, Mass., engaged in re-evaluating its collection, said last week that it expects to relabel about one-fourth of its 321 European paintings, including ones formerly attributed to Turner, Constable and Courbet.

was always much rougher, more bitter and cruel than the finished work, showing a constant spontaneous response of the artist to his model. Another trait, primarily visible in the portraits of Rembrandt's later period: the bright side of the face is prepared with white underpaint, the shadowy side is built up with glazes.

From the Mists. Magdeleine Hours, director of the Louvre's outstanding scientific laboratory, argues that Rembrandt's "handwriting" may be superior to that of some of his followers only because it is better known. It is her hope that more exhaustive study of the dubious Rembrandts will serve to identify fully the other painters in his circle, who may thus emerge as memorable artists on their own. The genius of Georges de La Tour, she points out, was overlooked by scholars for centuries simply because most of his finest paintings were attributed to Caravaggio, Velásquez or other artists.

Though reattribution of a painting from Rembrandt to his pupil Carel Fabritius or Jan Lievens may knock thousands of dollars from its current market value, the loss is only a paper one. The picture itself is no less beautiful. Indeed, as the name of its creator emerges from the mists in which history has shrouded it, his painting's value may even appreciate faster than that of a known Rembrandt.

Rather than haggling endlessly over the fine points of attribution, some museum directors are now trusting their own judgment, taste and intuition. The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, for instance, recently purchased, as its 22nd Rembrandt, a *Holy Family* from a private English collection; the painting is challenged by Rembrandt Experts Bauch and Gerson. Snaps Rijksmuseum Director Dr. A. Van Schendel: "We disagree—it does not matter. A good painting is a good painting."

PAINTING

Hélas pour la Grandeur

Like all the forms of nonverbal human expression, the arts are international, leaping the bounds of language and education as easily as they do those of class or color. All the great art styles of Western history have flourished in many countries. Inevitably, then, the historian who tries to prove that one nation's painting is innately superior to that of any other is treading on shaky ground. Such technicalities, however, have hardly hindered the zealous ministers of Charles de Gaulle.

"Painting in France, 1900-1967," an exhibit of 150 paintings assembled by the French government at the behest of the U.S.'s International Exhibitions Foundation, is an ambitious attempt on the part of Culture Minister André Malraux to demonstrate that, as one of his minions puts it, France in the arts is still capable of "inventing the future." The proof is uphill work, for (non-French) authorities agree that, while Paris blazed the trails prior to World War II, since then the leadership has migrated across the Atlantic. Nonetheless, France can still claim a few pioneers in the realm of geometric art (*see color opposite*).

Timid & Prettified. So debatable is Malraux's basic premise, that when "Painting in France, 1900-1967" went on view at Manhattan's Metropolitan Museum of Art last week,* the Met's contemporary art curator, Henry Geldzahler, angrily disowned it. Said he: "Shocking! While there are some postwar French artists I respect, lumping together postwar French art with the great masters from before 1930 is artificial and unfair. The work is simply not of the same order." He is at least 91.23% correct, though the distinction is not likely to disturb the average museumgoer, who will revel in the early, if decidedly familiar canvases by Matisse, Chagall, Braque, Dufy, Derain, Vlaminck and other cubist and fauvist favorites. Particularly impressive: Picasso's rarely shown room-sized stage curtain from the 1917 production of Diaghilev's ballet, *Parade*.

The average museumgoer, on the other hand, will be mystified by a large gallery full of airy, forgettable abstract canvases. These are meant to support the French thesis that Paris, and not New York, invented abstract expressionism in the 1950s (the French call their version *tachisme*, or staining). *Hélas pour la grandeur*, for just the reverse is shown. By comparison with the work turned out by the dynamic U.S. action painters, the French products look timid, prettified and unconvincing—with a few exceptions, most notably the stark abstractions of Pierre Soulages.

Little Embarrassments. Among the French pop artists, only Arman and Martial Raysse bubble with any degree of effervescence; the rest are merely low-cal imitations of U.S. originals. But when it comes to op, kinetic and geometric art, the clear, rational air that bred Descartes, Pascal and cubism seems to have kept the Paris pot percolating merrily from the past to the present. Looking uncannily like the 1967 minimal cartwheels of the U.S.'s Frank Stella (TIME, Nov. 24), Robert Delaunay's 13-ft. by 26-ft. *Panel from the Entrance to the Railroad Pavilion*, built back in 1937, overshadows an entire room. Across from it stands Yaacov Agam's *Transparent Rhythms II*, made of triangular strips of aluminum, so that its patterns jiggle and flicker as the viewer passes. Jean Dewasne's 12-ft.-high, glossily enameled *Badia*, like Agam's work constructed for the exhibition, dominates another room occupied by Kindred Spirits Vasarely, Herbin and 1966 Venice Biennale Prizewinner Julio Le Parc.

In fact, Le Parc won the Biennale representing Argentina, his native land. One of Malraux's little embarrassments is that so many of his "French" artists were either born elsewhere or live elsewhere now. A case in point is Belgian-born Pol Bury, 45, who used to live all year round in France but now spends half his time in New York, and who is represented by his 1966 *Flat Iron Building*. The wiggly, optically elusive "cinetization" was made by taking a photograph of the Manhattan landmark, cutting circles in it then twisting them around. The result was rephotographed and swabbed with yellow paint so that the building seems to swim like a coral growth undersea. Bury's more recent, brass-and-steel-plated, slowly moving constructions are a current sellout attraction at Manhattan's Lefebre Gallery, just five blocks from the Met.

* The exhibit, which opened at Washington's National Gallery of Art, will be shown later at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Art Institute of Chicago.

DEN MARTIN

DELAUNAY'S "PANEL FROM THE ENTRANCE TO THE RAILROAD PAVILION" (1937)
Ambitious attempt to invent the future.