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RESPONSES TO Rembrandt

ANTHONY BAILEY

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The Rembrandt Research Project

THE MEMBERS of the Rembrandt Research Project are the sort of scholars who do not take much for granted; doubt is fundamental to their enterprise.[1] Five remain of the seven scholars who constituted the team in 1968—all Dutch, all men, all art historians. The two who have died are J. A. Emmens and J. G. van Gelder. Two current members, S. H. Levie and P. J. J. van Thiel, are respectively director general and curator of paintings at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, and in recent years their museum responsibilities have made them less active in the Project. The three other members are Bob Haak, former head of the Amsterdam Historical Museum; Josua Bruyn, professor emeritus of art history at the University of Amsterdam; and Ernst van de Wetering, who, in his early fifties, is the youngest, and who served as a junior researcher before becoming a full member of the team.

Haak is the founding father of the RRP. Now in his mid-sixties, the author of a number of books, including a respected biography of Rembrandt and an extensive survey of Dutch seventeenth-century painting, he lives in an early-eighteenth-century house on the Prinsengracht, one of the old canals encircling the center of Amsterdam, and writes occasional pieces about art for a Dutch financial newspaper. Haak is exceptional among the scholars; he has no degree and no professional title. His hair is gray, cut short. His face is broad-cheeked and weathered—you could imagine him at the helm of a Dutch sailing barge. His first experience in the art world was practical, as assistant to an art dealer. "Mr. van Hoogendijk taught me how to look at paintings," Haak says of the dealer. "He showed me how to study a picture all over with a magnifying glass, and to look just as closely at the back of it." While at van Hoogendijk's, Haak read a great deal of art history, which helped him get his next job: as an assistant in the Department of Painting at the Rijksmuseum. In 1956, he took part in organizing a large exhibition for the 350th anniversary of Rembrandt's birth. "The paintings poured in, and we tried to put them in chronological order," he recounts. "I was faced with many paintings said to have been painted by Rembrandt at the same period, and it struck me that one man could not have created so many different sorts of pictures at one time. Many, surely, were not by Rembrandt."[2]

Although he may have felt like an iconoclast at that moment, Haak was having doubts others had had before. In 1792, a French art dealer named Lebrun warned that many paintings claimed as authentic Rembrandts were in fact by his pupils.[3] From early in the Master's career, students had copied his works; sometimes these paintings may have been touched up by Rembrandt. Dealers even in the seventeenth century may have added a Rembrandt signature to such works, and some scholars believe that Rembrandt may have done so, too. The practice was not unusual: Titian and Raphael, among others, signed their pupils' work.[4] Haak, in any event, shared his worries with a dealer friend, Dan Cevat, who told him, "You ought to do something about this. Otherwise it's chaos." Haak began to question the reigning experts. He talked to van Gelder and Bruyn, who agreed action was needed to redefine Rembrandt's oeuvre. Haak says, "Bruyn took charge. He is much cleverer than I am."

The aim of the Project, which Haak thus founded, was to establish for

Rembrandt an authentic body of work by conscientious examination and by such up-to-date scientific methods of investigation as dendrochronology (to date wood used in panels), chemical analysis of pigments, and X-ray photography. In 1968, the Project was provided with funds for research, travel, substitute lecturers, and secretarial expenses by the Netherlands Organization for the Advancement of Pure Research. The team members, who were unsalaried, took time off from their jobs and looked at some six hundred paintings then considered to be Rembrandts. They went out in pairs to museums and private collections in different parts of the world, and they made thorough observations and wrote painstaking descriptions of the paintings. Generally, they had a friendly reception and were helped in their work. However, a few private collectors and smaller museums were suspicious of the team's intentions. According to Haak, one owner didn't want to let the scholars see his painting but changed his mind when he realized how serious they were. In several places, such as the Morehead Planetarium gallery at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, they were forced to examine a painting on the wall, in a frame, even under glass. Sometimes they worked in dim light, or balancing on a ladder with a hand-held lantern, while being watched by curious members of the owner's family.

This examination period lasted five years, through 1972. Then the team began to sift the findings and bring in technical evidence. They usually met for Friday lunch in an office they had been given in the Central Research Laboratory for Art and Science at the south end of the Museumplein, a five-minute walk from the Rijksmuseum. On an easel in the room, as if monitoring the discussions, was an enlarged detail of the head and baleful eye of Rembrandt's Claudius Civilis. In his painting *The Revolt of the Batavians*, the artist had made the leader of the insurgent tribesmen against the Romans look like a bandit chief.

The chairman of the Rembrandt Research Project Foundation and effective leader of the team for its first quarter-century has been Josua Bruyn. In his late sixties, born in Amsterdam, he is a tall man with a courteous, formal manner which could be that of a distinguished surgeon or judge. He did his doctoral dissertation on Jan van Eyck but, like many art

historians in Holland, found it impossible to avoid the seventeenth century. His chief aide on the RRP for some time has been Ernst van de Wetering, who now holds Bruyn's old professorial chair. Van de Wetering's admiration for Bruyn's stamina is great: "He has been the motor of the Project." But Bruyn has admitted that he did not realize at the start how much time and labor would be involved. "Fifteen years would have been all right," he says. "But twenty—and more than twenty! It has gone on too long."

It was not until 1982 that the team brought forth the first volume of its *Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*. The book covered the period from 1625 to 1631, and had the appearance of a massive old-fashioned family Bible. Volume two, even larger, came out in 1986 and dealt with the years from 1631 to 1634. Volume three, taking us to 1642, the year of *The Night Watch*, appeared in 1990. With twenty-seven years of Rembrandt's career still to digest, and at least two more volumes needed to handle them, the team's work, presented in English for an international readership, will probably not be finished before the turn of the century. It is not known which of the volumes yet to come will embrace 1655, when *The Polish Rider* is thought to have been painted, and give the Project's verdict on the picture; it is probably at least five years away.

The two members of the RRP who studied *The Polish Rider* were Bob Haak and Josua Bruyn. The year was 1969. For the sake of economy and convenience, the team worked geographically rather than chronologically—in this case, looking at all the paintings in and around New York City that were attributed to Rembrandt, whether they were thought to be early, middle, or late works. Haak and Bruyn traveled thriftily; where they could they stayed with friends. They had only amateur photographic equipment and counted on museums and owners to provide detailed photographs. At the Frick, they were received hospitably and given access to facilities that ordinary visitors to the collection do not enjoy. They were allowed to work upstairs in the private rooms, with *The Polish Rider* and two other Rembrandts in the collection removed from their frames and placed on easels. The two men were able to eschew the customary mu-

seum formality, take their jackets off and spread their notes on the floor. They spent hours with the *Portrait of Nicolaes Ruts*, which Rembrandt painted in 1631; with *The Polish Rider*; and with the *Self-Portrait* of 1658 (ill. 3). William Suhr, the Frick's conservator, was on hand to answer questions about the condition of the pictures and about restoration that had been done. Recalling those days, Josua Bruyn says, "It was an experience to see a picture off the wall, out of the frame, and away from the slightly sanctifying atmosphere a gallery gives it. You could look at it in more of a vacuum. In such circumstances a lesser picture will lose much of its authority, with its weaknesses laid bare. A good picture may gain." (Haak had seen *The Polish Rider* on an earlier visit to New York and had already felt that it had weaknesses.) Not long after Haak and Bruyn returned to Amsterdam, the Frick helpfully sent Bruyn some twenty photographs he had requested of the three pictures; eleven were of *The Polish Rider* and included details of the horse's legs and head and the rider's head, and X rays of the horse's right forehoof.

Previous attempts to catalogue Rembrandt's oeuvre have been made by connoisseurs working on their own. An early contribution was that of John Smith, an English art dealer, who, without actually seeing many of the originals, in the 1830s accepted 614 paintings as authentic Rembrandts. In 1913, the Dutch scholar Cornelius Hofstede de Groot published a catalogue raising the figure to 988. The trend since has been downward. In 1923, John C. Van Dyke, a professor of art history at Rutgers College and something of a wild card in this business, did the most reductionist job on the Master to date, granting him only 48 paintings. A less radical oeuvre was that catalogued by the Dutch scholar Abraham Bredius in 1935, which accepted 630. Horst Gerson, also Dutch, in 1968 brought the total of accepted paintings down to 420. It looks as if the Rembrandt Research Project might reject between 100 and 150 of these.

A characteristic of many previous connoisseurs in this field of attribution has been to pick and choose without giving convincing reasons for their choices. Haak observes, "Gerson threw out many paintings but didn't say why." The *Corpus* of the RRP goes to the other extreme: it gives

thread counts of the warp and woof of canvases and includes dissertations on such subjects as the painting of lace or the value of Rembrandt signatures; details the provenance of pictures and provides long quotations from sale catalogues; and considers at length for each painting how the painter has approached the theme, handled the paint, and arrived at a color scheme. The paintings are arranged in three categories: category A comprises those paintings which are undoubtedly by Rembrandt; category B, those on which no absolute decision has been reached; and category C, those which the team concludes are not by the Master and which are therefore deattributed, disattributed, demoted, or rejected. The three volumes of the *Corpus* contain 144 A's, 12 B's (7 in volume one, 1 in volume two, and 4 in volume three), and 120 C's.

This severity of judgment reflects Josua Bruyn's intentions. The number of cases in which decisions about authenticity have been left open is "fairly small," the *Corpus* notes.[5] It continues: "This can be seen as an indication that there has been an urge to express firm opinions. In this respect, this book is in the tradition of oeuvre catalogues that present a solid body of accepted works and just as solid a body of rejected paintings, in a situation where in fact there is always room for discussion and reconsideration." This final statement is seen by some as disingenuous. The size, presentation, and gravitas of the *Corpus* appear to leave very little room. (The eminent British art journal *The Burlington Magazine* commented in an editorial generally welcoming volume one that the weighty tome was not good for reading in bed, particularly if the bed was shared with a partner.[6]) Yet the first volume was, for the most part, well received, the team's hard work admired, and little exception taken to its weeding out of Rembrandt's work of that period; indeed, a few experts wondered why the team had bothered to consider a number of paintings that were not seriously regarded as Rembrandts by most contemporary scholars of the subject. This criticism the RRP apparently took to heart: in the next volume the members announced they were shifting the basis of their work from Bredius's number to Gerson's smaller total of attributions. Despite this, the second volume was longer. Although there were signs in volume one that the team had a constrained view of Rembrandt that might arouse dis-

agreement, opposition took time to form. When it did, some critics expressed suspicion of the team's methodology; others proceeded from anxieties about individual paintings—on which the team was known or suspected to hold strong opinions—to concern for the team's overall judgment. Soon controversy seemed to be expanding much faster than the RRP's *Corpus*.

The Master's Reputation

REMBRANDT'S REPUTATION has never been so far-reaching as it is today. His name has become synonymous with the term "great artist"; in an episode of the television series *M*A*S*H*, for example, a wounded GI refers to his tattoo as having been done by "the Rembrandt of tattooists." Rembrandt's work appears, apparently because easily recognized, like Leonardo's Mona Lisa, in a 1988 British television commercial for a cereal, while in the United States, a recently developed "tooth-whitening system" has been given the name Rembrandt. In the Netherlands, the artist's name or illustrations of his paintings lend luster to trains, ships, city squares, restaurants, hotels, biscuits, and cigars. The Dutch Elisabeth Bas cigar was named after a well-known portrait in the Rijksmuseum. (Unfortunately, Abraham Bredius decided that the painting was not by Rembrandt but by his pupil Ferdinand Bol; other experts, though, think Rembrandt may have had a hand in it.) Homage to the Master is paid even in a club in Maastricht, where once a week the regulars dress up as the figures

as convincing evidence—the Beresteyns are still Rembrandts. Meanwhile, the RRP has had further proof of the dissent its verdict on certain paintings can arouse, and has concluded that in some cases advance work needs to be done before publication of the rest of the *Corpus*. Josua Bruyn says, "It seems best to us nowadays to try to prepare museum directors and members of the art-loving public for what may be a shock."

The Case of The Polish Rider

WHAT ARGUMENTS do the Project's members use when they are asked to put their case against Rembrandt's authorship of *The Polish Rider*? What reasons do those who disagree with the Project in this matter give? And what do the waverers have to say?

Bob Haak, of the RRP, says, "All over, the painting is a little too weak. It is not at all balanced. I don't see Rembrandt's brushstrokes. There's the expression of the face, the impossible leg, the very strange horse. And then the whole background—well, it could be unfinished, but some tiny details in it led us to conclude that it was finished or nearly so, and in that case the painting is not by Rembrandt." Josua Bruyn says, "Pictorially, *The Polish Rider* seems to me to spring from a temperament different from that of the 1658 *Self-Portrait*. The modeling of the figure, the feeling of the landscape—it is all much softer. A more feminine temperament is at work." Ernst van de Wetering says, "In Rembrandt, things always have a certain weight, a certain 'body-ness' or stability. Here, with *The Polish Rider*,

everything is too slim. The entire painting is shaky. The proportions of the figure are strange. There is a lack of relationship between the figure and the background—and I am convinced Rembrandt always got his backgrounds right first of all. There is a great deal of detail that isn't incorporated in the whole scene. And the lighting is curious—it breaks up the unity of the painting. All this makes me doubt the picture, makes me wonder if another mentality was behind it."

That mentality and "more feminine temperament" were given a name in Bruyn's review of a book by Werner Sumowski that appeared in *Oud Holland* in 1984—a review the RRP chairman may have intended also to prepare the Frick Collection for a shock about *The Polish Rider*. In conversation, Bruyn recognizes the painting as one of those fabulous pictures which attract devotion: "It is a case," he says, "where we have to tread carefully." However, if the remarks in *Oud Holland* were an instance of this, then the sound of eggshells crunching under Bruyn's feet reverberated around the art world. Bruyn himself has not committed his colleagues; his "own personal doubts have been expressed." The expression took the somewhat roundabout form of proposing in the book review that when examining the possible work of Rembrandt pupils, and in particular that of Willem Drost, "to clear the terrain, one will not have to forget a number of paintings which until now are considered Rembrandts—*The Seated Man with a Cane* in London (National Gallery), or the so-called '*Polish Rider*' in the Frick Collection, which at the least shows remarkable similarities with Drost's early, Rembrandtesque work."[1] I doubt that it does Bruyn an injustice to suspect he must have felt relief, perhaps even wry pleasure, at finally getting this off his chest. Since 1969, he had been living with his own conviction that *The Polish Rider* was not by Rembrandt, and in more recent years with a belief that Drost was probably its painter. According to Gary Schwartz, rumors that *The Polish Rider* was going to be on the Project's hit list had circulated in Dutch art historical circles nearly fifteen years before that issue of *Oud Holland*. Apart from his possible wish to prepare people for a shock, Bruyn may well have felt a strong need to satisfy those clamoring for a public statement—and perhaps all the more so because the relevant volume of the *Corpus* was, and is, still in the future.

Whatever the case, any element of caution in Bruyn's expression of doubt was ignored by a number of commentators. Sylvia Hochfield wrote of Rembrandt's being "stripped of some beloved works, such as . . . *The Polish Rider*."[2] Svetlana Alpers's book seems to regard the deattribution of the painting as a fait accompli and beneath an illustration of it gives the artist as Rembrandt—but with the name in quotation marks to denote the now RRP-authorized doubt.[3] A question mark is actually attached to the "Rembrandt" in the caption for the reproduction of the painting in the catalogue of the 1991–1992 Berlin/Amsterdam/London show.[4] In a 1986 article titled "The Faker's Art," Joseph Alsop suggested that for the RRP the authenticity of *The Polish Rider* was of no consequence.[5] This led Bruyn to protest that "the Rembrandt Research Project . . . has not 'sat in judgment' on *The Polish Rider* [as Alsop had written] nor 'decided to remove it from the sacred list of authentic Rembrandts' . . . leave alone 'by a vote of three to two'!" No member of the Project thought of the painting as a fake, Bruyn concluded, "and there should have been no place for it in an article on 'the Faker's Art.' " To the then director of the Frick, Everett Fahy, Bruyn wrote that "there was some misinformed talk—not to say gossip—about our team's opinion on *The Polish Rider*," and he enclosed a copy of his letter of protest, which, he hoped, made the Project's position clear.[6]

The matter of fakery may not be at issue here—although Alsop might not have been as misinformed as Bruyn claimed when Alsop placed the RRP and *The Polish Rider* in that context. Svetlana Alpers has pointed out that in volume one of the *Corpus*, a member of the team complained, in regard to some rejected paintings: "In a number of cases it is all but impossible to decide whether the Rembrandtesque aspect is due to a deliberate, or even fraudulent, intention or to Rembrandt's direct influence on a pupil or follower."[7] In the early years of the Project, the team apparently assumed that part of the problem was the existence of a large number of eighteenth-century fakes or pastiches among the "accretions" to the Master's oeuvre; but very few of these have in fact been found by the team. One that might fall into that category is the seemingly eighteenth-century Rembrandtesque *Man in a Room*, formerly known as *Scholar in a Lofty Room*, in the National Gallery in London. For that matter, the art of fak-

ing presumably came into being not long after the art of creating; art experts continue to be taken in by works of all periods; and *Fingerspitzengefühl*, the ability to discern a fake immediately, is as rare among connoisseurs as the ability to admit, "I don't really know who painted it." And while it is true, as Bruyn protests, that the RRP has not yet formally reached a verdict on *The Polish Rider*, Alsop's perception of how the team might vote does not appear wildly inaccurate. Of the three crucial members who might make up a majority for the rejection of the painting, Bruyn told me that in his opinion *The Polish Rider* was definitely a C painting; Bob Haak agreed, saying it was not by the Master; and Ernst van de Wetering, while a little more hesitant about committing himself to anything that sounded like a final judgment, was happy to talk about the many features of the picture that would move one to reject it.

At the Frick, Bruyn's ranging shot in *Oud Holland* and the correspondence about the Alsop article have been the only items received concerning the Project's intentions toward *The Polish Rider*. The gallery has made no public announcements on the subject. Despite a healthy $15 million endowment from its founder, which enables the collection to continue to buy works of art (more than a third of its paintings have been bought since Henry Clay Frick's death), the Frick does not have the resources of a large museum. It has no expert on Dutch art or scientific investigator on its staff. It brings in conservators from outside; and since its governing regulations prohibit paintings from being taken out of the building, trips to Brookhaven for neutron bombardment and autoradiography are ruled out. The Frick's small scale and somewhat sequestered character seem to nurture less of-the-moment qualities. It has no big, blockbuster shows; no restaurant; no roving children under ten; and no groups streaming through its rooms in pursuit of lecturers dispensing cultural tidbits. The adjacent library is a scholarly haven, which until 1990 insisted that male readers wear jackets and female readers skirts.[8]

Yet despite the outward calm and customary serenity of the Frick, one soon learns that several of its senior officers are infuriated by the Rembrandt Research Project. The current director is Charles Ryskamp, who came from the Pierpont Morgan Library in 1987. A specialist in eighteenth-century art and literature, he has a stout, pink-gray

eighteenth-century look about him. (Sir Joshua Reynolds would be the artist for *his* portrait.) Ryskamp is not shy about the Frick. He says, proudly, "If there were a poll on the subject, I'm sure the Frick would be chosen as the world's favorite museum. Have you read Peter Sutton's book *Dutch Art in America*? He writes, 'Painting for painting, the Frick Collection is quite simply the greatest in the world.'[9] Of these paintings, there are two or three that continue to provoke most public reaction—*The Polish Rider* is one. Before I came here, I heard of Professor Bruyn's theory and I thought, So what? Now, I still couldn't care less what the Rembrandt Research Project says. Connoisseurship has an ugly name these days, and a good deal of the labor of art historians does nothing to increase our joy. I don't think the Project's opinions detract from one of the greatest paintings on earth. It is unthinkable that it isn't by Rembrandt. To prove that it is not by him, someone is going to have to assemble a body of work for an artist capable of that kind of masterpiece. To me, the problem of Rembrandt is similar to that presented by Shakespeare. Some people just can't accept his genius. They want to chip away at the hugeness of it. They come up with other authors for the plays—noblemen preferred, of course. Shakespeare's father was a smallholder. Rembrandt's father was a miller. I think the Project is a Dutch attempt to make Rembrandt tidy, safe, and rational. It is an attempt that is concerned with only a few qualities of the paintings, and does not take in other qualities, which create responses in the hearts of people all over the world who look at the pictures. Anyway, even if the Dutchmen say that *The Polish Rider* is by Jan Smit, it is not going to come out of that room. Surely the severest test is how it stands up in there, surrounded by fine pictures, and with the 1658 *Self-Portrait* for company."

Despite the director's passionate dismissal of the Project, the Frick in late 1987 invited Ernst van de Wetering to give a talk about *The Polish Rider* and the Project—to show, perhaps, that the gallery could handle this sort of problem with confident and unruffled courtesy, and perhaps, as well, to give the enemy a chance to expose its positions. Van de Wetering accepted. He titled his talk "Rediscovering Rembrandt," and he spoke without a prepared text. Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, who was in the audience in the Frick's small auditorium, said of the talk, "I thought

it was a courageous act, like that of Daniel going into the lions' den." Edgar Munhall, the Frick's curator, commented that van de Wetering spoke "most of the time about the problems of Rembrandt attribution in general, and only a little about *The Polish Rider*. It was a most unconvincing performance."

Van de Wetering was careful to explain to his audience that he had *not* said, "The painting is not by Rembrandt." He has since emphasized that there is "nothing firm yet" about the RRP's decision on *The Polish Rider*, and has added that Bruyn's comments in *Oud Holland* have been exaggerated. "In any event," he says, "these early, premature opinions aren't worth very much." Yet he is aware that these opinions and the team's doubts have had far-flung effects. They have undermined the confidence with which some scholars—even those who continue to have other disagreements with the RRP—view *The Polish Rider*. Haverkamp-Begemann says, "I see weaknesses now that I didn't see before. I'm afraid *The Polish Rider* will probably sink." Although Gary Schwartz had been resisting the reattribution, he has admitted that doubts brought on by the RRP forced him to look at the painting more critically: "One then discovers that features of the painting which were always considered marks of its greatness as long as it was a Rembrandt—a certain vagueness, a poetic suggestiveness, an ambiguity of meaning—turn into signs of inferior artistry when they are attributed to Drost."[10] David Freedberg admits, "I've looked at it more closely because of the RRP. I suppose I'm now inclined against its being by Rembrandt. Yet it is a great picture. It continues to move me more than any other Rembrandt in New York except the *Self-Portrait* on the same wall. The team will have to be pretty skillful to prove it's by a certain pupil."

"If it is by a pupil, then it is his masterpiece," is an observation often made by dissenting experts about some of the more contentious RRP deattributions, and about *The Polish Rider*. John Brealey is one of many who considers this a great painting, "one of the masterpieces of painting in America. If it is not by Rembrandt then we are in the ridiculous position of launching a quest for a missing and hitherto unrecognized Titan."

For Josua Bruyn, the quest may be over, the pupil found, in the shape of Willem Drost; he is, apart from Aert de Gelder (who was Alfred von Wurzbach's nomination), the only pupil or follower so far put forward by name for authorship of the painting. In coming up with a specific name, Bruyn heeds the admonition the Project offers in the *Corpus*, that is, "taking seriously the principle . . . that no painting should be rejected unless a new attribution is possible."[11] And he gives credit to two men for helping create this possibility: Ernst van de Wetering, whose study of Rembrandt's workshop forms chapter 3 of the second volume of the *Corpus*, and Werner Sumowski, the first volume of whose heavily illustrated catalogue of the Rembrandt school occasioned Bruyn's *Oud Holland* review. Bruyn believes that Sumowski has "come up with a fairly convincing personality for Drost," on the basis of eight paintings (seven of which are signed "W. Drost") that apparently constitute the bulk of Drost's known oeuvre[12] (ill. 18, 19). It might be noted that John Van Dyke in 1923 called Drost "one of the most accomplished and original of the Rembrandt pupils, with much sensitiveness and feeling. Taken as a whole, his pictures present us with a new personality in art."[13] Van Dyke credited to Drost the *Portrait of a Man* in the Duke of Westminster's collection, which is signed "Rembrandt 1647." He was less sure about the companion portrait of a woman. In the eight Drost works favored by Sumowski, Bruyn—following Sumowski—sees Drost as an artist whose pictures often contain soft, rounded masses of drapery and figures isolated by a strong sidelight that gives the impression of attaching itself to the surfaces. He used strong brushstrokes and favored yellow and white, brown and red.[14] Bruyn's theory is given partial support by van de Wetering, who picks his words carefully: "Some of the properties I see in *The Polish Rider* I see in Drost's work." Yet Bruyn himself now and then seems to acknowledge that he may be too far out on a limb. He told me, "This is a suggestion—not a fixed opinion. Before being absolutely sure, we have to go into Rembrandt's own work for the 1650s and also carefully examine Drost's work, including his etchings and drawings." (There are several signed etchings by Drost but no signed drawings.) Bruyn, as it happens, is one of the few experts who do not consider *The Polish Rider* a master-

piece. Although he calls it a great picture, he says that if it is by Drost it is not a masterpiece, because Drost composed it in a style that was less than original, being derived partly from Rembrandt.

It might help if we knew about Willem Drost. In fact, little is known; neither the date of his birth nor the date of his death is recorded. The first record of his name as yet found in Holland is in Houbraken, where one Drost is mentioned as a pupil of Rembrandt and as an artist who spent considerable time in Rome.[15] A signed self-portrait etching of 1652 appears to be the first work known of his. A document recently uncovered in Florence describes a painting in the Uffizi, dating from about 1655, as a self-portrait by Drost.[16] The painting previously has been attributed to other artists, and it certainly shows the influence of another Rembrandt pupil, Carel Fabritius. But there seem to be no other biographical references to Drost, and the lack of evidence may, indeed, contribute to an unfairness, in failing to assign to Drost pictures that belong to him. Undoubtedly, unsigned works of art can gravitate (or be pushed by dealers) toward powerful identities; minor artists may lose out. But that said, there is, to my mind, little in Drost's small currently known body of work that would lead one to believe he could paint unaided a picture that reverberates with such mysteries and complications as *The Polish Rider*. His work shows Rembrandt's influence and displays a similar interest in biblical figures, but in a much more straightforward way. The subjects are simply presented. They are what they say they are, and that's all. In his *Ruth and Naomi* in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, depicting the Old Testament scene in which Ruth tells her mother-in-law that she will return with her to the land of Judah, there seems no real relation between the two figures; their faces are inexpressive. To this viewer, moreover, Drost's paintings favor the smooth, fine style that a fashion for the classical began to encourage in the Netherlands in the second half of the seventeenth century (and which commanded higher prices), over the rougher, less finished late manner of the Master. In their scholarly survey *Dutch Art and Architecture, 1600–1800*, Jakob Rosenberg, Seymour Slive, and E. H. ter Kuile write of the light velvety quality and regular diagonal hatched strokes characteristic of Drost's work.[17] The view of probably most critics of the RRP on this matter is expressed by Arthur Wheelock:

"The Drost we know hadn't the creative power to paint *The Polish Rider*." Walter Liedtke writes of Drost as one of the "lesser associates of the Master" who have become "convenient receptacles of marginal pictures that even Valentiner came to reject."[18] Werner Sumowski, it should be noted, does not mention *The Polish Rider* in relation to Willem Drost.[19]

The "shakiness" discerned in *The Polish Rider* by the Rembrandt Research Project is seen also by viewers who do not believe the painting was done by anyone other than Rembrandt. In 1910, Walter Sickert, while calling the work "one of the perfect masterpieces of the world," wrote that the face of the rider was lacking in "plastic observation." To Sickert it was "a spiritual rather than a plastic portrait of a face."[20] And there were other flaws: "No Rembrandt is quite Rembrandt without, somewhere, an unexpected bit of drawing that is a little stumpy, and squarer than one expects. . . . I see this trait in the knee of *The Polish Rider*—just enough to be, not a flaw, but an added emphasis on the signature."

One area of alleged weakness in *The Polish Rider* that the Project fastens on is the background. Some members of the team regard it as not Rembrandtlike because of its unfinished appearance; associated with this criticism is a perception of a break or disjunction between the background and the horse and rider in the foreground. But these features may not add up to much of an argument against Rembrandt's authorship. As we have seen, George Stout, when he was working on the picture for the Frick in 1938, concluded that the background had been damaged and restored. Furthermore, although Rembrandt, like almost all seventeenth-century Dutch artists, generally worked from back to front, painting the background first, he did not always do so, and he did not always finish his backgrounds.[21] Maryan Ainsworth points to a portrait of Hendrickje Stoffels in which Rembrandt's attention was on the sitter's face rather than other parts of the picture. "Perhaps he abandoned the rest," Ainsworth writes, adding that "the question of paintings left unfinished by Rembrandt has not been thoroughly studied."[22] Ernst van de Wetering acknowledges that Rembrandt did not finish the hands in his self-portrait now at Kenwood House in London, although perhaps because of diffi-

culties arising from his looking in a mirror and shifting his palette from the hand that usually held it to the hand he painted with.[23] For Christopher Brown, the Project's notion of a break between background and foreground is exasperating: "I've heard them say it about other pictures which are clearly by Rembrandt, and I think it's silly." He also believes that the effect may be due to the simple fact that Rembrandt failed to finish the painting. Brown, too, has a close-at-hand example of Rembrandt's readiness to leave a painting unfinished; it is another presumably uncommissioned work, the London National Gallery *Portrait of Hendrickje Stoffels* of 1659. One more work of that period, the 1654 *Portrait of Jan Six*, is painted in broad brushstrokes, and a large element of it, Six's red cloak, hanging from one shoulder and dominating the right side of the picture, is remarkably sketchy; still, its unfinished quality does not seem to have worried the subject, who commissioned it, and in whose family house in Amsterdam it hangs today (ill. 20).

Whether finished or unfinished, Rembrandt's later paintings struck some of his more finicky contemporaries as badly finished, with the paint splashed on and the impasto—according to Baldinucci—half a finger thick. Houbraken said that Rembrandt worked so quickly in later life that his paintings, examined closely, looked as if they had had paint smeared on with a bricklayer's trowel.[24] John Elsum, an English writer of verse epigrams about painting, attended enthusiastically to Rembrandt in 1700:

> What a coarse rugged way of Painting's here,
> Stroaks upon Stroaks, Dabbs upon Dabbs appear.
> The Work you'd think was huddled up in haste,
> But mark how truly ev'ry Colour's plac'd...
> Rembrant! Thy pencil plays a subtil Part.
> This Roughness is contriv'd to hide thy Art.[25]

As for Jonathan Richardson, he thought a loose, free painting was harder to imitate than a painting that was highly finished.[26]

For several other connoisseurs, the background of *The Polish Rider* furnishes no cause for doubt as to who painted it. Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann says that there is nothing about the background to make one

question the picture and that it is indeed in Rembrandt's manner. For Julius Held, the background is, in fact, proof rather than disproof: it is part of "Rembrandt's own artistic property," prefigured in the 1647 *Landscape with Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (National Gallery, Dublin), "where the small figures nestle in the protection of the dark landscape behind them" (ill. 21). And Held sees in other Rembrandt works a similar relation of foreground to background, of central figure or figures to the hills behind, and a similar movement along the same slight diagonal[27] (ill. 22).

No art historian has devoted as much time to *The Polish Rider* as has Julius Held. His long article about the painting, which originally appeared in 1944,[28] was his first major work and his means of introducing himself to the American art world. He initially saw the painting in 1934, when, at age twenty-nine, he arrived in New York from Germany and went almost immediately to the Frick. As a young art historian specializing in Flemish and Dutch painting, he had been an assistant in the state museums in Berlin. In April 1933, like many other Jews in Germany, he lost his job. He was fortunate to be taken up by an American financier, Clarence Palitz, who wanted advice on assembling an art collection and who sponsored his voyage to the United States. From 1937 to 1970, Held taught at Barnard and Columbia, his six annual courses always including one on Rembrandt, and frequently incorporating visits with his students to the Frick to study *The Polish Rider* and, in later years, to the Metropolitan to look at *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*. At Barnard, he became professor of art history and chairman of the art history department. Many of his former students are now teaching in their turn or working in museums. Among Held's principal written works are a two-volume catalogue of the oil sketches of Rubens and a collection of essays, *Rembrandt Studies*, which includes the article on *The Polish Rider*.

Since 1971, Held has been living in semi-retirement in Bennington, Vermont, giving occasional lectures, writing, and examining paintings for dealers and collectors. (Among the latter was J. Paul Getty, who wanted to buy a painting believed to be by Rubens and so brought Held to his Sutton Place estate in England to give his opinion. Held told Getty it

was a Rubens with student help. This didn't satisfy Getty, who wanted to know exactly what percentage was by Rubens. Held said there was no answer to that, unless one were able to count the brushstrokes done by Rubens and those done by apprentices.) Now in his late eighties, Held spends most mornings in the large library of his home, which is just down the road from the handsome 1805 clapboard church in whose graveyard Robert Frost is buried. When I visited Held, he had just returned from a visit to his birthplace, the small town of Mosbach, near Heidelberg, where he had been invited to participate in a ceremony honoring those who had suffered on Kristallnacht. We talked for a moment about the horrors of that time, before turning, as to a refuge, to Rembrandt and the RRP.

A fine distraction! Held grimaced at the mention of the team. "You mean the Amsterdam Mafia," he said. He had studied the *Corpus*—too expensive for him to purchase—in the library of the Clark Art Institute in nearby Williamstown, and it had bolstered his suspicions about group connoisseurship. "In our field, it's hard to get two people to agree totally. As for five—impossible. To achieve a consensus in print, much disagreement must be hidden. Then there is always bound to be a mixture of the objective and the subjective, which the Project plays down. And perhaps most worrying of all, I find in the *Corpus* a peculiar insensitivity to the works themselves. The members of the team look at the details—a leg, a foot, a lace collar. But they don't get the overall feeling."

Held was fully prepared to acknowledge that many paintings traditionally attributed to Rembrandt are not by the Master. "Gerson did a good job of cutting down an inflated oeuvre. But the process has to stop at a certain reasonable point. Of course, there will always be marginal cases where disagreement is possible. However, *The Polish Rider* is not one of those cases." His own involvement with the painting remains intense, and he has kept up with scholarly writing about it. Reviewing some of this, he said that he found unconvincing the suggestion that the work has a connection with the Socinians. "They were pacifists—one of them wouldn't be shown bearing arms." As for the Prodigal Son theory, where's the bag for the young man's money? Held agreed that the rider probably

does wear Polish costume, and that there is quite possibly a link with one of the Ogińskis who were in the Netherlands in the mid–seventeenth century. But unlike Ben Broos, who has proposed this, Held does not believe the picture is a straightforward portrait. "I feel it is an idealized portrait, perhaps commissioned by the younger Ogiński brother, Marcyan, who was nineteen in 1650, the year he matriculated at Leiden University—a portrait done in terms of a youthful Polish national hero who fought against the Eastern intruders, like Marc Sobieski, or such leaders in battle against the Tatars and Turks as Prince John Radziwill of Lithuania and the famed Albanian Giorgio Castriota, known as Scanderbeg." Held believes it would have been possible for young Marcyan Ogiński to have himself portrayed in that guise, just as Dutch burghers and their wives had themselves limned as, say, Antony and Cleopatra.

Held admitted to me that he was not an expert at distinguishing the hands of various Rembrandt pupils, but with the first volume of Sumowski's catalogue *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler* open before him, he examined the illustrations of the Drosts. "Pleasant pictures, smoothly modeled, all very decent—he gets the chiaroscuro—but pedestrian in comparison with Rembrandt. No, it cannot be." Held turned to a six-by-seven-inch print of *The Polish Rider* and a postcard detail of the rider's head and shoulders which I had put on the table, and said, his voice rising with urgency, "Look! Look at the face of that young man! The free modeling, the freedom of the brush, everything so boldly handled! When you turn to Drost, or any of the pupils, you look in vain for this level of work. And what about the horse? No self-respecting Dutchman would have a horse that looked like this. This is a useful old horse that clearly grew out of Rembrandt's drawing of the skeletal horse and rider—you can see the bones there. And see how horse and rider move from left to right, and how the rider's head seems to be on the point of coming out from the looming presence of the hill to the lightness of the sky—it hasn't yet, but is just about to, and the viewer feels that, anticipates it. Then note the little watch-fire with people around it, painted with know-how, evoking a sleepy mood in the background, and reminding one of other works by Rembrandt. And as for the finished or unfinished quality of the back-

ground—well, to me it is the way Rembrandt often painted his backgrounds. It is broad. But he is not a *Kleinmeister*, involved in niggling things. And although I see a break between foreground and background—perhaps the lack of cohesion the Project talks about—it has a purpose. It causes the rider and horse to stand out in the light of dawn against the nocturnal setting. Are those people blind!"

A Matter of Emotion

FOR THE members of the Rembrandt Research Project, I suspect, Julius Held's feeling about *The Polish Rider* would disqualify him as a reliable advocate. His ardor is great—and he admits it: "I know. I stick my head out." He does not believe in an aseptic, emotionless art history of the sort that Josua Bruyn, for one, apparently seeks to practice. Bruyn is applauded for his effort by some younger Dutch art historians, among them his former student Rob Ruurs, but this deliberately dispassionate approach may fail to take into account that when a human being stands in front of a picture, certain things happen that are not entirely rational. Gary Schwartz recognizes this and confesses to having undergone, as a student, in the presence of Rembrandt's work "moments of something like mystic transport."[1] And he has said that one thing that led him to write about Rembrandt was a desire "to find a way to deal with this emotion that came out of me in front of the work."[2] David Freedberg, I recall,