

Alfred Baber Fonds

Writings

Double Theft, Triple Trouble.

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DOUBLE THEFT, TRIPLE TROUBLE

What do you do when both thieves and the police rob you? International art collector-detective Alfred Bader tells us what he did and shares an intriguing tale about one valuable 17th-century painting it's unlikely he will ever be able to give to Queen's.

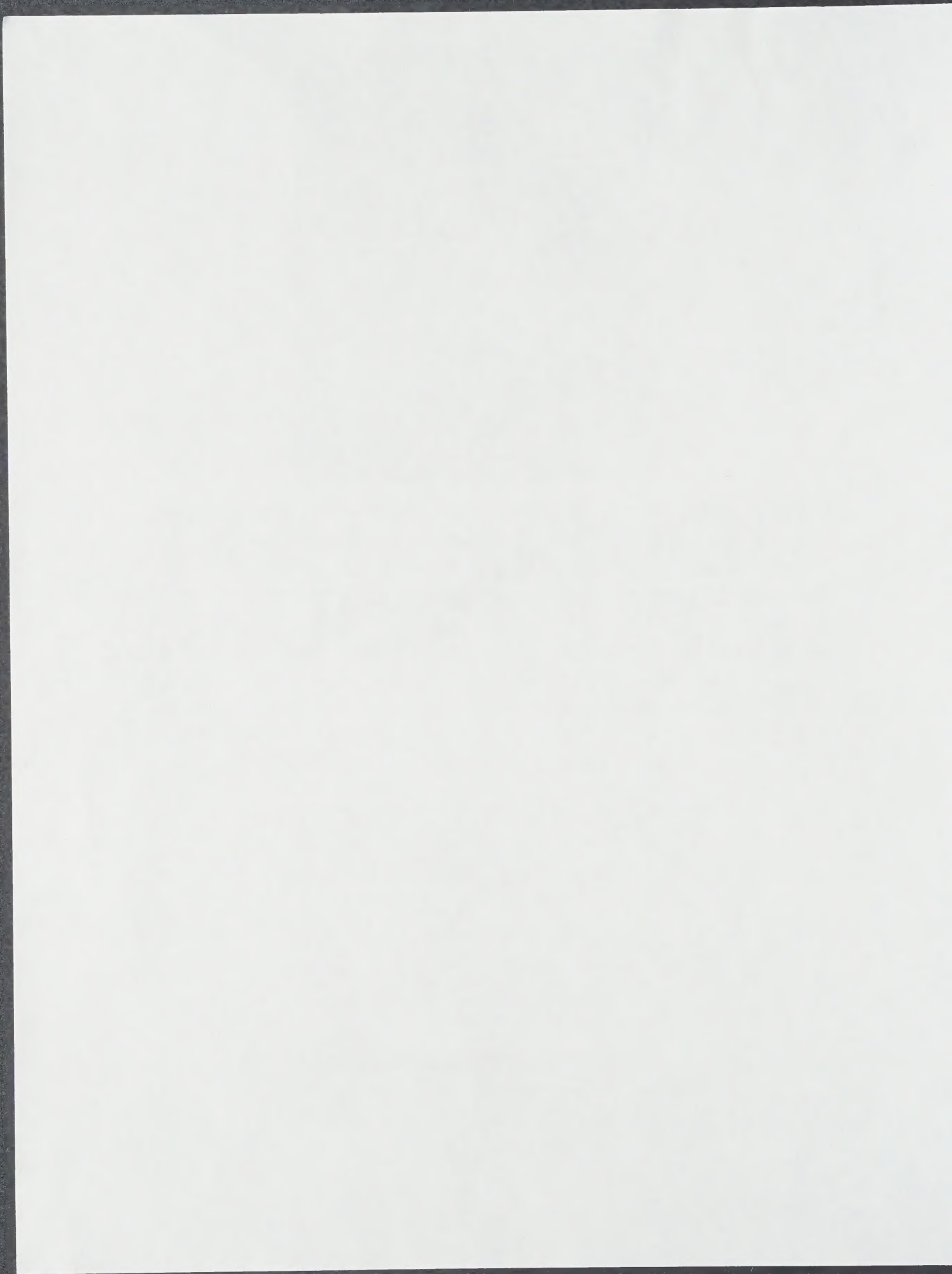
BY ALFRED BADER, SC'45, ARTS'46, MSC'47, LLD'86

My wife Isabel and I arrived at Amsterdam's Central Station on Saturday afternoon, November 12, 1994, and while waiting for the tram to take us to our hotel, I went to the tourist office to get a map of the city. Isabel stayed with our luggage, which consisted of two suitcases and my briefcase. When I returned minutes later, the briefcase was gone. A swarthy, bearded man had distracted Isabel with a question about trams, while a female accomplice grabbed the case.

It contained many photographs and papers, American and English money, traveler's cheque, chequebooks, two pieces of jewelry, and three small paintings that I had planned to discuss with Dutch art historians.

AN EXCERPT FROM ...

This above article is an excerpt from a planned second volume of Alfred Bader's memoirs. The first book, *Adventures of a Chemist Collector* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson) was published in 1995.



We rushed to the police station in the nearby *Voorburgwal* area, where Martin Te Pas, a very pleasant officer, took down the details. He told us that the money was certainly lost, but the paintings might be recovered.

From our hotel, we called two old friends: one in London to ask for help with alerting the London bank about the blank cheques, the other a friend and art dealer in The Hague, Saskia Jungeling, to ask for advice about the paintings.

All three paintings were 17th century. I had purchased the smallest one at Sotheby's in London the previous July. A sketch of a man, I believe by Gonzalez Coques, the Antwerp portraitist (circa 1635), might have seemed the most valuable to the thieves because it was in an elaborate carved gilt frame with an 18th century label on the back stating that it was by Anthony van Dyck. Thieves may not know of the unreliability of 18th-century attributions.

The other two paintings, both on thin wooden panels, I had purchased from London dealers just days before. One, in the manner of the Dutch Baroque painter Gerrit Dou (1613-1675), depicted Rembrandt's mother and was probably done by one of Rembrandt's student around 1630. It was in a padded envelope, unframed. The other, also unframed, was in a plastic folder, between my papers. The seller had suggested that this study of a man might be by Willem Drost, a well-known Rembrandt student, an attribution I found difficult to believe. But as it was certainly mid-17th century and of fine quality, I liked it immensely and thought it the best of the three lost paintings.

Exhausted after our phone calls from the hotel, we took sleeping pills and both had nightmares about robberies and paintings. At least we were physically unharmed, and one couldn't but admire the teamwork of the thieves!

Miracles still happen. At 8 o'clock the next morning, our art dealer friend Saskia called to tell us of a midnight phone call she had received from a man in Amsterdam who had found many of the photographs and papers and one of the paintings. At first, we thought he might be one of the thieves trying to exchange paintings for money. That this was ludicrous soon became clear when we met Bert



Alfred and Isabel Bader travel the globe in search of art treasures - known and unknown.

PHOTO BY JUDITH BROWN

the non-Drost painting of a man and my telephone list. Vos called my son in Milwaukee, but got the answering machine; he then phoned the police and the *Rijksmuseum* because he had seen a letter from Dr. Filedt-Kok to me. At midnight, he was only able to talk to a guard, of course. Then he noticed one Dutch phone number, that of Saskia Jungeling, who knew of our loss and cautioned him not to dry the painting on panel on a radiator.

The miracle is not that we recovered our papers and the painting, but that anyone would do what Bert Vos did. Just think of it: a man living alone, going to the enormous trouble - at midnight - to examine the papers, make those phone calls around the world, and try to dry out the damp material. At first, he refused compensation. Only when I insisted did he agree to use it for his Boy Scout troop. Of course, we

invited him to be our guest at our home in Milwaukee. When I fell asleep the night of our misfortune, I thought that I never wanted to be in Amsterdam again. Now I knew that I wanted to go back, if only to get to know this man better. We have since enjoyed his visit to Milwaukee and have been back to Amsterdam several times.

The thieves had taken the study of Rembrandt's mother out of its envelope, which they threw away with all the other papers, but they overlooked the study of a man and the panel had not suffered. We took it to the *Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Dokumentatie* (RKD) in The Hague and discovered that the painting came from the Hermitage in St. Petersburg and had been sold in Berlin in 1935. Abraham Bredius, the greatest Rembrandt expert of his day, had considered it a genuine Rembrandt, and gave it Number

**Stolen from Alfred Bader
in Amsterdam on November 12, 1994**



Gonzales Coques (1614-84)
Portrait of a Man
Oil on panel, 10.2 cm. x 8.3 cm.

Provenance: Sotheby's, London, July 6, 1994, Lot #186

Thief reported to the Amsterdam police and to IFAR (illustrated in IFAR reports, 16, 4, No. 236).

Three paintings were stolen. Of these, the best (previously attributed to Rembrandt, Eredius 226) was discarded by the thieves and found that evening. The two others, a period portrait of Rembrandt's mother and the Coques portrait were sent to the auction house De Eland in Amsterdam, were offered for sale in 1995, but returned as reserves were not reached. Shortly thereafter, the Amsterdam police recovered the paintings, checked neither their own police report nor IFAR, kept both paintings in their Lost and Found for three years and then sent them to auction (again to De Eland) where they were offered and sold on June 25, 1996, as lots 1420 and 1421.

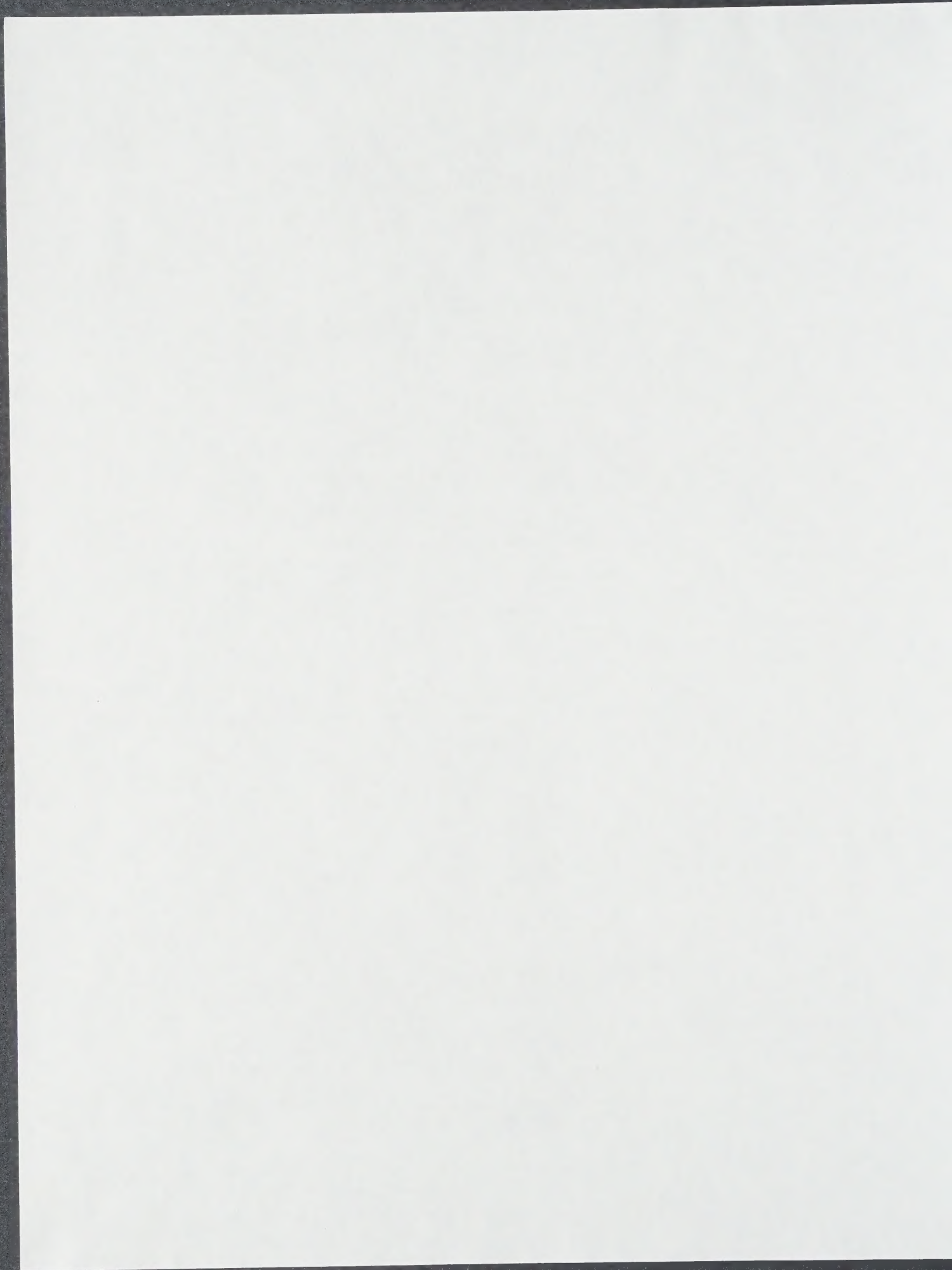
Rembrandt's Mother was bought by an Utrecht collector, Dr. M. B. H. Schilder, who took it to the RKD where it was identified as one of the paintings stolen from Bader. Dutch law gives buyers at auction legal possession of their purchase if acquired three years after the theft. Hence, Bader negotiated a repurchase of Rembrandt's Mother from Dr. Schilder and would like to negotiate a similar repurchase with the buyer of the Coques.

Please contact Dr. Alfred Bader, 924 E. Juneau Avenue, Suite 622, Milwaukee, WI 53202 USA. Phone (414) 277-0730. Fax: (414) 277-0709. E-mail: baderfa@execpc.com

An art historians' journal in the Netherlands published a full-page advertisement about the missing Coques painting, but it has not yet been recovered.

bad opt!

The Historians of Netherlandish Art



226 in his catalogue of the Master's work. When I first saw it in London, I remembered seeing another, certainly inferior, version in the Johnson Collection in the museum in Philadelphia. Today, these sketches are no longer thought to be by Rembrandt, but ours is certainly by one of his ablest students, painted in the 1640s.

At the *Mauritshuis* in The Hague, Frits Duparc, its director, compared the painting to a portrait of a man in a helmet by the Dutch Baroque painter Carel Fabritius (1622-1654), then on loan from the museum in Groningen. There certainly is similar handling of paint.

When I showed my panel to Dr. Filedt-Kok, he said, "How nice - 'the poor man's Rembrandt'." When I showed it to Professor Josua Bruyn, the retired head of the Rembrandt Research Project, he agreed with my dating, but thought we might never be able to ascertain the name of the very able student. Whether or not it is by Carel Fabritius, as he suggested, I think of it as my Bert Vos panel.

Naturally, we reported our loss to Christie's and Sotheby's, to the RKD, and to the International Foundation for Art Research (IFAR), which publicized the theft, illustrating both paintings in the *IFAR Reports* and *the Art Loss Register*. Then we waited. And hoped.

It was four years before the break in the case came. On December 23, 1998, Dr. Rudi Ekkart, the Director of the RKD, faxed me that a collector in Utrecht, Dr. Matthias M.B. Schilder, had bought my Rembrandt's mother at a small auction in Amsterdam and had then brought the panel to the RKD for identification. Drs. Jan Kosten, the Rembrandt school specialist there, had identified it as the stolen painting.

"Unfortunately for you," Ekkart wrote in a letter to me, "according to the Dutch civil code, a work of art that had been bought in good confidence (and in this case even in a public auction) longer than three years after the theft is the legal possession of the buyer." However, Ekkart added, "the present owner, who is a very reliable and rational man ... is willing to sell it to you for a reasonable price according to the market value".

Just what was the painting's market value?

Two days before the 1994 theft, I had bought the painting from a gallery in London, Whitfield Fine Arts, for £3200 (app. \$7,000 Canadian). Schilder had bought it, Lot 1420 in the De Eland auction on June 25, 1998, for a hammer price of the equivalent of about \$435 (Canadian), paying a total of \$550.



This portrait of a woman believed to be Rembrandt's mother was painted by one of the Master's students around 1630.

for its expertise but not its low prices), Whitfield Fine Arts, for \$7,000, less than a third of the price you are asking. The second point, selling my painting, you have considered, but that may not be as easy as you think. Knowing the facts, a truly good person will not buy it, and a really knowledgeable person will not either, because he can never get completely clear title. The silver lining is that I now know where the painting is.

"My worry is not that you will not return it. I can live without it, as I own many better Rembrandt School paintings. Rather, my worry is that you will not return it, but that neither you nor anyone else will really enjoy looking at it for a very long time. That would be a pity. Also, it would be a loss of a very interesting study piece to my University's museum, to which my wife and I are leaving our collection.

"What do I suggest? Certainly not that you just return my painting without compensation. Then you would be the second victim of the thief, and of the almost unbelievable police carelessness. Think about it, and let me know your reaction entirely at your convenience."

My friend, Dr. Otto Naumann, had suggested that I consult an Amsterdam lawyer, Dr. Willem Russell, himself an astute collector.

Russell discovered that both stolen paintings had been offered for sale at the auction house De Eland in February 1995. However, the consignee had demanded so high a reserve that they did not sell and were returned to him. Shortly thereafter, they were seized by the police from a Moroccan drug dealer and held by the police in their lost-and-found storeroom for the next three years, without anyone checking their own police reports or with IFAR. Then the *police* sent both paintings to De Eland again, where they were sold without reserve on June 25, 1998!



Thieves overlooked this valuable study of a man which Good Samaritan Bert Vos (l) returned to Alfred Bader, when he found it lying alongside an Amsterdam tram line.



Russell tried very hard to persuade the Amsterdam police to compensate me, to no avail. They did not even offer to give me the money they had received from the auction house. The lawyer advised me that suing the Amsterdam police would be far more costly than the value of the paintings.

At the time, Dr. Cynthia Schneider was the American ambassador to Holland, and I related these facts to her. She responded most kindly on April 1, 1999: "Your letter of March 24 regarding the theft of several of your paintings in Amsterdam distressed me more than you might have imagined. As a scholar of Dutch art, recently named American Ambassador to the Netherlands, your name is extremely well known to me. Before assuming my post, I was an Associate Professor of Art History at Georgetown University; I received my doctorate at Harvard under Seymour Slive. We have many friends in common, from Bill Robinson to Walter Liedtke to Seymour himself. In any case, your story is indeed a distressing one. I will do everything I can to investigate the situation, and I will get back to you with information as soon as possible."

But even the American Ambassador could not persuade A. A. Smit, the Commissioner of the Amsterdam Police, to be fair. I had myself written to the police by registered mail on February 22, 1999, but received no reply. Schneider wrote to Smit shortly after that, and he finally wrote to me on May 24, 2001 (two years later!).

"Although late, I'll try to answer the questions you asked," he said. "But let me start by saying that your version of what happened with your paintings is the correct one..." Even so, he made no offer of compensation.

I replied, "That being so, why does the Amsterdam Police not reimburse me for the two paintings it recovered and sold through auction?" I never got a reply. This was another example of stonewalling from the police of the city I had thought to be one of the fairest in Europe.

In December 1994 a Dutch paper, *Het Parool*, published a delightful article about Bert Vos' finding the best of these paintings. On April 10, 1999, the same paper featured another article about a Utrecht zoologist asking \$28,000 (Canadian) for the Rembrandt's mother, which the police had sent to auc-

tion. Another Dutch paper, *De Volkskrant*, published a similar article with an image of Rembrandt's mother on April 24.

Perhaps these articles and my writing to Schilder changed his mind. I told him that I had read some of his papers, particularly about ill-treated dogs, and I realized that he was an able zoologist, and that I hoped that he would sell me Rembrandt's mother reasonably. What was reasonable? I had bought the painting from Clovis Whitfield for roughly the equivalent of \$7,800 (Canadian), and he finally asked if I was willing to pay that. Of course I was, and Ekkart at the RKD exchanged my banker's draft for my painting which now hangs in our home.

We even visited Schilder in his home, happily smiling about the past and admiring his 19th century paintings. He gave us the *De Eland* catalogue of June 25, 1998, listing the two paintings sent in by the police. What a pity that P.J.C. Trommelen, the director of the auction house, could not tell us who had bought the Gonzales Coques, and that he appears not to have checked whether the paintings were stolen. Had he done so in 1995, they would have been returned to me.

The *Historians of Netherlandish Art* published a full-page advertisement in their April 2000 issue and, if I live long enough, I may find out about the third and least important painting.

In the meantime, the Rijksmuseum has asked me to lend a Sweet's self-portrait and the Rembrandthuis asked for two early Rembrandts. I hesitated, thinking of A. A. Smit, the Amsterdam Police Commissioner, but should I cut off my nose to spite my face? I enjoyed seeing all three of these paintings in the exhibitions and all have been returned safely.

Note: Alfred R. Bader, is the founder of both the Aldrich Chemical Company and the Bader Fine Arts Gallery in Milwaukee, WI. He and his wife Isabel travel the globe on the trail of Old Master paintings – known and unknown – and the couple are among the world's foremost collectors, lecturers, and art detectives. The Baders are also among the University's most loyal and generous benefactors. Their gifts have helped the Agnes Etherington Art Centre build one the finest publicly held collections in Canada. ■



The Baders with some of the dozens of students who have benefitted as recipients of the Bader Awards.



A DOUBLE THEFT

Isabel and I arrived at Amsterdam's Central Station on Saturday afternoon, November 12, 1994, and while waiting for the tram to take us to our hotel, I went to the tourist office to pick up a map of the city, leaving Isabel with our luggage - two suitcases and my briefcase. When I returned minutes later, the briefcase was gone. A swarthy, bearded man had distracted her attention by asking a question about trams while a woman grabbed the case.

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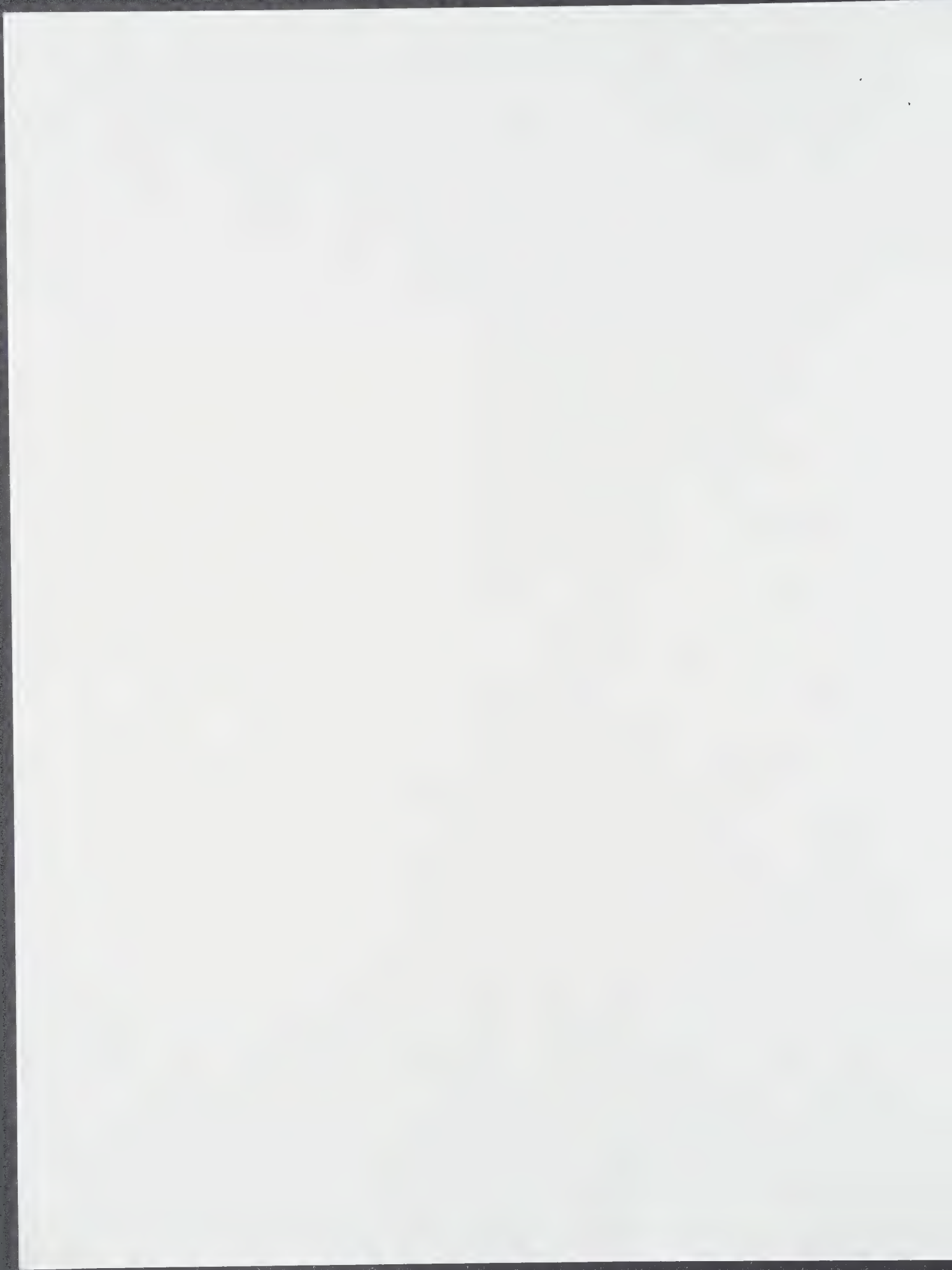
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The other two paintings, both on panels, I had purchased from London dealers just days before. One depicted Rembrandt's mother ^(Fig. 2) in the manner of Dou, and probably by a Rembrandt student of around 1630. It was in a padded envelope, unframed. The other, also unframed, was just in a plastic folder, between my papers. The seller had suggested that this study of a man might be by Willem Drost, a well-known Rembrandt student, an attribution I found difficult to believe; but as it was certainly mid 17th century and of fine quality, I liked it immensely and thought it the best of the three lost paintings. ^(Fig. 3)

We were exhausted after our phone calls from the hotel, took sleeping pills and both had nightmares about robberies and paintings. But at least we were physically unharmed and one couldn't but admire the teamwork of the thieves!

Miracles still happen. At 8:00 the next morning Saskia called us to tell us of a phone call she had received at midnight from a man in Amsterdam who had found many of the photographs and papers and one painting. At first we thought he might be one of the thieves trying to exchange paintings for more money. That this was ludicrous soon became clear when we met Bert Vos later that morning. He had been returning to his home along tramline 17, several miles from the station, at 11:15 the night before, when he noticed a pile of papers and 8" x 10" photographs lying in the gutter between two dustbins. Closer inspection convinced him that this was not rubbish, so he scooped up the pile and took it to his simple third-story apartment, spread out the papers and photographs to dry, read some of the documents, discovered the non-Drost painting of a



man and my telephone list. He called my son in Milwaukee but reached the answering machine; he then phoned the police and the Rijksmuseum because he had seen a letter from Dr. Filedt-Kok to me, but of course at midnight, he was only able to talk to a guard. Then he noticed one Dutch phone number, that of Saskia, who knew of our loss and cautioned him not to dry the painting on panel on a radiator.

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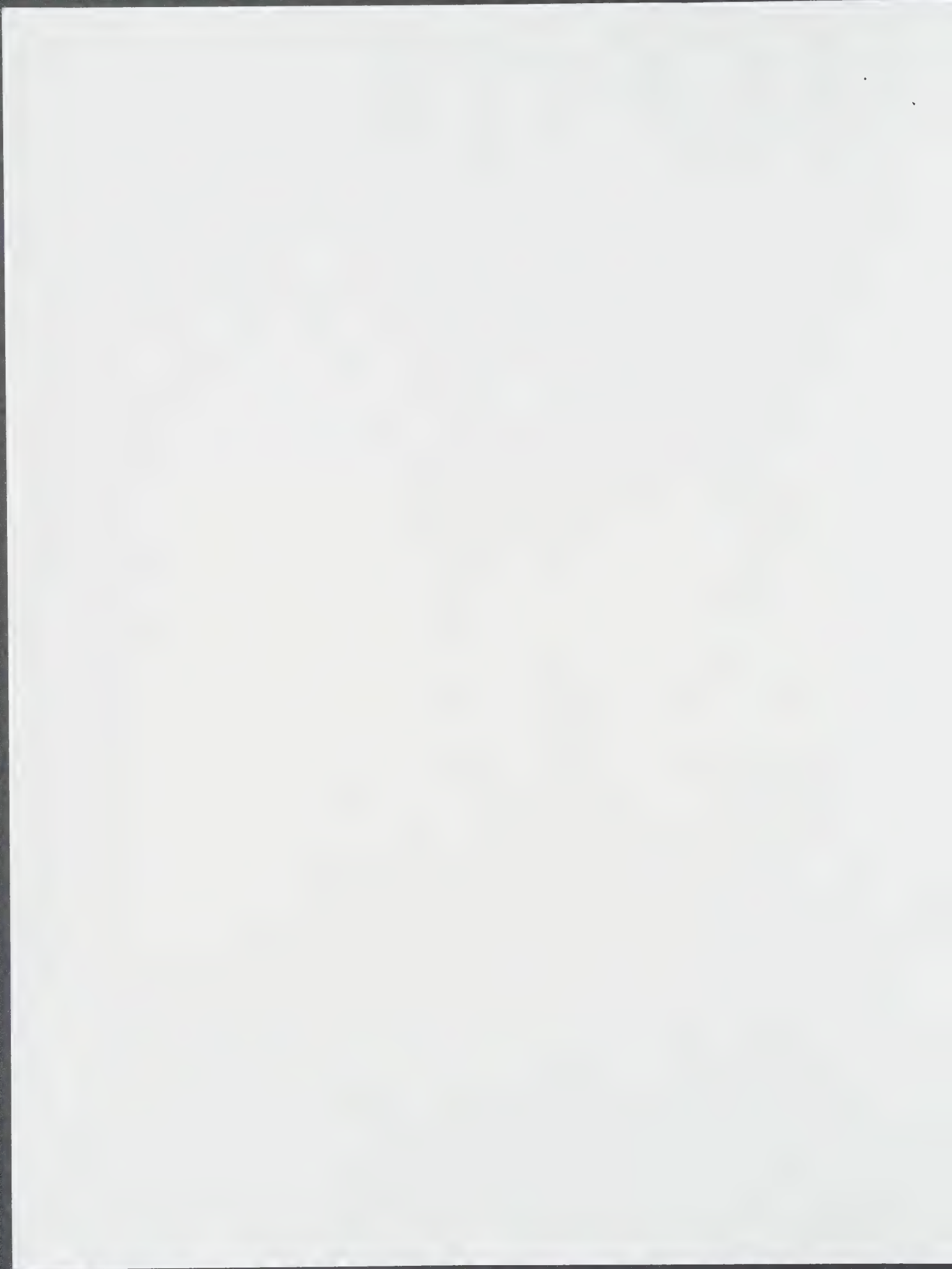
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"Unfortunately for you", wrote Dr. Ekkart, "according to the Dutch civil code a work of art that had been bought in good confidence (and in this case even in a public auction) longer than three years after the theft is the legal possession of the buyer." Dr. Ekkart added, however, that "the present owner, who is a very reliable and rational man . . . is willing to sell it to you for a reasonable price according to the market value".



Just what was the market value?

Two days before the theft in 1994 I had bought the painting from a gallery in London, Whitfield Fine Arts, for £3200. Dr. Schilder had bought it, Lot 1420 in the De Eland auction on June 25, 1998, for a hammer price of Hfl 600, paying a total of Hfl 762.

Professor Werner Sumowski had written to Dr. Schilder that he considered the painting to be one of the best copies of a lost original by Rembrandt. Another copy is in the Mauritshuis (RRP C-41).

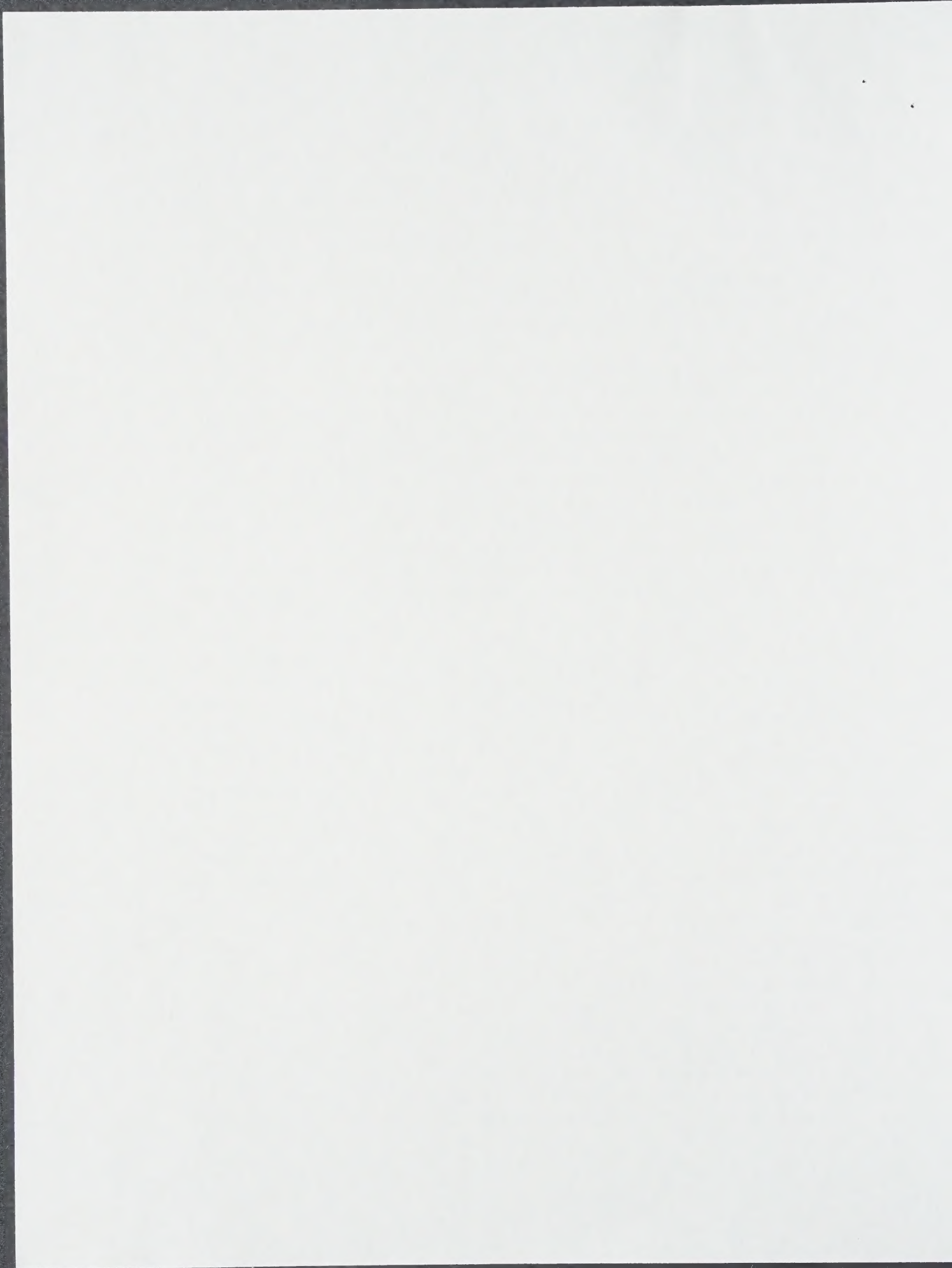
A dealer in Amsterdam had offered Dr. Schilder Hfl 20,000 and now he concluded that "Hfl 35,000 is a correct price . . . its value would go up easily to Hfl 50,000 in just a few years as was suggested by an art dealer, who advised me not to sell the painting now".

Naturally I asked Dr. Ekkart whether he still considered Dr. Schilder a very reliable and rational man and I remonstrated with Dr. Schilder, ". . . you would like thirty five thousand guilders for a painting which I had purchased in November 1994 from a London gallery (known for its expertise but not its low prices), Whitfield Fine Arts, for £3200, less than a third of the price you are asking. The second point, selling my painting, you have considered, but that may not be as easy as you think. Knowing the facts, a truly good person will not buy it, and a really knowledgeable person will not either, because he can never get completely clear title. The silver lining is that I now know where the painting is. My worry is not that you will not return it. I can live without it, as I own many better Rembrandt School paintings. Rather, my worry is that you will not return it, but that neither you nor anyone else will really enjoy looking at it for a very long time. That would be a pity. Also, it would be a loss of a very interesting study piece to my University's museum, to which my wife and I are leaving our collection. What do I suggest? Certainly not that you just return my painting without compensation. Then you would be the second victim of the thief, and of the almost unbelievable police carelessness. Think about it, and let me know your reaction entirely at your convenience."

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In December 1994 a Dutch paper, *Het Parool*, had written a delightful article about Bert Vos’ finding the best of these paintings. On April 10, 1999 the same paper published another article about a Utrecht zoologist asking Hfl 35,000 for the Rembrandt’s mother which the police had sent to auction. Another Dutch paper, *De Volkskrant*, published a similar article with a photo of Rembrandt’s mother on April 24.

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