

Alfred Baber Fonds

Chemistry and Art
More Adventures of a Chemist Collector

Chapter 4 -
Rembrandt / Not Rembrandt

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Chapter 4

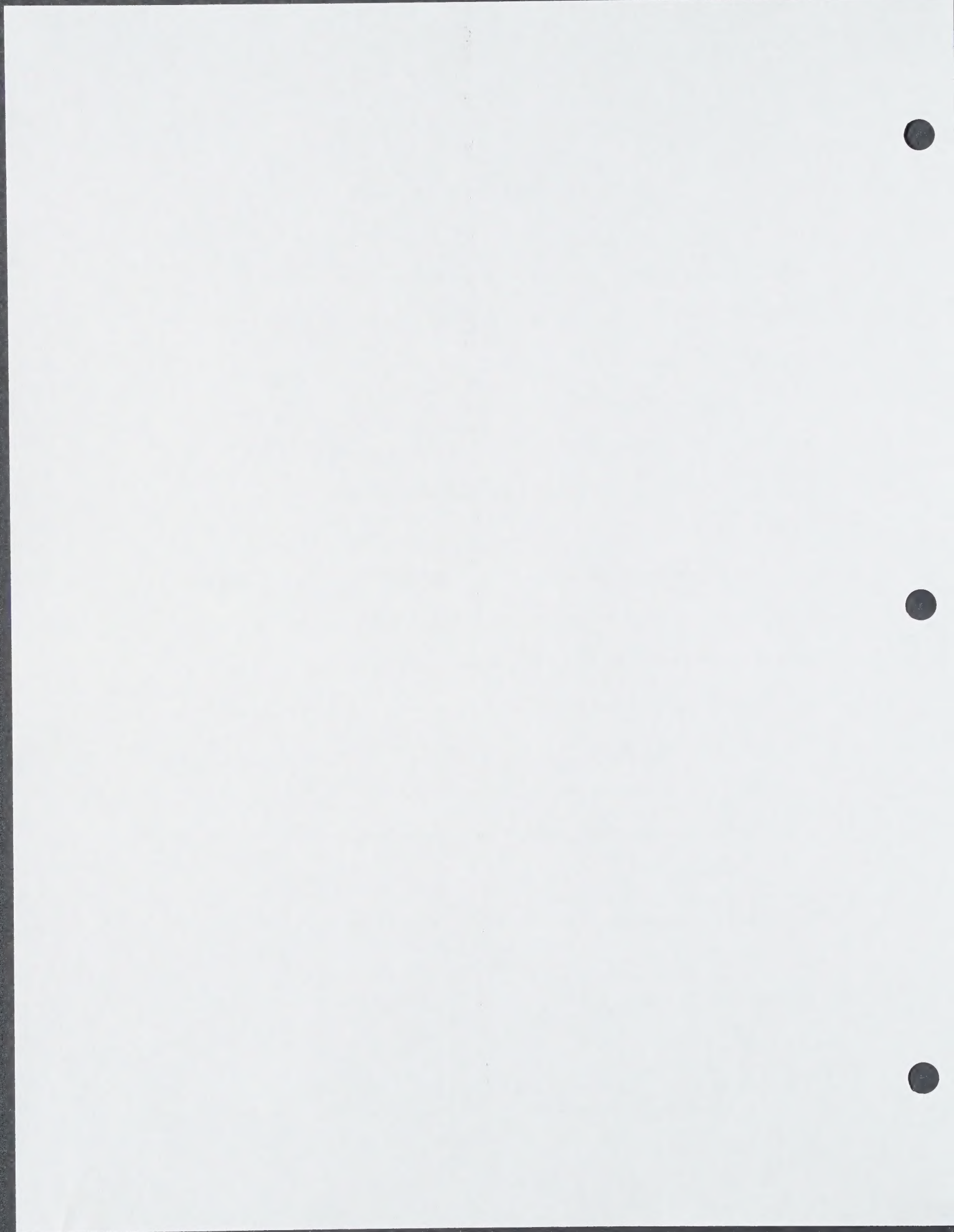
Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt¹

Ever since listening to Jakob Rosenberg's lecture on Rembrandt at Harvard in 1948, I hoped that some day I would be able to acquire one of Rembrandt's paintings. The first opportunity arose when the Viennese owner of a small work on copper depicting *A Scholar by Candlelight* (fig.) sold this to me in 1959. I bought it subject to Jakob Rosenberg's accepting it as a Rembrandt, which he did after close inspection at Harvard during a week I left it with him.

Two members of the Rembrandt Research Project (RRP), S.H. Levie and Ernst van de Wetering, examined this painting in my house in September 1972 and told me during their visit that they believed it to be an early work by Rembrandt, in paint handling very similar to that of Rembrandt's *Flight into Egypt* in Tours. The RRP then asked me to bring it to Amsterdam in 1973, and in Volume 1 of the Corpus that appeared in 1982, gave both my painting and that in Tours C numbers (not by Rembrandt), C18 and C5, probably by the same artist from Rembrandt's immediate circle.

From November 2001 to May 2002, the museum in Kassel and the Rembrandthuis in Amsterdam held an exhibition, *The Mystery of the Young Rembrandt*, which included the *Flight into Egypt* as a Rembrandt and my painting hanging next to the *Flight* as a Rembrandt or Circle of Rembrandt.

¹ I want to thank Walter Liedtke for allowing me to use the title of his great exhibition in the Metropolitan Museum in 1995–1996 for the title of this chapter.

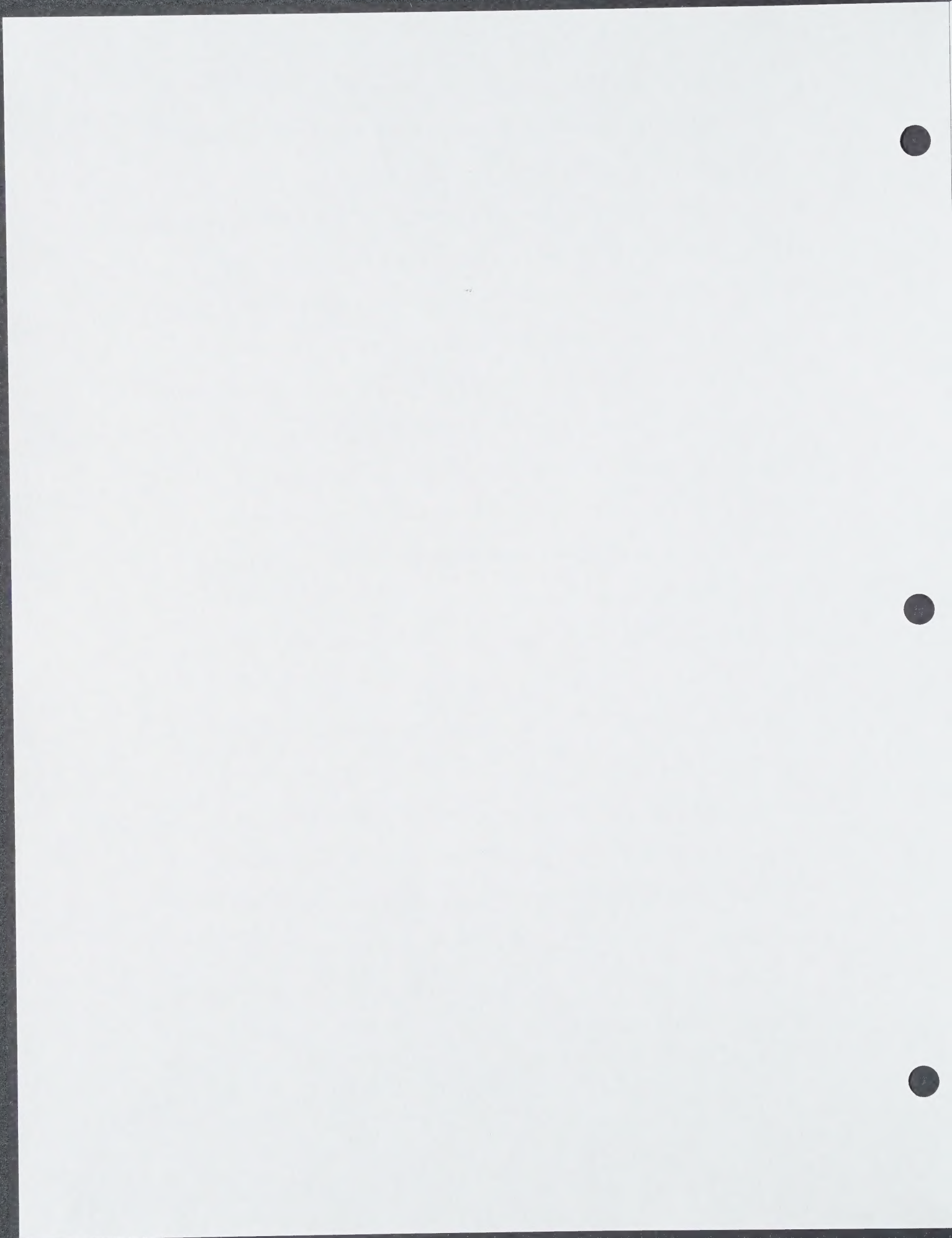


The history of this painting and the question of attribution have been described clearly in David de Witt's 2007 catalogue The Bader Collection.

My next Rembrandt acquisition, again initially C22 in the Corpus, was the *Head of an Old Man in a Cap*, ^(fig.) which I was able to purchase very inexpensively at Christie's in London in March 1979. I was convinced of its authenticity, but as the Christie's catalogue stated that the RRP did not accept it, there was little competition. Volume I of the Corpus, published in 1982, gives a three-page discussion of the painting, beginning with the summarized opinion that describes C22 as "a well preserved painting from Rembrandt's immediate circle, reproduced in 1634 as his invention in an etching by J.G. Van Vliet". Following Section 4. Comments is a note, "December 1979: one of the authors (Ernst van de Wetering) does not rule out the possibility of no. C22 being an autograph work by Rembrandt."

As David de Witt has pointed out in the 2007 catalogue The Bader Collection:

The turning point came with the 1996 exhibition on Rembrandt and Van Vliet in the Rembrandthuis in Amsterdam, where it was proven that Van Vliet and Rembrandt collaborated on some prints, and that the watermarks appearing in the paper on some examples also appeared in impressions of Van Vliet's print after the present painting. Evidently, Rembrandt returned regularly to Leiden to direct the work of Van Vliet, and so there would not have been a mistake about the right in authorship of the present painting. Since the 1996 exhibition, scholars have generally voiced approval of the attribution to Rembrandt.



Isabel and I gave this painting to Queen's University in 2003, the first of several Rembrandts to go to Queen's.

In his two-volume work on Rembrandt published in 1949, Jakob Rosenberg illustrated two heads of old men ^(figs. &) side by side on one page. Both of these subsequently came up at auction. The one I liked particularly (fig. 100 in Rosenberg's book) was offered in the sale of the famous Alfred W. Erickson collection at Parke-Bernet in New York in November 1961. There it was one of three Rembrandts, the most famous of which, *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*, was purchased by the Metropolitan Museum for \$2.3 million. The other two Rembrandts were estimated very reasonably, and so I flew to New York to bid for the *Old Man*, signed and dated Rembrandt f. 1659.^(fig.) I was not the only one to love this work, however, and Derek Cotton, a collector in Birmingham, England, bought it for \$180,000. This was far more than I was able to pay. My salary was very modest; Aldrich was still a small company, and had not yet gone public. In the 1970s, the Rembrandt Research Project must have indicated that they did not accept it as genuine, and when Derek Cotton's son offered it at Christie's London in April 1993, it was described as Circle of Rembrandt, with an estimate of £60,000–80,000. I was at the sale, once again hoping to buy it, but when I noted that no one was bidding, I decided not to bid either. I made a much lower bid after the sale, and that was accepted.

Both of my sons, David and Daniel, are serious collectors of paintings, and each will have two of my best paintings. Daniel has really loved this *Old Man*, and so I gave it to him. The painting has again been carefully examined by van de Wetering, who has



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told us that he is now certain of its authenticity. He borrowed it with three other works for a small exhibition in Amsterdam in 2005 titled Rembrandt's Studies: New Light on an Old Problem. In 2006, it was included in the great Rembrandt exhibitions in the Rembrandthuis and in Berlin in celebration of four hundred years since Rembrandt's birth. Is it by Rembrandt? I am not totally certain, as I am not certain of some of van de Wetering's other new attributions, but I love it, as does Daniel. Again, this painting is carefully described in David de Witt's Bader catalogue, which contains descriptions of two paintings that will not come to Queen's because this is Daniel's; a second, a *Joseph and the Baker* by a Delft Rembrandt student will also go to David.

The second of the two paintings illustrated by Jakob Rosenberg (fig. 99) is *Head of a Bearded Man: Study for St. Matthew*,^(fig.) which I bought as Circle of Rembrandt at Christie's London in February 1995. David de Witt^(fig.) has described this painting in his 2007 *Bader Catalogue* clearly:

This little panel displays the moving visage of a man in robust middle age, with a heavy, thick beard. He turns to the right and looks off to the side. His lowered eyelids, furrowed brow, pursed lips, and empty gaze suggest that he is absorbed in thought. His expression connects him directly to Rembrandt's well-known depiction of *St. Matthew Inspired by the Angel* in the Louvre, as do his features, such as his prominent brow and cheekbones, and the pronounced *levator labii* muscles flanking the nose. This painting does not appear to be derived from the St. Matthew, however. In the Paris painting, the figure is seen more on a level, draws his hand to his chin, and wears a turban-like headdress. Here the figure wears a simple soft cap and a

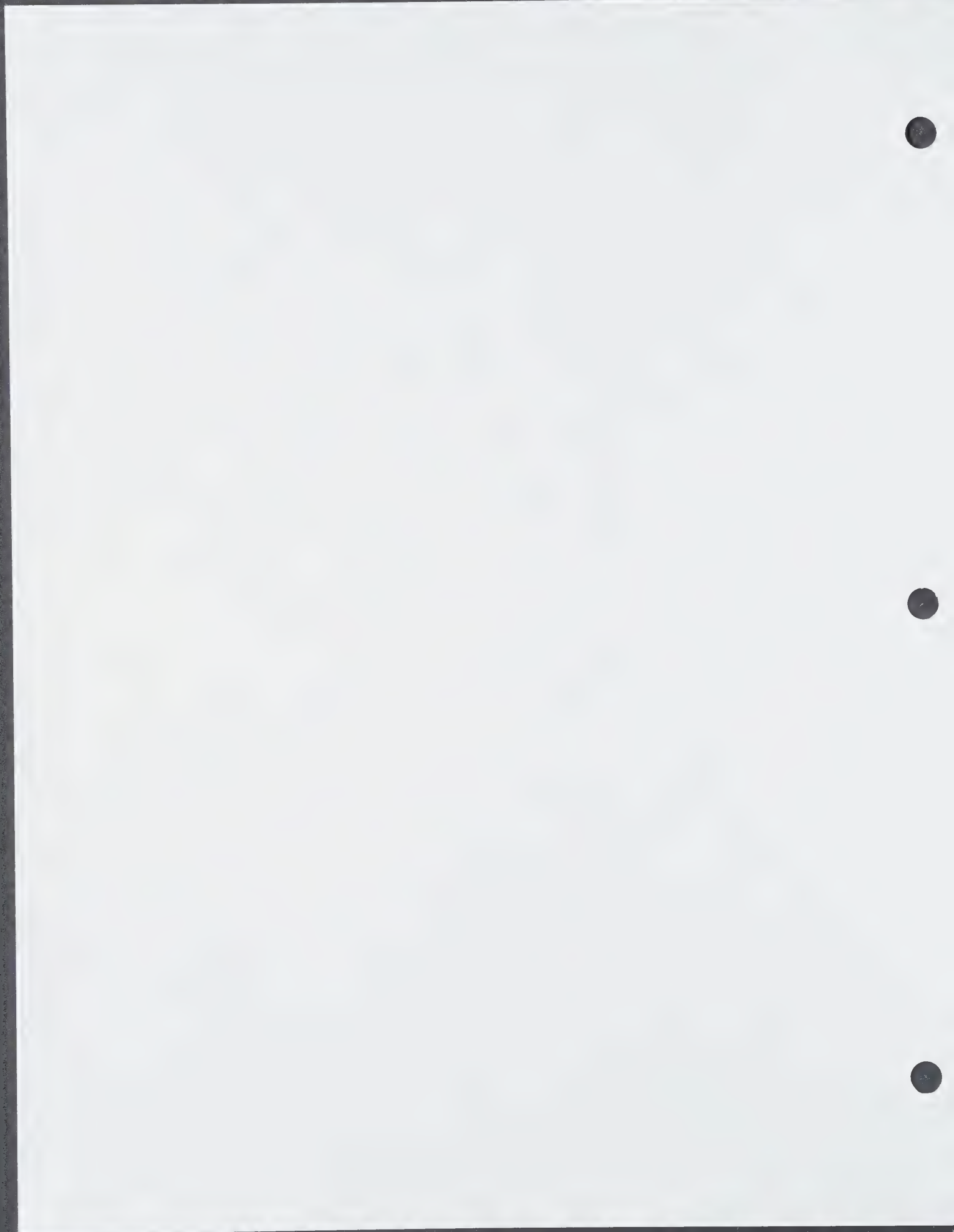


heavy smock. The differences between the two could reflect the transformation of a head study from a model into a finished history painting. The simple costume in the small panel is derived from contemporary dress, bereft of any historical allusions. The lack of any sign of Rembrandt's inventive elaboration of St. Matthew's figure again indicates that it is not a copy after it. It is nearly certain that the present work reflects Rembrandt's study of a figure in preparation for the St. Matthew. The question remains whether it is an original sketch, or a copy after one, by Rembrandt. Depictions by him of Jeremiah and of Jesus seem to have been preceded by painted studies in a similar fashion.

Bredius identifies it as autograph, but groups it with three other small panels showing the same model in slightly varying views. However, none of these other works approaches its decisive handling and structure. One of them, a panel in Washington, is an exercise in direct impasto strokes, but does not yield a strong impression.

Isabel and I took this painting to the National Gallery in Washington, where the curator Arthur Wheelock allowed us to compare it with their version (Bredius 302). His comments were, "I cannot tell you whether your version is by Rembrandt, but I can tell you that yours is much better than ours." Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt: clearly the jury is still out, but whether by the master or one of his students, it has given us a good deal of pleasure.

Perhaps my happiest acquisition was that of a *Small Head of an Old Man in Profile* ^(fig.) on panel, offered from the John Hay Whitney collection at Sotheby's in New



York in May 2000. Described as Circle of Rembrandt, it was estimated at only \$40,000-60,000. Bidding by telephone, I was prepared to go very high, as I believed that there was a good chance that it was an original Rembrandt, and I was very happy when the auctioneer, George Gordon, knocked it down to me for \$125,000. Our good friend George hand-delivered it when he came to Milwaukee on a visit to the Midwest after the sales.

Removing the dirty old varnish was very easy; conservator Charles Munch told me that he had seldom worked on a seventeenth-century panel in such good condition. I was eager to show it to Ernst van de Wetering and offered to take it with us when we went to Amsterdam in November. He spent a long time with the little panel when we showed it to him, and Peter Klein from Hamburg, who happened to be visiting him at the time, took a small sample of the wood and was able to determine by dendrochronology that a date around 1661 was likely. Ernst asked us to bring the panel to the Rijksmuseum the next day so that he could compare it with Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul*, which is signed and dated 1661.

In *Rembrandt Quest of a Genius*, the catalog of the Rembrandthuis exhibition of 2006 where our paintings were exhibited, Ernst wrote:

This small painting, which is evidently related to Rembrandt's *Circumcision of Christ in the Stable* in 1661 in Washington, originated rather late in Rembrandt's career. In the *Circumcision*, several old men - including the Mohel who carries out the circumcision and a man who writes in a book - are depicted in roughly the same way as the man in this study....Now that the painting has been freed of its thick



layer of varnish, it can be seen as a small masterpiece, both as regards colour and *peinture*. It has been executed at a high tempo, wet in wet. With all its dynamism, it betrays such an astonishing control of the pictorial means available and, as a result, such a supreme sense of form on the part of its author, that one can scarcely imagine it could have been painted by a pupil. Nor could it be a copy, executed by a pupil, after one of the figures in the Washington *Circumcision*: the visual 'information' in the *Circumcision* is simply too scant for that. In its execution and colour scheme, the *Lighting Study of an Old Man in Profile* shows a striking resemblance to Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait as Paul* from 1661 in the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum. Confrontation between these two paintings leaves no room for doubt as to the study's authenticity. On this basis alone, it may be assumed that the study originated around 1661, the year in which the Washington *Circumcision* originated according to the date applied to that painting. We can safely accept, therefore, that the small painting from the Bader collection was a preparatory study for the *Circumcision*.

This painting was also in van de Wetering's small 2005 exhibition and in the major Rembrandt exhibitions in Amsterdam and Berlin in 2006, and I have now given it to Queen's University.

One of the best dealers in Old Master paintings I have ever known was Neville Orgel in London. Despite his great knowledge, he was pessimistic and so self-effacing that he asked me not to mention his name in my first autobiography. I bought many paintings from him before he moved from London to Israel, where he died in 2003. In



1977, on one of my rare visits to his home in Golder's Green, I saw a fine portrait of *Rembrandt Sketching*,^(fig.) much like Bredius 46 in Dresden and Bredius 47 in San Francisco. In 1970, Neville had sent a photograph of his painting to Dr Kurt Bauch, the great Rembrandt expert in Germany, who had replied that he preferred Neville's portrait to those in Dresden and San Francisco, but did not believe that Neville's was by Rembrandt. I loved the portrait. Neville was not keen to sell it (he had never taken it to his gallery), but he said he would sell to me if I paid him enough to buy an apartment he wanted in Israel - £40,000.

Since then, it has hung over my desk at home and given me a great deal of pleasure. It has graced the cover of an Aldrich catalogue and has been in two exhibitions at Purdue, two at Queen's University, and one titled *The Detective's Eye* at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

There are six versions of this portrait of Rembrandt, and at first I had hoped that mine might be the original. It is not. Volume IV of the Rembrandt Research Project deals only with Rembrandt self-portraits. In this volume, van de Wetering has written about all six versions, including mine, which he has illustrated extensively giving one full color illustration and one black/white and two color illustrations of details of my painting, coming to the conclusion that it is a period portrait of Rembrandt, but not even painted in Rembrandt's workshop.

Over the years, I kept Neville informed about my findings, and shortly before he died, he offered to repurchase the picture for \$100,000. I declined. I just like it too much, no matter who painted it.



The last Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt painting I acquired was the *Portrait of a Woman* (fig.), perhaps Hendrickje Stoffels, Bredius 112, the purchase of which I have described in Chapter 3.

Who painted Lucille Simon's favorite portrait? In 1979, when I purchased *The Head of an Old Man*, RRP C22, at an auction at Christie's London, I was convinced that it was by Rembrandt, although the RRP was not. Now it is universally accepted as by Rembrandt. With Bredius 112, however, I am not convinced, but I love it and, like the four dealers who owned it until February 2003, I have been searching for a name. It is certainly period. Drost has been suggested, but it is not like any of the thirty-eight works accepted by Jonathan Bikker. David de Witt, the Bader curator at Queen's, thought briefly of Abraham van Dyck, and that is close. But I have two of his signed works at home, and the paint handling is not quite the same. Now David has considered the possibility that it might be by Jacobus Leveck, working in Rembrandt's studio in the 1650s. Again, a detailed history and description of this painting is given in David's *Bader Collection Catalogue of 2007*.

Ernst van de Wetering has told me that he hates the painting. What a strange reaction to a painting, which Jacob Rosenberg had loved and considered a great Rembrandt, and which was the frontispiece in color of the catalogue of the Rembrandt exhibition in Chicago in 1969. Paintings do cause strong emotions, and I buy only paintings I really love for my own collection. This is one of them.

