

## (1) Abraham Bredius and Rembrandt

This year, Museum Bredius celebrates its 100th anniversary.

In 1921, a year before he founded the museum, Abraham Bredius (1855-1946) acquired a small panel which he judged to have been painted by Rembrandt. It is an oil sketch depicting the Raising of the Cross, which he kept above a table arranged as an altar to art as an object of private devotion.



Bredius supposed it to have been a study by Rembrandt for a larger painting of the theme now at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. However, later art historians rejected it as an imitation, painted in Rembrandt's manner. In 1969, art experts called it a 'crude imitation' and in 1973 'an important later imitation', since when it has been omitted in the literature on Rembrandt.

Jeroen Giltaij, former chief curator of old master paintings and sculpture at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, thinks otherwise. He believes that the oil sketch must indeed have been painted by Rembrandt.

Abraham Bredius was a leading connoisseur of Rembrandt's work. In 1935, he was the first to gather all Rembrandt's paintings in a single volume, *The Paintings of Rembrandt 630 Reproductions*. Jeroen Giltaij took on the task of revisiting these paintings in *Het Grote Rembrandt Boek: Alle 684 schilderijen*.

# Avondblad, B.

## Letteren en Kunst.

Dr. A. Bredius schrijft ons:

Hoe ongaarne ook, moet ik toch Dr. Hofstede de Groot van antwoord dienen op een aantijging in de N. R. C. van 10 dezer tegen mij geuit, die ik niet weersproken m'g laten.

In zijn stukje, gevolg van een helaas in die courant afgedrukt particulier schrijven aan den heer de Meester, lees ik dat „het oordeel van den adviseur niet onbevangen is. Immers hij had gewild, dat een aan hem behorende Rembrandt voor het K. Kab. v. Sob. zou worden aangekocht en dat is niet geschied.”

Dit is nu een absoluut onware voorstelling der dingen. Toevallig had ik te Amsterdam de Kruis-opheffing van Rembrandt gezien, die nu op de tentoonstelling te Parijs zal hangen. Dit stuk was zoo goed als gekocht door een onlangs overleden Amsterdam'sch verzamelaar, voor een zeer lagen prijs. Ik begrijp eerst thans waarom die prijs zoo laag was: te Londen had een expert van naam het voor een onecht stuk verklaard. Ik was zóó door de schoonheid van dit werk getroffen, dat ik den kooper verzocht, het stuk liever aan mij te willen laten, daar ik hoopte, het nog eens in een onzer publice verzamelingen te zien. In een zeer vriendelijk schrijven liet de heer Ostwalt mij de voorkeur, en het stuk werd mijn eigendom. Dat op een oogenblik, waarop het mij uit een finantieel oogpunt zeer weinig schikte een zoo groote uitgave te doen, zoodat ik, hoewel ongaarne, voor een klein gedeelte met een schilderij van Teniers uit de verzameling van mijn grootvader betasde, dat thans alweer voor den driedubbelen prijs te koop aangeboden wordt.

Ik heb toen den Minister medegedeeld, dat ik dit buitengewone werk van Rembrandt ter beschikking der Regeering stelde, natuurlijk voor den kostenden prijs. Ik heb ook Martin daarover gesproken, die er niet van hooren wilde, daar hij liever een primitief wilde koopen,

## (2) A Teniers in exchange for *The Raising of the Cross*

Abraham Bredius was immensely proud of his purchase. He had been 'so struck by its beauty' that he agreed to include a painting by David Teniers in part exchange. Bredius felt that the work deserved a place in one of the great Dutch art museums.

In 1921, leading Dutch newspaper NRC published a letter received from Bredius regarding the purchase.

*Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, Monday  
11 April 1921, Avondblad B

### (3) The painting in Munich



Between 1633 and 1639, Rembrandt produced a series of six paintings depicting scenes from the Life and Passion of Christ commissioned by Stadholder Frederick Henry. The canvas depicting the Raising of the Cross, said to be the first of the series, was painted around 1633 and is presently at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich.

*Rembrandt, The Raising of the Cross, c. 1633,  
Oil on canvas, 96.2 x 72.2 cm  
Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte  
Pinakothek*

### How are the oil sketch in The Hague and the painting in Munich connected?

The two versions of the *Raising of the Cross* are similar in so many ways that they must be linked in some way. Giltaij has no doubt that the sketch was painted by Rembrandt. The meticulous brushwork and the dramatic effect of the skilful chiaroscuro all point to Rembrandt's hand.



Giltaij had initially thought that the sketch was a preliminary study for the larger canvas in Munich. This opinion was reinforced by the existence of a drawing of the same subject made by Rembrandt in 1629. It shows a remarkably similar composition, but in reverse. Was the drawing perhaps Rembrandt's first idea for the Munich painting?

*Rembrandt, The Rasing of the Cross,  
1629, black chalk, heightened with white, 193 x 148 mm,  
Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen*

When Frederick Henry's secretary Constantijn Huygens visited the young Rembrandt in 1628/29, the artist may already have been involved in discussions about a painting of the Raising of the Cross or even a Passion series, for which the drawing may have been a kind of preview. That they may also have discussed an oil sketch as a coloured draft at this meeting seems quite plausible.

However, recent research has brought new evidence to light.

Dendrochronological measurements of the wood's annual tree rings indicate a date for the panel of between 1642 and 1645. This means that the oil sketch was painted after the Munich painting. Which leaves the function of the sketch in doubt.

Rembrandt appears to have continued working on the composition of the Munich painting in the oil sketch, making several significant changes. Alterations made while painting are known as pentiments. For example, he moved the Cross further to the left. And perhaps the most important change involves the captain on horseback: in the Munich piece he appears prominently to the left of Christ; in the sketch, Rembrandt moved him to the bottom right corner.

## (4) The panel

Why did the great Rembrandt experts who followed Bredius question his attribution of the painting to Rembrandt?

One reason may have been that they thought that the panel on which the sketch was painted dated from the nineteenth century. Indeed, any experienced art connoisseur who examined the back of the painting in the frame would have concluded that it was not seventeenth-century.

Yet had they removed the panel from the frame, they would have seen that a nineteenth-century panel had been pasted onto the back of the original panel to reinforce it. The painted panel is slightly smaller and has the original chamfered corners. It appears to have been shaved down to just a few millimetres thick, but definitely dates from the seventeenth century.

Marta Dominguez-Delmás, guest dendrochronologist at Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, measured the annual tree rings. She then compared these to samples of precisely dated wood. From this she was able to determine that the latest annual ring dates from 1634, so that painters in Amsterdam could not have used the panel earlier than between 1642 and 1645.



*The front and back of the oil sketch, in the frame in which Bredius bought the painting*



## **(5) Further research: Rembrandt as the maker of the oil sketch**

Museum Bredius was naturally pleased when Giltaij's concluded that the oil sketch could be attributed to Rembrandt, but decided to undertake technical research to confirm the results, recording the entire process. Johanneke Verhave of Restoration Studio Rotterdam took on the task.

Verhave began by stripping the painting of all later additions to study the original seventeenth-century paint more closely. At the same time, the materials and techniques used by the artist were examined to find out whether the attribution to Rembrandt did indeed hold up.

The sketch had probably never been restored since its acquisition by Bredius in 1921. So the restoration materials on the front, the varnish layer and retouches, were now more than a century old and considerably out of date. Indeed, the varnish had turned a dark yellow.

The old restoration materials were removed under the microscope using organic solvents on small cotton swabs. The original paint layer emerged far brighter and clearer.

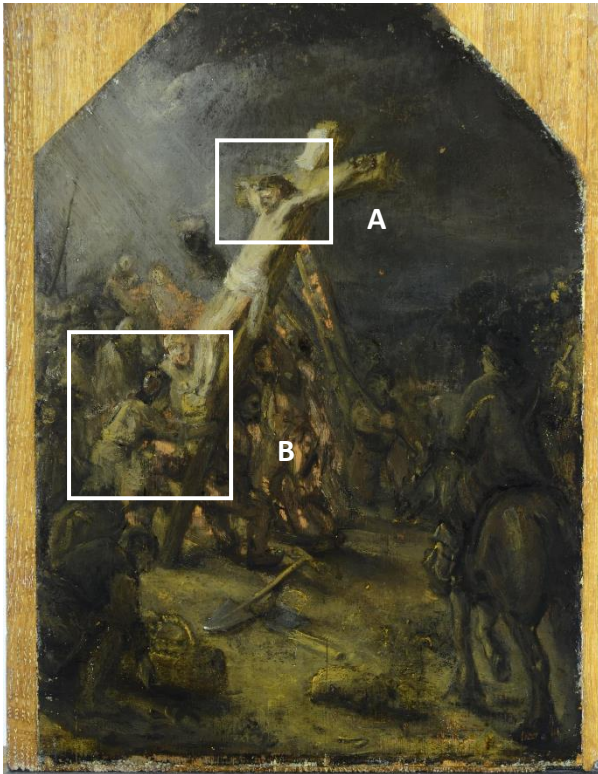


*Before 2021 restoration*



*After 2021 restoration*

## (6) The 'handwriting' of Rembrandt



Every artist has their own characteristic way of painting and Rembrandt's brushwork has a unique signature. He showed his mastery with dramatic chiaroscuro contrasts, achieving this effect in his own magisterial fashion with just a few cursory brushstrokes.

Various details reveal Rembrandt's signature style, of which Giltaij offers several examples.

### A. Detail of the head of Christ

For example, Christ's head is indicated almost without paint: his nose, mouth

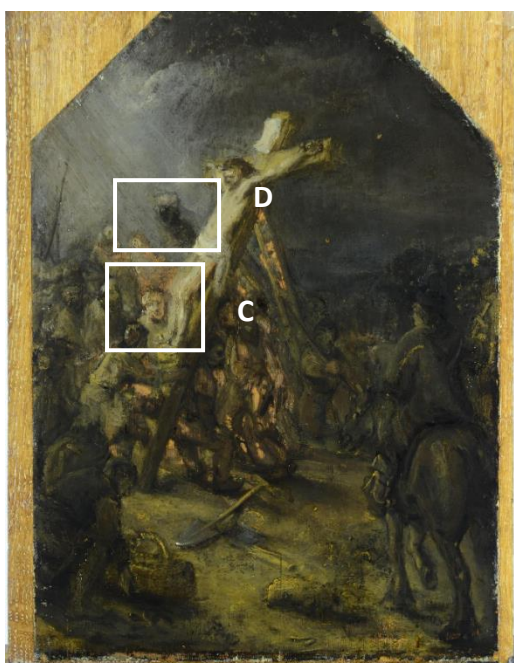


and beard are rendered with a few touches. These sketchy, virtuoso strokes are typical of Rembrandt's style. A divine light illuminates Christ's forehead from the top left. His face with its dark eyes turns down humbly, while on his head rests a crown of thorns.

### B. Detail of the soldier raising the cross

Rembrandt's hand is also evident in this detail: a Roman soldier is helping to raise the cross. He appears to be standing with his leg on the cross in an attempt to gain purchase while the light shines on his helmet and back. Also catching the light are the nails piercing Christ's feet just in front of his face. These touches are applied with brisk brushstrokes and all slightly different from the large painting in Munich. The brushwork is loose and free as would be expected from Rembrandt.





### **C. Detail of the self-portrait of Rembrandt**

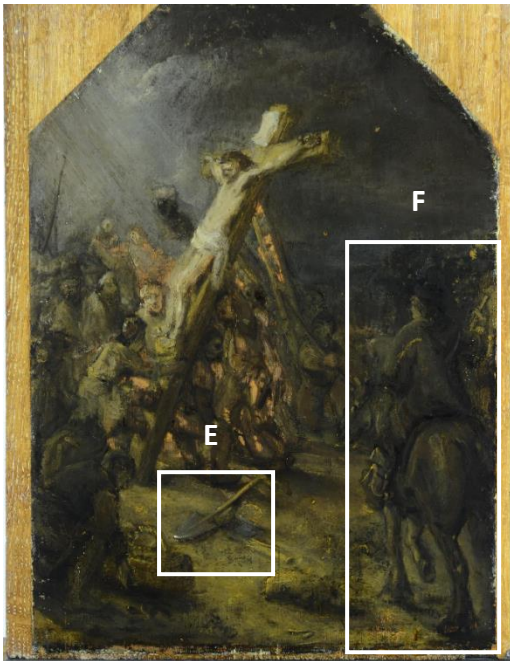
barely discernible face can be seen to the left of Christ's legs. The summarily indicated eyes gaze straight at us, and we can make out a nose and a mouth. In the Munich painting, this is a self-portrait. Presumably, the face in the sketch is also intended to portray the artist. Rembrandt often depicted himself in paintings of dramatic events, incorporating himself into the narrative.



### **D. Detail of the chieftain**

Against the grey cloudy sky, dark and white forms loom beside to the crucified Christ. The Munich painting depicts a turbaned Roman captain gazing gravely at us from here. These dark and light shapes in the sketch, rendered so sparingly by Rembrandt, therefore represent the captain, despite our difficulty in recognising him.





### (E) Detail of the spade and axe

While the oil sketch is mostly painted with quick brushstrokes, the spade and axe in the foreground are rendered in greater detail. Particularly the highlight on the tip of the metal blade. It is with this spade that the hole was dug in which the cross was placed. Rembrandt depicted these details meticulously.



### f. Detail of the rider seen from behind

In the bottom right corner, a horse rider looks on. We see him from behind, his left foot in the stirrup. The horse's head turns to the left and its right foreleg is raised, as if walking. All this adds a vibrant element to the scene. A similar horseman appears in an etching made by Rembrandt around 1629. This pictorial motif seems to have engaged Rembrandt's interest around this time. It is an additional argument in favour of attributing the oil sketch to Rembrandt.



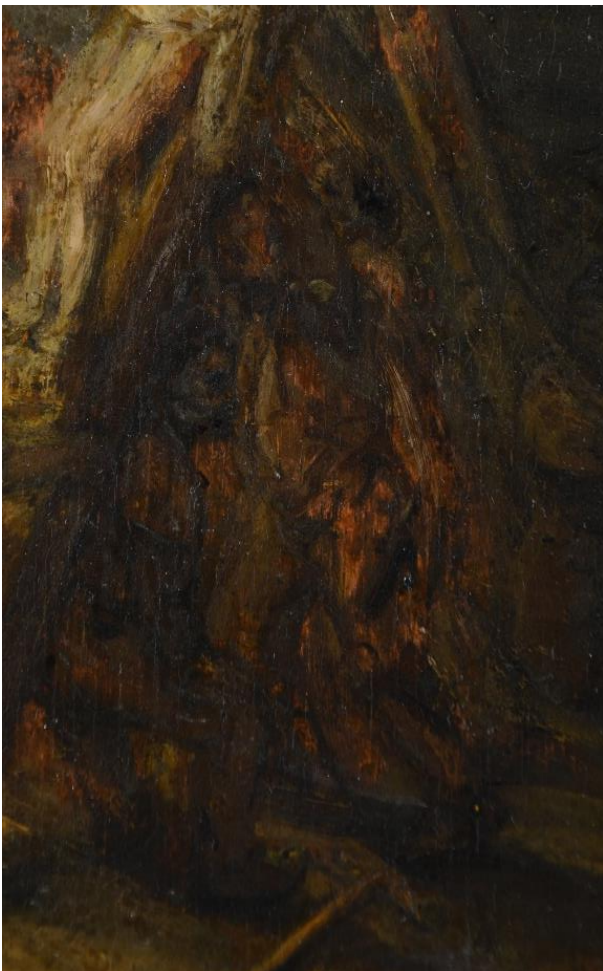
*Rembrandt, Soldier with turban on horse-back, etching, 82 x 57 mm, c. 1629, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum*



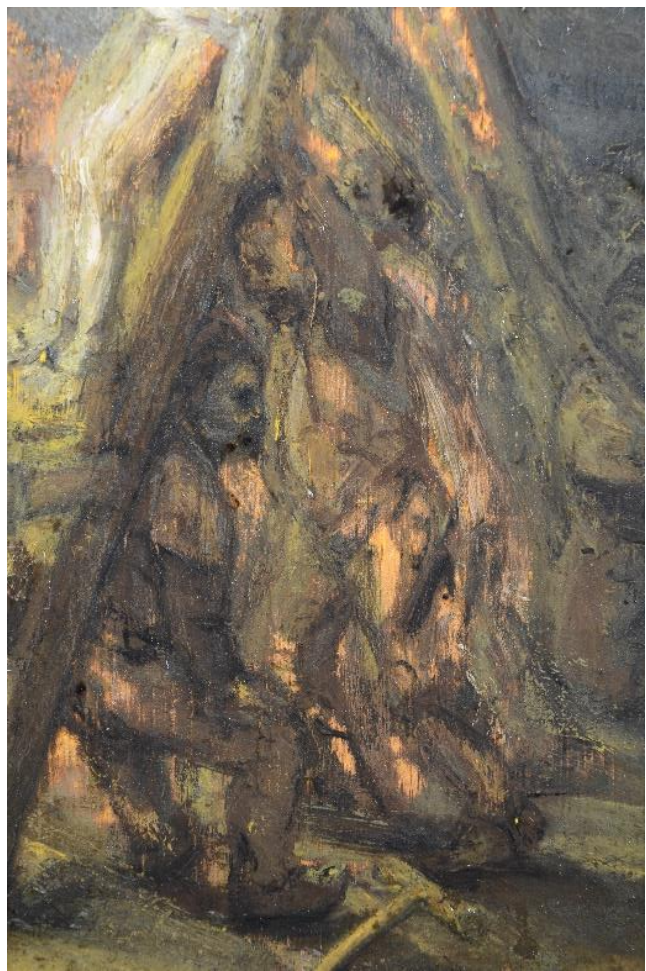
## (7) Naked paint

What makes this presentation of the painting truly exceptional is that it appears here without any retouches. The original painting is fully exposed: every brushstroke is seventeenth-century.

Yet successive treatments have clearly affected the seventeenth-century paints. Especially in the central figures: the brushstrokes have been polished down to the primer and sometimes even to the wood. All this polish and damage to the paint has deliberately not been retouched, or indeed de-retouched with new restoration paint. As a result, we are now able to assess the quality of the paint touch of the sketch without the interfering hand of a restorer.



*Before restoration*



*After restoration*

*Many polished paint marks are evident in the figures of the three men lifting the cross.*

## (8) Restoration and research - X-ray reveals first draft



Cleaning the painting has brought us closer to the original character of the paint scheme. To study the painter's hand in even greater detail, new imaging techniques were employed: X-ray photography and infrared reflectography.

The X-ray image provides a clear view of an early stage of the composition of the oil sketch. The X-ray mainly picks up the leaded yellow and white pigments used to set up light in the sky and below the cross. At this stage, the artist had yet to insert a horseman in the bottom right corner.

*X-ray by René Gerritsen.*

## (9) Restoration and research - Infrared reflectography reveals pentiments

Infrared radiation is used to activate elements containing carbon. The vibration of these particles can be captured in a reflectogram which is particularly useful for capturing black underdrawing.

Oil sketches are rarely signed, if at all. Yet the infrared reflectogram reveals an important detail in this *Raising of the Cross*. The horse rider in the lower right corner appears to have been prepared with quickly sketched lines, as can be seen between the horse's legs, while to the left of the horse, another shape is visible, possibly a preparation for a dog.



*Infrared  
reflectogram  
(Osiris  
camera) by  
René  
Gerritsen*

What makes this so significant is that it reveals how at every stage of the work, the artist was making decisions and changes. The sketch is the result of an artistic process. This rules out the possibility that the sketch is a copy made in Rembrandt's day of another painting now lost.

## Restoration and research - Macro XRF research

Macro X-ray fluorescence (Macro XRF) can be used to map molecules in paint. It allows the different layers of paint to be distinguished and shows which pigments were used for the various colours.

Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum agreed to make a Macro XRF scan of the oil sketch and the data obtained is still being analysed. Information from this scan will provide new insights into the way Rembrandt worked.

## (10) The frame

When Abraham Bredius first saw the oil sketch, it was in a nineteenth-century frame. This undoubtedly contributed to the mistaken view that the painting was a nineteenth-century imitation.

Today, Rembrandt's oil sketch has a new frame based on a seventeenth-century ebony example.

The nineteenth-century frame has not been discarded: it now contains a reproduction of the oil sketch before restoration.

## Conclusion

Evidence shows that the oil sketch was painted on a seventeenth-century panel, providing a probable dating of between 1642 and 1645. Clearly, the sketch is linked to the *Raising of the Cross* in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, which Rembrandt painted around 1633. It is not a copy made in Rembrandt's time, since it differs in many ways from the Munich piece. Moreover, the sketch is not a copy after another work, since major changes, pentiments, were made while it was being painted. Infrared reflectograms and X-ray photographs show how the artist searched for ways to improve the composition while painting the sketch. Over the old dark sky, powerful celestial - divine - rays of light descend from heaven onto the crucified Christ. A later addition is a horse rider, reminiscent of an etching Rembrandt had made earlier.

The result of the sketch is a composition far more dramatic and exciting than the large painting Rembrandt had completed some ten years previously.

The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam found no evidence in the materials used to refute an attribution to Rembrandt.

We may therefore safely conclude that Jeroen Giltaij's assessment that the oil sketch is an authentic sketch by Rembrandt has been confirmed after restoration and that the seventeenth-century painting now reveals Rembrandt's signature with even greater clarity.

### **Het Grote Rembrandt Boek. Alle 684 schilderijen**

Celebrated since his early days as a superbly talented artist, Rembrandt's paintings, drawings and prints made him one of the greatest masters of all time. In all, some 684 paintings have been attributed or historically ascribed to the Dutch master - all of which are discussed in this new, monumental *Grote Rembrandt Boek*, compiled by Jeroen Giltaij.

The publication was made possible with financial support from Stichting Steunfonds Museum Bredius, Hendrik Mullerfonds, Stichting De Gijsselaar-Hintzenfonds and Stichting Pieter Haverkorn van Rijsewijk also contributed to the realisation of *Het Grote Rembrandt Boek*.

