

Rembrandt van Rijn

A Polish Nobleman

1637

Oil on oak, 96.8 x 66 (38⁷/₈ x 26)

Andrew W. Mellon Collection

InscriptionsAt upper right: *Rembrandt. f. / 1637*

Technical Notes: The panel is composed of a single piece of oak with a vertical grain and has been cradled. Dendrochronology dates the tree felling to about 1633.¹ Old repaired vertical splits are found at top center and bottom left. Moderate-sized losses of splintered wood have occurred in the panel edges.

The ground consists of two layers, a lower white layer of medium thickness covered by a very thin ochre layer.² A rich paste paint layer of moderate thickness has been applied with a dry brush producing a highly textured surface, with thick impasted accents on the jewels and staff. The tan ground layer is visible between the broad, opaque brushmarks and is incorporated into the structure of the cloak. Individual fur hairs have been delicately painted with a fine brush. The fur hat has been incised with the butt end of a brush to expose the ground layer. Glazing is minimal, employed chiefly in the dark shadows of the face and hand.

Several pentimenti are visible with the naked eye and in the x-radiograph. Slight color variations in the background to the sitter's right were occasioned by the artist's repainting of the facial contour to slim the profile. X-radiography confirms alterations as well that reshape the lower portion of the head and shows that the thumb was once inclined downward at a sharper angle and the index finger more tightly curved. This original position of the hand corresponds to the grip necessary to hold the staff in its initial position, inclined away from the sitter, as evidenced by a reserve left in the background. Once adjusted to its more upright position, the staff was longer than it now appears. Its earlier form is visible through the gray covering paint of the background. A pearl drop, which once hung from the hat jewel, and a pearl earring attached to the proper left earlobe were both painted out.

The paint layer is in excellent condition, with minimal abrasion and only minor losses in the face and around edges. Conservation was carried out in 1985 to remove an aged varnish and discolored repaints.

Provenance: Possibly Harman van Swol; (sale, Amsterdam, 20 April 1707).³ Catherine II, empress of Russia [1729–1796], Saint Petersburg; Imperial Hermitage Gallery, Saint Petersburg; sold February 1931 through (Matthiesen Gallery, Berlin; P. & D. Colnaghi & Co., London; and M. Knoedler & Co., New York) to Andrew W. Mellon, Pittsburgh and Washington; deeded 30 March 1932 to The A. W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, Pittsburgh.

Exhibited: Washington 1969, no. 3.

ONE of Rembrandt's most powerfully evocative paintings from the late 1630s, *A Polish Nobleman* displays a richness of conception and technique that is unmatched by any other painting by the master in the National Gallery's collection. As this imposing figure stares out beneath his tall beaver hat, he at once confronts the viewer with directness and draws him in with his introspective gaze. His confident stance as he grasps a gold-topped wooden staff, his broad mustache, and the gold chain and pendant that hang over the broad fur collar that covers his jacket give him an air of authority and exotic grandeur. At the same time, the shaded eyes, furrowed brow, and partially opened mouth suggest a caring and thoughtful individual, far more approachable than the pose and costume would initially imply.

Largely because of the individualized character of the sitter, but also because of the obvious care with which Rembrandt modeled the forms, scholars have since the nineteenth century sought to identify this sitter with a specific individual.⁴ The earliest, and most persistent, of these identifications is the one mentioned by Smith in 1836: Jan III Sobieski (1629–1696), who was king of Poland from 1674 until his death.⁵ Since Sobieski was only eight years old in 1637, such an identification is clearly impossible. Stefan Batory, the other Polish king whose name was mentioned in the nineteenth century in connection with this painting, is likewise mistaken, for he died in 1586.⁶

Another identification more recently proposed, that the figure represents the Polish nobleman Andrzej Rej, would seem to have more merit.⁷ Rej, well-traveled, well-educated, and well-bred, had a close and cordial relationship to the royal court in Poland. As one of the most influential and trusted Protestants in the country, he was chosen by King Wladyslaw in 1637 to act as a special envoy to England and to the Netherlands at a time when relations between Poland and these countries were rather frosty.⁸ His diplomatic ventures, first in England, where Charles I would not even receive him, and then in the Netherlands, were not successful. After leaving The Hague on 19 December 1637 he seems to have traveled to Amsterdam where his son was enrolled as a student at the Amsterdam "Athenaeum Illustre." Although he must not have stayed long, for he was documented in Hamburg by 19 January 1638, he did take time to have his portrait painted. In a document from 1641 Rej's son, Mikolaj, acknowledges that he owes Hendrik van Uylenburgh fifty guilders "for portraying my father."⁹

The coincidence of Rej's presence in Amsterdam in 1637 and Rembrandt's portrait of a Polish noble-



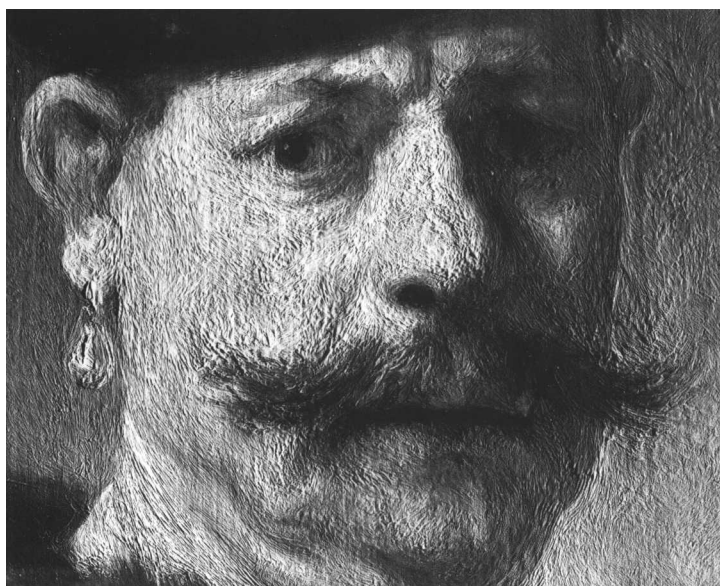
Rembrandt van Rijn, *A Polish Nobleman*, 1637.1.78



Fig. 1. Detail of x-radiograph of 1937.1.78

man of that date would lead one to hypothesize a connection even if a document did not exist confirming that a portrait was in fact painted. Since Hendrik van Uylenburgh, who was of Polish descent, had had a business connection with Rembrandt in the early 1630s, one might assume that Van Uylenburgh would have arranged for Rembrandt to paint a portrait of Andrzej Rej. Nevertheless, the evidence is not compelling enough to make a convincing connection. To begin with, Rembrandt is not mentioned in the document. Secondly, the price for the portrait would have been extremely low

Fig. 2. Detail of face in 1937.1.78 in raking light



for such a large-scale, fully worked out painting of this date by the master. Moreover, despite their earlier business relations, it is unlikely that in 1637 Hendrik van Uylenburgh was actively procuring commissions for Rembrandt or administering his financial affairs. Finally, the costume is not one that a Polish nobleman on an official diplomatic mission would have worn in 1637. While the elements of the costume are essentially Polish, they had been in fashion some twenty years earlier.¹⁰

Rather than depicting a specific individual, *A Polish Nobleman* is very likely part of the same tradition of fanciful portraits of figures in oriental costumes to which *Man in Oriental Costume* belongs (for a discussion of this type of portraiture see the entry on 1940.1.13).¹¹ The models for such paintings seem to have been people close to Rembrandt, among them Saskia, his mother, possibly his father, and his brother Adriaen.¹² Rembrandt also used himself as a model for fanciful figures in his etchings and paintings. Quite frequently he radically changed his appearance with different hairstyles, beards, and mustaches. The penetrating expression of *A Polish Nobleman* and the striking resemblance of the sitter's features to Rembrandt's, particularly in the area around the eyes and nose, make one wonder if this painting is not, in fact, a fanciful self-portrait. The main objection to this hypothesis is that Rembrandt had not developed such a jowled countenance at this date. X-radiographs, however, clearly indicate that the pronounced jowls were not part of the initial concept but were an adaptation done when Rembrandt altered the right contour of the face (fig. 1).¹³ At that time he also eliminated the earlobe and a pearl earring.¹⁴

The extraordinary power of *A Polish Nobleman*, which is painted on a single, large oak panel, is all the more enhanced because it has been so well preserved. Rich impastos on the face, which can be seen in the photograph taken in a raking light (fig. 2), reinforce the three-dimensional presence of the image. Similar impastos accent the gold medallion falling over his shoulder. The brown collar and reddish brown sleeve of the jacket, however, are painted thinly to suggest the softer textures of fur and cloth. In these areas the ocher ground, which is allowed to show through the surface paint, provides a unifying tone. Rembrandt has consciously sought to reveal this tone by wiping his wet paint with a cloth or, as in the beaver hat, by scratching the surface with the butt end of his brush. Even the background, which because of the painted crack must represent a wall, has been carefully modeled. Since the recent restoration of the painting, the care with which he mod-

ulated his paints over the entire surface is once again visible. Indeed, he even left a thumbprint along the lower edge.

Notes

1. Dendrochronological examination by Dr. Joseph Bauch of Universität Hamburg in 1977 has determined that the wood comes from a tree felled around 1633. Panels from the same tree were used for two other paintings by Rembrandt at the end of the 1630s, the *Concord of State* (Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam) and *River Landscape with a Windmill* (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie, Kassel). See Dr. Peter Klein letter, 25 September 1987, in NGA curatorial files.

2. Reports are available in the Scientific Research department on pigment analysis (December 1984) and pigment and media analysis (25 February 1985).

3. See note 4 below.

4. No identifications to specific individuals are given in eighteenth-century references. In the Harman van Swol sale in Amsterdam on 20 April 1707 a painting described as "Een Ambassadeur van Moscovien, van Rembrandt kragtig geschildert" may have been this work; the association of this painting with *A Polish Nobleman* was first made in the *Corpus* 1982–, 3: 247. When *A Polish Nobleman* was first described in the catalogue of the collection of Catherine II of Russia, compiled between 1773 and 1783, it bore the title "Portrait d'un Turc."

5. Smith 1829–1842, 7: 310: "A Military Gentleman, styled 'Sobieski'..." Although the tradition was already questioned in Hermitage 1838 ("n'est justifiée par aucun des documents que nous avons notre disposition"), the identification continued to be proposed as an option throughout most of the nineteenth century.

6. Bode 1883, 464.

7. First proposed by Odlozilik 1963, 3–32. This identification was supported by Broos 1974, 210–213.

8. King Wladyslaw had just gone back on his highly controversial plan to marry the niece of Charles I of England. The niece was Elizabeth, daughter of Frederick V, king of Bohemia and elector of the Palatinate, and his consort Elizabeth Stuart. The king and queen of Bohemia, the so-called Winter King and Winter Queen, were also intimates with the Prince of Orange, Frederik Hendrik, and his wife, Amalia van Solms. Not only was Frederik Hendrik the uncle of Frederick, but when the Bohemian king and queen had come to The Hague in exile in the 1620s, Amalia van Solms came with them as one of Elizabeth's ladies-in-waiting.

9. Broos 1974, 213, note 49. The document was published by Bredius 1915–1922, 5 (1918), 1688.

10. I am indebted for this information to Dr. Julius Chrosicki, from the University of Warsaw, who, as a fellow at the NGA's Center for Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts, was studying the problem of Rembrandt's depictions of Polish subjects.

11. *Corpus* 1982–, 3: 247, considers this work a *tronie*, a term that seems inappropriate for such a large, fully conceived three-quarter-length figure. Although the meaning of the term as used in the seventeenth century is not clear, it seems most probable that *tronies* were bust-length studies of heads rather than finished paintings. The prices paid for *tronies* were quite low, as noted by Bruyn in *Corpus* 1982–, 3 (1989): 23, "a relatively cheap product."

12. Bauch 1960, 168, suggested that the model for *A Polish*

Nobleman was Adriaen. No identifiable portraits of Adriaen, however, are known.

13. The connections to Rembrandt's own physiognomy in the original concept for the portrait are particularly evident in a comparison of the x-radiograph with those of other Rembrandt self-portraits from the late 1630s. See in particular the x-radiograph of *Bust of Rembrandt with an Architectural Background*, Paris, Louvre, inv. no. 1746, repro. in *Corpus* 1982–, 3: 499.

14. A few other minor changes, such as on the staff and gold medallion on the hat, are evident in the x-radiograph and upon close observation of the painting itself.

References

- 1774 Hermitage: no. 44.
- 1783 Hermitage: no. 44.
- 1829–1842 Smith, 7 (1836): 113, no. 310.
- 1838 Hermitage: 125, no. 23.
- 1864 Waagen: 182, no. 811.
- 1863 De Köhne: 172, no. 811 (also 1870 2nd ed., 2: 137, no. 811; 3rd ed. Somof, 2: 285, no. 811, repro.).
- 1868 Vosmaer: 449 (also 1877 2nd ed.: 515, 576).
- 1873 Blanc, 2: 404.
- 1879 De Ris: 377–388, repro.
- 1883 Bode: 464–465, 601, no. 335.
- 1885 Dutuit: 38, 64, 67, no. 387.
- 1886 Wurzbach: 87, no. 402, repro.
- 1893 Michel: 216, 507 (also 1894 ed., 1: 216–217, repro.; 2: 246).
- 1897–1906 Bode, 3 (1899): 36–36, 200, no. 228, repro.
- 1899 Bell: 70, 179 (also 1907 rev. ed.: 65, 150, repro.).
- 1899 Knackfuss: 18, repro. no. 15.
- 1902 Neumann: repro. 93 (also 1922 ed., 2 vols., 2: 414–415, repro.).
- 1906 Schmidt-Degener: 89–108.
- 1906 Rosenberg: 166, repro., 427 (also 1909 rev. ed.: 216, repro., 556).
- 1907b Michel: 46, repro.
- 1907 Brown: 254–255, 302.
- 1907–1927 HdG, 6 (1916): 165, no. 271.
- 1909 Wrangell: xxix, 111, repro.
- 1911 Bode and Knapp: unpaginated, repro.
- 1912 Réau: 471–488, repro.
- 1923 Weiner: unpaginated, repro.
- 1923 Meldrum: 190, pl. cxix.
- 1924 Knackfuss: 62, repro.
- 1926 Hymans: no. 47, repro.
- 1935 Bredius: no. 211, repro. (also 1936 English ed., 211, repro.).
- 1937 Frankfurter: 9–13, repro.
- 1937 Cortisoz: 38–39.
- 1941 NGA: 166, no. 78.
- 1943 Benesch: 20–33, fig. 1 (also reprint in Benesch 1970, 1: 140–146, fig. 108).
- 1948 Rosenberg, 1: 43, fig. 59 (also 1964 rev. ed.: 71, fig. 59).
- 1949 Mellon: 80, repro.
- 1960 Bauch: 168–169, repro.
- 1963 Odlozilik: 3–32, repro.
- 1965 NGA: 109, no. 78.
- 1966 Bauch: 10, no. 174, repro.
- 1968 NGA: 96, repro.
- 1968 Gerson: 56, 495, 298, repro.
- 1969 Gerson/Bredius: 565, 170, repro.

- 1969 Washington: no. 3.
 1974 Broos: 192–218, repro. fig. 19.
 1975 NGA: 286–287, repro.
 1976 Walker: 273–273, no. 359, color repro.
 1977 Bolten and Bolten-Rempt: 186, no. 264, repro.
 1981 Chroscicki: 441–448.
 1984 Wheelock: 12, color repro.
 1984/1985 Schwartz: 200, no. 219, color repro. (also 1985 English ed.).
 1985 NGA: 330, repro.
 1986 Tümpel: 197, color repro., 406, no. 137.
 1986 Sutton: 312.
 1986 Guillaud and Guillaud: 311, no. 366, color repro.
 1986 Hermesdorf: 35–49.
 1988 Wheelock: 214–245, fig. 9–28.
 1982–*Corpus*, 3 (1989): 242–247, repros.
 1990 Schneider: 68, 69, repro., 70, 95, 154, 171, 233
 note 80.
 1991 Le Bihan: 362.
 1991 Grimm: 95, pl. 51 (color detail), 97, fig. 179.
 1992 NGA: 124, color repro.

1937.1.73 (73)

Rembrandt van Rijn and Workshop

An Old Lady with a Book

1637
 Oil on canvas, 109.7 x 91.5 (43¼ x 36)
 Andrew W. Mellon Collection

Inscriptions

On the bottom left: *Rembr[an]dt. / f. 1 [63] 7*

Technical Notes: The support, a medium-weight, tightly and plain-woven fabric, is relined with the tacking margins trimmed. Cusping is present on all sides, suggesting the original dimensions have been retained. The double ground consists of a thin, red lower layer followed by a very thin, gray upper layer.¹ Paint is applied as thin pastes in dark passages and thicker paste in the lights, with individual brushstrokes blended wet into wet. Visible in the x-radiograph surrounding the head are the limits of a rather large reserve left for this area.

Losses are found in the signature and date, to the left of the head, and along the edges. Minor flaking has occurred at crackle junctures, and the pale halo around the figure is moderately abraded. The painting underwent treatment in 1981–1983 at which time early linings were removed, the painting was relined, and discolored varnish and repaints were removed.

Provenance: Johan van der Marck, Amsterdam; (sale, 25 August 1773, no. 259). M. Thélusson, Paris; (sale, Paris, 1 December 1777, no. 17).² Montesquieu (sale, Paris, 9 March 1788, no. 45); purchased by Lebrun. C. A. de Calonne (sale, London, 23 March 1795, no. 38); purchased by John Julius Angerstein, London; by gift to Sir Thomas Lawrence [1769–1830], London.³ John Allnut, London, (sale, London, 18–20 June 1863, no. 502); purchased by François Nieuwenhuys,

Brussels. Louis Lebeuf de Montgermont, Paris; Prince de Broglie, Paris, by 1920; (Duveen Brothers, London and New York, in 1920); sold November 1924 to Andrew W. Mellon, Pittsburgh and Washington; deeded 28 December 1934 to The A. W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, Pittsburgh.

Exhibited: British Institution, London, 1861, no. 123. *Paintings by Old Masters from Pittsburgh Collections*, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, 1925, no. 60. *Paintings by Rembrandt*, Detroit Institute of Arts, 1930, no. 36. Washington 1969, no. 4.

ALTHOUGH the identity of this formidable woman is not known, her black cap indicates that she is in mourning and is probably a widow. Her stern demeanor, wide-wheel ruff collar, and the Bible she holds in her lap suggest that she was a conservative member of Dutch society and dedicated to her religious beliefs. Despite the bold execution, the portrait is remarkably subdued. The sitter does not communicate directly with the viewer either through a gaze or gesture, but rather is lost in her thoughts as she ponders the words of the Bible she has just read.⁴ As she stares outward but looks inward, she gently fingers the clasp of the Bible with one hand while holding her spectacles between the fingers of her other.

Because such black, fur-trimmed costumes are found in Dutch painting from the mid-1630s until the late 1650s, the dating of this imposing painting has posed particular problems. Until a date was discovered in the lower left at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was generally described in an all-inclusive way as belonging to Rembrandt's "best period." First read as 1643,⁵ the date was later believed to be 164[7].⁶ The confusion is understandable because damage in this area of the painting obliterates a portion of both the signature and the date. The restoration of the painting in 1983, however, revealed that the date should be read as 1637. While the damage does affect both the "6" and the "3," enough of each number survives to identify them (see Appendix). The signature and date are integral with the paint structure and are of a type characteristic of the late 1630s.

This information is of some consequence when discussing the attribution of the work, which has been rejected in recent years by both Gerson and Schwartz.⁷ Indeed, while the execution does not relate easily with Rembrandt's paintings from the late 1640s, close comparisons can be made with other women's portraits from the late 1630s, in particular *Alotte Adriaensdr.* of 1639 in the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam (fig. 1).⁸ Not only are the costumes of both figures similar, but also the sure