

the rembrant search party / jean-marie clarke

Practice_2

In the beginning was the navel

Clearly there must be a line of demarcation somewhere between the ‘unconscious symbols’ that may reveal the *stato dell’ animo* of their creator and those betraying only the *stato dell’ animo* of the beholder.

H. W. Janson quoted in James Elkins, *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?*, p. 203 (see note 1).

Discoveries count as ‘good news’ for a researcher, even if these discoveries are often unspectacular. It is the ‘bad news’ that can be spectacular, since even a minor discovery can shift the course of one’s life and career in an unforeseen direction. In the case of the discovery that I am about to relate, the collateral damage involved nothing less than my credibility as an art historian.

One day fine in 1987, while typing, I casually glanced at an illustration in a catalogue lying open on my work table. It showed a detail of the *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632), the group portrait that launched Rembrandt’s career in Amsterdam. The illustration showed the abdomen of the corpse and Dr. Tulp’s hands. It was in vertical format and cropped in such a way that the navel lay near the left margin, giving it a special prominence. Instead of being an amorphous dark spot, the navel was distinctly composed of lines that, when viewed in the axis of the corpse, immediately made me think of a capital ‘R’.



I had sighted what the art historian James Elkins calls a *cryptograph*: ‘A text hidden in a picture.’¹ Most cryptographs – or the more frequent *cryptomorphs* (pictures hidden within picture) – are unintentional (unconscious) and discovered by people with overactive imaginations: the ones who tend to ‘see things’ in paintings. Elkins, who recognises that he has an ambivalent attitude toward pictures in general,² is less torn when it comes to claims of decrypting the ‘secret’ meaning of pictures thanks to the discovery of a cryptomorph or cryptograph:

When a cryptomorph is securely hidden and then suddenly revealed, the effect can be disorienting and even malicious. In that sense hidden images are coercive. . . . The act of revealing fully hidden cryptomorphs is an act of terrorism against pictorial sense.³

For me, however, the discovery of this R-shaped navel, for all its obvious omphalic symbolism,⁴ did not necessarily reveal any hidden meanings, but possibly *a special focus of attention on the artist’s part involving the initial letter of his first name*. This attention was reciprocated, or mirrored by my own attention to the form of his signatures. The ‘R’ in the navel added a dimension of personal identification on Rembrandt’s part that remained to be explored, and this became the express purpose of the Rembrant Search Party project initiated soon after in 1987.

It is worth mentioning that the navel was one of the standard places for beginning the dissection of human corpses: the spot where the first incision was made.⁵ Furthermore, the metaphysical significance of anatomy lessons in Rembrandt's day was *nosce te ipsum*: that is, 'Know Thyself.'⁶

Now let me take a step back and give the larger picture surrounding this discovery.

In the spring of the year 1987, I was still living in Paris, in an old building with a winding staircase in the Rue Mouffetard. I was eleven years into my research on the Rembrandt painting in the Louvre (*Philosophe en méditation / Old Man in an Interior with a Winding Stair*, ex-Br. 431, 1632), which had just been disattributed by the Rembrandt Research Project (RRP) in the second volume of its *Corpus*. Since I seemed predestined for the job, the curator for Dutch and Flemish Painting, Jacques Foucart, asked me to write an article for the *Revue du Louvre* to weigh the arguments of the RRP against those for the continued attribution to Rembrandt.⁷ From the time the painting was acquired for the Royal Collections of Louis XVI in the Louvre in 1784, no art historian had called Rembrandt's authorship into question.⁸

The strongest and weakest piece of evidence speaking for Rembrandt's hand was a signature. Strong because it was there; weak because signatures can so easily be faked. It was difficult to examine because it had been drawn with a fine brush in a dark area, and was now covered by a layer of old, yellowed varnish. Still, with some perseverance, it could be made out with the help of good light and a magnifying glass: 'RHL-van Rijn / 163*.' The asterisk means that the last numeral is illegible. The size and position of the tiny blob of paint at that spot and the form of the signature, however, speak for the year 1632. We know that Rembrandt used this type of signature only in that particular year (I will have more to say about this in the following chapter).

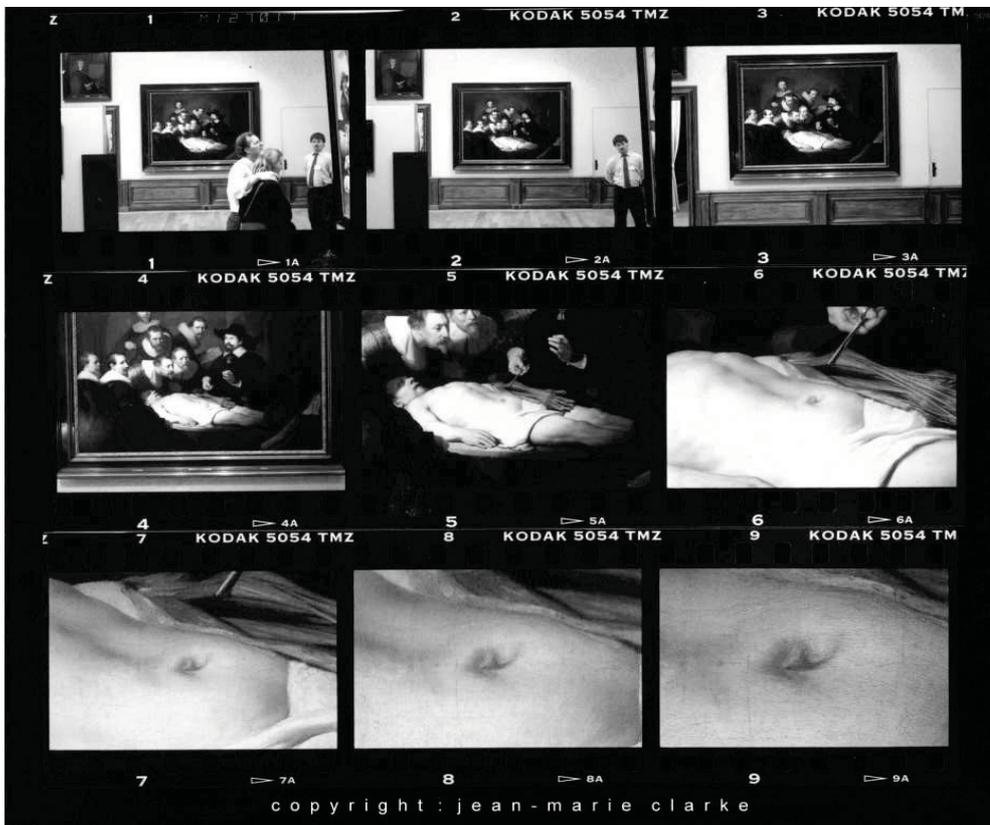
It was my good luck that the RRP had published reliable information on and photographic documents of Rembrandt signatures in the first two volumes of the *Corpus* in the 1980s. Otherwise, until that time, literature on the signatures was scanty, fragmentary, confused, and very often incorrect.⁹ For example, the spellings 'Rembrant' and 'Rembrandt' were usually treated indifferently, as if 'Rembrant' had been a spelling mistake. No one had made anything of the fact that Rembrandt added the 'd' to his first name in 1633, much less tried to explain this transformation.

That is why the discovery of the R-shaped navel promised interesting and pioneering research. I say that because I had no set path to follow as an art historian: there was little detailed information on signatures (other than graphological) to be had in the 1980s and 90s. It seems that art historians had left the field to the art dealers and forgers. In other words, for many years I groped in the dark, wondering what I was doing. I went around showing a picture of the detail of the navel to friends and acquaintances and asked them whether they saw anything 'peculiar' there. I seldom had to prompt them further; most art historians, however, were incapable of seeing anything resembling a letter.

This led me to regard my little 'test' as a useful tool to oblige art historians to admit that they reasoned in psychological terms.¹⁰ If someone sees the 'R', the reason might be that they 'want' to see it. If someone does not see it, it might be because they 'don't want' to see it. Both 'explanations' are biased by psychological assumptions as to the possible motivation of the viewer. It was necessary to introduce a psychological dimension – without risking any 'psycho-analytical' interpretations – to attribute a probable cause to the effects rendered visible by Rembrandt in his name and signatures in the crucial years 1631–33.

But how does one establish so strange a psychological fact as an initial in the navel of a corpse on a painting? In the previous chapter, I showed that Rembrandt's attention applied to the scale of individual letters. I will do the same in the next chapter, when I discuss the evolution of his signatures, except that I will discuss the form not of a single letter but of his name.

For five years I pursued my research on the signatures before finally going to The Hague to see the *Anatomy Lesson* again and check the shape of the navel. Although the ‘R’ can be seen on all good reproductions of the painting – assuming, of course, that one is willing to see it – it might be a graphic artefact resulting from the printing process. In front of the painting, however, I was relieved to see that my perception of the ‘R’ in the navel could be maintained and I documented this in the series of black and white photographs below.¹¹



This took place on 11 January 1992, a date that is associated with a famous Rembrandt portrait that depicts a man holding a letter dated 11 January 1632 and signed with the most calligraphic ‘RHL’ monogram ever done by the artist on a painting: the *Portrait of Marten Looten* in the Los Angeles County Museum. In any case, I now had a certainty of sorts: I was not seeing a technical figment of the imagination. I could claim to have discovered a visual fact.

In the intervening time, with a grant from the French Ministry of Culture in my pocket, I had left Paris for Hamburg, among other things to study performance with Marina Abramović at the Hochschule für bildende Künste. Until then, I had worked only in the medium of words and photography, and I felt a need to look into what I considered to be a more ‘immediate’ mode, such as performance work permits. I also felt a need to define myself more clearly as an artist and to progress accordingly.

And so it happened that I contrived the plan to travel to Amsterdam and to have a story on the discovery of the ‘R’ in the navel published in a daily newspaper. I preferred this tack to a scholarly publication – assuming I could have found a journal to publish my work – because that was the young Rembrandt’s style: attracting attention and catering to the appetite for sensation. To commemorate the original anatomy lesson of 1632, I chose the 31st as target date and arrived in Amsterdam on the morning of the 30th, looked through the daily press, and picked two newspapers that happened to be located on opposite sides of the same street: *Trouw* and *Volkskrant* (they belong to the same group). I had prepared an article on the train, but *Trouw* (Dutch for ‘Trust’) offered to interview me instead. Despite my very arty costume (see the ‘selfie’ on the right), the editor of the art pages believed my story. On the next day, an article by Michiel Koolbergen illustrated with one of my photos appeared in the morning paper. Mission accomplished. I quote from the article:



A restorer-cleaner of the ceiling fresco in the Sistine Chapel in Rome claimed several years ago that the angel in the scene of the ‘Original Sin’/‘Expulsion from Paradise’ holds the sword in his left hand, because Michelangelo accidentally¹² reversed the stencil with which he applied the figure. The logical question was: why had nobody – absolutely no one – noticed this until now? According to him, this was because a truly great work of art blinds the beholder with its power, like a rabbit paralysed by the dazzling beam of a flashlight. Basically this year is a Rembrandt Year because of the blockbuster at the Rijksmuseum. And so it was to be expected that a ‘discovery’ would be announced that fitted in the above category. Yet despite the examinations and calculations of the Rembrandt Research Project, the team overlooked what could be seen with the naked eye: the navel of the corpse in the ‘Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp’ (1632) was painted by Rembrandt with an R, the initial of his first name.¹³

Navelstaren levert R van Rembrandt op

Van onze kunstredactie
AMSTERDAM – Ernstig kijken de omstanders toe, als op een koude winterdag professor Nicolaas Tulp een lijk gaat ontlede. 31 januari 1632, vandaag precies 360 jaar geleden, vindt het college plaats, dat als ‘Anatomische les’ de geschiedenis in zal gaan. Een toeschouwer van de lijkschouwing staat niet op het tafereel: Rembrandt. De nog jonge schilder heeft een van zijn eerste grote opdrachten binnen en kijkt vanaf de tribune toe hoe het menselijk lichaam ter lering te kijk ligt. In de daarop volgende weken zou Rembrandt aan het doek werken, dat ruim drieëneenhalve eeuw later in het Mauritshuis in Den Haag een ereplaats inneemt. Rembrandt heeft zijn ogen en penseel gericht op het centrum van de gestorven man, de navel, ooit de toegang tot nieuw leven. Dit is de eigenlijke plek voor mijn signatuur, dacht de kunstenaar, hier zet ik mijn initiaal! Hoe heeft iedereen die ‘R’ in de navel 360 jaar over het hoofd kunnen zien?

• Pagina 13: De R van Rembrandt



Zelfportret van de jonge Rembrandt.

De R van Rembrandt

Waarheen wijst de tang van dokter Tulp?

door Michiel Koolboer

AMSTERDAM - De magie van bronnc kunstwerken is dat ze bij veld aandacht geven tot fysieke en intellectuele reactie. Sommigen maken gebruik van meesterwerken om de een of andere Boodschap onder de aandacht van een groot publiek te brengen. De moderne kunst doet niet? Men heeft een Stanley met op zak en baseko een interessant museum. Al dat raakt in de Renaissance-kunst is te aantoelgave? Maar onder die jas en weg met de teken van Michelangelo's 'David'! Da toren van David! Die is verna schied gelouwd, weni omangs nu bewaerd. Een Van Gogh-jaar in 1980 in Baaren duikt een stoel op waarop de meester eens gezeten had. Een schoenmaker van de plaats (mecc) en de vesting laer pie in Rome bewaerde een paar jaar geleden dat die engel in de schildering 'Zondeval/Vredrijving uit het Paradijs' het zwaard in de eekhand heeft, omdat Michielangelo het sabbon waarmee hij de figuren aanbracht per ongeluk ontgrend had. Maar waarom had niemand maar dan ook nimmard dat tot nu toe opgemerkt, wat de fotsche vraag? Dat komt, aldus de schoenmaker, omdat een waalrige spoor kunstwerk de schoenmaker met zijn kracht verbodt, hij is als het korp dat toerico in het helle licht van de kopling staet. Eigenlijk is het dit jaar Rembrandt-jaar, vanwege de grote expositie in het Rijksmuseum. Dus lag het

voor de hand dat er zich ook nu een 'vondst' aandert, die past in de bovengenoemde categorie. En jawel, al het getuie en gemellier van de heren van het Rembrandt Research Project ten spijt, ze koken haan over wat toch klip en klaar met het blote oog te zien is: de navel van het lijk op de 'Anatomische les van dr. Tulp' (1632) schilderde Rembrandt als een 'R', de initial van zijn voornaam. Dat beweert abbaas de Franse kunsthistoricus Jean Marie Clarke uit Parijs, in 1979 afgestudeerd aan de Sorbonne. Meer dan zestien jaar bestudeerde hij het werk van Rembrandt, met name zijn opnatuur. Vele schilderijen van de meester inspecteerde hij, de verschillende versen van de hupbrekening zet hij zo uit het blote hoofd op papier. En toet gebuur het. Die navel op dat ene achil deri. 'De anatomische les', leek toch wel heel bijzonder. Verder onderzoek volgde. Alle door Rembrandt geschilderde navels werden aandachtig bestudeerd. Conclusie: die ene navel leek niet bijzonder, maar is bijzonder. Niemans is die ze afgewerkt, in de vorm van een 'R', niemans is hij zo centraal geplaatst, dat tang van dokter Tulp wijst er zelf naar.

Eenige verbanden waren na deze 'opvatting' niet gegel. Door zijn eerste in opdracht gemaakte werk te tekenen met zijn voornaam 'Rembrandt', reester di, aldus Clarke, vestigde de 25-jarige schilder hij zijn verhuizing van zijn geboortplaats Leiden naar Amsterdam

lettarijk zijn naam. In zijn laatste periode ligende hij nog met 'RHL' (Rembrandt Harmensz. Leidenis). Hij was vooridantend met zijn identiteit, dus met zijn handtekening bezig. Tussen 1626 - het vragelie jaartal dat in verband met zijn schilderijen bekend is - en 1633, het jaar waarin hij de 'd' in zijn handtekening weegde, gebruikte Rembrandt met minder dan een verschillende signaturen, op weg naar zelfbewustzijn. 'Kunsthistorici verrichten veel te weinig studie naar Rembrandts signatuur als expresse van zijn intense zelfbewustzijn, waarvan ook zijn vele zelfportretten een uiting zijn', aldus Clarke. Dat hij in 1632 op de 'Anatomische les' de navel als een 'R' schilderde, stroekt volgens Clarke geheel met de huidige opvatting dat de scene bedoeld was als een uitsmeding tot zelf-

kennis door middel van anatomische studie. Zelfkennis en de navel als tastbare metafoer daarvan niet voor niets kent elke taal de uitdrukking 'navelstaren'. Clarke is overtuigd van zijn gelijk, al is hij zich ervan bewust dat andere deskundigen zijn vondst ogenschijnlijk en onverbiddelijk zullen lipenten in het laboret 'curiosa/onzin'. 'Maar dat is te gemakkelijk', aldus de kunsthistoricus, er voert vaak te rechtlijnig gespeerd. Meestal wordt er een interpretatie aan een kunstwerk opgehangen, om daarmee houdt het dan op. Maar er zijn meer kanten aan het tot stand komen van kunst, de psychologische factoren bijvoorbeeld. Rembrandt had de neiging om via zijn werk de aandacht op zichzelf te vestigen, dus mijn ontdekking komt eigenlijk niet als een grote verrassing.



De 'Anatomische les van dr. Tulp' (links), en een detail daarvan: de navel in de vorm van een bijna liggende R (rechts). De anatomische les werd gecreëerd 340 jaar geleden geleden.



FOTO: KUNSTSTUDIO, FOTO: J.M.C.

The article was announced on the front page with the header 'Navelstaren levert R van Rembrandt op', which means 'Contemplation of the Navel Turns up Rembrandt's R'. The feature article was subtitled 'What are the forceps of doctor Tulp pointing at?' I expected some reactions from the readership at the time, but, if there were any, I was never informed about them. I did have the satisfaction of having persuaded a major Amsterdam daily that this 'R' in the navel was not only a noteworthy fact, but also a newsworthy event. Since I had been pressed by the editor for an answer to the question of whether Rembrandt had designed this initial-navel consciously or unconsciously, I opted for the hypothesis of unconsciousness - but that is pure speculation.

Summary

A heightened sensitivity to Rembrandt's signatures and to the attention that he brought to them in 1631-32 led me to discover an initial 'R' in a strategic and telling spot: the navel of the corpse in his *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp* from 1632. This was the year in which he established himself in Amsterdam and worked on his signature the most intensively in his career, using three different types. Subsequent research confirmed the plausibility of this find and the reciprocal effects of attention on the artist and the observer. In the next chapter I will trace the evolution of his signatures and distil as much psychological energy from them as I can. (Opposite: a historic moment in the darkroom c.1992).



NOTES

¹ Cryptographs often take the form of signatures. James Elkins, *The Domain of Images* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 1999, p. 254 (glossary). By the same author, see chapter 7 of *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles? On the Modern Origins of Pictorial Complexity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

² Elkins, *Puzzles*, p. 259. The last sentence of the book reads: ‘For some reason, pictures make us anxious; and one of the things that people do when they are anxious . . . is talk a great deal – as we all do in art history, and as I have just done again here.’ Elkins is indeed a very prolific writer.

³ Elkins, *Puzzles*, p. 203.

⁴ I have run across three instances of navels inset with a symbolic ‘eye’: one is cited by Daniel Arasse, *Le Détail: Pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), pp. 337–46, in a *St. Sebastian* by Antonello da Messina (c.1476); the other two I discovered in a former Benedictine convent in Münstair (Engadine, CH), on an atlante figure (thirteenth century?) and a bas-relief of the *Baptism of Christ* from about the same period.

⁵ I remember reading somewhere that this incision was also called the ‘incipit’, but have failed to find the source for this information again.

⁶ William S. Heckscher, *Rembrandt’s Anatomy of Dr. Nicolaas Tulp: An Iconological Study* (New York: New York University Press, 1958), p. 112.

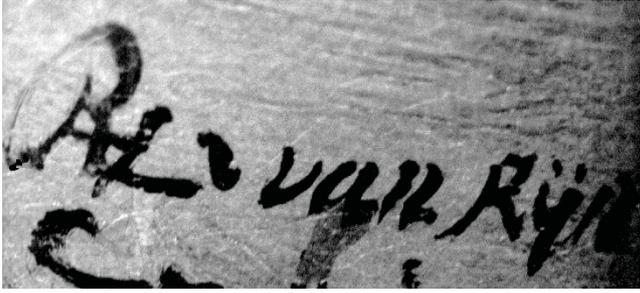
⁷ Jean-Marie Clarke, ‘Le *Philosophe en méditation* du Louvre: Un tableau signé “RHL-van Rijn” et daté “1632”’, *Revue du Louvre*, 40.3 (1990), 191–200. The English version can now be read on the Rembrandt Database <<http://www.rembrandtdatabase.org/Rembrandt/painting/208164/old-man-in-an-interior-with-winding-staircase/document/17824>> [accessed 25 July 2016]. I have also summarised the information in a Wikipedia article (‘Philosopher in Meditation’).

⁸ There is only one exception: the American art historian John Charles van Dyke. In *Rembrandt and His School* (New York: Scribner, 1923), pp. 114–15, he categorically rejected Rembrandt’s authorship. Van Dyke was right in distrusting the authenticity of the over eight hundred paintings attributed to Rembrandt at the time, but jumped to the opposite extreme by attributing only about fifty paintings to the master who, he says, ‘dragged his entire family into paint’.

⁹ For example, there was an obstinate tradition that attributed the first name of ‘Paul’ to Rembrandt, probably because it ignored the fact that ‘Rembran[d]t’ is a first name and misread the ‘RHL’ monogram that he used with his patronymic in 1632. More information on this topic can be found in article 59, ‘Paul Rembrandt & Co.’, of my online book *The Rembrandt Search Party: Anatomy of a Brand Name* (2006) at <<http://www.rembrandt-signature-file.com/>> [accessed 25 July 2016].

¹⁰ Art historians, and in particular my professor, the late Daniel Arasse, liked to point out that the discipline of psychology was an invention of the late nineteenth century, and therefore it was anachronistic to apply its concepts and methods to the art of the past.

¹¹ The attentive reader may have noticed something that I did not notice for several years: that the ‘R’ in the navel does not display the same form as the one that Rembrandt gave to the initial letter of his first name. The problem is solved if we consider that the shape of the R-navel is the one that the artist regularly gave to his patronymic in his ‘RHL-van Rijn’ signatures. His own looped ‘R’ appears to underpin the entire composition of the *Anatomy Lesson*: see chapter 4 of this article.



1632, *Portrait of a Man Trimming His Quill*, Cassel.

¹² On this scale – an entire figure – how can anyone pretend to know what Michelangelo did intentionally or unintentionally? Maybe the sword-wielding angel fit better in the composition the ‘wrong’ way around.

¹³ Michiel Koolbergen, ‘De R van Rembrandt: Waarheen wijst de tang van dokter Tulp?’ *Trouw*, 31 January 1992, p. 13 (translated into German by Annemarijke van Etten and into English by myself).