

Practice_3

Rembrandt's signatures 1625–1633

Some people are artists only on one occasion in their lives; namely when they are signing their names. The rest of the time, when they are writing something else, they are usually tame, modest, reserved.

Franzsepp Würtenberger¹

Even when I am writing my name, I am drawing.

Joseph Beuys²

Aside from the fact that reliable scholarly literature on artists' signatures is very sparse, the issue of signing and signatures presents a chaotic field that is characterised more by exceptions than rules. Signatures in the seventeenth century, to speak only of Rembrandt's time, could be appended to a painting by the artist or could not be; they were not mandatory unless explicitly requested by the client. Similarly, unless otherwise stipulated by contract, the placing, style, and formulation of a signature were left entirely to the discretion and taste of the painter. It is rare to find an artist with a consistent practice.³ Studio works by apprentices and pupils could be signed by them with the master's signature or by the master himself. Not only that, but art forgers and dealers have long known that the easiest part of a painting to forge is the signature. Given that – and the astronomically high market and cultural value assigned to Rembrandt paintings – you have a situation in which it is practically impossible to establish the authenticity of a signature, even if it was painted 'wet in wet' – that is, when the paint was not yet dry.⁴ This is no different from the situation of trying to prove by scientific means that a painting is *entirely* from Rembrandt's hand.



As with all Gordian knots, the best approach is to take a good whack at it and split it down the middle. In Rembrandt's case, this opportunity is provided by two well-established facts: he was relatively unknown before 1632 and he established a definitive form of his name and signature in 1633: 'Rembrandt f[eci]t. + date'. These two hard facts are useful as long as we are only trying to define the development of his signatures – and not to authenticate one. The premise here is that the early works are smaller and so less likely to be studio productions, and they are less readily recognisable as 'Rembrandts'. The motivation to fake an early signature is correspondingly reduced. Dealers and buyers want above all to see the name 'Rembrandt'. This logo is more important than the style or content of the picture.

I have already written in detail on the complex topic of Rembrandt signatures in my online book, *The Rembrandt Search Party: Anatomy of a Brand Name* (2006; see notes 3 and 4), so I will limit myself to reproducing and commenting on my diagram on the typology of Rembrandt signatures, which is featured in the most clicked-on article on my website ('50. Rembrandt signs his paintings – a Typology').

THE EVOLUTION OF REMBRANDT'S SIGNATURES

Full name: **Rembrant Harmenszoon van Rijn**

1625 - 1629: initial	<i>R</i>	or monogram (short form)	<i>RH</i>
1629 - Jan. 1632: monogram (long form)	<i>RHL</i>		
1632: monogram (l.f.) plus patronym	<i>RHL - van Rijn</i>		
Late 1632 - early 1633: first name	<i>Rembrant. fr.</i>		
1633 - 1669: first name plus "d"	<i>Rembrandt. fr.</i>		

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You will notice a clear development that spans the distance between an initial and a name written out in full within a period of seven years. The first signatures consist of a capital Roman 'R' done with a classic, straight stem. This form is expanded in the course of time to a monogram consisting of the initial letters 'RH', which stands for 'Rembrant Harmensz.' The full monogram 'RHL' (possibly Latin for 'Rembrantus Hermanus Leidensis') appears at about the same time as the rounded, cursive, one-stroke form of the initial 'R'. This last 'R' is the one feature of his signature that remains constant from then on. It should be noted that the reference to his hometown of Leiden in the last letter of the monogram (in Latin?) is unusual in a Dutch artist's signature at this period: could it be a reference to Lucas van Leyden, the town's most famous painter until then?⁵

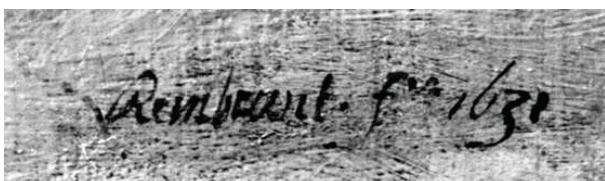
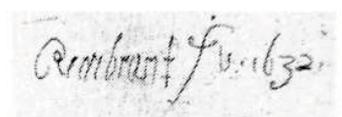
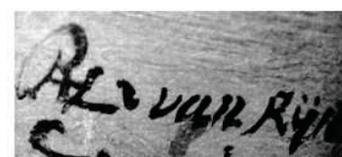
In 1632, we can observe a sudden flurry of activity around his signature: the year began with the 'RHL' monogram, continued with the monogram plus patronymic 'van Rijn', and probably ended with his first name written in cursive script, 'Rembrant'. This alone was a revolutionary move, but he upped the stakes in 1633 by adding a 'd' to literally make a name for himself: 'Rembrandt'. This additional letter does not appreciably change the appearance, much less the pronunciation of the name, and it does not seem to have been widely noticed by his contemporaries.⁶ It is true that the spelling of names was not standardised in those days, but it is also true that Rembrandt stuck to this new spelling for the rest of his life. The reversions to the 'Rembrant' form in signatures on his paintings and etchings after 1633 can be counted on the fingers of one hand, and so may be considered as slips of the pen, brush, or burin. Could it be that he wanted to give his first name – an uncommon first name at that – the appearance of a last name?

The standard art-historical explanation for this radical move was that Rembrandt wanted to be referred to by his first name like the great masters of the Italian Renaissance: Raphael, Leonardo, Michelangelo, and others. This is plausible, but not very satisfying if our thinking ends there. After all, if nothing else, the three-phase change of signature in 1632 tells us that the young artist was very attentive to the graphic sign of his identity. In that year he had begun to mass-produce portraits in partnership with the art dealer Hendrik Uylenburgh and was probably filling his orders with the help of apprentices and studio assistants. Did he feel a need to not just establish a logo but also personalise it? This would imply a psychological motivation. The personal formulation and individual design of his signature might have compensated for the fact that other persons could sign his name on their products.

One of the reasons that Rembrandt became so well known lay in his exceptionally large production of self-portraits.⁷ It so happens that his most intense period of self-portraiture spanned the years 1629–31, and it involved mainly the medium of etching. The etchings might well have been the laboratory for his signatures, since the scale and gestures are closer to writing and the attention to the form of the letters and signatures is more acute because he had to sign the plates in reverse.⁸ In any event, both the production of etchings and self-portraits dropped drastically in 1632: only three or four etchings and one painting (Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum).⁹ Rembrandt was simply too busy churning out portraits for well-to-do merchants and dignitaries. Yet the momentum of his ‘self-crafting’ (to use Svetlana Alpers’s formulation) did not let up, such that it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that it found an outlet in a heightened attention to his name and signature. What else can one make of the three types of signature in the 1632 document, if not precisely this excursion into ‘corporate identity’, whereby the logo involved was his first name and the was identity his own.

So much for the map. Here is what the territory looks like:

We see at the top a brushed monogram from the year 1631 (cleaned up for purposes of demonstration).¹⁰ In the middle, there is a monogram plus patronymic from the year 1632,¹¹ and, at the bottom, a signature on one of the few etchings of that year (B 101). It is interesting to note the attention to certain details in the same year: the ornate ‘hyphen’ in the middle signature and the addition of the ‘f’ abbreviation (for ‘fecit’) at the bottom, which had already appeared in etchings from 1630–31 and then became a standard feature of the definitive signature in 1633: ‘Rembrandt ft. + date’. This ‘f’ has a visual history of its own: see article 28 (‘Give me an “F”’) of *TRSP 2006* (see note 3). It should be clear that, for all the monotony of portrait painting, Rembrandt was not working according to habit in 1632.



Things quickly get messier.

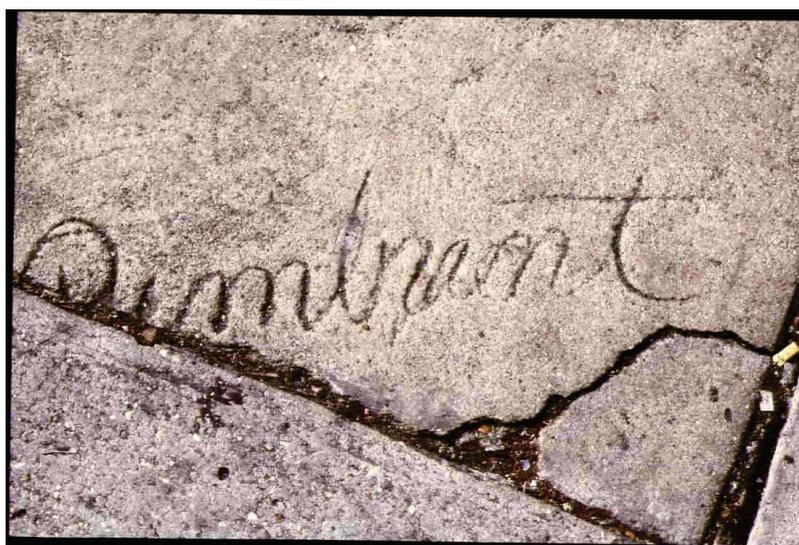
On the left is a signature using the first name in its original form, accompanied by the date 1631. This is so unexpected that I assume, with other scholars, that

Rembrandt antedated this painting, which happens to be a *Portrait of the Artist in Oriental Costume* (Paris, Musée de la Ville de Paris-Petit Palais). This supposition is given some weight because Rembrandt added the poodle at a later stage, as can be seen from the paint layers in grazing light. And there is a copy of this same figure without the poodle painted by Rembrandt’s apprentice Isaac de Jouderville, the one mentioned in the apprentice slips of 1630–31. Be that as it may, the signature displays a certain timidity, being quite small and done with a fine brush in the lower right corner of the painting. The plain form of the ‘b’ betrays its genesis during the short phase in 1632–33, before Rembrandt changed to a ‘gothic’ script style in 1633 – another instance of his attention to the scale of individual letters. There are instances of a double signature from 1632 that show the early ‘Rembrandt’ form brushed over by an ‘RHL-van Rijn’ signature (e.g., *Portrait of a Man*, Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum). The latter is no longer accepted as an autograph work, but even if it was signed by a studio assistant or pupil, the gesture of updating the signature is further evidence of attention to the logo of Rembrandt’s studio.



Summary

In this chapter I have outlined what must be considered a deliberate development of Rembrandt's signatures from the beginning of his career in 1625 until the year 1633, in which he designed the definitive form of his name and signature. In particular the year 1632 – his first year in Amsterdam – demonstrates an intensive preoccupation with the form and formulation of the latter. I interpret this as a relay from his production of self-portraits in the years 1630–31: a continuation of self-portraiture and self-reference by other means. Rembrandt's attention to single letters is evidenced by the fact that he added a 'd' to his first name in 1633.



The paths of research are unfathomable. Here is a 'Rembrandt' signature scratched in the concrete of a New York City sidewalk in the Village.

NOTES

¹ Franzsepp Würtenberger, *Meine akrobatischen Unterschriften* (Karlsruhe: self-published, 1976), p. 1, my translation. Würtenberger, an artist and professor at the Karlsruhe Art Academy, used his own name and signatures as the principal medium for his art. The apparently obsessive nature of his work is offset by the *attention* that it draws to the signature as a work of visual art and as a 'performance' of identity. This is something that graphologists have known for a long time, but graphology has always been considered by mainstream culture as an accessory and somewhat dubious undertaking: it is as if there were an inhibition, a kind of 'modesty' where signs of ego and self-knowledge are concerned. The coming-of-age of graffiti art since the 1980s has changed all that.

² Text of a postcard written at Documenta 6 in 1977: 'Auch wenn ich meinen Namen schreibe, zeichne ich.'

³ Of the 281 paintings catalogued in the first three volumes of the Rembrandt Research Project's *Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, 228 bear a signature, meaning that 81.1 per cent are signed, which is a fairly high rate. Of the 146 paintings accepted as autograph by the RRP, 87.7 per cent are signed – though not necessarily by the artist. For more information, see article 49 ('Statistics') in Jean-Marie Clarke, *The Rembrandt Search Party: Anatomy of a Brand Name (TRSP 2006)* <<http://www.rembrandt-signature-file.com/>> [accessed 25 July 2016].

⁴ H. J. J. Hardy, W. Froentjes, and R. ter Kuile-Haller, ‘A Comparative Analysis of Rembrandt Signatures’, in *Künstlerischer Austausch / Artistic Exchange: 27th International Congress for Art History*, ed. by Thomas W. Gaehtgens, 3 vols (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1992), 2, pp. 595–605. This team of forensic handwriting experts from the Dutch Ministry of Justice made a brave attempt at authenticating Rembrandt signatures in collaboration with the RRP during the first phase of that project. The collaboration ended owing, among other things, to disagreements on how many signatures considered to be authentic appeared on paintings considered to be non-autograph – that is, studio works. See articles ‘20. Act I – Forensics’ and ‘29. What the Corpus says’ in *TRSP 2006* (link in note 3).

⁵ I sometimes suspect that Rembrandt’s association or competition with his fellow painter Jan Lievens (who signed ‘I.L.’) may have played a part in this particular feature. ‘Lievens’ also rhymes well with ‘Rubens’.

⁶ See my chapter on the ‘Apprentice slips’ of 1630–31.

⁷ Ernst van de Wetering and others, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings IV: Self Portraits* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005). Van de Wetering, sole remaining member of the original RRP team, argues for a reconsideration of the term ‘self-portrait’ applied to Rembrandt’s production in reaction to an apparently anachronistic urge to interpret ‘portraits of the artist by himself’ in psychological and philosophical terms. According to Van de Wetering, Rembrandt painted these depictions of himself in response to new tastes and market demand. This hypothesis replaces one orthodoxy with another, and it seems unlikely, considering the number of self-depictions that Rembrandt produced before he became famous (i.e., before 1632) and because he represented himself as a painter only at the end of his career, in the 1660s. The experience of and motivation for painting one’s likeness cannot be reduced to art alone, nor can art be reduced to art history. It seems clear to me that Rembrandt was a key figure in a long development in self-consciousness and self-referentiality that peaked in graffiti art and today’s ‘selfie’ trend.

⁸ For a discussion of this, see article 6 (‘1632 / The Etchings’) in *TRSP 2006* (link in note 3). Approximately two-thirds of the etchings attributed to Rembrandt by Gary Schwartz in his 1977 catalogue bear a signature. This could be a result of the printing process, a collaborative undertaking (Rembrandt worked with the engraver Jan Joris van Vliet in Leiden in the early 1630s), in which credit was often given by the printer/publisher to the ‘inventor’ of the design. The print medium was the best way for an artist to establish an international reputation.

⁹ The major exception is the etched self-portrait showing him as a dapper man about town (B 7) – more appropriate for Amsterdam than the costumed fantasies of his Leiden period. It went through a record eleven states between 1632 and 1633. See article 3 (‘Chronological Puzzle in Eleven States, One Painting, and Two Black Chalk Drawings’) in *TRSP 2006* (link in note 3).

¹⁰ From the *Christ on the Cross*, A35, Le Mas d’Agenais.

¹¹ From the *Portrait of a Man Trimming His Quill*, A54, Cassel, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen.