

## the rembrant search party / jean-marie clarke

Practice\_1  
Apprentice slips\_1630–31

Whether the mind acquires the ability to form immediately the desired image; or whether the eye picks out single forms in rough sketches of chance objects, as we do when we sit at the hearth gazing into the fire; or whether the hand makes something by habit, more or less as when we write; for a good scribe makes fine letters without thinking about it, as though the mind and eye were placed in his hand.

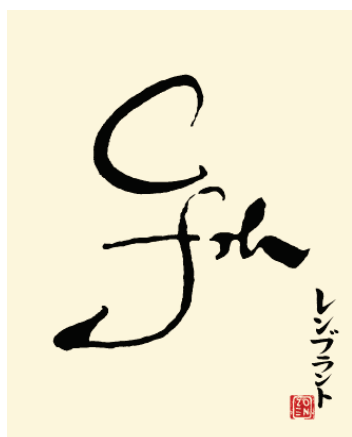
Samuel van Hoogstraten<sup>1</sup>

Above all, the Rembrant search party is about learning to see, becoming more visual, shifting and paying attention to what we call details – something that artists and scientists deal with daily. Details, being small, often bring us closer to the pictorial medium simply because we have to look more closely. This shift from the general to the particular is analogous to the alternation – in science – between theory and practice. I call details ‘elementary particles of meaning’ because they are evidence of attention and intention. These details orient research, and therefore the attention of the researcher, in a particular direction and sometimes at a particular scale. In the hard sciences, they are called ‘facts’.

Instead of being blinded by the name ‘Rembrandt’ and the high cultural – and economic – status that is attributed to it, we will look at how he formulated his name and how he formed certain letters of it. Our attention to these ‘details’ will reveal Rembrandt’s own attention to them.

The signed documents that I present were made with a quill pen and ink on paper, an instrument that allows for finer detail and thus a much smaller size than a signature made with a brush. The difference in scale between a pen-and-ink signature and one made with a brush is not significant in terms of overall form: Rembrandt was used to making even finer signatures with a needle on his etchings (in reverse).

First, let us consider this amazing piece of work, which I have greatly enlarged and enhanced for visual effect:



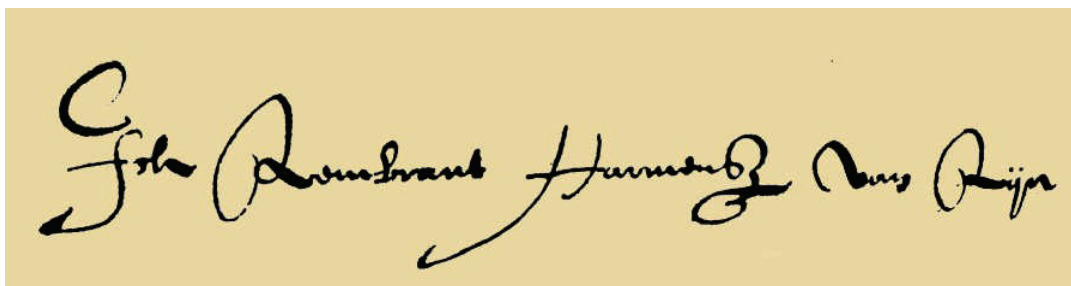
What you are seeing is the Dutch personal pronoun *ick* ('I') in Rembrandt's hand. I present it with a passing wink at Chinese calligraphy, a writing system that was technically refined to the status of a fine art (the small characters are Japanese katakana for 'remburanto').

This pronoun appears at the beginning of the first of the five receipts that the young Rembrandt wrote for one of his first apprentices, Isaac de Jouderville, on 1 May 1630. As it happens, he wrote this receipt in the week that followed his father's burial.

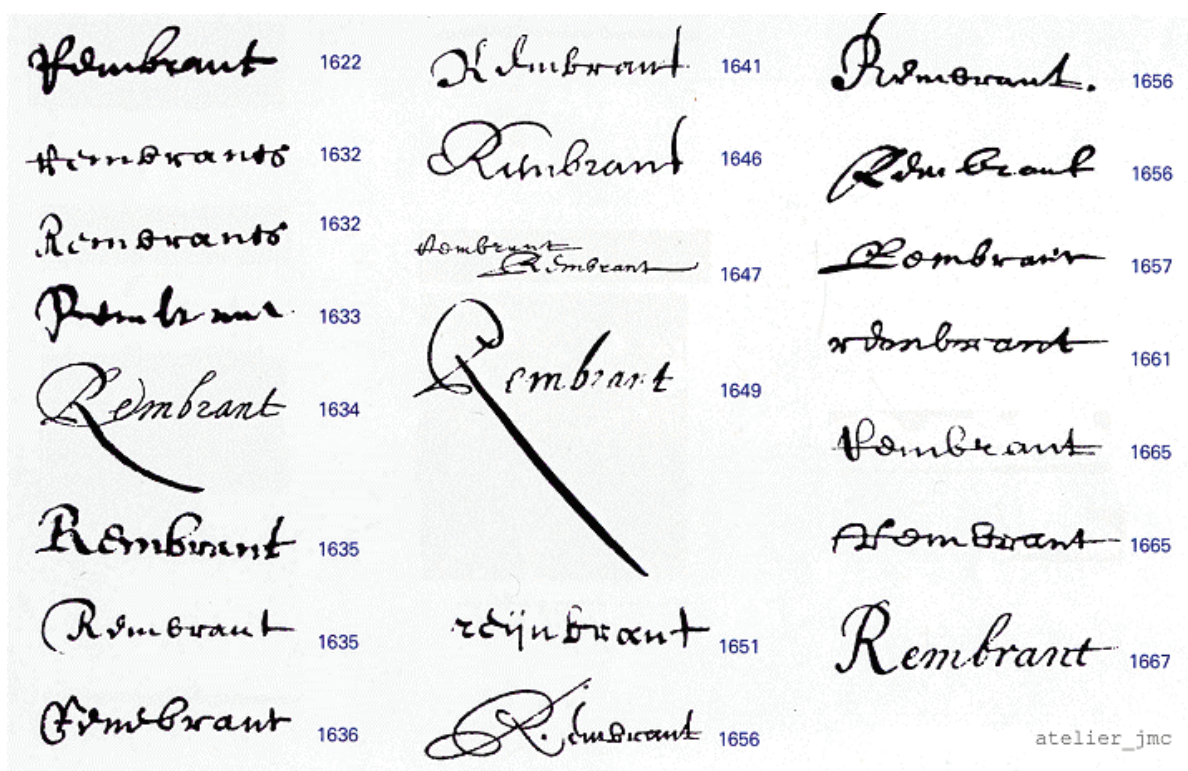


After noting the circular ductus of the top element (which is analogous to the loop of Rembrandt's initial 'R' (here, not to scale), it might occur to you that you are looking at a sort of graphic self-portrait, especially considering the size of the first letter: 'I'. This impression is strengthened by what follows it: Rembrandt's full name

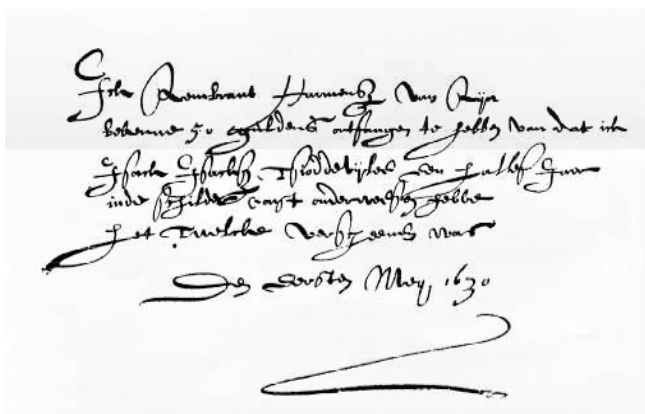
'Rembrant Harmensz[oon] van Rijn'



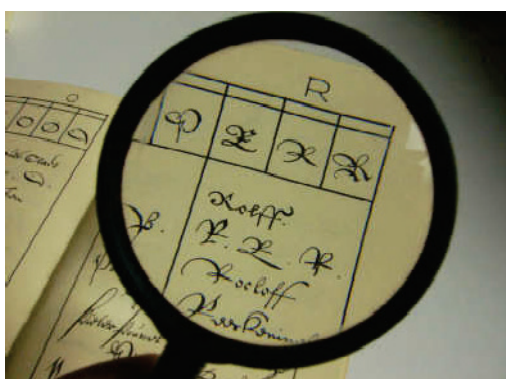
His first name is 'Rembrant'. This unfamiliar spelling is correct: as we will see, the artist was to add a 'd' to his first name in 1633. The original spelling, however, is the one that is to be found most frequently in documents that mention him during his lifetime, as seen in the following examples.<sup>2</sup>



In keeping with Dutch tradition, the second name cites his father's first name and adds the suffix for 'son' (*szoon*). I am impressed here by the relative plainness of the lines of the 'H' of 'Harmensz', which indicate speed and only slight pressure on the nib. This plainness stands in stark contrast to the ornate curlicues of the abbreviation 'sz'. At the end comes the patronymic proper: 'van Rijn', a last name that Rembrandt's father took the liberty of adopting because he owned shares in a windmill called 'de Rijn'.



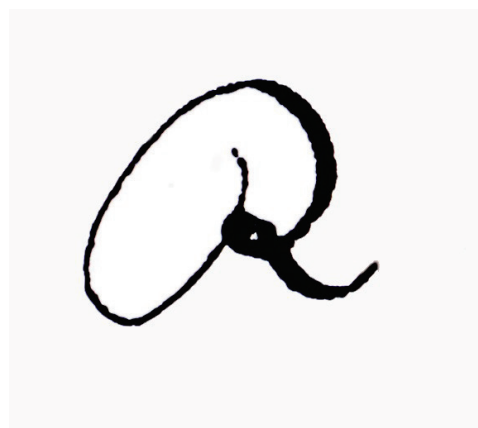
As with the remaining four slips, the content acknowledges receipt of payment for an instalment of the apprenticeship fee due to Rembrandt by Isaac de Jouderville, his last student in Leiden in 1630–31.<sup>3</sup> This first slip differs from the others in beginning with the formal designation 'I, Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn' and in being unsigned. The writing out of his full name on the first slip is not to be considered as a signature.



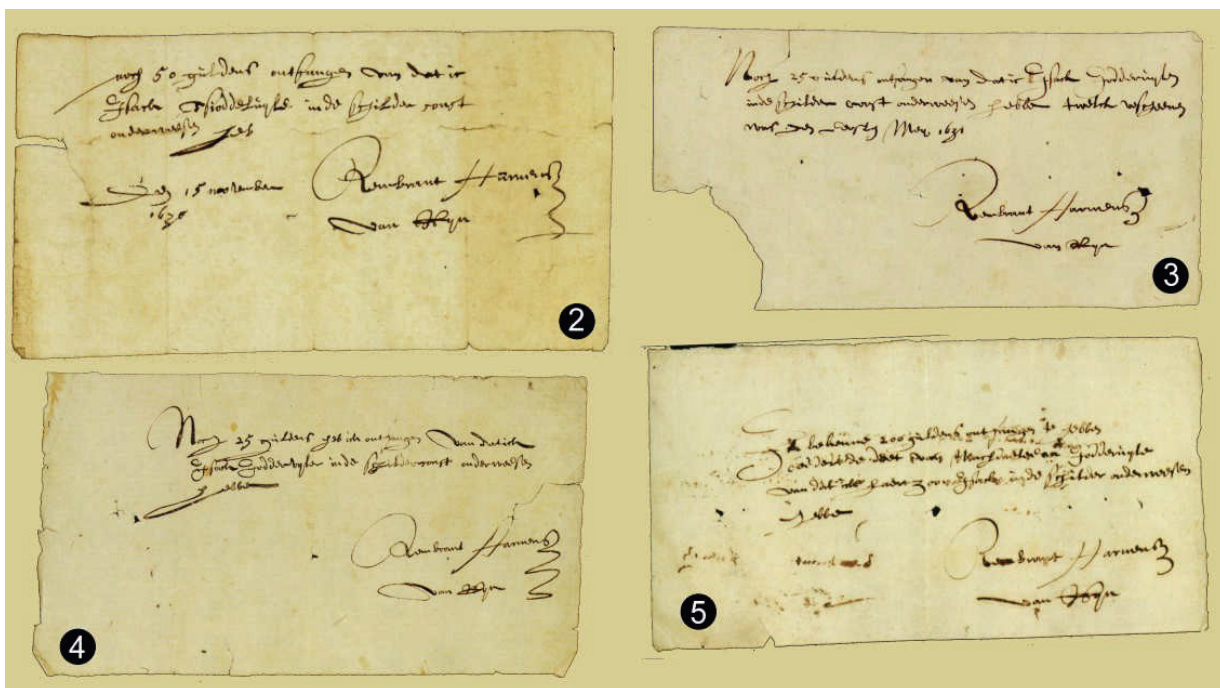
This point is important because it suggests an attention on Rembrandt's part to the difference between plain writing and signing. This is most evident in the fact that, in this first slip, he gave the same shape to the initial 'R' of his first name and that of his last name, 'Rijn'. These initial letters have a horizontal 'leg', showing that, although idiosyncratic in design, they derive from standard script forms (see left) and not from those of his signature.<sup>4</sup>

These two 'R's – the first of which is conspicuously larger than the second – display the characteristic form that he had been giving to this initial since 1629. This particular form permitted Rembrandt to 'draw' the letter in a single stroke. It also had a marked aesthetic effect because of the resulting bowl and the tiny loop – called an 'eyelet' in graphology – that sometimes appears at the spot where the circle closes in on itself and changes direction into the leg.

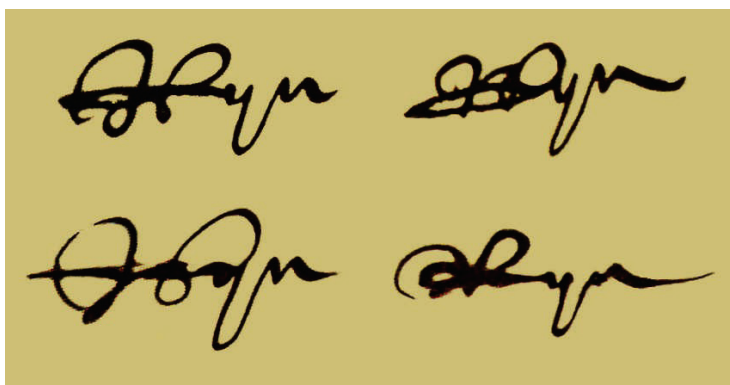
This 'classic' form of Rembrandt's initial is the visual leitmotif of the Rembrandt Search Party.



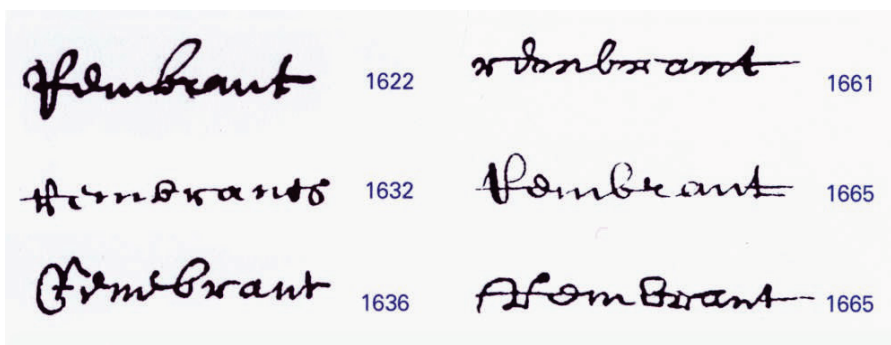
We will see the importance of these isomorphic 'R's in Rembrandt's name on the first slip when we look at the remaining apprentice slips, all of which were signed by Rembrandt with his full name.<sup>5</sup>



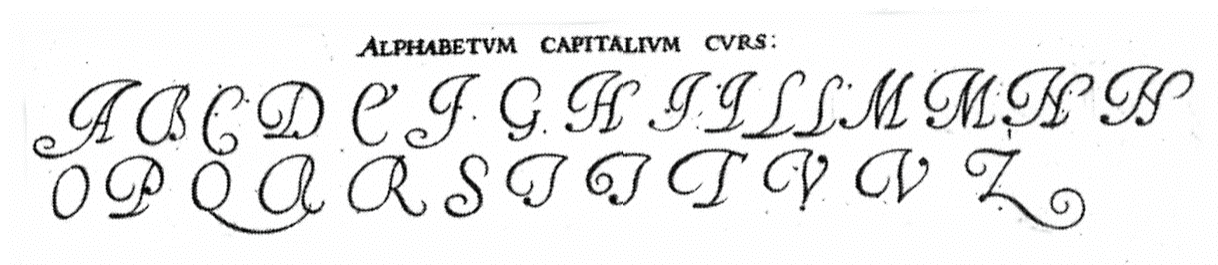
Notice the unusual form given to the initial letter of 'Rijn'.



To the modern eye, it does not look like an 'R' at all, but more like a knot, and in some cases it looks like it was crossed out. This form of 'R' was a holdover from Gothic cursive scripts long used in the Netherlands and Germany.<sup>6</sup> The complexity and fussiness of this particular type of 'R' – which could also be drawn in one stroke – contrasts with the elegance of the 'R' that Rembrandt created for the initial letter of his first name and used for both his signature and his name written out. Below are examples of Rembrandt's name written by other hands that show the archaic 'R' (see note 2).



The design of Rembrandt's 'R' can properly be termed a creation – like a logo – because it was a rare form.<sup>7</sup> Below is an example from the book of alphabets published in 1596 by the De Bry brothers<sup>8</sup> that shows the rounded type of 'R' done in one stroke. Note, however, that the stroke begins at the top to make the characteristic 'stem' of the 'R', whereas Rembrandt began his stroke toward the bottom of the letter, thus further individualising his initial:<sup>9</sup>



Above all, the difference between the two types of 'R' – the one for his first name and the one for his patronymic – tells us that Rembrandt's attention extended to such details, and thus that they mattered to him. In the case of the apprentice slips, each type of 'R' distinctly identified and differentiated father and son. Attention to this difference in identity resulted in a difference in form. It is worth noting that the Latin word for letter forms at the time was 'character', which suggests that expression of *character* was implicit in the individual gestalt of letters.<sup>10</sup> We can only speculate on the meanings involved for the artist, especially considering the psychological situation: the months following the death of Rembrandt's father.

Further scriptorial effects can be seen in a drawing from around 1630 that bears an inscription identifying the model as Rembrandt's father.



The anomalies displayed by this inscription have led scholars to doubt its autograph nature: the mixture of block letters and cursive script, the variant spelling of 'Harmen', and the unique instance of his patronymic in the form of 'van den Rhijn'. Nor is there any reason not to consider these 'anomalies' as constituting proof of its authenticity and the correctness of the information they offer.<sup>11</sup>

We see an old man seated with his eyes shut tight near a light source coming from the left, as we might imagine Rembrandt's father at the end of his life (he died in the last week of April 1630). The detailed rendering of the head and sketchy treatment of the bust suggest that Rembrandt may have spontaneously portrayed his father while he was dozing.

The block letters spelling out his name – Harman Gerrits[zoon] – have a formal character that confirms the impression that this is a portrait. Since the drawing

was done with red and black chalk and wash, it remains to be seen whether the pen and ink inscription was added at a later moment. The addition of 'van den Rhijn' in a different script underscores the memorial intention of the drawing, while introducing a new element, since it has the appearance of a signature. The general form of the initial 'R' is characteristic of Rembrandt's signature and his handwriting: the horizontal position of the leg can be observed on the first apprentice slip.

In the years 1630–31 Rembrandt signed his paintings and etchings with the monogram ‘RHL’, which is generally assumed to stand for ‘Rembrant Harmensz. [from] Leiden’. Here, we see the ‘R’ followed by an ‘h’, just as we would expect in the monogram signature form. Although the spelling of words and names in the seventeenth century was not standardised, Rembrandt’s spelling of ‘Rhijn’ here is a unique occurrence in his hand. It may be that he was trying it on for size, for he began signing with his patronymic ‘van Rijn’ only in 1632. Might he have reflexively reverted into a signature mode here?

### Summary

A close examination of examples of Rembrandt’s handwriting and signatures from the years 1630–31 shows that he was sensitive and attentive to letter forms. This attention expressed itself in the use of different types of initial letters for his first name – Rembrant – and for his patronymic – ‘[van] Rijn’. There are also similarities and differences in the initial ‘R’, depending on whether it appears in his name written out or as part of a signature. These differences imply that they had a significance for the artist, which is why I call them ‘elementary particles of meaning’: they are clues, signs pointing at significance, because they are themselves evidence of attention.

Below: inscription found on old wallpaper in my apartment. The letters display a mixture of scripts, with the ‘R’ and ‘t’ being done in the so-called Sutterlin script, also called Deutsche Schreibschrift (pencil, SW Germany, first half of the twentieth century).



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am quoting the English translation of a passage from van Hoogstraten's *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der Schilderkonst* (1678), as it appeared in Ernst van de Wetering, *Rembrandt: The Painter at Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 85–86. Van Hoogstraten, a pupil of Rembrandt's, makes the opposite assumption from mine: writing is done automatically, unconsciously.

<sup>2</sup> Samples reproduced from Walter L. Strauss and Marjon van der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents* (New York: Abaris Books, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, '1630/2', p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> This photo shows the close-up of a page from Willem Bogtman, *Het Nederlandsche Handschrift in 1600* (Haarlem: Bogtman, 1973), unpaginated. Note in particular the form given to the 'R' of 'Roeloff', and also the row of 'R's above it. The third 'R' appears in a more elaborate form on the apprentice slips. Some of these forms were still in use in Germany in the late eighteenth century and had the particularity of being drawn in one continuous stroke: the Latin capital 'R' requires at least two.

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from Roelof van Straten, *Rembrandts Weg zur Kunst, 1606–1632* (Berlin: Reimer, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> We know that Rembrandt completed six years of schooling between the ages of seven and thirteen, learning his 'letters' and completing the classic(al) curriculum of the Latin School in Leiden. He matriculated at the University of Leiden at the age of fourteen in 1620. Several months later, however, he began an apprenticeship as a painter. Rembrandt was much better educated than most other artists and probably learned the finer points of handwriting, something that he may have appreciated since calligraphy was a fine art in its own right. Books with models of handwriting and letter forms abounded, analogous to the diversity of type fonts today.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly enough, a variant of this 'R' – including the eyelet – was officially taken up as a writing model by the school system in Germany during the nineteenth century and continued to be used well into the twentieth century.

<sup>8</sup> J. Theodor de Bry and J. Israel de Bry, *Alphabeta et Characteres, jam inde a creato mundo ad nostra usque tempora . . .* (Frankfurt am Main, 1596), p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Examples of old calligraphic alphabets can be found in Peter Jessen, *Meister der Schreibkunst aus drei Jahrhunderte* (Stuttgart: J. Hoffmann, 1923).

<sup>10</sup> Here, I quote the etymology of the word 'character' as given by the Online Etymological Dictionary <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=character>> [accessed 25 July 2016]:

'mid-14c., *carecter*, "symbol marked or branded on the body"; mid-15c., "symbol or drawing used in sorcery", from Old French *caratere* "feature, character" (13c., Modern French *caractère*), from Latin *character*, from Greek *kharakter* "engraved mark", also "symbol or imprint on the soul", also "instrument for marking", from *kharassein* "to engrave", from *kharax* "pointed stake", from PIE root *\*gher-* (4) "to scrape, scratch". Meaning extended in ancient times by metaphor to "a defining quality".'

<sup>11</sup> Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, *Rembrandt's Father*, c.1630. Benesch 56, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum (Red and black chalk, wash, 189 × 240 mm).