

TECHNICAL ART HISTORY AND ARCHEOMETRY III

AN EXPLORATION OF REMBRANDT'S PAINTING AND DRAWING TECHNIQUES

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Introduction

This study begun in 2003 as a collaboration between the authors, a conservator and a painter, was directed towards presenting workshops on Rembrandt's painting materials and techniques in connection with the exhibition, "Rembrandt's Journey" held at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Chicago Art Institute in 2003-04. A considerable amount of technical information has been presented in the literature, most notably the publications of the Rembrandt Research Project begun in the 1960's, along with studies undertaken by museums (1) and Rembrandt scholars (2). The technical literature includes accounts of attempts to analyze and to duplicate Rembrandt's remarkable technique and experimentation with materials, notably the utilization of a medium with which he could produce a thick impasto in the later works.

Materials and Methods

In the course of studying the sources the authors found a disagreement in the conclusions of scientific analysis of Rembrandt's pastose medium. Belchetz-Swenson, like Rembrandt a painter and printmaker, suggested that the artist might have used "burnt plate oil", which is linseed oil that has been heated to the point of combustion (around 400°C.) and is the medium used for making printing ink. Rembrandt would have certainly had burnt plate oil in his studio and the authors experiments in making and utilizing this material in the painting medium successfully produced a wide range of impasto effects.

Results

Our reconstruction work supported the findings of the London National Gallery scientific studies that Rembrandt utilized linseed oil, or occasionally walnut oil, that had been heated and used in an uncomplicated way, occasionally with the addition of chalk as an additional bulking agent.

Other demonstrations such as the making of iron gall ink showed its original blue-black color that contrasts to the brown color of the ink as it appears today. Most people are not aware of the fact that Rembrandt's ink drawings, now brown, were originally a deep blue black.

Conclusions

By supplementing the scientific and historical information with reconstruction work much valuable information can be obtained that would not otherwise be available. Demonstrations of historical painting materials and techniques are a powerful teaching tool for both general and professional audiences.



Fig.1: Rembrandt, *Artist in his Studio*, detail
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Fig.2: Rembrandt, *Self Portrait*, detail
National Gallery, Washington, DC

References

- (1) Bomford, D. et. al., *Art in the Making: Rembrandt* (London:National Gallery) 1988.
- (2) Van de Wetering, E., *Rembrandt: the Painter at Work* (Amsterdam:Amsterdam Univ. Press) 1997.

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