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*Two paintings by Rembrandt: “Girl in a picture frame” and “Scholar at his writing table” from the collection of the Royal Castle in Warsaw – history, examination and conservation*

In 1994, the Warsaw Royal Castle was honoured with an unequalled artistic and historically valuable art collection in Poland – a donation from the Lanckoroński Family<sup>1</sup> – including two paintings attributed to Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606–1660): *Girl in a picture frame*<sup>2</sup> and *Scholar at his writing table*<sup>3</sup> (ill. I, II). The most precious of the Polish eighteenth century royal collection pieces were considered lost for about fifty years and that is why Rembrandt’s authorship was put into doubt, mostly as far as the Girl’s portrait is concerned. New research for an up-to-date attribution of both pictures became the main focus for the Warsaw Royal Castle team: between 2004 and 2006 the paintings were examined, treated and reattributed as a result of the cooperation of Polish

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<sup>1</sup> Karolina Lanckorońska, historian, PhD at Jan Kazimierz University in Lwow (until 1939), 1976–1993 Head of the Polish Historical Institute in Rome, established a donation to the free Republic of Poland. Both Polish Royal Castles were endowed: Royal Castle in Warsaw received a part of the family collection: 15 paintings from the former Stanislaus Augustus Gallery (northern schools’ paintings), Lanckoroński and Rzewuski family portraits and furniture; Wawel Royal Castle has gained about 76 Italian schools paintings.

<sup>2</sup> *Girl in a picture frame*, oil on panel, 104,5 (105,1) × 76,1 (76,0) cm, signed on the lower left side of the background: *Rembrandt//1641*, Royal Castle in Warsaw, inv. ZKW/3906 (King’s gallery no. 207).

<sup>3</sup> *Scholar at his writing table*, oil on panel, 104,5 (105,1) × 76,0 (76,1) cm, signed on the right side of the desk: *Rembrandt//1641*, Royal Castle in Warsaw, inv. ZKW/3905 (King’s gallery no. 208).

scientists, conservators and art historians – under guidance of professor Ernst van de Wetering, the head of the Rembrandt Research Project<sup>4</sup>.

The two pictures are not typical portraits – they are depictions of unknown persons referred to by the Dutch term *tronie*. Both models are picturesquely depicted in historical costumes, a frequent Rembrandt feature.

*The Girl* is shown from the front, resting her hands on the low bar of the painted frame surrounding the whole image. She wears a dark red dress lined with fur, gold necklaces and a wide rich belt. Her young idealized face is deeply shadowed by a black, soft beret from which long red, untied hair hangs freely. The background behind her is green and nondescript, with a poorly shaped column in the right corner, filling the upper space. The artist's name and a date are placed in a shadow between the black frame and the model's right arm. In this painting, Rembrandt achieved the highest degree of illusionism while avoiding typical *trompe l'oeil* devices – at that time he was interested in such effects (*Nightwatch*, 1642, *Portrait of Maria Trip*, 1939, both from the Rijksmuseum). He allowed parts of the painted scene to appear to project beyond the pictorial plane and he suggested a very subtle movement: the girl is in the process of laying her right hand on the illusionist picture frame, her thumb – reflected in the dark wood – already touches the frame, while the fingers are only approaching it. This movement comes from the girl's arms and is expressed in their uneven level and the sleeve's cloth. It reaches the right earring also<sup>5</sup>.

*The Scholar* as an old, bearded man shown in *three quarters* sitting at a table with a writing desk with an open book on it. Wearing a dark fur coat and soft black beret, he looks ahead with nostalgia – he probably stopped for a moment while writing, as he holds a quill pen. His rather philosophical attitude is reinforced by the gold necklace and ring. The manuscript – like an open book's pages has just been turned and a strong light shines through them as they are falling down – this representation giving the illusion of the book crossing the picture's physical surface. Books painted in a similar manner but not so illusionist can be observed on the *Anslo portrait*, in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, also dated at 1641<sup>6</sup>. The scholar's writing desk, decorated with a carved lion's head and sea creatures, features red tassels contrasting with the green tablecloth. On its side is visible a very legible signature of the artist. The thickly humanistic mood is enhanced by the delicate and indefinite green background. The painting is executed in a free manner, with thick impasto mostly reserved for the book and a masterful rendition of the quill pen, half-painted and half-drawn with fresh paint with the brush's shank. The exceptional place of both pictures in Rembrandt's *oeuvre*, particularly the *Girl in a picture frame*

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<sup>4</sup> Royal Castle in Warsaw was awarded with *Sybilla 2006 – The Museum Event of the Year* for the conservation project of both painting. See: J. Czernichowska, R. Dmowska, *Dwa obrazy Rembrandta z Zamku Królewskiego w Warszawie – ich przeszłość w służbie przyszłości* [w:] *Wobec zabytku... Tradycje i perspektywy postaw. Studia dedykowane pamięci prof. Jerzego Remera*, red. E. Pilecka, J. Raczkowski, Toruń 2010, p. 201–220.

<sup>5</sup> E. van de Wetering, *Rembrandt as a searching artist* [in:] *Rembrandt. Quest of a Genius*, p. 115, ex. cat., ed. B. van den Boogert, Amsterdam 2006 (Exhibition: *Rembrandt: The Quest of a Genius*, The Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam, 1 April–2 June 2006).

<sup>6</sup> *Portrait of Corneliss Claesz. Anslo and her wife Aeltje Gerritsdr. Schouten*, 1641, oil on canvas, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

as a absolute *trompe l'oeil* was emphasized by professor Ernst van de Wetering in his expert's opinion regarding the authorship<sup>7</sup>.

The interdisciplinary project undertaken to reattribute the pictures undertook to analyze their technical construction and state of preservation, as well as their history and the numerous copies attesting past interventions.

There are no records regarding the paintings' early history. They possibly belonged to J. van Lennep's Amsterdam collection (inventory from 1711)<sup>8</sup> or to the Polish King Jan III Sobieski, according to the King's inventory from 1696<sup>9</sup>. Probably from this period originates the copy of *The Young woman with her hands on the picture frame* from the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen<sup>10</sup>. It was executed on a landscape painting (possibly during a renovation of the original), and its dimensions and proportions differ from the original (narrower but wider), thus affecting the composition: there are no upper frame moldings, the model is positioned higher, its arms are shorter and the hands are set wider apart. Despite these alterations, this copy is among the closest to the original.

The first records mentioning both panels as *pendants* date from 1769, when they were part of Kamecke's collection in Berlin. In reality the pictures are not *pendants* despite the fact they were considered to constitute a pair for most of their history. In Rembrandt's *pendants*, men's portraits are always the left piece and both models face one each other; their scale is the same and sometimes they are similarly framed (ie.: *Portrait of Agata Baas* from the Quinn's Gallery in London and the *Portrait of Nicolaes Bambeck* from the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique in Brussels). The Warsaw pictures do not meet these criteria. Most likely they were linked together by given titles – *Jewish Bride* and *Father of Jewish Bride* – and by cutting panels to similar size for economical reasons – picture pairs were always more appreciated on the art market than single works.

The presence of the paintings in the Kamecke Family collection is also documented with two etchings by Georg Friedrich Schmidt executed in 1769 and 1770: *Jewish bride* and *The bride's father saves the dowry*<sup>11</sup>, provided with an inscription by the artist: *G.F. Schmidt fec. 1769* reading: *La fiancée Juive, grave d'après le tableau original de Rembrandt tiré du cabinet de Mr. Le Comte de Kamke et dédié au dit Seigneur etc.*, *G.F. Schmidt fec. Auqua forti 1770*, inscribed: *Le Père de la Fiancée réglant sa dot, d'après le tableau original de Rembrandt tiré du cabinet de Mr. Le Comte de Kamke. Rembrandt pinx. 1641.*

<sup>7</sup> E. van de Wetering, *Rembrandt as a searching artist* [in:] *Rembrandt. Quest of a Genius*, ex. cat., ed. B. van den Boogert, Amsterdam 2006, p. 115.

<sup>8</sup> D. Juszczak, H. Malachowicz, *Malarstwo do 1900. Katalog zbiorów, Zamek Królewski w Warszawie*, Warszawa 2007, pp. 408–415, no. 9, 262, 263.

<sup>9</sup> W. Drecka, *Na tropach obrazów ze zbiorów Jana III, „Studia Wilanowskie”*, Warszawa 1997, vol. I, pp. 130–132, ill. 2.

<sup>10</sup> *The Young woman with her hands on the picture frame*, oil on canvas, 97,2 × 81 cm, inv. KMSsp406, artist unknown.

<sup>11</sup> G.K. Nagler, *Neues allgemeines Kunstler – Lexikon*, 1845, vol. 15, p. 323, no. 156, 157; National Library of Ukraine, Kiev, Ukraine: Rkp 5919, Galerie Royale et Electoral a Dresde 1772, 2 vol.b, p. 403b, 405, no. 42, 55. Both graphics are in the collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco: inv. 1093.30.33949 and 1093.30.33950; dimensions respectively: 23,1 × 18,3 cm and 23,3 × 18,3 cm. The nineteenth-century print of the *Girl's* portrait is stored in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, print signed *Rembrandt pinx. G.F. Schmidt fec. 1769 / R. Schuster / Berlin 1881*; paper, mezzotint, 23,5 × 18,5 cm.

Both etchings are reversed in relation to the original paintings, they depict notably well in graphic techniques the pictorial value of both paintings.

In 1777 the last Polish king, Stanisław II August, bought Rembrandt's *pendants* for the Warsaw Royal collection. The royal miniaturist Vincent Lesseur executed two miniatures, now belonging to the Polish Museum in Rapperswil in Switzerland<sup>12</sup>: The *Portrait of young woman with his hands on the parapet*, signed on the right: *W. L. /1797*<sup>13</sup>; *Scholar at his writing table*, signed on the side of the table on the right: *W. L. /1797*<sup>14</sup>. On the *Girl's* portrait, Lesseur depicted the column in the background, but placed his signature on the opposite side of Rembrandt's, while in the *Scholar's* portrait he followed the artist's signature positioning.

Probably more recent is another pair of copies of the two portraits by an unknown artist, most likely from Bacciarelli's *Malarnia*. It is a Sapieha family deposit from their collections in Krasiczyn, now belonging to the Wawel Castle Museum in Cracow and stored in its branch museum at the Pieskowa Skala Castle<sup>15</sup>. In spite of the fact that the appearance of both copies has been altered by an old extensive restoration, they seem to be relatively close to the originals.

After the abdication of Stanisław II August, in 1815 the paintings were sold to the Polish aristocrat Kazimierz Rzewuski (1751–1820) and moved to Austria, later to be inherited by Karol Lanckoroński (1848–1933), a Polish landowner, politician, Viennese civil servant and famous art collector.

In the nineteenth century both pictures were copied several times – the *Girl's* picture more often with copies in two others Polish museums: the Museum Palace in Wilanów and the Łańcut Castle Museum. In the Wilanów copy<sup>16</sup>, the girl rests her hands on an armchair, not on the frame, but the picture seems to be heavily repainted. It is probably a nineteenth century copy – probably executed after an earlier one mentioned in King Jan III Sobieski's inventory and ordered by him in 1687 for his residence in Żółkiew (presently Ukraine)<sup>17</sup>. The Łańcut copy comes from the Potocki family collection or, possibly, duchess Lubomirska<sup>18</sup>. It is the weakest copy, but also heavily overpainted. The model is depicted without hands and is surrounded by a painted oval. The other pair of copies of both *tronies* come from the Lubomirski Museum in Lviv (existing until 1939), now in the collection of the Lviv Art Gallery, Ukraine – currently on display at Złoczów

<sup>12</sup> *Miniatury Wincentego Lesseura i Walerii Tarnowskiej z dawnej kolekcji Tarnowskich z Dzikowa w zbiorach Muzeum Polskiego w Rapperswilu, Zamek Królewski w Warszawie i Muzeum Polskie w Rapperswilu*, exh. cat., ed. H. Kamińska-Krassowska, Warszawa 1994, p. 5, no. 50, 51.

<sup>13</sup> Watercolor, gouache on ivory, 124 × 84 mm, inv. 701; on the back there are the subtitles: *61 / La Juive de la/ Collection du Roy/ de Pologne/ de Rembrandt/ VII5/104/ N. 93*.

<sup>14</sup> Watercolor, gouache on ivory, 125 × 93 mm, inv. 702; on the back there are the subtitles: *60/ VII3/102 Nr 91/ Żyd czytający/z Rembrandta N. 92*.

<sup>15</sup> Inv. PZS na Wawelu: dep. 161 and dep. 162, dimensions of both paintings: 89,5 × 71 cm. Recently another *Girl's* copy was on the sale at the London Christie's auction (4/13/2011, Lot.34/Sale 6025), considered to be the eighteenth-century.

<sup>16</sup> XIX (?), oil on canvas and panel, 87 × 71 cm, inv. Wil.1656.

<sup>17</sup> W. Drecka, *op.cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Oil on canvas, 91 × 75 cm, inv. S 234 ML. See J. Piotrowski, *Zamek w Łańcutu. Zwięzły opis dziejów i zbiorów*, Lwów 1935; *Katalog Zabytków Sztuki w Polsce*, vol. III, no. 5, „Łańcut i okolice”, ed. J. Sito, Warszawa 1994.