

Alois Riegl and the riddle of Rembrandt's *Staalmeesters*: Vienna schooling Dutch art scholarship*

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'Art history's culminating moment, the years when the project of art history most perfectly realized its possibilities' almost arrived in 1893 with Alois Riegl's first book *Questions of Style*, according to an appetizing formulation in Christopher Wood's critically-acclaimed recent study, *The History of Art History*.¹ Wood praised Riegl as 'a careful observer, trained in Morellian [comparative] method', and observed that 'Riegl's vases and carpets were authorless', whereas his book-length study of *The Dutch Group Portrait* from 1902, in Wood's gloss, concerned 'a kind of applied art'.² Yet following Ernst Gombrich, Wood rejected Riegl's Hegelian genealogical-developmental narrative in *Questions of Style* as 'a fantasy'.³ Wolfgang Kemp similarly contrasted the illuminating descriptive passages on particular works in Riegl's group portrait study with his dubious Hegelian scheme of oppositions as 'conceptual clap-trapparat [Begriffsklapparatismus]'.⁴ Despite its promise for the project of art history, the Vienna school is ultimately found wanting, like so many other names and movements in Wood's capacious review, nor is any progress evident in his broader history of art history up to the present.

As a corollary perspective, this paper proposes to move beyond what Riegl got wrong in order to emphasize the pertinence of what he got right for advancing art history today, specifically in his group portrait study and above all in relation to the riddle of Rembrandt's *Staalmeesters*. By bringing Riegl's close readings of mostly 'minor' paintings to bear on monuments of world art by Rembrandt, Riegl mediated

* A separate pdf containing the illustrations to this text is available [here](#).

¹ Alois Riegl, *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik*, Berlin, 1893; Christopher Wood, *A History of Art History*, Princeton, 2019, 268.

² Alois Riegl, *Das holländische Gruppenporträt* [1902], Vienna, 1931; Alois Riegl, 'Excerpts of English translation from Alois Riegl, *The Dutch Group Portrait*', trans. B. Binstock, *October* 74 (1995): 1-28; Wood, *A History of Art History*, 267, 294.

³ Ernst Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Ithaca (NY), 1979, 182; Wood, *The History of Art History*, 294.

⁴ Wolfgang Kemp, 'Alois Riegl' in *Altmeister moderner Kunstgeschichte*, ed. Heinrich Dilly, Berlin, 1990, 40-41, 54-55: 'The factors are available as endless antitheses... Name the ingredients and the conceptual clap-trapparat will continue to operate for some time... One would hardly expect that the same author is among the most patient in our discipline at describing the nuance of formal elements.'

between 'applied' and 'high' art, or authorless works and one of the world's foremost authors, who was profoundly concerned with his tradition. These concrete examples also demonstrate how Riegl's elucidations of visual particulars are not in contrast to but rather derive from and inform his theory of the broader development of group portraiture. Riegl sought to explain the *Kunstwollen* or 'will of art' of Dutch group portraits, what they seek to do *as art*.⁵ His approach is preferable to and directly applicable to current interpretations, I submit, and can thus serve as a corrective or a means of 'Vienna schooling' Dutch art scholarship. Conversely, situating Riegl's group portrait study, as his last major work and potentially the culmination of his thought, in relation to subsequent approaches can yield new insights into his place within the history of art history, a 'Vienna school' perspective applied to the Vienna school itself. From such a synthetic or cumulative art historiography and history of art history, looking backward in order to move forward, we can more perfectly realize the project of art history.⁶

1. Riegl on Dutch Group Portraits: 'internal unity' v. 'external unity'

Riegl divided the broader development of Dutch group portraits into three stages based on a fundamental distinction between an 'internal unity' among figures through physical, narrative action, characteristic of Italian (or Italianate) history paintings ([fig. 1](#)) and an 'external unity' of stationary, mostly vertical figures looking out at us in Dutch group portraits ([fig. 2](#)). External unity also involves how the viewer perceives what is depicted, including elements such as *chiaroscuro* or light and shadow, and optical as opposed to tactile qualities and contours of nearby persons and things, and more generally the relation of form to space. Riegl acknowledged that Dutch group portraits, with their mostly 'inactive figures, placed one beside another, or their broken-off actions fixed in half-completion' appear 'boring' to the modern beholder, which is why this genre, unique to Dutch art, did not interest anyone outside the country, and almost all examples remain there.⁷ Previous scholarship also only discussed Rembrandt's exceptional group portraits, whereas Riegl related Rembrandt's group

⁵ On the English translation of *Kunstwollen* as 'will of art' as opposed to other alternatives (including 'will to form' in Wood, *A History of Art History*, 291), see Benjamin Binstock, 'Alois Riegl, Monumental Ruin: Why We Still Need to Read Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts', introduction to Alois Riegl, *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*, trans. J. Jung, New York, 2004, 13-19. Riegl's concrete approach in his group portrait study demonstrates that he addresses neither a mystical 'spirit' of history nor the artist's intention in relation to function, material, and technique as articulated by Gottfried Semper, but rather what art (a period, tradition, genre, or single work) can do and seeks to do *as art*.

⁶ My proposal is in keeping with the practice of some of the greatest art historians, such as the legendary connoisseur Bernard Berenson, who is said to have displayed Riegl's *Spätrömische Kunstindustrie* on a lectern in his study as a model for Berenson's own reflections on Italian Renaissance painting, and Leo Steinberg, who cited Riegl's group portrait study as a model for Steinberg's interpretations of Picasso.

⁷ Riegl, *Das holländische Gruppenportrat*, 2; Riegl, 'The Dutch Group Portrait', 4.

portraits to his broader tradition. Whereas the development of Dutch group portraits moved from external unity (portraiture) toward internal unity (narrative), Rembrandt's development moved in the inverse direction. Paradoxically, 'by entering anew and in greater depth into the fundamental principle of Italian art, Rembrandt was able to bring about a new flowering—in our view the greatest flowering—of Dutch painting.'⁸

The first stage of Dutch group portraiture is vividly embodied in Pieter Pieters's *Sample-Masters of the Drapers' Guild* from 1599 ([fig. 3](#)), the earliest surviving group portrait, and the only other surviving group portrait for the guild later depicted by Rembrandt in his *Staalmeesters*.⁹ An obvious disparity is evident in Pieters's composition between the searching, attentive faces of his sitters, constituting an external unity with the beholder, and the symbolic activity of their hands. The sample-masters at the lower left and upper right judge samples of cloth held between their fingers; one at the lower right holds up the stamp with the guild's seal of approval; and the presumed chairman at the center counts on his fingers, perhaps calculating prices of particular samples.

Riegl more specifically distinguished between Italianate internal unity in Rubens's *Shepherd and Shepherdess* ([fig. 1](#)), in which the man physically dominates the woman, and her breasts 'as objects of erotic stimulation... are stripped bare', as opposed to Dutch external unity in a *Peasant Couple* now attributed to Pieter Pieters ([fig. 2](#)), in which the maiden's breasts are concealed beneath her clothing and fondled by a young man who looks out at the viewer. He 'simply lives at this moment exclusively in his subjective experience of touch, and does not want to see anything objective around him. Pieters does not depict a physical act so much as an inner sensation, so that we look not only into the young peasant's face but also into his thoughts; in Riegl's phrase, the Dutchman 'takes a detour by way of the consciousness and capacity for sensation of the beholding subject.'¹⁰ The same process appears to be at stake among Pieters's sample-masters. The chairman does not need to look at his fingers in order to count them, which would make his activity look pedestrian, whereas his expression evokes the mental strain of calculation. The sample-master with the seal similarly does not employ a tool used to mark cloth, so much as hold up a metaphor for the group's authoritative judgment. Even those holding samples of cloth between their fingers may judge their quality by the feel of their texture, rather than their relatively uniform appearance, like the young peasant fondling his beloved's breast. The seeming disparity between the heads and hands of Pieters's sample-masters is accordingly

⁸ Riegl, *Das holländische Gruppenportrat*, 201; Riegl, 'The Dutch Group Portrait', 9.

⁹ Riegl, *Das holländische Gruppenportrat*, 134-135, following Dutch scholars of that time, assigned the painting to Aert Pietersz. Henri Van de Waal, 'The Syndics and Their Legend' (1959) in *Steps Toward Rembrandt*, trans. P. Wardle and A. Griffiths, Amsterdam, 1974, 254, followed by subsequent authors, attributed the painting to Aert Pietersz's younger brother Pieter Pieters.

¹⁰ Riegl, *Das holländische Gruppenportrat*, 108.

mediated insofar as their activity involves a mental component, inner experience, reflected in their expressions, which we see and experience in turn.

According to Riegl, the second period of Dutch group portraiture strove toward a complete external unity in space and time, first achieved in Werner van den Valckert's *Male Regents of the Lepers Hospital* of 1624 ([fig. 4](#)). The regents are seated around a table in their (imagined) meeting room decorated by symbolic reliefs. Riegl proposed that the regent at the far left, the chairman of the group, who rests the back of his left hand with his index finger extended on a long, thin ledger-like book, poses a question to a leper in the audience. The next regent to the right supposedly 'reaches for pen and paper, to write down the required instructions, [and] the third holds his finger on the pile of coins, from which he will pay out the proffered support' to the leper. The last regent on the far right puts pen to paper, 'in order to record promptly the necessary entries' and raises his right index finger 'as if to demand silence, in order to hear better the awaited answer.'¹¹ In response to Riegl's account, the Dutch art historian Henri van de Waal proposed that 'it is not really worth the effort to refute such nonsense.'¹²

Riegl was certainly mistaken in his assertion that Van den Valckert's regents are depicted engaging a leper in the place of the viewer (rather uncomfortable for us), and more generally in his claim that this and other group portraits involve a verbal dimension. The chairman at the left most likely points to the guild's account book. The next regent to the right holds a small piece of paper with the date of Van den Valckert's painting, 1624, and the third regent from the left with the coins was presumably the group's treasurer [*penningmeester*, 'master of the pennies']. The regent on the far right appears to have written his own name below the others' as the last of four names in slightly varying scripts, and most plausibly points with his index finger to the group as a whole. The gesture is undeniably awkward, enough for Riegl to have misunderstood. More importantly, this awkwardness is directly related to Riegl's distinction between symbolic hand gestures and faces attentively gazing out in our direction, or internal v. external unities. Riegl's error, I submit, lay in substituting a verbal for a visual narrative, whereas his underlying scheme of the development of group portraiture remains illuminating.

2. Riegl on Rembrandt: synthesis of external and internal unities

The third stage of group portraiture embodied the transition to internal unity and culminated in Rembrandt's group portraits, which nevertheless present the inverse development, from internal to external unity. His first group portrait, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp* of 1632 ([fig. 5](#)) can already be said to have surpassed any previous group portrait, and by extension his tradition as a whole, in its artistic invention and dramatic power. Through the physical subordination among the surgeons, Rembrandt introduced an unprecedented internal unity, yet he also mediated this innovation

¹¹ Ibid., 162-163.

¹² Van de Waal, 'The Syndics and Their Legend', 255.

through *chiaroscuro* in space as a means to subordinate the surgeons to an external unity with the viewer. This 'double subordination' of internal and external unities involves us in the surgeons' psychological connections such that the composition seems 'transformed from an... objective event into an inner experience of the beholder' and reveals 'the goal of all Rembrandt's artistic aspiration: the interfusion of psyches [*Seelen*, also 'souls'] among one another and with the psyche of the beholder.'¹³

Riegl recognized that 'Tulp demonstrates certain muscles of the forearm' of the corpse, yet assumed that he made a rhetorical gesture with his left hand. Tulp's left hand actually performs the function of the tendons he holds up with the scalpel in his right hand, echoing his manual labor as surgeon, as William Schupbach first recognized in 1982, although like Riegl, Schupbach nevertheless posited that Tulp delivers a (theological) lecture.¹⁴ Tulp's lips are slightly parted, so he could be shown speaking, as he undoubtedly did during his actual anatomical demonstration. Yet attributing a verbal dimension to Rembrandt's composition is a projection. Both authors were likely also misled in part by the surgeon at the far left who stares at Tulp's face as if listening to his words. This surgeon was clearly added by a later artist, perhaps Jacob Backer, as evident from this verbal narrative conception, which undermines Rembrandt's central conceit; the less compelling rendering of the surgeon's face in a different style with thinner application of paint; and his position in rigid profile squeezed in at the edge of the painting, which undermines Rembrandt's subtle pyramidal composition in depth and on the plane. The same artist likely also added a list of the surgeons' names, including the added surgeon, over a page with drawings of dissected arms held by the surgeon just left of Tulp.¹⁵ These changes re-assert the conventions of the tradition, the

¹³ Riegl, *Das holländische Gruppenportrat*, 205; Riegl, 'The Dutch Group Portrait', 11, 21, opted for 'soul.'

¹⁴ William Shupbach, *The Paradox of Rembrandt's 'Anatomy of Dr. Tulp'*, London, 1982, 7-8, 23, 27-30, proposed that Tulp proclaimed a sentiment along the lines of 'Behold the wisdom of the almighty God which passeth all understanding', whereas the surgeon at the top of the pyramid looking out at us ostensibly points to the corpse as emblem of *vanitas* or the transience of human life, hence the ostensible 'paradox' of Rembrandt's picture. These ideas were adopted in turn in Alison Kettering, *Rembrandt's Group Portraits*, Zwolle, 2006, 14. A different paradox involves art historians' efforts to place Rembrandt's paintings in his historical context through recourse to conservative religious ideologies in texts, precisely *against* the radically modern artistic ideas manifest in his compositions.

¹⁵ Ary de Vries et al., *Rembrandt in the Mauritshuis: An Interdisciplinacy Study*, Alphen aan den Rijn, 1978, 83-86, 98-99, attributed the figure at the far left to Jacob Backer, and identified the drawing as a type illustrated in Vesalius, although Rembrandt's source could have been a similar drawing by Jacques de Gheyn. Joshua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, The Hague, 1982, vol. 2, 182, followed by subsequent scholars, proposed that Rembrandt himself added the figure. Rembrandt's own *pentimenti* revealed in X-rays were limited to removing a hat on the figure at the top of the pyramid and adding a right hand to the corpse's stump, a punishment for a previous offence, apparently observed 'from death' and possibly part of the inspiration for his conceit.

primary function of the group portrait as a record of the sitters, as opposed to Rembrandt's original artistic innovations, a central dialectic in his group portraits.

When these later additions are omitted ([fig. 5a](#)), we can recognize Rembrandt's central conceit as the displacement of speech by sight, and by extension text by image. Tulp's ordinary rhetorical gesture that would accompany a speech becomes a visual manual demonstration, carefully observed with intense concentration by the central triangle of surgeons leaning over the head of the corpse.¹⁶ The surgeon directly to the left of the corpse, who originally constituted the boundary of the group, turns his lost profile toward the large volume at the corpse's feet. This is presumably Andreas Vesalius's *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* of 1543, with a portrait of Vesalius on the right page holding the tendons of a dissected arm, whereas the left page with text would be difficult to read from that distance.¹⁷ The surgeon to the left of Tulp, who holds what was originally a drawing of dissected arms, reflects on this image with what Riegl rightly characterized as a 'look of recollection.'¹⁸

Rembrandt's emphasis on the priority of images and sight was in keeping with his own priorities as visual artist, as well as renaissance innovations in anatomical study, begun with Vesalius, the father of modern anatomy. Direct empirical observations of dissected corpses, as well as the use of images, often aided by the efforts of visual artists, progressively replaced the inherited theories of authoritative written tradition dating back to antiquity. Tulp participated in this process through his discovery of the so-called *valvula tulpiae* or ileo-cloacal valve used for defecation, which he held up in his anatomy lesson of 1632, although that would not have made a compelling narrative for Rembrandt's anatomy lesson.¹⁹ Instead, he shows Tulp using his own body to demonstrate a living organism, rather than, in William Wordsworth's infamous phrase, 'murder(ing) to dissect.'²⁰ Rembrandt also extended this idea to the visceral responses of the surgeons as active observers, rather than passive listeners. The surgeon at the top of the pyramid points to the group and looks out at us, implicitly

¹⁶ Schupbach, *Paradox*, 26, cited Rubens' *Doubting Thomas*, the center panel of his *Rockox Triptych*, as a compositional source for Rembrandt's *Tulp* in the muscular torso and extended arm of the corpse, Tulp's uplifted gaze, and the varied poses and expressions of the surgeons. Whereas Rubens emphasized religious faith over-coming doubt, Rembrandt employs the same pictorial elements to emphasize sight as the empirical foundation of modern science, and substitutes for Rubens's resurrected Christ a criminal corpse brought to animated movement through intellectual understanding.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁸ Riegl, *Das holländische Gruppenportrat*, 202, Riegl, 'The Dutch Group Portrait', 7.

¹⁹ Schupbach, *Paradox*, 21-22.

²⁰ William Wordsworth, 'The Tables Turned' [1802] in *William Wordsworth*, Oxford, 1984, 131. A similar idea was also expressed shortly after in G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* [1807] trans. A. Miller, New York, 1977, 166. For further elaboration of these points see Benjamin Binstock, 'I've Got You Under My Skin: Riegl, Rembrandt, and the Will of Art History' in *Framing Formalism: Riegl's Work* ed. R. Woodfield, Amsterdam, 2001, 219-263.

seated behind the balustrade in the first ring of the well of the anatomy theater. Through the inclination of our bodies and observation, we complete the group as 'missing piece' of a larger living, moving, seeing, and thinking whole, which thereby becomes, in Riegl's phrase, 'an inner experience of the beholder.'

Rembrandt's following group portrait from a decade later, *The Nightwatch* of 1642 ([fig. 6](#)) went much further in the direction of internal unity, evident in the fantastic variety of activities of the militiamen, including the raising of lances and the loading, cocking, and firing of muskets, based on engravings by Jacques de Gheyn. Earlier militia group portraits had shown the wealthy and prominent members meeting, eating, and drinking in their guildhalls, whereas, ironically, precisely by placing the militia in a military context, Rembrandt's composition suggests a farce, reducing his sitters to marionettes, *staffage*, or props in his artistic drama. Riegl specifically claimed that Rembrandt sought to establish an external unity in his picture solely by means of captain Banning-Coq's verbal command 'to have the troop move out' in the direction of the viewer, underscored by his out-stretched arm, mediated by way of his lieutenant Ruytenburgh, and resulting in the company's activities.²¹ Yet the company does not actually appear to be marching out in our direction, indeed, their diverse activities would seem to make that impossible. Rather, the external unity is constituted almost exclusively through the viewer, who is drawn into Rembrandt's intriguing composition, starting with the captain's out-stretched arm.

In interpreting Banning-Coq's out-stretched arm, Riegl once again erred in projecting a verbal dimension onto Rembrandt's painting, in my view, and underestimated the radical originality of his visual conceits. The captain's extended arm casts a shadow in the opposite direction across the lieutenant's nether regions, evoking a complex internal unity between them ([fig. 6a](#)). The shadow-hand is usually said to be 'holding' the lion of Amsterdam in the embroidered hem of Ruytenburgh's jacket.²² Yet the shadow fingers actually overlap the lion, as we can only see from up-close, whereas the shadow-hand already strikes the viewer from a far distance, and its implied 'handling'—of an embroidered lion, or something else—contradicts the captain's outward-directed gesture. Once again, Rembrandt displaced a conventional rhetorical gesture by an uncanny visual manual demonstration.

Even more uncanny, and disturbing, perhaps, is what Riegl called 'the maiden in the sun-beam' to the left ([fig. 6b](#)). She is usually identified as a 'suttlér', one of the women who accompanied earlier militia companies and tended to their culinary and sexual needs, effectively a prostitute-cook, whereas the chicken on her belt is routinely glossed as a reference to the militia company's emblem of the eagle's claw [*kloveniers*].²³ Yet the chicken evokes subversive associations in these contexts: martial (cowardice

²¹ Riegl, *Das holländische Gruppenportrat*, 210, Riegl, 'The Dutch Group Portrait', 15-16.

²² Willem Hellinga, *Rembrandt Fecit 1642*, Amsterdam, 1956, 13.

²³ Frederik Schmidt-Degener, 'Het genetische probleem van de Nachtwacht (III)', *Onze Kunst* 30 (1916), 45-47.

rather than valor); culinary (eating instead of fighting); and sexual (female rather than male). Perhaps in order to squeeze the figure into a small space of his already over-full composition, Rembrandt furthermore appears to have depicted her as a dwarf or child. Lastly, he lent this dwarf or child prostitute-cook the feature of his late wife Saskia, who had died while he was working on the painting, presumably as a tribute to her, an understandable procedure, yet one that carried unsettling associations.

According to Rembrandt's student Samuel van Hoogstraten, in the view of many he went too far, preferring his original composition over the individual portraits he was paid to paint, as confirmed by the later addition of a shield at the upper left with the names of those who paid for their portraits.²⁴ Following Van Hoogstraten, Riegl assumed that Rembrandt's painting provoked a controversy that contributed to his progressive alienation from his public, eventually leading to his bankruptcy, whereas modern scholars have tirelessly denied the 'myth' that *The Nightwatch* caused a scandal.²⁵ An intermediate and perhaps more accurate explanation would be that through his painting Rembrandt had established himself as the greatest painter in Europe, and his beloved wife had died in the process, both of which could have contributed to his turn away from his early ambitions and his alienation from the public, at least the social elite, as a form of artistic internal exile. His *Nightwatch* thus already exemplified these circumstances, regardless of any controversy the work might have subsequently provoked. We can also gauge the impact of Rembrandt's painting through its later positive reception. The Rijksmuseum was designed in a concrete sense around Rembrandt's *Nightwatch*, with the long central 'gallery of honor' culminating in 'the Nightwatch room' decorated with Rembrandt and Saskia's names and birthdays, symbols of day and night, dawn and dusk, as if a memorial to them.²⁶ In short, Rembrandt took up and transformed the most popular and prestigious genre of his time in a way that was later recognized as an unsurpassed personal artistic triumph, yet at the cost of his sitters and his tradition.

Rembrandt's production drastically decreased in the mid-1640's. He continued to receive a few exceptional commissions for portraits including a third group portrait, from the surgeons' guild for whom he painted his *Tulp*, resulting in his *Anatomy Lesson*

²⁴ Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst*, Amsterdam, 1672, 176, also described the painting as 'deserving of criticism [berispelijk].'

²⁵ Riegl, *Das holländische Gruppenportrat*, 211; Riegl, 'The Dutch Group Portrait', 16-17. Jan Emmens, *Rembrandt en de Regels van de Kunst*, Utrecht, 1968, *passim*, first rejected the 'Romantic myth' of Rembrandt's isolation as an ostensible reaction against classicist aesthetics. Cf. also Kettering, *Rembrandt's Group Portraits*, 29: 'The *Nightwatch* created a collective image of men of military strength committed to the greater good of the city of Amsterdam.' However, Emmens's account is directly contradicted by the testimony of Van Hoogstraten, himself a classicist, whose criticisms are perfectly understandable today.

²⁶ See Jeroen Boomgaard, 'Hangt mij op sterk licht.' Rembrandts licht en de plaatsing van de Nachtwacht in het Rijksmuseum', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 35 (1984), 227 ff, Benjamin Binstock, 'Alois Riegl in the Presence of 'The Nightwatch'', *October* 74 (1995), 36-44.

of *Dr. Deijman* of 1656 ([fig. 7](#)). His painting was tragically later largely destroyed in a fire and survives only as a small fragment from the center, showing Deijman peeling off the *dura mater* or hard outer lining of the corpse's brain and an assistant who holds the top of the corpse's cranium, together with Rembrandt's sketch of how his painting would appear in its intended location ([fig. 7a](#)).²⁷

According to Riegl, Rembrandt established an internal unity through his symmetrical composition of surgeons grouped around the corpse, in almost complete subordination to Deijman's verbal lecture, and an external unity with the viewer through the partially dissected and radically foreshortened corpse pointing feet first in our direction. He adopted both strategies from Italian renaissance paintings, which he transformed through his optical approach to his composition, breaking this up into successive planes, bathed in changing light from the circular window or oculus above.²⁸ The attendant to the left does not necessarily listen to Deijman's words as Riegl assumed, and could instead contemplate what he has just seen, picturing the corpse's brain in his own brain, echoed by the other surgeons and ourselves as viewers, corresponding to what Riegl called 'an inner experience.' Rembrandt's emphatically optical approach, which approximates our subjective experience of what we observe, 'beneath' linear contour and tactile texture, parallels Deijman's procedure of peeling away the outer lining of the brain. As evident from his sketch, Rembrandt's conception of the two sections of the anatomical theater to either side of central pilaster behind Deijman furthermore approximate the hemispheres of the exposed brain.

Rembrandt's *Staalmeesters* ([fig. 8](#)) of 1662 completes his trajectory and embodies the culmination of his tradition, according to Riegl, insofar as 'internal and external unities in the picture are no longer separate but identical.' The five sample-masters and their servant standing behind all turn out in our direction in an external unity, as in traditional group portraits ([figs. 3-4](#)), yet are simultaneously subtly related to one another in a narrative internal unity. Riegl specifically posited that the chairman at the center poses a question to 'an unseen party in the place of the beholder', referring to 'the contents (certain paragraphs) of a book lying on the table before him', while the other sample-masters listen to both his question and the party's answer.

Riegl was elaborating on the account of Théophile Thoré, one of the earliest modern art historians who 'discovered' Vermeer's importance and helped transform

²⁷ Following earlier scholars, Norbert Middelkoop, *De Anatomische Les van Dr. Deijman*, Amsterdam, 1994, 13-14, identified Rembrandt's drawing as completed after his painting, for the purpose of designing a frame. Yet his drawing must have come first, since he adapted the pose of the assistant at the front and the surgeon directly behind, as evident from the piece of collar in the fragment. Rembrandt could have made his drawing to show his patrons what his composition would look like, including a possible frame.

²⁸ Riegl, *Das holländische Gruppenportrat*, 219-220; Riegl, 'The Dutch Group Portrait', 23-24. Middelkoop, *De Anatomische Les van Dr. Deijman*, 14, identified the light source from above, yet the circle at the top of the drawing has never been recognized as an *oculus*.

thinking about Rembrandt. Thoré already assumed that the sample-masters were shown meeting with a public audience, in keeping with the traditional nineteenth-century title for Rembrandt's painting, *'The Syndics'*, which evokes the large meetings of labor organizations from that era. Riegl claimed that

out of a need for drama, the Frenchman Thoré interpreted into the scene an overly sharp polemic between the regents and the presumed party. By contrast, the impartial beholder is certainly able to read from the faces, together with the attention that constitutes the fundamental tone, the feeling of a certain satisfaction and agreement, rather than spiteful retribution and gloating.²⁹

Thoré thus introduced a verbal dimension into the scholarly literature, which Riegl merely refined and applied to a wide range of group portraits. In his 1959 essay on *'The Syndics and their Legend'*, Van de Waal observed that these guilds never met with public audiences as part of their official functions and dismissed Riegl's reading as a Romantic, anachronistic approach to paintings as 'snapshots' of actual events. As an alternative description of Rembrandt's painting, Van de Waal offered the phrase of a disgruntled nineteenth-century official who had failed to obtain the work at auction: 'simply five gentlemen in black who are just sitting to have their portraits painted.'³⁰ Was Riegl's essay actually 'nonsense' not worth refuting, as Van de Waal insisted, closer to art history's nadir than its culminating moment? Conversely, how should we judge art history today when, following Van de Waal's lead, scholars no longer even recognize a riddle in Rembrandt's *Staalmeesters*?

3. Rembrandt's process of composition in his *Staalmeesters*

The answers lie in Rembrandt's process of composition, evident from his preparatory drawings and X-rays of his painting. The names of the depicted figures have been identified on the basis of their apparent ages and activities.³¹ Rembrandt made a rough group sketch on a small piece of paper of the first three sample-masters on the left, from left to right, Jacob Van Loon, Volckert Jansz, and the chairman Willem van Doeyenburg ([fig. 9](#)), and two highly refined, single-figure portrait studies of Van Loon and Jansz on much larger, thicker sheets of paper with distinctive brown (originally red) vertical

²⁹ Wilhelm Bürger (Théophile Thoré), *Musées de la Hollande. Amsterdam et La Haye*, Paris, 1858, 25, read the expression of the standing second sample-master from the left as *'Hein! Qu'avez-vous à dire a cela? C'est sans réplique...* [Well! What do you say to that? No response is possible...]. Riegl, *Das holländische Gruppenportrat*, 221-223; Riegl, *'The Dutch Group Portrait'*, 26-27.

³⁰ Van de Waal, *'The Syndics and their Legend'*, 247-251, traced the error back to the earliest catalogue with Rembrandt's painting by C. Apostol from 1809, which already characterized the sample-masters as 'all looking up at someone.' Most subsequent scholars of Dutch art enthusiastically embraced Van de Waal's account.

³¹ Jan Six, "De Namen der Staalmeesters," *Oud Holland* 14 (1896), 65-67, tentatively identified the sample-masters' names, later confirmed by Isabella van Eeghen, "De Staalmeesters," *Amstelodamum* (1957), 65-80, summarized in Isabella van Eeghen, 'De Staalmeesters', *Oud Holland* 73 (1958), 80-84.

lines at the margins, identified as account book paper ([figs. 10, 11](#)).³² The X-rays of Rembrandt's painting indicate extensive changes to several of the figures, clearly related to his drawings ([fig. 8a](#)).³³ Rembrandt never made so many preparatory drawings for, or such extensive revisions to, another painting. Yet scholars have never explained the order of his drawings or their function in his process of composition.³⁴

The oldest member of the group on the far left in the painting, Van Loon, is seated in a folding chair on which he rests his right arm, his head facing out in our direction, in a quarter turn. In the group sketch ([fig. 9](#)) he is seated in the same way, but the direction of his gaze is difficult to read, it seems, because Rembrandt made a correction to his head. In the portrait study ([fig. 10](#)), Van Loon wears a simpler collar, is seated on a simpler chair, and looks outward and lower, bathed in light from the unseen window to the left, and from a lower viewpoint, changes Rembrandt incorporated in his revision of Van Loon's head in his painting, which accordingly looks smashed down in the X-rays ([figs. 8, 8a, 10](#)).³⁵

³² Wilhelm Valentiner, *Rembrandt, des Meisters Handzeichnungen*, Stuttgart, 1925, vol. 2, 426, first identified the account book paper, repeated by Otto Benesch, *Drawings of Rembrandt*, London, 1957, vol. 5, nos. 1179, 1180, 1142, 1146. The study of Van Loon bears traces of a vertical line at the left on the *recto* that Rembrandt largely effaced by vigorous rubbing of his brush with ink-wash. The study of Jansz has vertical lines running along the column at the right on the *recto* and his right arm at the left on the *verso*.

³³ Arthur van Schendel, 'De schimmen van de staalmeesters: een rontgenologisch onderzoek', *Oud Holland* 71 (1956), 1-23.

³⁴ Van Schendel, 'De schimmen van de staalmeesters, 4-14, 23, connected Rembrandt's group sketch with his first painted composition revealed in the X-rays, and assumed that the study of Van Loon preceded that of Jansz, but did not address their function or relation. Christopher Brown in Christopher Brown et al., *Rembrandt the Master and his Workshop. Paintings*, New Haven, 1991, 281-282, placed the study of Jansz before that of Van Loon, whereas Peter Schatborn in the companion volume, Holm Bevers et al., *Rembrandt: The Master and His Workshop. Drawings and Etchings*, New Haven, 1991, 131-132, placed the study of Van Loon first and the group sketch last. That companion volumes of a major Rembrandt exhibition placed his drawings in different orders, without explanation or addressing their relation to changes revealed by X-rays of his painting indicates a rudimentary level of thinking about his process of composition. Benjamin Binstock, 'Seeing Representations; or, The Hidden Master in Rembrandt's *'Syndics'*', *Representations* 83 (2003), 10-28, proposed an explanation of Rembrandt's drawings in relation to his process of composition that has not been addressed by other scholars. The most recent scholarly discussions of Rembrandt's painting and drawings by Marjorie Wieseman, Jonathan Bikker and Anna Krekeler, and Marijn Schapelhouman, in Jonathan Bikker et al., *Late Rembrandt*, London, 2014, 131, 141, 166, did not offer an account of his process of composition.

³⁵ Van Schendel, 'De schimmen van de staalmeesters, 4, claimed there were "barely changes" made to Van Loon visible in the X-rays, followed by Brown in Brown et al., *Rembrandt the Master and his Workshop. Paintings*, 281.

Standing beside him Jansz assumes a more erect, frontal position in the group sketch (**fig. 9**), his right arm behind Van Loon, and turns his head toward the third figure, the chairman Van Doeyenburg. In Rembrandt's portrait study (**fig. 11**) Jansz stands with his right arm leaning on the table, indicated by a broad stroke of ink, and holds his right glove in his left hand, his cloak wrapped around his left arm, as in Rembrandt's painting. The column to the right in the sketch indicates that Jansz stands on the far side of the table, and he looks down in seeming inward reflection, likewise seen from below. The X-rays of Rembrandt's paintings show that he depicted Jansz twice, a thinly painted version to the left in a more erect and frontal posture turning toward the chairman, as in the group sketch (**fig. 9**), and a more thickly applied version hunched over and turning out toward the viewer, leaning on the table with his right arm, as in the final painting, closer to the portrait study (**fig. 11**).

The X-rays reveal that Rembrandt painted the chairman Van Doeyenburg's head three times. A thinly-painted version visible to the left is turned in profile toward Jansz, as in the group sketch (**fig. 9**), a second thinly-painted version to the right looks more upward and to the left, and a third, more worked-up version in between looks outward and lower, corresponding to Rembrandt's final painting. Rembrandt also painted the chairman's right arm with the back of his hand against the book on the table three times corresponding to the three heads: two thinner versions pointing more toward the right and a thicker version in between positioned more frontally, pointing outward. These changes also correspond to Rembrandt's corrections with white wash to the chairman's posture and gesture in his group sketch.

Changes to the figures on the right side of the composition are more difficult to read in the X-rays. We can easily make out the fourth and fifth sample-masters to the right as they appear in the painting: a younger man, Jochem de Neve, who leans in and holds up the left page of the book on the table with the fingers of his left hand, and Aernout van der Mije at the far right, seated in a more erect position, holding fancy gloves, which he presumably just removed, in his left hand. The X-rays further reveal a sleeve visible over De Neve's upper right arm and three overlapping faces behind him to the right and higher up, the lowest of these with a shorter, stiffer collar. These could have been earlier attempts at the head of the servant Frans Bel, who was eventually placed behind.³⁶ Beneath Van der Mije's face we also see attempts at a longer collar, which could be earlier attempts at De Neve or Van der Mije.

The servant Bel was painted several times, as the most difficult figure for Rembrandt to place correctly. He could have begun with several versions of Bel's head in the area directly behind De Neve, perhaps handing him something over his right

³⁶ Binstock, 'Hidden Master', 21, proposed to identify an earlier version of De Neve in relation to Bel in this area, which is very difficult to read. The versions of Bel's head behind are more clearly seen in the more recent Macro XRF image published by Bikker in Bikker et al., 141, who however does not address the Macro XRF image in relation to Rembrandt's process of composition.

arm. A version of Bel is also clearly visible at roughly the same height to the right, which would have made him appear too tall within the perspective of the room. That would explain yet another version of Bel that Rembrandt repositioned at the right edge of the composition even lower than Van der Mije, in keeping with the perspective, but as a result, perhaps, in an overly marginal and subordinate position. His final place in the painting, also visible in the X-rays, in between and slightly higher than De Neve and Van Doeyenburg, and further back, takes slight liberties with the perspective scheme and lends him a modest yet central place, subtly uniting the group and Rembrandt's composition as the peak of subtle pyramids on the plane and in space.³⁷

The scholar who first published the X-rays of Rembrandt's painting, Arthur van Schendel, followed by others, already concluded that Rembrandt based the first version of his painted composition on his group sketch (**figs. 8a, 9**).³⁸ That is, Rembrandt depicted Jansz and the chairman Van Doeyenburg at the center turning toward each other, inter-acting in relation to the book on the table before them. Van Loon could have turned toward them. This was a staged narrative along the conventional lines of other group portraits from this time. Rembrandt either ran into increasing trouble toward the right side of his composition, or was already unhappy with his conception of the first three sample-masters on the left, which would explain why he returned to his group sketch in order to change the chairman's posture and gesture with white wash. Yet the small thin piece of paper did not easily accommodate further changes. Rembrandt appears to have accordingly abandoned his first version of his painting part way.³⁹

Previous scholars proposed that Rembrandt's changes to his composition were intended to center his composition, to enliven the left side, to fit all the sample-masters

³⁷ Van Schendel, 'De schimmen van de staalmeesters', 14-16, offered these readings of Bel's heads, but not in the order presented here.

³⁸ Van Schendel, 'De schimmen van de staalmeesters', 14, followed by Charles de Tolnay, 'The Syndics of the Drapers' Guild by Rembrandt (an Interpretation)', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 23 (1943), 32.

³⁹ Van Schendel, 'De schimmen van de staalmeesters', 14 n. 4 assumed that the circular form in between the chairman and De Neve in the group sketch was a sculpted head on the mantelpiece. Benesch, *Drawings of Rembrandt*, vol. 5, no. 1178, followed by all subsequent commentators, assumed this was a first indication of Bel and the black shape at the right edge was De Neve's hat, where the sketch was cut off. Brown in Brown et al., *Rembrandt the Master and his Workshop. Paintings*, 281, accordingly claimed that the group sketch shows 'an advanced stage' of the painting, after Bel's final position had been established, and Schatborn in Bevers et al., *Rembrandt: The Master and His Workshop. Drawings and Etchings*, 132, also identified the circular form as Bel and the group sketch as the third of the drawings. However, the group sketch shows the earlier positions of Janz and Bel, and there was no reason for anyone to have cut off Rembrandt's sketch in the middle, let alone through a hat. Rather, someone must have later added these cursory elements to indicate how the group sketch related to his final painting. The paper was also likely later trimmed as an arch-shape with a thin black line along its edge.

around the table, or to balance out the level of their heads.⁴⁰ If Van Schendel and other scholars were correct that Rembrandt based the first version of his painting on his group sketch, he logically based his revised second version of his painting on his single-figure portrait studies, which correspond in their elements (**figs. 8a, 10, 11**). He clearly composed his paintings and drawings from left to right, and apparently first went back to make his portrait study of Van Loon on the left and then proceeded to his study of Jansz to the right. Apparently inspired by the larger, thicker account book paper, Rembrandt made his portraits studies across full pages, with remnants of the red lines at the margins on either side in both cases. His final painting combines Van Loon's relatively erect posture in the first version of the painting and the group study with his out-turned gaze in the portrait study (**figs. 8-10**), so that his head is turned at an uncomfortably or even impossibly sharp angle to the right, which nevertheless serves the overall composition. Rembrandt repositioned Jansz in the final painting leaning his right arm on the table as in the portrait study (**figs. 8, 8a, 11**), more specifically, leaning on a small book in his right hand, with one finger in the book as if saving his place, hunched over the book on the table and turning his gaze outward.

As indicated by the X-rays, Rembrandt first repainted the chairman Van Doeyenburg's head a second time to the right, looking more downward and further to right, away from Jansz as in the first version of the painting and the group study and toward the viewer as in the portrait study. Rembrandt then repositioned the chairman's head a third time in between, turning even further downward and more outward to the viewer. As evident from his final painting, Rembrandt slightly repositioned the right half of Van Doeyenburg's face turned even more downward and outward. He also turned the chairman's torso and right arm and back of his hand on the book more frontally, corresponding to the changes he had already envisioned in his group sketch. Rembrandt was thus trying to achieve a subtle compromise between the chairman interacting with Jansz and turned out toward the viewer. Altogether the first three sample-masters were shifted, in what might be called an accordion-like movement, from a narrative relation to one another to a relation to the viewer, in a way that retained traces of their earlier connection, achieving what Riegl called an identity of internal and external unities.

Given that De Neve and Van der Mije only clearly appear once in the X-rays in their final positions, we can assume that they were first introduced in Rembrandt's second revised composition. He appears to have made initial attempts at one or both of these figures, either in his first or more likely in his second version. The servant Bel was

⁴⁰ These proposals were made respectively by Van Schendel, 'De schimmen van de staalmeesters', 14; Brown in Brown et al., *Rembrandt the Master and his Workshop. Paintings*, 282; Van de Waal, 'The Syndics and their Legend', 258; and Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings*, New York, 1985, 336: 'It was no doubt only after the shocked protests of the syndics—of four of them anyway—that [Rembrandt] bent [Jansz] into a position that with a little goodwill could be called half-seated.'

repeatedly repositioned, most plausibly in the second version in relation to the final positions of the sample-masters, as the last missing piece of the visual puzzle of Rembrandt's composition. All the figures now face outward, and from their varied positions could implicitly see the prominently displayed book on the table before them, to which the three sample-masters at the center are also directly related through inclination of their bodies and touch, and which accordingly serves to unite them to one another and to the viewer across space and time.

Rembrandt presumably understood what he was doing, and did not simply interrupt the process of painting the sample-masters' group portrait in order to make portrait studies of them, but did so in the process of revising his first painted composition. He would also have recognized that he could best revise his first painted composition from within, by making subtle adjustments, rather than starting from scratch. His portrait studies served the purpose of revising his second painted composition, not only his turn from a narrative conception to portraiture, and the sample-masters' accordion-like outward turns, but also their individual portraits within their collective group portrait, and even their interaction with him, as visual dialogues comprising the more complex harmony of the composition as a whole.

However, his portrait studies do not (yet) explain the narrative of his final painting. Other questions also remain, such as why he used precisely the smaller, thinner piece of paper for his group sketch, which proved difficult to revise, and only later turned to the larger, thicker account book paper for his single-figure portrait studies, which was also a highly unusual procedure that itself merits explanation. We can further bear in mind that Rembrandt had declared a form of bankruptcy several years earlier, and painted his *Staalmeesters* on a 'recycled' piece of reinforced Venetian herring-bone weave canvas that the burgomasters of the Town Hall must have given him for the purpose of repainting his *Oath of the Batavians* from the previous Fall.⁴¹ The impoverished painter had to work with the materials he had at hand, and could not afford to waste an opportunity or resource. Necessity is the mother of invention, according to the proverbial expression. Rembrandt's limitations, in materials as well as time, both the time that he had to make the sample-masters' group portrait and the time that he had on earth to develop as an artist, gave rise to the genius of his solution.

The book on the table, which in the first version of Rembrandt's painting and his group sketch appears to have already played a central role in the sample-masters' interaction, does not figure in his portrait studies, at least not as an object to be depicted, yet undeniably plays a central role in his final resolution recognized by Riegl. The book has been identified on the basis of its type and dimensions as an account book, also in keeping with earlier group portraits such as Van den Valckert's *Regents*, in

⁴¹ Van Schendel, 'De schimmen van de staalmeesters', 20, recognized the unusual canvas type, information repeated by Brown in Brown et al., *Rembrandt the Master and his Workshop. Paintings*, 282. Yet neither drew the conclusion that this canvas was provided by the burgomasters for Rembrandt to repaint his *Oath* for the Town Hall.

which the chairman likewise places the back of his right hand against an account book (**fig. 4**).⁴² Yet we cannot see into the sample-masters' book, and the documents of the Drapers' guild including their account book, or at least the majority of the book, were later destroyed in a fire in the Amsterdam archive. The matter would accordingly appear to present a riddle lost to history, or a closed book or one into which we cannot see, a secret between the sample-masters and Rembrandt. Unless, of course, we could explain what was in the book through Rembrandt's process of composition.

4. Rembrandt's portrait studies of sample-masters in their account book

One explanation would be that the impoverished painter brought with him only the small thin piece of paper for his group sketch, and after reaching an impasse in both his first painted composition and his group sketch, having asked their permission (or not), he made portrait studies of Van Loon and Jansz on paper in their account book. Since in both Rembrandt's first painted composition and his group sketch the chairman placed the back of his right hand against the right page of the book, this page presumably displayed the sample-masters' accounts (**fig. 12a**). This would have been their last accounts before their term as sample-masters ended on good Friday, April 15, 1662, the occasion for their group portrait. If Rembrandt took their account book from the other side of the table, turned this page to reveal two unused pages (**fig. 12b**), first portrayed Van Loon on the left (**fig. 12c**), and then Jansz on the right (**fig. 12d**), the sample-masters' last accounts would have been upside down on the back of the page with Jansz (the *verso*). As I suspected, that turned out to be the case when I held Rembrandt's study of Jansz, which is now doubled or reinforced with another sheet of paper on the *verso* and kept in a *passepourtout*, up to the light of the window of the Rotterdam Boymans museum drawing cabinet (**fig. 11a**). The notations, a list of prices and their sum preceded by the word 'Sum' [sum], characteristic of surviving accounts from other Drapers' guilds, are also faintly discernible behind the study on the *recto*, once they have been pointed out, in the bottom left corner just under Rembrandt's strokes indicating Jansz's legs and the side of the table. The name 'Rembrand', his birth name before he added a 't' in 1631 to his artist's name, also appears on top of the notations on the *verso*, right-side up in relation to the portrait study on the *recto* (**fig. 11a**).⁴³

⁴² Brown in Brown et al., *Rembrandt the Master and his Workshop. Paintings*, 278.

⁴³ Simon Schama, 'Dutch Courage' review of *Dutch Portraits: The Age of Rembrandt and Frans Hals at the National Gallery*, in *The Guardian* (2007), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/jun/23/art>, described the account in Binstock, 'Hidden Master', as 'a stunning insight [...that] can stand for the peculiar genius of Dutch art at this moment in its history.' To my knowledge no other scholar of Dutch art has cited this information about Rembrandt's drawing or its implications for his process of composition and the meaning of his painting. That could be a function of the essay's unconventional (polemical) presentation or the venue of a less well-known 'theory' journal. Perhaps this reconsideration offered in *The Journal of Art Historiography* can bring pertinent considerations to the attention of Rembrandt scholarship.

These notations, found upside-down on the back of Rembrandt's study, can hardly be explained otherwise than as the sample-masters' last accounts in their account book in which he made his portrait studies on account book paper ([fig. 12e](#)). The sample-masters had commissioned Rembrandt to paint their group portrait, despite his unconventional lifestyle and current impoverished circumstances, presumably because they esteemed his art. For the same reason, they apparently allowed, or did not to prevent, his use of paper in their account book for his studies, although they could also have easily recopied their last accounts onto the next blank page of their account book that was later destroyed. Since the pages with Rembrandt studies survived, these must have been subsequently removed, presumably to be given to the respective sitters. Rembrandt's studies must furthermore have been located on separate *bifolia* or double-width pages sewn into one of the book's gatherings, the *bifolia* with Van Loon at the center, which were later pulled out and cut off, since two more sheets of account book paper with corresponding widths and vertical lines at the margins were apparently also cut off and given to Rembrandt, and later used for drawings of nudes in his studio at this time.⁴⁴ Jansz in particular was known as 'one of the greatest amateurs and connoisseurs' because of his outstanding art collection inherited from his father, including a *kunstboek* or art book, an album of drawings purchased at an auction in 1637 at which Rembrandt also bought drawings.⁴⁵ The commission for Rembrandt's *Staalmeesters* was accordingly likely initiated by Jansz, who most likely added the name 'Rembrandt' on the back of the portrait study of himself later presumably given to him.

The extreme low viewpoint in the study of Van Loon on the right page indicates that Rembrandt placed the account book on the floor, as a support, and made his study kneeling on the ground. He would then have moved the account book to the far side of the table to depict Jansz on the left page from below, standing between the table and the column in the back-left corner of the room. After Rembrandt finished his portrait study of Jansz on the far side of the table, he could have placed the account book back

⁴⁴ Benesch, *Drawings of Rembrandt*, vol. 5, nos. 1142, 1146. Peter Schatborn, *Drawings by Rembrandt, His Anonymous Pupils and Followers in the Rijksmuseum*, The Hague, 1985, 13-14, attributed the nude in Amsterdam to Rembrandt and the nude in London to Johannes Raven, who came to Amsterdam in 1659 and is assumed to have participated shortly before his death in October 1662 in life drawing sessions in Rembrandt's studio. Martin Royalton-Kisch, *Drawings by Rembrandt and His Circle in the British Museum*, London, 1992, 215, attributed both nudes to Raven. Binstock, 'Hidden Master', 33-34 n. 26, assigned the nude in Amsterdam to Rembrandt's student Aert de Gelder and the nude in London to Raven, in keeping with a series of nudes these two students made of the same models in the same poses from the same places, separated by ninety degrees in their respective viewpoints, at drawing sessions in Rembrandt's studio.

⁴⁵ Van Eeghen, "De Staalmeesters" (1957), 79-80, asked who might have initiated the commission, yet concluded that "none of the names evokes" direct associations with the artist, although her own discovery about the 1637 auction is a palpable link. The chairman Van Doeyenburg could have been given the group sketch in which he appeared, to which the elements marking the final places of De Neve and Bel were added.

in its original place on that side of table, only turned around, so that his portrait studies would be turned toward the sample-masters. When he returned to his original place on the near side of the table, where his canvas presumably rested on an easel, the sample-masters could have assumed roughly their original places in the first version of his painting. He could accordingly have observed them once more in a slightly changed situation: in place of accounts on the right page of their account book, there would now be his portrait studies on its right and left pages ([fig. 12f](#)).⁴⁶ The sample-masters' last accounts, written symbols, and a possible basis for their verbal interaction in Rembrandt's first painted version and group sketch, were displaced in his revised second painted composition by his portrait studies of the sample-masters as images that they observed, and the cause of their outward turns toward Rembrandt as artist-viewer. Rembrandt thereby embedded portraiture (the external unity or Riegl's 'answer') at the heart of his narrative (the internal unity or Riegl's 'question'), making them identical, achieving the goal of all his artistic aspiration: the interfusion of psyches among one another and with the psyche of the beholder.

In this reading, Van Loon seated at the far left would have been able to see Rembrandt's portrait study of himself on the opposite left page of their account book, helpfully lifted up by De Neve, who had also observed the study, and now both turn out toward Rembrandt as the creator of the portrait study and their group portrait. Jansz was similarly hunched over their account book to look at the study of himself on the right page directly below him, and now turns his gaze out to Rembrandt, underscored by his pupils at the left sides of his eyes, as with Van Loon.

The chairman Van Doeyenburg still emphasizes the right page of the account book with the back of his right hand, yet now in place of their last accounts this would bear Rembrandt's portrait study of Jansz. That would also explain why Rembrandt adjusted the chairman's gesture in a more frontal direction, so as not to obscure the study, and to point toward Rembrandt as its author ([fig. 12f](#)).⁴⁷ The chairman's attention is specifically split between the left side of his face and his left eye, turned more toward Jansz as the subject of Rembrandt's portrait study, and the right side of his face and right eye, turned more toward Rembrandt as the study's creator. Riegl specifically associated the movement of eyes independent from the body with attention as a mental or psychic element.⁴⁸ Van der Mije on the right implicitly joins the group

⁴⁶ My reconstruction of the sample-masters viewing Rembrandt's portrait studies in their account book placed before them used the first edition of Benesch's *corpus* of Rembrandt drawings, which happens to depict his portrait studies in actual size on the appropriate sides.

⁴⁷ In Rembrandt's painting this page curls up along the edge, corresponding to his portrait study of Jansz, which could have curled because of the heavy ink-wash Rembrandt used to indicate the base of the column at the bottom right corner. The slightly twisting pages of the left edge of the account book below correspond to the used portion, and the uniformly curving pages on the right edge to its unused portion, the inverse of the normal circumstances because the book was turned upside-down.

⁴⁸ Riegl, *Das holländische Gruppenporträt*, 15.

already united through Rembrandt's portraits studies in their account book and turns together with them out to him, flanking the whole together with Van Loon. The servant Bel in the center at the back of the room could direct his lowered gaze at Rembrandt, although he is more plausibly understood as picturing in his mind Rembrandt's studies in the sample-masters' account book, or Rembrandt's painting as a whole, both of which were subsequently in Bel's charge. The low viewpoint would have suited the placement of Rembrandt's painting on the wall of the sample-masters' room, downstairs in the Staalhof on the Staalstraat, which Rembrandt may have depicted in his painting.⁴⁹

Rembrandt's portrait studies in the sample-masters' account book, which was thereby implicitly transformed into an art book [*kunstboek*], could even serve as the subtlest allusion to their professional identities. Whereas two of the sample-masters in Pieters's much earlier painting hold samples of cloth between their fingers (**fig. 3**), judging their quality by the feel of their texture rather than appearance, the sample-masters judged Rembrandt's portrait studies precisely through observation, and as samples of his own mastery, as part of the process of the commission and completion of their group portrait. Akin to the maiden's breasts hidden beneath clothing in the peasant scene by Pieter Pieters, in contrast to the openly exposed breasts in Rubens' scene (**figs. 1-2**), Rembrandt achieved a shift, in Riegl's words, from an external cause to an internal experience, as well as from touch to sight, as a more inward and mental sense. What Riegl characterized as the look of approval and agreement in the sample-masters' expressions is both an indication of Rembrandt's achievement, and an illustration of their authority and good judgement, the facial equivalent of the stamp with their seal of approval held up in Pieters's scene.⁵⁰ A second allusion is the Persian carpet on the table, common in group portraits, although never so sensitively described as here, in which Rembrandt playfully signed his name with dashes and the date. This has often been identified as an allusion to Drapers' guild, yet is better understood as

⁴⁹ See A. M. van de Waal, 'De Staalhof', *Ons Amsterdam* 6 (1954), 41.

⁵⁰ Van de Waal, 'The Syndics and Their Legend', 256, identified the chairman's gesture as 'simply a quiet, dignified reminder to every spectator: 'Look, this is what we are and this is our foundation.' In their subsequent debate, Charles de Tolnay, 'A note on the *Staalmeesters*', H. van de Waal, 'The Mood of the *Staalmeesters*. A note on Mr. De Tolnay's Interpretation,' *Oud Holland* 73 (1958), 85-86, De Tolnay insisted that 'the artist wanted to realize his personal experience in [the] face of these men,' whereas Van de Waal identified the chairman's gesture (and by implication Van de Waal's interpretation) as "demonstrating an unchallengeable or irrefutable fact [*perspicuitatem illustrat*]," repeated by Brown in Brown et al., *Rembrandt the Master and his Workshop. Paintings*, 281. Although I object to projecting a verbal dimension onto Rembrandt's painting, we can reconcile the debate by slightly emending Van de Waal's first proposal as: 'Look! This is *who* we are.'

representing Rembrandt in competition with the simpler black and blue cloths of the sample-masters, evoking their collaboration and interaction.⁵¹

Although not intended as a 'snapshot' of a real event, this account of Rembrandt's interaction with the sample-masters during his process of composition as the basis for his final narrative solution in his painting is admittedly extraordinarily concrete, even in comparison with accounts of nineteenth-century authors such as Thoré or Riegl. Modern scholars' rejection of such 'Romantic' outlooks as anachronistic, although partly justified on the basis of undeniable inaccuracies, was nevertheless misguided insofar as Rembrandt's painting was thereby drained of life, significance, and originality. This and other guilds never met with public audiences as part of their official functions, yet in order to have their portraits painted they had to meet with an artist, who can accordingly be equated with Riegl's viewing 'party', for whom Pieters's sample-masters and Van den Valckert's regents proffer their gestures and symbolic objects (**figs. 3, 4**). All the men (and women) in group portraits are necessarily 'sitting to have their portraits painted', yet Rembrandt alone through his reflection on his task made those circumstances into the subject of his painting.⁵² Rembrandt's *Staalmeesters* corresponds to what André Gide in 1939 called *mise en abyme* [staging in abyss] to designate artworks that reflect upon and internalize themselves, their production, and their reception, in this case both Rembrandt's singular vision and the tradition of Dutch group portraiture.⁵³

Rembrandt's greatest strengths combined an astounding naturalism based on acute observation of his surroundings with unparalleled invention, above all in his group portraits, focused through his radically original conceits. He also built on these conceits in forging his solution for his *Staalmeesters*. As in his *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp* (**fig. 5a**), he transformed a conventional group portrait through a brilliant scheme emphasizing sight over speech and image over text. Rembrandt's presentation of the sample-masters' account book containing his portrait studies also approximates several

⁵¹ Rembrandt's early biographer Joachim von Sandrart, *Teutsche Academie der Bau-, Bild-, und Mahlerey-Künste*, Nuremberg, 1675, 209, invoked the same analogy when he observed that Rembrandt 'knew how to break down colors intelligently and artfully into their own kind' in contrast to painters who 'place hard and raw colors next to one another... resembling the cloths brought from the dyers.' The second signature and date 1661 on the wall in the upper right corner of Rembrandt's *Staalmeesters* is a later addition, presumably by someone who did not see his signature in the rug.

⁵² Rembrandt did not paint an actual event, but rather adapted the actual event of the sample-masters sitting to have their portraits painted in his group portrait. He painted the sample-masters one by one, so their gazes do not exactly converge. Van de Waal, "The Syndics and Their Legend," 252, insisted that "changes in posture do not belong to the realm of pictorial art," yet figures can nevertheless be depicted *as if* they had changed their postures, which like their expressions, can be read, convincingly, or not. Most commentators refer to Jansz as rising from his chair, surely mistakenly.

⁵³ André Gide, *Journal 1889-1939*, trans. J. O'Brien, New York, 1956, p. 41.

elements of his earlier *Tulp*: the sheet with studies of dissected arms, Vesalius's portrait with a dissected arm on the right page of the volume at the corpse's feet, and the corpse itself as a unifying focus of the scene. Just as the surgeons with their varied expressions observed Tulp's manual demonstration with his left hand in relation to the corpse's dissected arm, the sample masters' varied gazes are directed at Rembrandt in relation to his studies in their account book lying before them. In both compositions, the figures at the center have a more direct relation to the 'visual demonstration', whereas those at the peripheries reflect on images in their minds with looks of recollection.

Rembrandt also employed similar structures in his *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Deijman* (**fig. 7**), in which the surgeons arranged symmetrically and frontally around the horizontal dissected corpse offer even closer parallels for the sample-masters in relation to Rembrandt's portrait studies in their account book. The exposed right and left hemispheres of the corpse's brain, echoed in the brains of the surgeons and the viewer, as well as the configuration of the anatomical theater, furthermore have parallels in the studies on the right and left pages of the account book, internalized in the sample-masters' brains as images of themselves, echoing Rembrandt's composition conceived in his brain as artist-viewer. Even Deijman's peeling away of the brain's outer skin can be compared to Rembrandt's portrait studies as traces of his process of composition hidden below the surface of his painting, as revealed by X-rays, and as hidden within their account book. In both of Rembrandt's anatomy lessons, the surgeons are not passive listeners to a speech, but rather active participants together with the artist-viewer as part of a larger living, moving, seeing, thinking whole. The same principle applies to his *Staalmeesters*, except that Rembrandt's interaction with his sitters is now an explicit part of his narrative.

Even Rembrandt's *Nightwatch* (**fig. 6**) has elements in common with his *Staalmeesters*, such as the right arms of the captain and chairman extended outward, and their relation to the lieutenant and Jansz, reverberating in the figures around them. Yet whereas Rembrandt was able to integrate his artistic concerns and innovations into anatomy lessons, in his *Nightwatch* he let his imagination run amok, at the cost of the conventional function of the group portrait, the militia company, and the sitters as individuals. In his *Staalmeesters*, he returned to the conventional function of group portraits, which he reconciled with his radically original innovations. To adapt Goethe's perceptive phrase, by restraining himself Rembrandt was better able to display his mastery. The commission from the sample-masters provided Rembrandt with another chance, after his bankruptcy, to redeem, if not his reputation, then at least his relation to his tradition.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ De Tolnay, 'The Syndics of the Drapers' Guild', 36 n. 10, identified the painting in the mantlepiece as a burning city as symbol of *vanitas*; Van de Waal, 'The Syndics and Their Legend', 269, followed by Brown in Brown et al., *Rembrandt the Master and his Workshop. Paintings*, 281, identified an emblem of a watchtower with burning beacons as symbol of 'burgerly virtue' citing the poet Jacob Cats; Ludwig Goldscheider, *Rembrandt*, New York, 1960,

5. Conclusion: a cumulative history of art history

I conclude with five propositions demonstrated by these examples. 1. Riegl's ingenious close readings of minor group portraits culminate in those of Rembrandt, as his tradition's foremost representative, and thus are not at odds with, but rather derive from and inform his genealogical-development scheme. 2. Riegl is best evaluated, not in terms of whether he got things wrong or right in relation to his own historical context, but rather how his insights can inform current accounts. 3. Such a synthetic or cumulative art historiography and history of art history is healthy for our discipline and the sub-field of Dutch art, especially "the will of art" as potential antidote for the dominance of technical art history focused on objective data from technical examination, which is however inevitably interpreted in subjective ways, often independent of both art and history. 4. We can profit from returning to and reconsidering not only older texts such as Riegl's, but also our own earlier texts, on which we can likewise improve as part of a synthetic and cumulative process. 5. In keeping with Riegl's analysis, and also in parallel with his vision as art historian, the ingenious particulars of Rembrandt's paintings were grounded in his understanding of the broader development of his tradition and his own paintings, as a profound visual thinker who explicitly reflected on the meaning of his art. On all of these levels, the project of art history's culminating moment may, after all, still lie before us.⁵⁵

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183 n. 95, saw the burning old Town Hall of Amsterdam, followed by Binstock, 'Hidden Master', 26, who explained the motif as representing the art and culture of 'Old Amsterdam' of the sample-masters and Rembrandt, as opposed to the 'New Amsterdam' of the regent elites who built the costly, classicist new Town Hall in its place and rejected Rembrandt's *Oath*, presenting him with a second canvas on which he painted his *Staalmeesters*.

⁵⁵ Alois Riegl, 'Eine neue Kunstgeschichte' (1897) in *Gesammelte Aefsätze*, 43-49, already compared the history of art history to the building of Saint Peter's in Rome. The original plans by the master builder, 'Aesthetics' (i.e. Hegel), 'proved weak' and were 'promptly dismissed.' Hence the need for 'the second phase of art-historical inquiry: the strengthening of the foundations', to be completed by a crowning cupola 'in the form of a theoretical model encompassing all art history', to be supplied by Riegl himself. *Kunstwollen*, the will of art, may be as close to a crowning cupola as the project of art history will ever get, yet we continue our work, returning to and elaborating on the texts of Riegl, and others.

Benjamin Binstock

Alois Riegl and the riddle of Rembrandt's *Staalmeesters*:
Vienna Schooling Dutch Art Scholarship



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