

REMBRANDT (Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn) (Dutch, 1606-1669)

The Rat Poison Seller, ca. 1625

Oil on panel

Muscarelle Museum of Art, Acquired with funds from the Board of Visitors Muscarelle Museum of Art Endowment

It may appear at first glance that this oil on panel painting is a copy of Rembrandt's famous print of the same subject. The print is signed and dated in the etching plate 1632 (see top image). Like many of Rembrandt's peasants, beggars and other street people, they were very popular images in Holland in the first half of the 17th century and to this day it continues to be rare to acquire a Rembrandt print from Rembrandt's time. There were later editions struck from the many original plates that survived, but they are of much lesser quality. However, this painting is not a copy of the print because, for one reason, it does not fully copy the print leaving out the cat in the middle ground and the birds in the sky as seen in the painting. Also, there are other changes for the figure leaning out of the window in the background and in the rendering of the bricks around the door. The painting articulates these areas in much more detail, for example, the round rat cage atop of the staff is muddled in the print. In the painting, it is more detailed and you can actually see through the tiny bars.

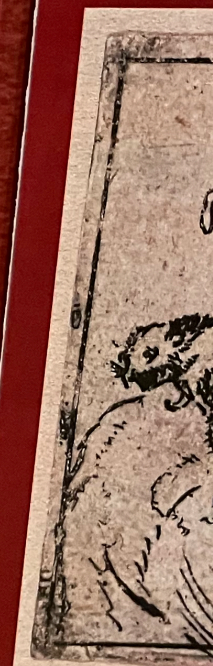
There is another compelling reason to think this painting is not a copy of the famous print. There exists a third image of the head of the Rat Catcher this time illustrating only the head of the man in his Polish hat, with the rat on his shoulder and the round cage on top of the staff (see bottom image). Interestingly, this etching is in reverse of the painting and it is signed and dated 1630 in the etching plate. This is called a reproductive print when it is reversed from the original. Yet how can this reversed head dated 1630 have come from the full Rat Catcher print dated 1632? It is posited that it was not and that the source for the reproductive engraving is this very early painting.

This panel painting has a wax collectors seal on the verso. These, like bookplates and stamps, mark the painting as an important work and in a noteworthy collection as they are fairly rare. It is not known from which collection this work was placed as there is scant research into these seals, but simply being a copy of a print would not suffice. The suggestion being put forth here is that this painting is Rembrandt's original thought idea that eventually led to the reproductive print and then the final full print. Its suspected date of c.1625 joins this work with only a handful of other known works completed by Rembrandt before he was twenty. A significant study was conducted on the pigments, binders, particle size, etc., and all was found to be consistent with Rembrandt in the first half of the 17th century, not the second half under which the painting was offered and sold to the Muscarelle.

At the age of 13, Rembrandt was enrolled at the University of Leiden, although according to a contemporary he had a greater inclination towards painting; he was soon apprenticed to a Leiden history painter, Jacob van Swanenburg, with whom he studied for three years. After a brief but important apprenticeship of six months with the painter Pieter Lastman in Amsterdam, Rembrandt stayed a few months with Jacob Pynas and then started his own workshop. This is important because the style of the painting, kind of brushwork and the choice of pigments are very similar to the early works Rembrandt produced in both the studios of Swanenburg and Lastman. Rembrandt opened a studio in Leiden in 1624 or 1625, which he shared with friend and colleague Jan Lievens. In 1627, Rembrandt began to accept students, among them Gerrit Dou in 1628.

This painting may be, in fact, the only known painted "idea" or almost a "study" for a later print that exists by Rembrandt. One can imagine these ideas may have been discarded as part of the thoughts or the process of making the prints. This can be likened to all the full-scale study drawings that Michelangelo did for the Sistine Chapel ceiling. The "cartoons" -as these full size and scale *cartones* or "patterns" were called, would be laid into the wet plaster of his frescoes, and then the outlines made with charcoal dust through pin-prick holes to transfer the general shape of the figure to the fresco surface was widely described and documented. However, of the hundreds of figures in the Sistine ceiling and walls by Michelangelo which all had a study cartoon, not one of the drawings from Michelangelo's herculean undertaking exists today because they were a throw-away as part of the artist's process. There are only a handful of cartoons from the Renaissance existent in Italy today.

The subject of the Rat Catcher was pretty much only depicted in Northern art of the seventeenth century and is focused in Holland. The man receiving the poison is Jewish as can be identified with many depictions of Jews by Rembrandt in his career in both paintings and prints. This picture is in no way anti-semitic and there is some period literature that exists that describe how one must keep their homes as fastidious and clean for the good of the family. Given the bouts of the plague raging in Europe and most specifically in the Netherlands and the fact that the plague was spread by fleas on rats, it is wondered if this correlation was not made sooner than previously known. It was suspected in London in the mid-17th century that black rats were the cause of the pestilence, however, officially the causative bacterium of plague was described and cultured by Alexandre Yersin in Hong Kong in 1894, after which transmission of bacteria from rodents by flea bites was discovered by Jean-Paul Simond in 1898. The plague was also described in the Bible from ancient times. To the Dutch in the 17th century to be clean was to be moral and free. The act of cleaning and sweeping was an act of patriotism and this was spelled out in public pamphlets available to the citizenry. There is much more to explore on the subject of the Rat Catcher in Dutch society and that will be more fully explored in a forthcoming article on this painting.



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