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REMBRANDT BEHIND THE SCENES. CHRIST DISPUTING WITH THE DOCTORS: AN INTRIGUING PANEL FROM SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY BARCELONA

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Works of art being moved around as mere merchandise by fine—or crude—*connoisseur* burghers and young artists roaming within modern Europe explain artistic exchanges between distant and apparently unconnected traditions. During the Golden Age, the academic Roman journey acted as a strong pulling power on Northern painters, despite the embarrassing awareness of being settled among «papists»; in the Reformed countries, this mainly contemptuous word suggested a sinful and enticing Catholic universe, where the wonder city of Rome became a sort of worldly meeting point, firmly connected with the neighbouring Mediterranean Spanish realms, pouring sharp diplomacy and magnificent ceremony over a segmented Italy, and politically balancing between the secular obedience to the declining Spanish Habsburgs and the increasingly powerful Bourbons. An international artistic reputation also needed a similar equilibrium and, of course, some success among the Roman *cognoscenti*—open-minded art lovers inclined to admire the latest in foreign excellence, such as the French Vouet, Poussin, and Lorraine, and the brilliant *fiamminghi* Bril, Honhorst, and Van Laer. Unlikely the abovementioned names, Rembrandt, who never moved to Italy but seduced it from afar through his oh-so rare etchings, appears to be a unique soul without a material presence descending on some less important place like Messina, where the avid collector Antonio Ruffo requested original works of the then-so ethereal Dutch master. An exception was the all-aristocratic Genoa, where his skill as a designer was requested once in a while. Therefore, the Catalan capital Barcelona may seem to be an exotic minor place where one would expect to find a trace related to him or his followers; however, the possible knowledge of the great Dutch talents—not documented so far—would be reduced to a few aristocratic circles, traditionally most inclined to spend high sums on gaudy

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Flemish tapestries than on rare costly *fijnschilders*. Despite this obvious distance in every field between the Calvinists United Provinces and the very Catholic principality of Catalonia, seventeenth-century Barcelona, like other Mediterranean cities, became a place commonly visited by the Dutch sea traders, and since the middle of the century onwards, the Dutch merchant had at his disposal a permanent consul *(cònsol holandès)* in the capital, working in the local trade as a mere foreign dealer, often involved in textile and commodities importation; however, business matters and the unavoidable presence of these foreigners among the over 35,000 inhabitants of the city[1] do not imply the existence of a consolidated Dutch community reunited under the identifying word *Flemish (flamench).*

Like other past times, Flemish or Dutch artists working in various fields are a common entity that comes to light in the surviving seventeenth-century documentation, but one hardly has any opportunity to identify any existing work: The frightful art losses during the 1936 civil war make it almost impossible to propose any overall assessment of the Catalan baroque painting, mostly developed on altarpieces and other church ornaments, recognisable nowadays only through old and blurred photographs, a precious document that contributes, however, to putting some order in a very puzzling heritage.[2] Within this problematic context, only a few isolated names have come down to us; perhaps the most intriguing of all is the painter Josep Rosbico, documented in Barcelona since 1617, then temporarily employed by the local painter Jaume Galí. Impossible to be pronounced by his Catalan peers, the original name of Rosbico was undoubtedly Rooswijk; a native of Haarlem and the son of a civil engineer, he may have landed in Barcelona—like many other painters—thanks to the intricate paths of the Italian journey. Jozef Rooswijk died in his adopted city in the summer of the year 1636 at an unknown age, and his presence in the proper artistic milieu raises a lot of essential questions: He was never enlisted in the Saint Luke's guild, but his activity until death remains documented in his 1636 inventory, full of engravings, unfinished works, and traditional paintings representing saints and New Testamentary scenes. Among his sold possessions was a drawing of a smoker, an absolute novelty in his field at the time, perhaps an influence of his awareness of the followers of Brouwer or van Ostade in *Haarlem [Item, un quadro de paper ab una figura que pren tabaco ab fum, a mossèn Joan Baptista Lunell, negociant, per dotze sous].* In the first half of the century genuine Dutch and Flemish motifs such as seascapes, kermises, or drunken brawls, were hung in a few wealthy people's houses, probably imported from Italy, Flanders, or France. Is not clear if Jozef Rooswijk was involved in such trade, although his acquaintance with the Dutch merchant Bernat de Justi (Joosten)—another Haarlemer well connected with the city elites and long-time resident of Bar-

[1] Juan Antonio Sánchez Belén, «El comercio de exportación holandés en el Mediterráneo español durante la regencia de doña Mariana de Austria», *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma,* Serie IV, H. Moderna, t. 9, 1996, pp. 267-321.

[2] A good online inventory of the church art damages caused by the 1936 civil war is available in the website *Art en perill*, established by Catalan scholars and researchers from Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) and Universitat de Girona (UdG): https://ddd.uab.cat/pub/pagweb/2016/artenperill/content/art-en-perill-cens-i-mem%C3%B2ria-de-la-destrucci%C3%B3.html .

celona, where he died in 1642—is documented. Moreover, Rooswijk was a relative, perhaps a cousin, of the better-known painter Engel Jansz Rooswijk (ca 1583–1643/1649), born in Haarlem and settled in Delft and Copenhagen while charged by King Christian IV to buy paintings in the Netherlands.[3]

There are other Flemish or Dutch names known in Barcelona, for example, Nicolau Escalins (maybe Schellinks), another obscure painter who worked during this same period; his activity is documented between 1618 and 1627, the year of his return to Flanders. Despite his status as an outsider (he was not registered in the guild), in 1625 he was allowed to paint ten panels—nine single saints and one sacred history scene—for a new altarpiece in the prestigious church of Santa Maria del Mar *[deu teulons, çò és hu de història y los altres ab una figura sensilla, de pintura bona y al oli, de les figures dels sans li ordenarà].* This was a highly coveted commission which involved an awkward competition with other workshops, usually unhappy with foreign interference, though during his short Catalan stay Escalins seemingly enjoyed his peers' tolerance. More fruitful was the career of Josep Bal (maybe Bol or Balen) during the last third of the century, a native of Antwerp and a member of the Saint Luke's guild since 1670, where he played a substantial role in increasing the social relevance of the institution. His evolution probably represents the highest point of an ideal northern integration—taking a Catalan spouse and working under the strict laws established by the guild, which he led in 1683 and 1696; some remaining works testify to his expertise in wall painting as well (Barcelona, Casa de la Convalescència).[4] To the list of less-known northern painters flooding the country could be added Sebastià Delmonte (maybe Van der Mondt, documented in 1622–1624), Simó de Man (documented outside Barcelona in 1613–1629), and Onofre Boet (maybe Voët, a painter and gilder enlisted in the Saint Luke's guild in 1670–1682). Most of the aforementioned were probably minor artists, producing works to satisfy a low-quality demand, which did not come from the wealthiest Catalan nobility, oriented mostly to the royal court in Madrid but strongly connected to their native land, such as Francesc de Montcada (1585–1635), third marquis of Aitona, governor of the Low Countries, well learned and rich enough to pay for large portraits by Anthony van Dyck (equestrian portrait, 1634/1635, Paris, Louvre).[5] Obviously, local painters were not good enough for a highly cosmopolitan nobility accustomed to large and magnificent collections in Madrid, Seville, Naples, Rome, or elsewhere; they were requested mostly for civic patronage in parish churches or by large convents, but always in underrated conditions. Faced with a poor economic expectation, local painters suffered from a lack of refined skills, which made the main artistic atmosphere so unattractive to foreign young and ambitious

[3] Biographical information about Engel Jansz Rooswijk can be found in: Rembrandt Database [online], The Hage, RKD - Netherlands Institute for Art History, available in www.rembrandtdatabase.org. Santi Torras Tilló, «Pintura catalana del Barroc. L'auge col·leccionista i l'ofici de pintor al segle XVII», *Memoria Artium*, Bellaterra, Barcelona, Girona, Lleida, Tarragona, 2012.

[4] About Josep Bal see: Santiago Alcolea, «La pintura en Barcelona durante el siglo xviii, II», *Anales y Boletín de los Museos de Arte de Barcelona*, XV, 1961–1962, pp. 28–30. Bal died in 1729.

[5] Jahel Sanz Salazar, «Van Dyck, noticias sobre los retratos ecuestres de Francisco de Moncada, marqués de Aytona, y su procedencia en el siglo xvii», *Archivo Español de Arte,* 315, 2006, pp. 320-332.

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artists, trained among the Italian excellence, that to them, the city probably was a place to be passing through rather than an option; the 1640 Catalan Revolt and the subsequent war against France extinguished all opportunities in every field, at least in the following 20 years.

At first glance, any talented Rembrandt apprentice would expect working abroad to imply working at the lower end of the profession and living an impoverished life in a second-grade «papist» (or Reformed) country; the most successful painters in Amsterdam between 1630 and 1650—as Eric Jan Sluijter points out—enjoyed a good life and the patronage of the wealthiest citizens, which explains the hard competition for a better social position; if we look at the evolution of thriving painters such as Gerrit Dou, Govert Flinck, or Ferdinand Bol, there is an unavoidable sense of irony in comparing their success with their old master's financial decrepitude; but going at the other end, the truth is that we do not know anything about the dark fate of the less-gifted pupils, engulfed by a *parbula mediocritate* that crudely excluded any of the Dutch finest, such as the subtle abilities of *ordonnantie*, *houding* or *schikschaduwen;* one cannot but suppose that among the «hundreds» of young apprentices filling up Rembrandt's workshop, as reported by Joachim Sandrart, there was a great variation in skilled hands, including an indefinite number of clumsy ones. This fluttering crowd with its ugly works has simply disappeared, erased by a bizarre kind of natural law selection that promises us that only the most powerful species survive; following the same notion, it is reasonable to argue that a microorganism is indestructible due to its adaptability under extreme environmental conditions. This idea—especially the 'extreme environmental conditions'—comes to mind when one considers some outstanding elements of the surviving Catalan baroque painting. To reverse Samuel van Hoogstraten's words, «A good painter pursues the kind of art that is held in esteem in the place where he is working»,[6] a less-gifted painter may have realised the same thing, but far enough from the kind of art and place suggested by the talented Hoogstraten. The two Catalan panels on discussion, *Christ Disputing with the Doctors* and *The Flight into Egypt* (Figures 1 and 2),[7] show through their own figurative appearance the social environment in which these painters were admitted. Both are the kind of paintings that most scholars would not spend more than a few seconds before turning their sight to more attractive shapes, but the subtler issues lie sometimes in the humblest elements: a bulbous nose on a rising face half-cast in shadows—hardly anything—perhaps the kind of unmistakable nose that recalls Rembrandtists' visions. Indeed, this odd resemblance to the late Rembrandt's self-portrait in the National Gallery, London (Figure 3) by itself might be nothing else than a pure subjective inference, even more so due to its dam-

[6] As quoted by Eric Jan Sluijter, *Rembrandt's Rivals. History Painting in Amsterdam, 1630-1650*, Amsterdam - Philadelphia, Oculi, Studies in the arts of the Low Countries, vol. 14, John Benjamins, 2015. p. 19, n. 67.

[7] I'm grateful to Àngels Planell and Centre de Restauració de Béns Mobles de Catalunya staff who have provided me with the graphic material from the archives. The current photographs are digitally brightened to make the figures more distinguishable.

age, but at the very least it deserves to be examined in relation to all the elements of the composition to decide whether there is any trace or exotic echo of Rembrandt's motifs, followers, or anything else.

The poor nuns from the Convent dels Àngels

The paintings are a small remnant of the depleted artistic heritage that has come down to us from the Dominican nunnery Convent dels Àngels in Barcelona. In fact, they are still the property of the community of Santo Domingo de Guzmán in Sant Cugat del Vallès (Vallès Occidental), and were brought in for a much-needed restoration between 2012 and 2013 because of their alarming condition—the paint coats were highly damaged and both were heavily eroded and irretrievably darkened; moreover, the surface of *Christ Disputing with the Doctors* presented traces of shrapnel, a dramatic

Fig. 1. Dutch anonymous, *Christ Disputing with the Doctors*, ca. 1670–1680, panel, 176 × 132.5 × 4 cm, Barcelona, Sant Cugat del Vallès (courtesy of CRBMC).

Fig. 2. Dutch anonymous, *The Flight into Egypt*, ca. 1670–1680, panel, 176 × 136.5 × 4 cm, Barcelona, Sant Cugat del Vallès (courtesy of CRBMC).

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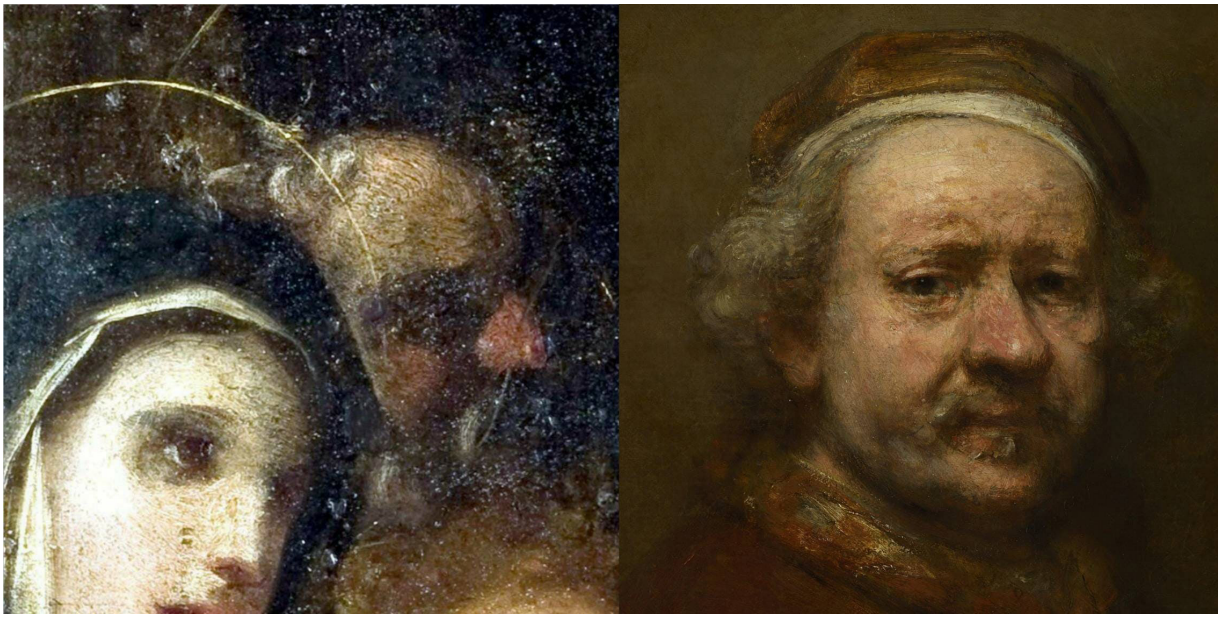

Fig. 3. Detail of Figure 1 compared with Rembrandt's self-portrait (detail), 1669, London, National Gallery.

piece of evidence that speaks of a nearby war scene. On the same panel, X-rays brought to light an underlying layer of a sixteenth-century painting showing a nativity scene, which certifies the reuse of an ancient dismantled altarpiece (Figure 4). Both panels are similar in size and wood, so one may conclude they have the same provenance.[8] There is no information regarding the physical context, use, and location due to a lack of documentary evidence such as an inventory of the seventeenth-century convent, any precise details on the character and distribution of the votive ornaments within the original buildings that conformed to the different spaces where the community lived, or the names of the artists who worked on them.[9]

The presence of this female congregation in Barcelona goes back to 1497, when it was precariously established in a building attached to the City walls, a circumstance that in 1562 compelled the council to donate an ancient chapel within the city (the so-called Capella del Peu de la Creu). In the following years a new church by the master Bartomeu Roig (1566) and a modest monastery were erected for the then-enclosed community; between 1568 and 1569 the original chapel offered by the city was refurbished in the mixture of Renaissance and Gothic elements that distinguished the sixteenth-century Catalan architecture. The main part of the church and the buildings still exist as a newly restored head office of FAD (Foment de les Arts Decoratives). Other parts, such as the cloister and the

[8] *Christ Disputing with the Doctors* measures 176 × 132.5 × 4 cm and *The Flight into Egypt* 176 × 136.5 × 4 cm. A short report on the restoring intervention details, written by Josep Paret, Koro Abalia, and Eulàlia Soler is available on: CRBMC, «Informe de restauració de les pintures *Jesús entre els Doctors* i *La fugida a Egipte*» [online], Valldoreix, CRBMC, 2013, available in https://centrederestauracio.gencat.cat/web/.content/crbmc/pdf/arxiu/dominiques_scugat.pdf [query: 19-10-2023].

[9] The community possesses a rich and useful historical archive, but unfortunately, scholars and investigators are very rarely allowed in it; however, I must acknowledge the kind intercession of Sister Maria del Carmen López Delgado, Laia de Ahumada, and Rosa Maria Alabrús, who helped me in my attempt. Documents available in other public archives provide

Fig. 4. *Christ Disputing with the Doctors*, X-ray photography (courtesy of CRBMC).

some information about Gabriel Honet, formerly a Roman artist, who painted six panels of the church's altarpiece (Arxiu Històric de Protocols de Barcelona. Esteve Vallalta, *Llibre de capítols matrimonials i concòrdies*, 1591–1609, 522/29, s.f, FM, 27 d'octubre de 1602). Any of the history scenes described in the document matches up with the abovementioned nativity scene, so we may exclude his authorship; on the other hand, the community possesses a sixteenth-century panel of a visitation that might have been part of the same altarpiece.

garden, can be seen only in old plans that describe it as a minor institution compared with the greatest male convents (Figure 5). The use of simple, functional solutions and cheap materials speaks plainly about the secular poverty of a small and enclosed female community who lived on donations from the neighbours; as some of its members were impoverished burgher widows who decided on religious self-confinement, it suffered from a lack of generous income as enjoyed by the wealthiest orders, who were beneficiaries of public subsidies, dynastic legacies, or large rural properties. This condition normal for female congregations was not an obstacle to the popularity of the institution among citizens, and a rich secular and mystic literary tradition related to the nuns of the convent is well known to scholars and researchers.

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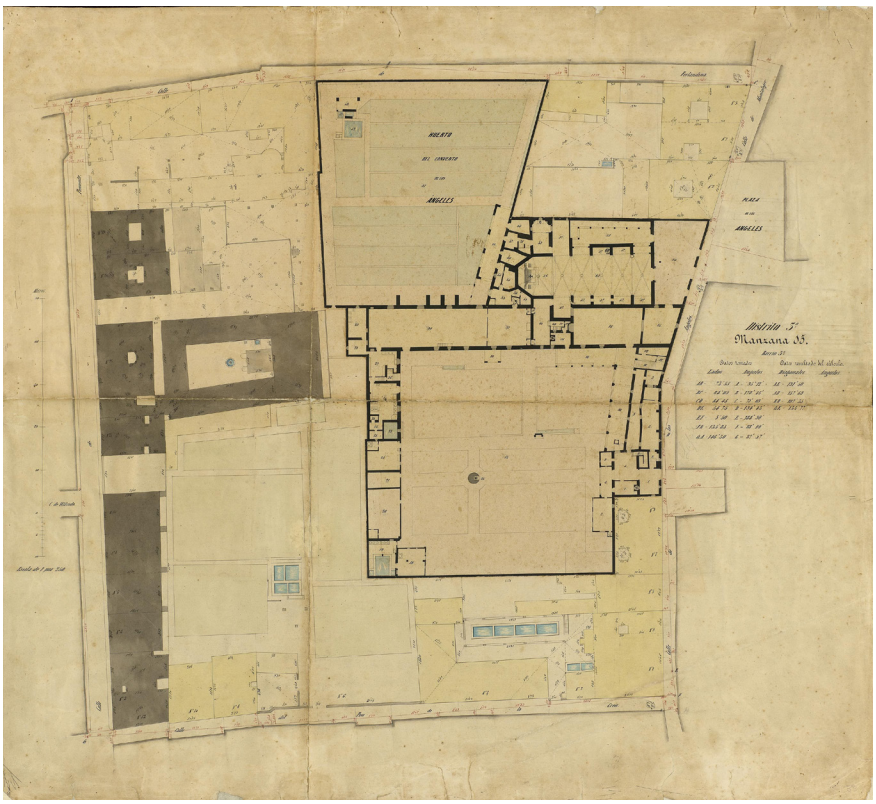

Fig. 5. M. Garriga Roca, *Plan of the ancient Convent dels Àngels i del Peu de la Creu*, 1858, *Quarterons*, *53*, Barcelona, Arxiu Històric de la Ciutat de Barcelona.

A bundle of odd formal analogies and digressions

Remarkably, the first appealing piece of evidence lies in the first painting's differing from the usual compositions of the seventeenth-century Catalan painters, while at the same time conforming to a manifest intention towards dogmatic legibility, which makes *Christ Disputing with the Doctors* an image that must be read as a devotional object rather than a sacred history painting—even more so since it was destined to be exhibited within a religious community and serve to the pious needs of the nuns; this could be the principal reason that explains the disproportionate body of the young Jesus in comparison with the minor-sized surrounding crowd, executed with rough strokes of diluted pigments, in a sketchy manner that pays little attention to details and focuses on facial expressions. Nothing farther from Rembrandt's principles is the complete lack of coherent space, especially when tradition requested the

physical presence of the impressive temple of Jerusalem, where every wall, stone arch, glimmer, or shadow must recall to the viewer the veiled closeness of Yahwe, allowing the biblical nation of Israel to show its arcane acquaintance with God, a mystic scenery bathed in holy smoke which played an essential role in almost every Dutch religious painting on that subject. On the panel, only an upper canopy and the stone where the young Jesus stands, suggest the placement in an interior space; obviously, the absence of any architectural description conforms to the general bareness of the offer, and probably such a low-cost work did not allow any other elements in it apart from the essential.

Without being even a distant version, the painting clearly pays a tribute to one of the most imitated engravings of this theme at the time: a beautiful 1567 Cornelis Cort burin print after a Giulio Clovio composition (Figure 6).[10]

[10] Manfred Sellink, Huigen Leeflang (eds.), *Cornelis Cort*, Part I, The New Hollstein Dutch & Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts, 1450–1700, Rotterdam, Sound & Vision Publishers, 2000, pp. 143–146. Cat. 43: *The Twelve-Year-Old Christ Teaching in the Temple*, 1567, [Luke 2:22–51], after Giulio Clovio, engraving, 27.4 × 20.8 cm.

Fig. 6. Cornelis Cort (after Giulio Clovio), *Christ Disputing with the Doctors*, 1567, engraving, 27.4 × 20.8 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. RP-P-BI-6489.

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The compact horseshoe distribution of heads and bodies around the orator, and the impressive vertical format, graced with two monumental *repoussoir* figures in the foreground, made that composition a model widely imitated by the late sixteenth-century Catalan painters and a common image on main altarpiece panels; for instance, the French painter Jaume Bazin created on the altar of Vallmoll (Capella del Roser, 1580) a nearly literal reproduction of Cort's engraving, which was used together with other well-known sources such as the famous Italian engravings by Girolamo Muziano or Federico Zuccaro.[11] The close knowledge of Cort's work is attested to in our anonymous panel by the seated doctor in the foreground on the right, painted with some alterations, but its origin still recognisable; the rest of the scene merely follows some guidelines whose result is a chaotic piled-up compilation of heads and faces, plainly devised to exhibit an assorted catalogue of facial and gestural emotions, perhaps a feature more related to scenic conventions put into practice as a rhetorical category in Dutch history paintings and a matter of great importance in Rembrandt's work.[12] There is no need to comment on the harshness—from a modern seventeenth-century point of view—of the corporal attitudes and countenances reproduced in a late-Renaissance print like Cort's work, and on the innovative creative process that aimed to instil a proper Dutch *naar het leven* attitude on a painted human being. Of course, this is the most striking feature of the Catalan panel under discussion, very different from the common graphic description expected of a Catalan master, accustomed to reproduce accurately a basic *repertoire* of Italian or Flemish engravings; one senses that our anonymous, ordinary artist tried to portray, with his own limited vocabulary, the flexible expressiveness of human affection, analogous to figurative Dutch eloquence.

It might be a defiant heresy to compare the physical features of this kind of painting with Rembrandt's artful expressions; I would not dare, but walking on an intangible path may be a stimulating experience to find an open theoretical field conceived like a prophylactic domain, where, after all, such intellectual interferences could be credible. Looking at Rembrandt's etchings of young Jesus preaching in the Temple, one can see that he never referenced any of Cort's motifs openly, but he might have been aware of this remarkable composition, perhaps from his early years in Leyden. But before we plunge into the theoretical fog, a brief *excursus* about the intricate complexity of Rembrandt's creative notions must be made. A suitable example is the crucial ca 1648 etching *Christ Healing the Sick* (the so-called *The Hundred Guilder Print),* a piece filled with indecipherable formal analogies and, at that time, one of his most reflexive and ambitious compositions as an etcher. The harmonious crowd orchestration is one of Rembrandt's artistic achievements—the hand gestures, facial expressions, realistic dress, individualisa-

[11] J.M. Torrell Pareta, «El retaule del Roser de Vallmoll», *Quaderns de Vilaniu,* 43, 2003, pp. 131-146.

[12] Svetlana Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988.

tion of every physical and psychologic emotion; Rembrandt achieved his objective of giving each figure their uniqueness. Even today our gaze is caught and seduced by the burly man standing in the foreground on the left, catching plenty of the sunlight, with the hands behind his back, holding a walking stick, while listening to the words of a grotesque figure. This little group — as perhaps many scholars have observed before — is influenced by Dürer's *The Whore of Babylon*, the fifteenth woodcut in the 1498 edition of his *Apocalypse*, as related in the Book of Revelation (17:3–4). A detailed comparison is possible because Rembrandt deliberately preserved the same group's position in his print, avoiding the graphic effect of «mirror-image» in the previous drawing of the plate (Figure 7). We do not have any proof, but one is led to ask whether it aims to establish a sort of presumptuous *paragone*, as a defiance of connoisseurship; after all, Dürer was one of the greatest artists of all times, and Rembrandt one of his firm admirers.[13] But a closer look at the

[13] Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt's Dürer*, 2013. Avalaible at http://www.garyschwartzarthistorian.nl (as the author points out: *Rembrandt's Dürer* is the text of a talk delivered by Gary Schwartz on 9 March 2013 at the opening of a sales exhibition of work on paper by both artists at Christopher-Clark Fine Art, 377 Geary Street, San Francisco. These pages are from a printed brochure produced by the gallery).

Fig. 7. Rembrandt, *Christ Healing the Sick (The Hundred Guilder Print)* detail (ca 1648, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) compared with Dürer, *The Whore of Babylon*, detail (ca 1498, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum).

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course of Rembrandt's tool through Dürer's outlines reveals a transgression of the edges and a selective invasion of the nearby figure, so much so that the surpassed woodcut ink is literally embedded on a completely new form; the act in itself is not a copy, neither a mechanical point of departure nor an ordinary source of artistic inspiration; it is a free «eye-handed» experience of deeply understanding the true idea of an ancient master as something unattainable and timeless. Apart from the formal realm, Rembrandt also paid attention to the basic eschatological significance of Dürer's *Apocalypse*, and his worldly audience confronted by the healing Jesus represents a foolish and sinful civilisation disregarding the voice of the prophet: «Babylon has been a golden cup in the Lord's hand, that made all the earth drunken: the nations have drunken of her wine; therefore, the nations are mad» (Jeremiah 51:7); this rasping admonition implies that the city of Babylon stands for the luxurious Amsterdam, drunk from sweet wine and tasty beer. This idea is reinforced by the fashionable dress, the large silky caps, and the modern attitude—a true depiction of wealthy Amsterdammers conversing elegantly in the city bourse courtyard.

The precedent example helps us trace the evolution of Rembrandt's attitude towards imitation; if Dürer, the great German artist, and Lucas van Leyden were the brilliant masters of Gothic and Renaissance prints, though obsolete for the modern taste, Cornelis Cort (the Romanised Dutch), just like many others late-Renaissance artists, was in Rembrandt's times an academic lesson in antique, also passé in fashionable terms, but an authority greatly praised by the artistic literature produced under Karel Van Mander's influence, and a poetic Italianate *criteria* still alive in the permanent classical revival of the arts; but all the haughty aesthetical critiques made in literary cenacles could be a pedantic shot at the vulgar illiterate painter, unable to enjoy the flavoursome products of a high Latin school, an academic setting that Rembrandt himself came across in his youth, and perhaps the origin of a compulsive rejection of conceited erudition of classical arts and opinions on painting. The problematic discrepancy between artistic value and rhetorical significance seems even worse in the case of a dogmatic print such as Cort's *Christ Disputing with the Doctors*, where a deep Catholic (or «papist» for Reformed eyes) meaning pervades the entire composition. This might explain a certain reservation in Rembrandt's work, in spite of the print's highly useful artistic information.[14] In my opinion, this issue solves itself through the same intellectual resources employed in the above-mentioned Dürer reference, though not in *Christ Disputing with the Doctors*, but in the 1638 etching *Joseph Telling His Dreams* (Figure 8).[15] The concealed analogies between these two works, as in Dürer's case, allow us to hypothesise on Rembrandt's knowledge of the work in order to not only create an erudite replica but to

[14] As a suitable example, the balanced baby near the aforementioned standing man in the etching *Christ Healing the Sick*, recalls strongly the figure of a baby Jesus that Cort created in two engravings of the adoration of the shepherds after a Taddeo Zuccaro composition. Manfred Sellink, Huigen Leeflang (eds.), *Cornelis Cort*, Part I, The New Hollstein Dutch & Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts, 1450–1700, Rotterdam, Sound & Vision Publishers, 2000, pp. 89–96. Cat. 30: *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1567, [Luke 2:15–20], after Taddeo Zuccaro, engraving, 43.0 × 28.8 cm.

[15] Eric Hinterding, Jaco Rutgers, Ger Luijten (eds.), *Rembrandt*, Text II, 1636–1665, Nos. 156–314, The New Hollstein Dutch & Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts, 1450–1700, Ouderkerk aan den Ijsel, Sound & Vision Publishers, 2013, pp. 24–26. Cat. 167: *Joseph Telling His Dreams*, 1638, [Gen. 37:5–10], etching, 11.0 × 8.3 cm. Signed and dated lower left: *Rembrandt f.* 1638.

Fig. 8. Rembrandt, *Joseph Telling His Dreams*, 1638, etching, 11.0 × 8.3 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. RP-P-OB-292.

explore the limits of a well-known composition as well, all in a diminutive 88 cm^2 etching, perhaps the best and most versatile means to prove such knowledge. The principal similarity lies in the use of the same vertical composition consisting of a piled-up crowd surrounding a standing talking youth, with the addition of two seated *repoussoir* figures in the foreground, one of them (Jo-

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seph's sister Dinah) heavily referenced with an open book in her hands. The choice of an indoor setting seems a minor deviation from the biblical text (Genesis, 37:2–7) which suggests an open space location, as traditionally depicted by many Dutch painters; nevertheless, it might be Rembrandt's response to the Revelation curtain that frames Cort's engraving and fills the entire episode with an overbearing theological message—the act of turning this symbolic element into a banal domestic object, in the form of a vulgar bed curtain dominating the upper part of the etching, tallying perfectly with the coarseness of some pictorial features, for example, the little dog licking its groin in the lower part functions as a displeasing detail to the pedantic eye and at the same time stresses the constant wish to become truthful. A closer look at the bearded audience in Cort's engraving reveals a conspicuous resemblance between the bulky contour of Joseph's father (Jacob) and the outlines of the two doctors nearby, as if Rembrandt's imagination tried to reunite them in a new prominent human being, exceeding the edges of each single subject (Figure 9). Therefore, the preliminary drawings made from life could not be a completely free disposition, but a work plainly deliberate in intention.[16] Obviously, this analogy can be only an ambiguous *trompe-l'oeil* and the best path towards a false formalist over-interpretation, but our doubt rose again after the comparison of Cort's Christ and Rembrandt's Joseph.

[16] Peter Schatborn, «Rembrandt: From life and from memory», in Görel Cavalli-Björkman (ed.), *Rembrandt and his pupils: Papers given at a symposium in the Nationalmuseum Stockholm*, Stockholm 1993, pp. 156-172. Rembrandt, *Bearded Old Man Seated in an Armchair*. Signed with the monogram *RHL* and dated 1631. New York, private collection (Martin Royalton-Kisch, «The Drawings of Rembrandt. A Revision of Otto Benesch's Catalogue Raisonné's» [online], available in www.rembrandtcatalogue.net, 2010; Benesch 20. Hinterding 2008, under nr. 25, note 4. MRK 2010). Rembrandt, *Studies of a Woman Reading and an Oriental*, ca. 1637. New York, private collection (Martin Royalton-Kisch, «The Drawings...»; Benesch 168. Hinterding et al. 2000, sub nr. 31. Not MRK 2010). Rembrandt, *Joseph Telling His*

Fig. 9. Detail of Figure 6 compared with detail of Figure 8.

Again, a probably deliberate parallel allows us to make this symmetrical comparison between the engraving and the etching, and at the same time to analyse the differences in the pictorial handling, such as Rembrandt's shadowing through small, flecked strokes that in some parts seems to interpret freely Cort's well-disciplined burin. The result appears to be a lesson in bringing to life a statue-like face, which could introduce a small nuance in our historical interpretation of the Dutch principle *naar het leven*, as Rembrandt's treatment of Homer's bust did. The radical contrast in gesticulation also contributes to the animation of Joseph's figure as a reaction against a doctrinal proclamation: In a classical culture, a raised forefinger showed to the audience was a conventional sign of symbolic *Auctoritas*. Christ points straight ahead to the high paternal divinity and spreads left the law over the Temple with an open hand, as the prophets did in the past with preaching words among the faithful crowd.[17] Rembrandt seems to avoid this gesture in his entire oeuvre, perhaps because of a dogmatic rejection or an insulting meaning in ordinary life; as a matter of fact, Joseph keeps both hands low,[18] acting literally the Genesis 37:6, where he tells his dream: «We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.» The rest of the etching consists of an assorted catalogue of the family's facial reactions to the intended prophetic words—from restrained surprise on Jacob's face and his reclining wife Rachel (or Leah) to the brothers' contempt and slight or deep worry. Fitting fourteen lively figures as *tronies* in such a narrow vertical space gives the scene a fanciful and humorous feeling, like the Marx Brothers' crowded cabin scene in *A Night at the Opera*, so much so that one of Joseph's brothers is present only through his hand on the table. The closely related 1633 oil sketched version of the same history scene, over a wider square surface, represents a more rational space distribution,[19] notwithstanding that some primordial figures are similar to the 1638 etched version; in both the problematic relationship between chronological distance and formal digression diminishes the issue of the 1638 etching as an experimental attempt, so much so that such a confusing piled-up crowd will rarely appear in later etched or painted works. Apart from formal and hypothetical arguments that might point to Rembrandt's knowledge and use of Cort's engraving, the theological parallel between Joseph's and Jesus's poignant biographies, like a bond between the Old and the New Testaments, could act as a final and deep meaning of a symbolic formal absorption: Young Joseph's figure's foreshadowing the young Messiah might have been the ultimate reason that bonds within an inner artistic dimension the old Italian Renaissance and the new Amsterdam painting, though Rembrandt always shied away from such intellectual exercise. If we admit some degree of true significance

Dreams, ca. 1637. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen; (Martin Royalton-Kisch, «The Drawings... »; on the verso of Benesch 161, not mentioned by Benesch. Giltaij 1988, sub nr. 13. Hinterding 2008, sub nr. 25. MRK 2010).

[17] Nicole Rouillé provides a detailed commentary about rhetorical gesticulation in a work of the history of Joseph telling his dreams by Giovanni Battista Baciccio Il Gaulli (Musée Fesch, Ajaccio). Nicole Rouillé, *Peindre et dire les passions: la gestuelle baroque aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles: l'exemple du Musée Fesch d'Ajaccio,* Ajaccio, Éditions Alain Piazzola, 2006, pp. 84-94, Richard Verdi, *Rembrandt's Themes: life into art*, New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 2014.

[18] Similar to Rembrandt's young Jesus in the late etchings (1652, 1654) *Christ Disputing with the Doctors*. Eric Hinterding, Jaco Rutgers, Ger Luijten (eds.), *Rembrandt*, Text II, 1636–1665, Nos. 156–314, The New Hollstein Dutch & Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts, 1450–1700, Ouderkerk aan den Ijsel, Sound & Vision Publishers, 2013, pp. 209–210. Cat. 267: *Christ Disputing with the Doctors*: A sketch, [Luke 2: 42-51], etching and drypoint, 12.6 x 21.4 cm. Signed and dated lower left: *Rembrandt. f.* 1652. Cat. 281: *Christ Seated Disputing with the Doctors,* [Luke 2: 42–51], 1654, etching possibly with touches of drypoint, 9.5 x 14.4 cm. Signed and dated upper left: *Rembrandt. f.* 1654.

[19] Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, *Joseph Telling His Dreams to His Parents and Brothers* SK-A-3477 painting signed and dated *Rembrandt f 1633*, paper oil paint (paint). Measurements h 51 cm x w 39 cm d 4.5 cm.

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to the related formal analogies—in general terms—this could mean not only a *naar het leven* interpretation of an old statue-like late-Renaissance motif and a mechanical point of departure moulded by a creative mind (*uit de geest*), regardless of its logic coherence, by means of an intuitive process, glancing loosely over a track of outlines, perhaps half consciously, half unconsciously; it seems to be something more intricate than this—a true lesson in artistic knowledge that relies on significance and graphical perception, an attitude that serves to the main work process and at the same time, to a substantial notion of visual awareness. Learning something truthful from old artists means achieving a complete self-consciousness and creating anew by means of a speculative experience, wandering safely through the same old boundless path.

Our short and speculative *ex cursus* about Rembrandt's creative notions should provide an adequate milieu for an accurate reading of specific aspects of formal reception and influence; if we look again at the similarly grouped faces in our Catalan panel *Christ Disputing with the Doctors* (Figure 1), the various emotional reactions of the surrounding bearded audience bear a little more definite Dutch influence.[20] In spite of the defective touch, this humble painting shares with Rembrandt's etching the intentional avoidance of an explicit quotation of Cort's engraving, probably explained by a similar lofty belief about the good-heartedness of a pubescent Jesus surrounded in the Temple by outdated servants of the dogma, as natural and candid as the young Joseph encircled by malevolent brothers. Even Jesus's gesticulation appears to be halfway between Cort's severe pointing finger and Rembrandt's open hands. All the above-mentioned inferences invite us to search for other formal correspondences between the etching and the panel, and in my opinion only one face could evoke some Rembrandtesque affinity: The pointing doctor on Jesus's left, wearing an extravagant mushroom cap, seems suspiciously similar to one of Joseph's brothers, daydreaming with an empty look; this figure—incarnating perhaps stupidity—finds his parallel in the 1633 oil sketched version, where he is leaning lost in thought behind Joseph's back; within the Biblical episode no other face on the panel admits such reasonable comparison. To find a further surprising assortment of formal analogies one must scrutinise freely the entire corpus of Rembrandt paintings, and the result of such an audacious attempt is at least shocking.[21] In the group placed on Jesus's right, beneath Saint Joseph, the face of the Virgin could be read perfectly as a copy of the face of a standing veiled woman in Rembrandt's 1637 *The Angel Raphael Leaving Tobit and His Family* (Paris, Musée du Louvre); in the next pair of faces on the panel, the old covered priest recalls slightly Rembrandt's 1663 *Homer* (Den Haag, Mauritshuis), and the youth looking up at Jesus's finger bears some resemblance to the young Joseph in Rembrandt's 1655 *Joseph Accused by the*

[20] For instance, this conventional group of figures is also referenced by an anonymous Rembrandt follower: *Six Apostles*, Anonymous Rembrandt-school, formerly Panshanger, Earl Cowper. (Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, CH. Paudiss-Anonyme, vol. IV, Edition PVA, Landau/Pfalz, 1983-1989, p. 2876, p. 2905. As the author points out, «Man kann nur sagen, dass der Maler ein schüler der fünfziger jahre gewesen ist, der Rembrandts *Moses mit den Gesetzestafeln* von 1659 in Berlin gekannt hat»).

[21] All the mentioned Rembrandt paintings are cited according to Rembrandt Database [online], available in www.rembrandtdatabase.org.

Wife of Potiphar (Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin). The last pair of faces in the foreground on the same side may also have some Rembrandt equivalents: The old turbaned doctor recalls the ca 1661 *Old Man Prying* (Cleveland Ohio, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Bequest), now attributed to a follower of Rembrandt, and the seated man, gesticulating in amazement, has the facial outlines of the centurion in the foreground of Rembrandt's 1660 *The Denial of Saint Peter* (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum). Another clear analogy can be found on Jesus's left—a replica of an apostle's face in Rembrandt's 1648 *The Supper at Emmaus*, (Paris, Musée du Louvre). As an arbitrary medley of formal comparisons, as this collection of possible similitudes appears, the logical deductions should be extremely cautious, because every supposed aesthetical analogy will be always something evanescent originated in our private *logos*, an illusionistic and arbitrary statement that depends mostly on our self-thought which summarises the intention to resolve what lies behind a striking image that unconsciously moves upon our intuition and to establish the logical principles of our historical interpretation. In our case, the inferences are irretrievably antithetical—accept or reject; the former axiom will transform deeply our understanding of the Catalan panel and recognise the composition of the scene *Christ Disputing with the Doctors* as a kind of figurative debt, created by an unskilled artist who, from afar, managed to assemble a wonderful collection of Rembrandt's features, probably not directly as a formal pupil, but from somewhere in his dense entourage; to admit such a theory also means to identify Saint Joseph's raising face on the upper left with Rembrandt's physiognomy, perhaps performing the allegorical role of the old family father in painting creation. On the other hand, to reject all the presumed analogies means to banish any definite artistic filiation and relegate this painting to the uncanny exotic category. The choice of a single conclusion based on formal disquisition represents the eternal entanglement in art history matters; the only solution usually resides in an outer reception and a collective review that might give solid consistency to subjective assessments.

Apart from the veracity of an incidental group of formal similitudes, another fundamental question about the climacteric juncture needs to be resolved: If we are taking for granted that the author is a Dutch artist active in Barcelona around 1670–1680, the two panels in question can hardly be regarded as true Dutch paintings; they must be read precisely as a hybrid result holding essential information about artistic transgressions. This quality is more evident in *The Flight into Egypt* (Figure 2), which is attributable to the same artist, where the traditional composition might at first elude any foreign ascription, to such an extent that there is little to

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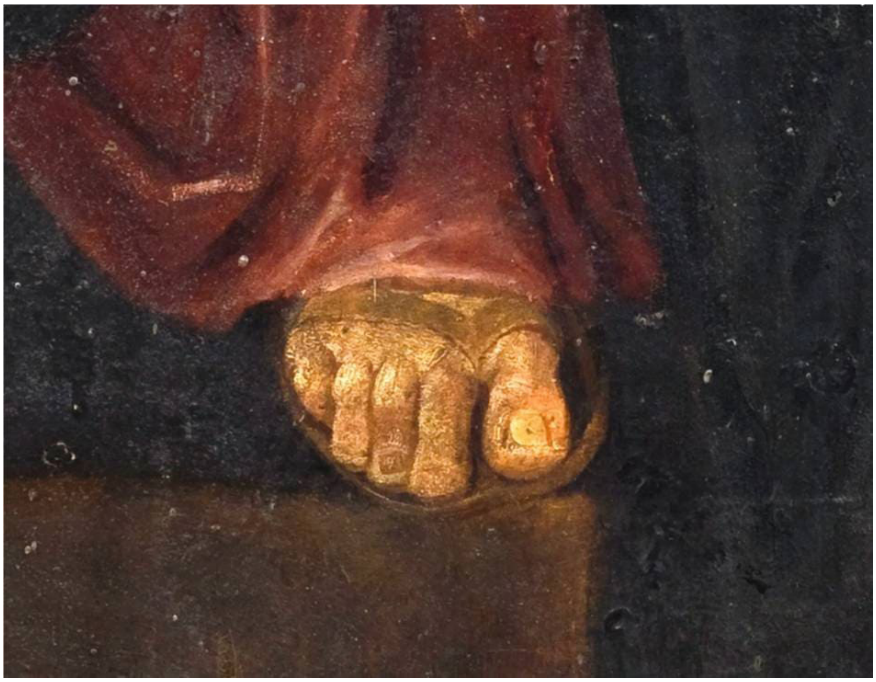

Fig. 10. Detail of Figure 2.

comment on, except for the deep Italianate character that makes the Virgin and Child couple more a late-Renaissance Madonna than a subject correlated with a devotional account, and—of course—a creation openly divergent from Rembrandt's vivid ideas. In spite of its conventional appearance, the only remarkable and perhaps casual bond lies in the reversed and modified borrowing of an old engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi after Rafael—*The Virgin and the Cradle* (ca 1520), also partially referenced by the young Rembrandt in his painting *Simeon in the Temple* (1627/1628, Hamburg, Kunsthalle);[22] in that respect it is an anachronistic paraphrase, even among the contemporary Catalan painters (some of them well informed about the newest Italian chalcography), decorously antiquated as a biblical representation, but completely out-of-date if inserted in *The Flight into Egypt*, a depiction traditionally graced more with an open, wide Italianate landscape than unyielding mannerist prototypes. Obviously, such a classical quotation could be understood not as a displeasing slip-up into unfashionable arrangements, as it appears, but, on the contrary, a lavish Roman proclamation in front of the nuns which apparently indicates a young artist seeking to snobbishly advertise his Italian journey—nothing unusual among the community of wandering seventeenth-century artists.

[22] Kenneth CLARK, *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance*, London, 1966. Konrad OBERHUBER, Marcantonio RAIMONDI, *The Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 26, *The works of Marcantonio Raimondi and of his school*, New York, Abaris Books, 1978, pp. 90–91. Cat. 63(70), 63A-I(70).

The estrangement caused by the foreign artistic and sociocultural environment could produce hybrids such as a Dutch standing Jesus painted in an emphatic *contrapposto*, inconceivable as a *naar het leven* bodily attitude but unavoidable for the Catholic decorum that requests such a conventional distinction over pious images. Ultimately, there is still a lesson to be learned from a recondite pair of panels, severely damaged, produced by an unknown foreign artist in a distant country as a cheap artwork, and commissioned by the patrons of an impoverished female convent—too many negatives to arouse nowadays a real scholar interest, hard to enjoy if a minimum formal beauty does not grace the printed lines—in elegant high-class art history issues which benefit and excite the author as well. A final and a metaphorical note, like a thoughtful answer, is to observe a single modest detail as an isolated piece, detached from *The Flight into Egypt* (Figure 10); there is a veiled revelation on the humblest part of the human body, the Holy Virgin's feet: It is meticulously detailed as if to signal a skilled master's talent which is sombrely self-restrained on the rest of the painted surface. The achievements of a Dutch descriptive breeding concentrate in it the essence of one entire theological heaven.

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REMBRANDT BEHIND THE SCENES. *CHRIST DISPUTING WITH THE DOCTORS*: AN INTRIGUING PANEL FROM SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY BARCELONA

Between July 2012 and December 2013, the CRBMC (Centre de Restauració de Béns Mobles de Catalunya) restored two severely damaged works, painted probably around the middle of the seventeenth century by an anonymous and second-rate artist. The paintings were *Christ Disputing with the Doctors* and *The Flight into Egypt*. When the restoration was completed, it brought to light several interesting aspects: new painting had been applied over ancient panels from a sixteenth-century altarpiece, and the details in the new works, especially the first, did not follow the usual formula of Catalan baroque masters. The article analyses the clues that could point to the author's being a Dutch or Flemish Rembrandtesque artist temporarily settled in Barcelona.

Keywords: Rembrandt, Dutch Golden Age painting, Catalan baroque painting

REMBRANDT RERE LES ESCENES. *CRIST ENTRE ELS DOCTORS*: UNA TAULA ENIGMÀTICA DE LA BARCELONA DEL SEGLE XVII

Entre el mes de juliol de l'any 2012 i el mes de desembre de 2013, el Centre de Restauració de Béns Mobles de Catalunya va recuperar dues imatges de pintura molt deteriorades, de mitjan segle XVII, obres d'un modest artista anònim. Les taules representen les escenes *Crist entre els doctors* i *La fugida a Egipte*, respectivament. Els treballs de restauració van evidenciar algunes característiques prou significatives: les imatges havien estat pintades sobre taules reaprofitades d'un antic altar renaixentista, alhora que aquesta mateixa pintura sis-centista no semblava respondre a la praxi comuna dels pintors catalans de l'època. L'estudi analitza els elements que podrien fer pensar en la presència d'un pintor rembrandtesc, holandès o flamenc, temporalment establert a Barcelona.

Paraules clau: Rembrandt, pintura holandesa del segle d'Or, pintura barroca catalana

REMBRANDT TRAS LAS ESCENAS. *CRISTO ENTRE LOS DOCTORES*: UNA TABLA ENIGMÁTICA DE LA BARCELONA DEL SIGLO XVII

Entre julio de 2012 y diciembre de 2013, el Centre de Restauració de Béns Mobles de Cataluña recuperó dos imágenes de pintura muy deterioradas, de mediados del siglo XVII, obras de un modesto artista anónimo. Las tablas representan las escenas de *Cristo entre los doctores* y *La huida a Egipto*, respectivamente. Los trabajos de restauración evidenciaron algunas características suficientemente significativas: las imágenes habían sido pintadas sobre tablas reaprovechadas de un antiguo altar renacentista, a la vez que esta misma pintura seiscentista no parecía responder a la praxis común de los pintores catalanes de la época. El estudio analiza los elementos que podrían hacer pensar en la presencia de un pintor rembrandtesco, holandés o flamenco, temporalmente afincado en Barcelona.

Palabras clave: Rembrandt, pintura holandesa del siglo de Oro, pintura barroca catalana

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