5. Determining Single-Handedness in Rubens's Œuvre

5.1. Connoisseurship

When dealing with the attribution of paintings, at some point one is inevitably confronted with the term "connoisseurship", and in the following chapter the basic features as well as the problems that arise from this practice will be briefly discussed. Considerations were made with reference to old master paintings and most observations are only valid in this context.

As Nils Büttner highlights, connoisseurship is falsely considered to be an art historical method since the times of Max J. Friedländer, although it is much rather "*a more or less consciously-driven application of a whole set of methods*".[245] Ultimately, connoisseurship can be categorised as a form of contemporary reception of artworks, in its essence not dissimilar to what viewers already practised at the time of the artworks' origination.

A connoisseur's core mission is to determine the authorship of paintings and – in further consequence – their date of origin. This is achieved through examining a work's stylistic and technical traits, and matching those traits to an equivalent group of works that bear the same characteristics. Traditionally, the ability to compare and attribute the painting should stem from the connoisseur's strong familiarity with comparative material. When practising connoisseurship, artworks are classified according to their uniform and reproducible stylistic traits, which neglects the concept of an artwork's uniqueness. After all, "style" is a summative term that can only be determined by investigating a series of works. In today's scholarly climate, style and the analysis of style play a subordinate or minor role for various reasons, including the modern situational and performative understanding of art, which rejects holistic concepts. Nevertheless, the concept of "style" is indispensable to the subject of Art History, not least because it is closely linked with art historical practice. When an unsigned painting stands by itself with no other clues such as historical documents available, connoisseurship is more or less still the only way of categorising a work by establishing an artwork's authorship or its affiliation to a specific "school". Consequently, art historic research still builds on the strong legacy of pioneering scholars such as

245 See: Büttner 2017, p. 43.

Schmiedlechner, Patricia, Modi Operandi in Rubens's Workshop. A Study on the Creative Process and Studio Practice, Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net, 2021. DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.828, e-ISBN: 978-3-948466-95-4

Max J. Friedländer or Abraham Bredius, whose findings were based on archival documentation as well as connoisseurship. The categories drawn up by the results of connoisseurship shape the field until today; for instance, through the prevalent illustrated *catalogues raisonnés*.[246]

Given the significance that connoisseurship has held to the subject of Art History, the underlying issues of attributing artworks – such as the existence of workshop production – and the principles associated with this line of questioning have not been discussed by scholars as sufficiently as one might anticipate.[247] On the other hand, the question of how to go about connoisseurship correctly has been the cause of much debate. In 1895, Abraham Bredius wrote about a painting by Rembrandt: "*A single glance at the whole, an inspection of the technique that required no more than seconds, were all that was necessary to convince me at once that here, in this remote region* […] *hung one of Rembrandt's greatest masterpieces*".[248] Max J. Friedländer understood connoisseurship in similar terms: to him, the essence of traditional connoisseurship is the ability to recognise the hand of a painter based on experience. He compared a connoisseur's subjective intuition to the magnetic needle of a compass, pointing the way not despite but rather because of its trembling and vibrating.[249] To him, more objective indications such as contracts and deeds are to a connoisseur what solid ground beneath one's feet is to a swimmer.[250]

Bredius and Friedländer both promoted an intuitive approach to assessing art, in which case the attribution is entirely dependent on the instinct of the person doing the attributing. Other art historians sought to achieve a higher level of objectivity. The Italian politician, physician and art historian Giovanni Morelli can be considered the founder of a more transparent method. To Morelli, certain formal features of paintings such as individual body fragments represented the key to the attribution process. For instance, he deemed the basic shape of both the hand and the ear characteristic with all independent masters and therefore crucial to ascertaining their

246 For example, Anne-Marie Logan highlights that Julius Held's publications on the work of Rubens remain the standard reference for any research on the artist. See: Logan 2007, p. 160. A strong awareness of ongoing influence is especially important insofar as that the judgements of any connoisseur can be biased by political agendas or professional alliances. For a historiographical study on – for instance – Rembrandt connoisseurship, see: Scallen 2004.

247 More recent noteworthy publications on the subject include: Schwartz 1988; Talley 1989; Scallen 2004; Tummers 2009; Tummers 2011; Schwartz 201a4.

248 Boer/Leistra 1991, p. 17.

249 See: Friedländer 1942, p. 116.

250 Friedländer 1942, p. 107.

works.[251] This method of drawing comparisons has the great advantage of being rationally verifiable. Nevertheless, it is debatable whether the claim that artists leave a "fingerprint" in the form of individually-depicted body parts is valid.

In any case, both approaches have some justification, even the intuitive approach, which is certainly less scientific. Ernst Gombrich argues that the incapacity to rationally describe an insight does not render it irrelevant. He compares the intuitive process of connoisseurship with the ability to recognise a familiar voice over the telephone: a skill that we possess but cannot explain rationally.[252] Contemporary research along these lines offers new understandings concerning the adaptive unconscious and our brain's ability to register signals long before we can explain them rationally.[253]

Although these two doctrines of connoisseurship – the "morellian" and the intuitive approach – leave much room for discussion, there used to be no real alternative to trusting one's connoisseur of choice: without the means to prove an attribution wrong, connoisseurship was to some degree infallible. Fellow scholars generally accepted attributions made by renowned art historians such as Max J. Friedländer.[254] However, when new ways to examine paintings emerged in the form of technical investigations, connoisseurship as a whole came under increased pressure concerning its validity.[255] For instance, it became increasingly customary to examine paintings across a larger range of the electromagnetic spectrum during the course of the

251 Morelli writes: *"Allow me to cite the characteristic features by which one can discern the works of Palma Vecchio from those of his imitators and students. With Palma, the ear has a large round auricle that ends in a pointed lobe. Whereas in the case of Bonifazio, the ear is always elongated"* (Lermolieff 1891, p. 26–27). This approach was pursued by scholars such as Maurits van Dantzig who developed a method of establishing 100 criteria for comparisons that he called "Pictology". See: Van Dantzig 1973.

252 Gombrich 1952, p. 656.

253 See for instance: Gladwell 2005.

254 One telling example of the authority that the renowned art historians had regarding attributions is the drawing of the *"Madonna Enthroned with Child and Saints"* in the *Nationalmuseum* in Stockholm (Held 1986, no. 171, p. 136.). The work will be discussed in more detail below, but in this context it is interesting to note that the work was considered to be by Anthonis van Dyck until Frits Lugt – a well-known connoisseur – attributed the work to Rubens (see: Lugt 1925, p. 200.). Only Leo van Puyvelde ever challenged this attribution, albeit with little consequence (see: Van Puyvelde 1940, p. 83.). Lugt's attribution prevailed and the drawing was generally considered to be by Rubens until the emergence of a second drawing on the subject in the early-2000s. See: Cat.-NewYork 2004, p. 140ff. In the case of Max Friedländer – who was of Jewish descent his enormous reputation as a connoisseur and art expert protected him from being deported by the Nazis during World War II. See: Wendland 1999, p. 163ff.

255 Some forms of technical investigations have been around since the 19th century, although art historians did not generally utilise them until around the middle of the 20th century. For instance, Julius Held was an early advocate of using technical investigations. See: Scallen 2007, p. 192.

20th century.[256] The human eye can only detect a wavelength between 400nm to 700nm, whereas other wavelengths have the ability to reveal invisible differences in paint or penetrate layers.[257] Moreover, some organic materials such as certain pigments, fluoresce when excited by UV light and can thereby be detected. Infrared photography and infrared reflectography have the ability to penetrate paint layers, potentially revealing preparatory layers.

To some degree, the findings based on technical investigations simply offer more material for the "connoisseur". The prevailing method (or set of methods) to evaluate paintings by making comparisons was not necessarily revolutionised, as the results still heavily depend on the interpretation of new findings. This becomes especially clear when it comes to determining whether a specific master completed a painting, or whether it stems from his workshop.[258] When faced with the problem of workshop employees, the works in question stem from the same time period and are made of the same material as the canon of autograph works. In these cases, additional technical material such as x-ray images simply add to the accumulation of comparative material, whereas the analysis of the panels or the paint itself can hardly offer additional clues.[259] Consequently, attributions are eventually mostly made based on connoisseurship.

In cases where the work in question is further removed from the canon of reference paintings in time or place (or both), technical examinations have the ability to expose false attributions. For instance, evidence provided by dendrochronology or the examination of the pigments or binding agents can potentially contradict an assumption based on connoisseurship.[260] This is not

256 X-ray was the first wavelength to be used on paintings and has been available since the end of the 19th century. Ultraviolet light has been in use to examine paintings since around 1920. One of the first publications to include an infrared photograph was published in 1940 (by the *National Gallery Laboratory*). Infrared reflectography was developed in the late-1960s by Johann R. J. van Asperen de Boer (see: Van Asperen de Boer 1970). During the last decades of the 20th century, it became prevalent to publish technical findings not only in specific journals but also in more mainstream publications such as exhibition catalogues. On the development of the different methods of technical investigations, see: MacBeth 2012; Stoner 2012. On the recently-developed ma-XRF scanning – an analytical imaging technique using macro X-ray fluorescence – see: Alfeld/Vaz Pedroso/van Eikema Hommes 2013.

257 For instance, some materials such as specific pigments fluoresce when excited by UV light. Infrared photography and infrared reflectography even have the ability to penetrate paint layers, potentially revealing preparatory layers.

258 Although this is a line of questioning not compliant with contemporary practices, the question arises.

259 For instance, the existence of underdrawings can sometimes offer additional clues regarding the painting's authorship within a workshop. On the study of underdrawings, see: Van Asperen de Boer 1985.

260 Naturally, this is only applicable when the painting in question was executed at a much later date than assumed by the connoisseur and this is potentially the case with forgeries. Although exposing wrong attributions with the help of this kind of technical evidence can discredit the method of connoisseurship as a whole, as has been said, the findings themselves offer no additional help with the process of attributing a painting when it comes to choosing between two contemporary artists.

to say that the investigation of a painting's support or paint layer offers certainty. For instance, it is possible to create forgeries on top of 17th-century paintings and use pigments that are coherent with those used by old masters. Nevertheless, a number of scandals challenged the authority of connoisseurship during the 20th century, in which technical investigations offered key clues.[261] It became apparent that in some cases a technical analysis of a painting could effortlessly debunk any assessment by even the most learned scholar or connoisseur.[262] One example of this would be a painting depicting a landscape and the seven deathly sins (*Geneva Fine Arts Foundation*), which was periodically attributed to Hieronymus Bosch. The dendrochronological investigation by Peter Klein suggested a date of origin around 1530, more than two decades after the painter's death.[263]

For a certain period of time, there was some confidence that technical investigations could provide key evidence and help to further objectify the attribution process; for instance, when the Rembrandt Research Project announced that it would make the greatest possible use of technical investigations, there was hope that the main doubts regarding authorship would be dispelled with the help of new examination methods.[264] Today, it has become very clear that the technical analysis of artworks is unable to answer all problems regarding the attribution of works, nor will it put connoisseurs out of work.[265] To the contrary, contextualising the growing volume of information produced by these new methods has become a challenge in itself. However, simultaneously the art of connoisseurship is decried as outdated and its legitimacy as a "method" within the subject of Art History is strongly challenged.

Despite its shortcomings, ultimately connoisseurship is indispensable when dealing with the attribution of old master paintings. The *catalogues raisonnés* of the previous centuries were

261 For instance, a very famous scandal involved the forgery of numerous paintings by Han van Meegeren, a deceit that was only uncovered through Van Meegeren's confession. Scientific tests on the paintings that revealed the use of phenol-formaldehyde confirmed his statement. See: Tummers 2009, p. 18ff. This scandal will be discussed in more detail below.

262 However, technical examinations should not be overestimated as they only very seldom offer "knockout" evidence. For instance, Julius Held – in principle an advocate of technical examinations – published an article in 1848 titled "*The Stylistic Detection of Fraud*", in which he stressed the superiority of connoisseurship over technical investigations when distinguishing forgeries. See: Held 1948, p. 181. For more on Julius Held, see: Scallen 2007.

263 See: Büttner 2014, p. 33–34.

264 See: Van de Wetering 2015, p. 10.

265 Nonetheless, a superficial discussion concerning the necessity and purpose of scientific analysis on paintings is not yet contended. All too often the art historian's indispensable ability to interpret any type of result is emphasised and scientific findings are often viewed with scepticism. This certain element of uncertainty towards new technical possibilities is not an exclusive trait of the subject of art history. For instance, journalism is confronted with unprecedented amounts of data, but nevertheless public trust in the free media is at an all-time low.

established by connoisseurs or with the help of connoisseurship, and they still constitute the capital stock of art historical knowledge. Gary Schwarz quite rightly states: "*If you can not live with* [connoisseurship], *you cannot live without it either*".[266] Looking more closely into the problematic nature of connoisseurship leads to the conclusion that the practice's main problem is not the subjectivity associated with the comparative visual analysis of a painting. It is for this reason that technical examinations did little to eliminate possible doubts with respect to attributions. It is very likely that at some point in the future technology will be able to compare paintings more accurately than the human eye. All the same, this would not suddenly answer all questions of attribution. The reasons for this predominantly lie in the paintings' complex production process.

Connoisseurship builds on the premise of a substantial autograph core œuvre. When attributing a painting to a certain artist, the work is either rejected or included into this artist's nucleus of autograph work by assessing a painting's stylistic conformity and its overall quality. The problematic nature of these queries becomes clear when one recalls the "Van Meegeren" affair, one of the largest art world scandals of the 20th century. Han van Meegeren succeeded in deceiving numerous scholars – including the well-known connoisseur Abraham Bredius – by passing a self-made forgery as an authentic painting by Jan Vermeer. The *Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum* subsequently acquired the painting and the deceit was only uncovered years later when Van Meegeren confessed to having painted the work himself in a statement before court.[267] If the painting had been completely stylistically compliant with Vermeer's œuvre, this error in judgement might be easier to understand. However, the painting's characteristics differed from what was usually considered typical for Vermeer and therefore the painting was declared as an "early work". There is hardly any reference material from Vermeer's early creative period and thus the forgery's characteristics were admitted to the canon of Vermeer's stylistic traits. To the contrary, the painting's otherness gave it distinction as a rare key piece of an otherwise under-represented period. In this particular case, the truth was eventually discovered.

266 See: Schwartz 1988, p. 262.

267 Van Meegeren was accused of having sold paintings – among them a Vermeer – to Hermann Göring during WWII. He saved himself from a conviction for treason by revealing the works had been forgeries. For further insights on the scandal, see: Tummers 2009, p. 18ff.

The incident exemplifies how easily a single painting – falsely accepted into the catalogue – can alter paragons and change the way in which we perceive a whole œuvre. Consequently, every question of attribution is highly consequential and a painting can never be assessed in isolation.

If modern technical investigations such as the analysis of pigments expose paintings done in later years and make it increasingly difficult to make forgeries, this still leaves the issue of those works manufactured during an artist's lifetime, sometimes even in the same studio. The question that needs to be addressed is whether it is even possible to single out single-handedly done works. In order to make any assumptions, an in-depth analysis of a painter's working methods should precede any consideration. In simple terms, it is less a question of *how* paintings are compared to one another, but much rather *which* comparisons are made. Historical practices cannot be ignored for the benefit of the modern perception of art and resultant assumptions. If finding a painting's sole creator is not always compatible with historical practices, the line of questioning must adapt correspondingly.

5.2. Rubens's Elusive Core Œuvre

In order to embark on the issue of single-handed execution in Rubens's canon of works, it is necessary to address the aforementioned "core œuvre". The key question of course is whether 17th-century artists generally even created a core œuvre of autograph paintings. In the following, the issue of whether parts of Rubens's œuvre can be categorised along these lines will be examined.

It should be highlighted in advance that Rubens usually did not sign his works. This includes paintings, oil sketches and drawings.[268] There are countless examples of paintings or drawings with signatures or initials; however, these were generally added at later dates.[269] The only works that customarily include his name are the captions of prints, which are commonly inscribed with "*PPRubens pinxit*" (or similar), which indicates that Rubens was the inventor of the composition.[270]

268 There are only six paintings and one drawing in which Rubens seems to have made an exception to that rule. As Nils Büttner observes, it is no longer possible to determine why these particular works were signed and dated. See: Büttner 2018, p. 418/No. 47.

269 For the very few exceptions, see footnote above.

270 The engraver can usually be identified with the epithet "*fecit*" or "*sculpsit*", whereas the publisher was sometimes cited with an "*excudit*". For a catalogue of Rubens's title pages, see for instance: Bertram/Büttner 2018.

When looking at Rubens's biography, it quickly becomes clear that after he became a master, he was unfailingly accompanied by at least one of his pupils.[271] Thus, it can reasonably be assumed that Rubens never created an autograph painting in today's sense of the term, meaning that he did everything in a painting from top to bottom. To begin at the very base, Rubens most probably refrained from prepping his painting underground or mixing colours himself. The same most likely applies for less important parts of a composition. For instance, as the head of the workshop, Rubens can hardly be suspected to have spent hours on meticulously shaping background leaves in trees or bunches of grapes.

However, there is a certain type of execution that points to the master's single-handed involvement insofar as it presupposes a confident and quick execution. As has been established through evidence such as the letter to Sir Dudley Carleton, the common method for working together was that pupils of employees would set up a painting, to which Rubens would later add the finishing touches. In Rubens's own words, the workshop's involvement in these paintings would then hardly be discernible.[272] Nonetheless, it would necessarily result in more layers of paint.[273] However, in some paintings, the paint is applied in a manner that rules out an appliance in more than one step: in some cases, the paint was applied in such a thin and opaque layer that the *imprimatura's* streaky finish still shines through. Of course, one paint layer means one step of application, inherently by one person. The very thinly-applied paint is especially often apparent in flesh tones and a most spectacular example of this is the "*Venus in Front of the Mirror*".[274] The stroke of the brush with which the *imprimatura* was applied is still visible through the paint of Venus's skin, which results in a striking, life-like effect.[275] Although this would seem like an almost fool-proof way of determining single-handedness, it nevertheless does not guarantee Rubens's own involvement, as it still cannot be ruled out that skilful assistants were also capable of this way of painting. While paintings that show this technique are usually thought of as the works of the highest quality within Rubens's œuvre, the question remains whether a certain body of works can be considered more likely to be by the master's own hand based on criteria that do not pertain to the painting's stylistic traits.

271 This is also true for the work he completed outside of Antwerp. See the above chapter on Rubens's studio.

272 Rubens writes: "*Yet Your Excellency must not think that the others are mere copies, for they are so well retouched by my hand that they are hardly to be distinguished from originals.*" Magurn 1955, p. 60–61.

273 Regarding Rubens's painting technique, the existence of numerous layers and how these layers hint towards numerous participating hands, research by Jørgen Wadum offers insights. See for instance: Wadum 1996.

274 The painting is part of the *Liechtenstein Princely Collections* in Vienna (GE120).

275 On Rubens's flesh tones, see for instance: Balis/Van Hout 2012, p. 72–73.

As it turns out, not only the application of paint is potentially telling of the artwork's maker. The previously-discussed enlargement of panels and – in some cases – canvases is a further peculiarity regarding Rubens's image carriers. It has been observed that within Rubens's œuvre there are a number of paintings that were done on somewhat faulty panels.[276] Apart from few exemptions that were enlarged for necessary reasons not pertaining to their content (for instance, due to spatial requirements at the painting's planned location), fragmented panels very often show depictions of close family members and landscapes: in other words, paintings that were perhaps never meant for the market, but evidently made for Rubens's own use. A good example of this is "*Hélène Fourment in her Wedding Dress*", which was started on a smaller panel, but enlarged on three sides and thus turned into a full-length portrait.[277] In contrast to enlargements that were done during or after the initial painting process and perhaps due to impulsive changes of heart, the painting of Hélène was intentionally done on a fragmented panel. This can be determined due to the fact that the paint layer between the core panel and the enlargements is seamless, which indicates that the core panel had not been fully painted at the point of enlargement.[278] Consequently, the choice of using a fragmented support of lower quality was made knowingly in the case of Hélène's portrait, a painting which was evidently made for Rubens's home. The obvious reason for this use of panels of lower quality would have been the lower cost.[279]

The fact that this procedure frequently concerns paintings with private subjects is hardly surprising, as Rubens sold his paintings for exceptionally high sums and was doubtlessly expected to deliver his compositions on impeccable supports. It is difficult to imagine a buyer approving of a fragmented panel, and thus it makes sense that Rubens would principally only have used flawed panels for his own private use. However, these enlargements exist in a number far too large to consider them all part of his personal collection. Perhaps they were fit to be sold on the open market and possibly the panel's condition was reflected in the painting's price. In any case, the paintings that were done on faulty panels *and* show private subjects (such as the portrait of Rubens's wife or landscapes) can be considered more likely to be made for Rubens's own collection and plausibly more often painted by the master himself.

276 On the subject of Rubens's faulty and enlarged panels, see chapter 4.3.3.

277 This painting of Rubens's second wife is on display in the *Alte Pinakothek* in Munich (no. 340).

278 See: Renger 1994, p. 159.

279 See: Fraiture/Dubois 2011a, p. 136.

However, in the context of Rubens's private art collection, it must be highlighted that not all paintings that were presented in his home were necessarily works by his own hand. In a letter to Balthasar Gerbier in 1640, Rubens reveals that a painting that had caught the eye of the art connoisseur Edward Norgate when he had visited Rubens's home (and which was now to be sold to King Charles I.) was in fact "*painted entirely by a very mediocre painter of this city (called Verhulst)*", rather than by Rubens himself.[280] The painting had been done after a drawing of a landscape, which Rubens had made when visiting the Escorial during his travels to Spain.[281] Consequently, this exchange of letters explicitly reveals that the presence in Rubens's home cannot guarantee that a painting was single-handedly executed by Rubens himself, even if it was done after one of his drawings.

In summary, these hallmarks lead to the conclusion that some paintings can indeed be categorised as more likely to be single-handed than others, due to their physical characteristics. However, this hardly allows for definite assertions and every painting should be considered on a case-by-case basis. In the spirit of Reinhart Koselleck, even if these aspects cannot tell us whether a painting was done by Rubens, they may well be able to tell us if a painting was definitely *not* done by Rubens. In terms of the autograph "core œuvre" that is crucial for defining the characteristics for single-handed attribution, it should be noted that all evidence points to the fact that the larger part of works originated from a collaborative working process. There is no reliable indication that Rubens would have purposefully created a separate body of autograph paintings. Consequently, any established characteristics should apply to "Rubens" as an enterprise, rather than "Rubens" the individual artist.

280 For a transcript of the whole letter to Balthasar Gerbier, in which the copy in Rubens's collection is discussed, see: Magurn 1955, p. 412.

281 The landscape around the Escorial was painted after Rubens's sketch in numerous versions. See the catalogue essay by Nils Büttner, in: Cat.-Dresden 2016, p. 226.