The portrait of a Lady with a Fan, given to the Museum by Mrs. Francis Neilson of Chicago, is an exceptional Rembrandt in its combination of elegant fashionableness with human appeal. The canvas is of generous size, just under fifty by forty inches, and the total impression is one of amplitude and dignity with a sustained delicacy and elaboration of detail. The treatment of the rich lace is in itself interesting to observe. Clearly the artist was genuinely engrossed, for he has analyzed the design as a lace-fancier would. Everything is clearly expressed in white, with the design redrawn for emphasis in sure and rapid brush strokes, light brown for the collar, black for the cuffs—for some excellent purpose concerning the distribution of the beholder’s attention, upon which the beholder may care to speculate.

The young lady herself, blondish and by no means ill-favored, impresses one as being almost free from the forbidding virtuousness or stuffy pride of purse so frequently present in Dutch portraits of the period. She belongs, perhaps, to a younger generation that takes its position in society for granted. At the same time Rembrandt has never set forth more brilliantly the rich panoply of peace and prosperity. The aforementioned lace is of the finest imported punto in aria, and sumptuous also is the black silk damask of which her dress is made. Diamonds sparkle on her fingers and at her ears. Pearls and rubies in abundance add luster to her silky throat and wrists. Her watch and key dangle from a complex of intricate gold chains, and her black feather fan is the accepted and essential costume accessory for fine Dutch ladies of her time.

From a worldly point of view Rembrandt’s first ten years in Amsterdam were the most successful of his life. He came from Leyden in 1632 at the age of twenty-six and was soon happily married to a charming and well-to-do girl. He received as many portrait commissions as he could fill. But in 1642 his wife died, and it was in that year also that he completed for the Civic Guard his famous, but for him disastrous, Night Watch.

It was especially during the first three of his years in Amsterdam that Rembrandt filled so many portrait orders. With his unrivaled skill and sense of theater, he was able to turn out the richest and handsomest portraits anyone had seen. Many of them were painted as pairs, and the resemblance to the sitters must have amazed all Amsterdam. Even the hands were closely studied for their individual qualities—a study by no means universal among great painters. In this connection it is interesting to compare the left hand of the young lady in this portrait dated 1633 with the Museum’s
A Young Man Rising from His Chair, by Rembrandt (1606-1669). In the Charles P. Taft Collection, Cincinnati. Photograph courtesy of the Cincinnati Institute of Fine Arts.
A Lady with a Fan, by Rembrandt, recently given to the Metropolitan Museum by Mrs. Francis Neilson. Possibly a companion picture to the one shown on the opposite page.
de Groot called them only "possibly" pendants, but by 1930 and 1931 Valentiner was publishing them as definitely a pair and as “proving in composition to be a well-balanced whole” when seen together in the Rembrandt exhibition at Detroit. Bredius in his recent monograph also accepts this close connection between the two portraits.

In many of Rembrandt’s early pairs of portraits the sitters look impassively outward as in the typical photographic portrait of a generation ago. In others there is a lively interchange of mood, and this is especially true where the artist shows the husband and wife together in a single picture, as in the delightful portrait of the preacher Anslo and his wife in the Berlin Museum or the dramatic Shipbuilder and His Wife at Buckingham Palace. There is indeed a close correspondence externally between our Lady with a Fan and the mercurial young gentleman rising from his chair, and it may be that they do indeed represent a married couple. One hopes that this is true, for they would constitute a most extraordinary couple from the point of view of portraiture, yet psychologically an entirely credible and rather fascinating one. A foppish husband with a none too interesting face springs into action under the impulsion of an idea. From his wife’s response, or lack of it, one assumes that this is only one of an endless succession of ideas, few of them interesting. Her chair is turned in his general direction, but her intelligent face is averted to the farthest limit of decorum. One would say that she has ideas of her own, but in order to hold on to them, and indeed in order to preserve her very sanity, she has been obliged to construct a barrier of stubborn inattention. But perhaps these remarks go too far in the direction of psychological conjecture when one considers the possibility that originally the portraits may not have constituted a pair after all.

The known history of our portrait of a Lady with a Fan extends backward little more than a century. It belonged to the Earl of Egremont and hung at Petworth, his estate in Sussex. In 1822 he lent it for an exhibition at the British Institution, of which he was one of the founders. The portrait continued in the family and was lent by Lord Leconfield in 1899 to the Royal Academy exhibition at Burlington House. It was still at Petworth in 1926. Two years later it was exhibited at Knoedler’s New York establishment in an exhibition of Twelve Masterpieces of Painting. Mrs. Neilson bought it in 1929 and lent it in 1930 to the Rembrandt exhibition at Detroit and five years later to the Rembrandt exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago.

The Lady with a Fan appears in critical studies of Rembrandt from the time of Waagen on. In 1897, when Bode published it in the second volume of his Complete Work (cat. no. 101 and p. 9), it was not yet known that the date 1633 was attached to the artist’s signature. Despite the lack of this clue, however, Bode noted a “similarity in size and conception” between our portrait and a portrait of that date, the Young Man Rising from His Chair, then in the Poutalès collection, now in the Cincinnati Museum (the Charles P. Taft Collection). “A married couple in my opinion,” remarked Bode. In the 1909 volume of Klassiker der Kunst, Valentiner accepted the portraits as “probably” companions. In 1916 Hofstede