REPORT ON AN EARLY REMBRANDT

By THEODORE ROUSSEAU, Jr., Associate Curator of Paintings

WITH TECHNICAL NOTES

By MURRAY PEASE, Associate Curator in Conservation and Technical Research

The cleaning of paintings by Rembrandt is a delicate matter, involving not only technical problems but the most deep-seated of aesthetic prejudices. Not so long ago when a well-known work by Rembrandt was shown after cleaning to the trustees of the Dutch museum to which it belongs, they were so shocked by the difference in color that they ordered it to be covered with a tinted varnish before it was exhibited again to the public. The change in a picture hitherto admired as a “golden” Rembrandt, when it suddenly appears to have a predominantly cool tonality, is indeed startling.

Just such a transformation is what has happened in the cleaning of the Museum’s Portrait of Saskia as Bellona. Presented with the Michael Friedsam collection in 1931, it had been questioned as by the hand of the master and was officially recorded as “attributed to Rembrandt.” Its general tonality was amber, the outlines of the figure of the young woman arrayed in what appeared to be intended as golden armor and holding a heavy bronze shield were vague, and the exact nature of the muddy brown background against which she stood difficult to distinguish. The colors, except for the brownish green feather and the ribbon across her breast, were all predominantly warm.

The cleaning has brought about two positive results, both of which can easily be observed in the color reproduction on the cover of this Bulletin. First, the removal of the tinted varnish shows, without any possibility of doubt, that the picture was conceived as a harmony of cool colors; the armor is white metal, the shield, with its magnificently executed Medusa head, is an iron gray metal, the ribbon and feather are cold blue-green, and the background is a cool gray. Second, the signature and date, previously doubted, were tested and shown to be an integral part of the original paint structure, which goes far to show that Rembrandt was the author. As the date is obviously correct and consistent with the style, the only other possibility is that Rembrandt allowed his signature to appear on the work of a pupil, which, considering the date and subject, is not likely.

Sixteen-thirty-three was the year Rembrandt became engaged to Saskia. At this time he painted her in many poses and costumes: in full face, profile, smiling, putting on her jewels, dressed as the goddess Flora. Among these the head-and-shoulders portrait which was in the collection of Lord Elgin at Broom Hall and is now in the collection of L. Bruyn at Spiez, is strikingly similar to ours in almost every detail. The position of the head, the features, the thoughtful, perhaps somewhat bovine look, the shadows around the left eye and the mouth are all the same. The only difference, judging from photographs, is the somewhat less vigorous modeling of the Elgin picture, but this is more than likely due to the fact that the photographs
showed it covered by darkened varnish. The head of the Flora in the National Gallery, London, and that of the Flora in the Hermitage, particularly the former, are also close to ours.

In addition to revealing the true tonality of the painting, cleaning has made easier the stylistic analysis of the picture. The outlines are now quite clear and the brushwork can be studied in detail. The Bellona is an interesting example of the transition between Rembrandt's earlier tight and detailed style and his later, freer and more vigorous work. The handling of the details of the armor, the jewels, and the skirt all belong to his earlier manner—although even here there is a certain freedom unlike the work of five years before. But the brushwork of the Medusa mask on the shield and of Saskia's face have a breadth and vigor which foreshadow the execution of the paintings of the late forties and fifties as we see it in the portrait of Hendrickje Stoffels in the Louvre (about 1652), the portrait of a painter in the Frick Collection (about 1648), or the head of Christ in the Metropolitan Museum (about 1659).

The picture as a whole, except for the head, is not the most remarkable of Rembrandt's portraits of Saskia. It is a curious mixture of portrait and still life. The head is living and has that strange, indefinable inner sensitivity which Rembrandt knew how to render. But a close analysis reveals it to be quite badly related to the rest of the figure, and the body, with its excessively narrow chest and shoulders and, if one follows the outline of the skirt under the shield, its gigantic hips, is not clearly defined. The enormous volume of hair is awkward and does not occur in any of the other portraits of Saskia, not even in the Hermitage Flora.

The armor itself is a disjointed combination of unrelated elements, the colletin and shoulder pieces being contemporary seventeenth-century field equipment and the breastplate an imitation of Roman armor, of which the skirt is also an adaptation. The magnificent Medusa head on the shield must have been based on a very finished drawing, possibly a copy of the famous example by Leonardo, whom we know Rembrandt admired very much. The form of the shield, indented on one side and round on the other, is most unusual, and the aimless way in which the top border ends on the left is an indication that it was probably an invention of the artist to fit his composition. This is confirmed to some extent by the fact that a shield with the same Medusa head occurs in a perfectly normal round shape in the Minerva formerly in the Charbonneau collection in Paris.

As one looks at this part of the picture, its angular, graceless quality leads one to believe that the artist first painted Saskia's head and then piled up a group of his studio trappings to make the body of the goddess of War. The inventory of his belongings lists a number of statues of Roman emperors, several suits of armor, and two shields, one described as "curious . . . in iron with figures, the work of Quentin the smith Massys," and the other as "with tresses." Were it not for the masterly execution of the shield and the details of the skirt, now seen more clearly than before, one might almost be tempted to suggest the hand of a pupil in these accessories.

Cleaning has thus revealed the Bellona to be, if not one of Rembrandt's great works, a good, representative example of his early style. Together with the recent and highly tasteful restoration of other Rembrandts in the Museum, among them the Man with a Magnifying Glass and the Lady with a Pink, this transformation helps to establish the Metropolitan as having one of the finest collections of the master's works, not only in quality but also in condition.

**TECHNICAL NOTES**

During the recent cleaning of Rembrandt's Portrait of Saskia as Bellona, perennial problems concerning picture varnish were so strikingly exemplified that a short review of them seems justified.

Most paintings require a surface coating, to maintain uniform gloss and reflection and to protect them against dirt and abrasion. Until recently only natural resin varnishes, such as mastic, dammar, and copal, were commonly accepted for this purpose. Their principal advantages are that they are easy to apply, have a high surface gloss, and are readily removed with
Rembrandt's Portrait of Saskia as Bellona, after cleaning. Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931
ordinary weak solvents. Their defects can be observed in any collection of old paintings that have not had recent technical attention.

One of the defects is rapid structural deterioration. In varying degrees, all these resins tend to become brittle and to shrink with age. On sound paint this produces nothing worse than the slight disfigurement of crackle lines, covering the surface with a faint haze of tiny reflected lights. But when there is poor attachment between paint and ground the traction of shrinking varnish causes paint flakes to curl up and sometimes to drop off. This is obviously a serious hazard.

Another characteristic defect is the deterioration of color. Within a few months after they are applied natural resin varnishes begin to turn yellowish brown, and they continue more or less indefinitely. They also become gradually more opaque, and extreme examples appear dark tarry brown over light areas and show a marked opaline cloudiness over dark passages. The resulting distortion of tone relations goes beyond the mere reduction of lights and lightening of darks; there is also a selective neutralizing of colors in the blue region of the spectrum, making them darker and duller than warm colors of corresponding intensity.

In the past, as these fugitive cosmetics were the only means of protecting the surface of a painting, people became used to their defects and made a virtue of necessity. As a result there were certain wide-spread misconceptions about the familiar yellowish tonality: that it was an age-induced modification of the paint itself, like the patina of ancient bronzes; that, if not part of the paint, it was an inseparable characteristic of "old masters"; that those who sought to remove it were, if not actually risking damage to the paint, at least brashly tampering with an accepted canon of aesthetics.

Rembrandt's Portrait of Saskia was covered by at least two layers of old, brittle varnish—enough to wreck a less craftsmanlike job of paint construction. Fortunately the paint was sound and had not been affected physically except for traces of crackle in some of the thin, dark passages.

Section of the armor skirt. The dark area, not yet cleaned, shows thick accumulations of varnish in the hollows where the paint flakes are out of line. About twice actual size. 

Detail of the lower edge. "Toned" varnish has been removed, showing both the original paint and the old losses filled in with gesso.
All the characteristic visual disfigurements, however, were grossly evident. The range of tone was diminished, many subtleties of detail and modeling were obscured, and the color design was distorted. Distinction between the yellow and white metals in the armor, for example, was scarcely perceptible. Moreover, at least one layer of the varnish had been deliberately toned. In the region near the lower edge this pigmentation reached the point of complete opacity, obliterating not only the white gesso filling in old losses (see ill. on opposite page) but all the adjacent original paint as well. Here, and in some other areas, every refinement of tone relation was totally invisible.

The preliminary laboratory examination provides a basis for certain generalities about the history of the varnish coatings. At some time, probably in the last century, the painting was relined. The relining is of the standard old-fashioned glue type, which usually involves application of considerable pressure during the setting of the adhesive. In this case, precautions were apparently not taken to protect the intricate variety of paint texture and high impasto that is so important an element of Rembrandt's technique. The result is a marked crushing and breaking up of the paint layers, with depressed moats surrounding the truncated peaks of isolated impasto and angular declivities where paint flakes have been forced out of plane. In all of these depressions the varnish collected thickly (adding the further defacement of irregularity in depth of discoloration, as the detail photograph shows). To produce this condition the varnish must have been applied after the relining operation, and it therefore follows that at some time, not much more or less than a hundred years ago, the painting was properly clean and was visible, as now, in its original clarity.

Removal of the recent varnish involved few technical problems. The varnish was immediately soluble in common solvents having no effect on the tough oil medium of Rembrandt's paint. It may be clarifying to say here that glazes, in the nineteenth-century sense of tinted varnish coatings, were not employed in the seventeenth century. Rembrandt's superb manipulation of transparent oil paint can properly be called glazing, but the result has none of the distressing vulnerability to varnish solvents that will plague the future conservators of much recent painting. Even an oil glaze, however, is vulnerable to repeated abrasion, and consequently the periods between necessary varnish replacement should be as long as possible. The new coating on this painting is of a synthetic resin having many times the life expectancy of natural varnish, combined with freedom from most of its dangerous and disfiguring faults.

The paint, except for the debased conformation already described, is beautifully preserved. There are a few minor losses—far less than the average for a painting over three hundred years old—but there is almost no general abrasion. Rembrandt's characteristic glazes, for instance the deep red in the tunic, are practically intact. A few transparent modeling strokes in the face have been somewhat thinned, but enough is left to make their reconstruction easy and certain. The signature and date have emerged with gratifying clarity and completeness as part of the original paint structure. The painting may now serve as valid evidence regarding the character and quality of Rembrandt's early technique.