

NEW DISCOVERY IN REMBRANDT RESEARCH

Pots Found in Rembrandt's Cesspit Prove to be True Rembrandt Relics

*The Rembrandt House Museum will present this new discovery in the exhibition **Rembrandt Laboratory: Rembrandt's Technique Unravalled** from 21 September 2019.*



Left: Two *grapen*, early seventeenth-century glazed pottery. City of Amsterdam, Archaeological Department, on long-term loan to The Rembrandt House Museum | Right: An archaeologist finds a tankard in Rembrandt's cesspit (Spring 1997).

We are all fascinated by 'the master's secret' – how Rembrandt made his artworks, what an average working day was like for him, and what materials he used. New research was recently undertaken into two pots ('grapen') discovered in 1997 in the cesspit in Rembrandt's former house – now the Rembrandt House Museum. One of the pots was found to contain remnants of a quartz ground: a mixture that *only* Rembrandt used to prepare his canvases before he started to paint. This makes it very likely that the pots were used by Rembrandt himself in his studio. Along with his funeral medallion (in the Rembrandt House Museum's collection), these are the only Rembrandt relics we know of.

'This is really fantastic news. We can now regard the pots as Rembrandt's. This makes them true relics. Rembrandt started to use a quartz ground as soon as he moved into the present-day Rembrandt House Museum, and as far as we know he was the only one who did. Financially and practically he probably found a mixture of quartz and clay convenient. As a rule, painters prepared their canvases with two layers of paint: first a layer of red ochre to even out the texture of the canvas, followed by a layer of grey paint containing lead white. The pigments needed for this made it an expensive process, and it took a long time before everything was dry. Quartz was not only more affordable and could be used as the ground for a painting in one layer, a quartz ground also kept the canvas flexible. Extremely useful for large sizes.'

- Leonore van Sloten, Curator, The Rembrandt House Museum

WHAT WERE THESE *GRAPEN* USED FOR?

In the seventeenth century *grapen* were used for cooking. But – where necessary – they were also used for other purposes. We see this in scenes of painters' workshops, in which they are sometimes being used as brush holders. Evidently painters used household objects that were readily to hand in their studios.

THE RESEARCH STEP-BY-STEP

In 1997 an archaeological survey was undertaken in the cesspit in the inner courtyard of the Rembrandt House Museum. Two cooking pots were found during the excavations, one with a white layer on the inside and one with a beige layer. These layers were subjected to chemical analysis. The white layer in one pot proved to be a chalky substance that painters used to prepare wooden panels. The only thing that the beige layer told us was that it contained some lead.

Recent research into the one-handled pot with the beige layer, however, has produced more results: aside from the presence of tiny traces of lead, there is a mixture of ground quartz (sand), which contains some earth pigments and chalk.

This combination matches the quartz ground which Karin Groen (one of the senior Rembrandt researchers at the then Centraal Laboratorium) discovered in Rembrandt's paintings. Her research shows that Rembrandt only started to use a quartz ground for his paintings on canvas during the time that he lived and worked in Jodenbreestraat, in the present-day Rembrandt House Museum. This ground layer was not used by other painters in the seventeenth century; it was only used in Rembrandt's workshop.

NEW TECHNIQUES

Petria Noble, head of the Rijksmuseum's restoration workshop, is closely involved with a number of Rembrandt research projects, including the recent research into the two pots from Rembrandt's cesspit. Noble: 'Along with Luc Megens from the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands we used XRD analysis of flakes taken from the one-handled pot. This revealed that they contained quartz, clay minerals and very little chalk. In collaboration with Katrien Keune (Rijksmuseum), we examined tiny samples of the remnants in the pot with an electron microscope (SEM-EDX). It became clear that the substance bore a strong resemblance to the quartz ground in paint samples from *The Night Watch*.' There is a little chalk in the other pot with the two handles, and a small amount of lead as a reaction product from the pot's glaze.

REMBRANDT LABORATORY

The Rembrandt House Museum will present this new discovery in *Rembrandt Laboratory: Rembrandt's Technique Unravelling*. In the autumn of 2019 the museum will be creating a laboratory-like setting. Six cases will highlight new insights into Rembrandt's paintings, discoveries from his cesspit, and his prints and drawings. In the exhibition visitors will step into the scientists' shoes. How did Rembrandt make his paintings, etchings and drawings? And how do we research that today? Think about the dilemmas faced by researchers and restorers in the place where Rembrandt made his works of art almost four hundred years ago. Especially for young researchers there are twelve places in the exhibition marked with a 'Rembrandt Junior Lab' logo, where there is something to do, to see or to learn for children from the age of six.

The *Rembrandt Laboratory: Rembrandt's Technique Unravelling* runs from 21 September 2019 to 16 February 2020 in the Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam.



This exhibition is staged in collaboration with the Rijksmuseum, the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands | Rijkserfgoed Laboratorium, the University of Amsterdam and Delft Technical University (united in NICAS), the City of Amsterdam Monuments and Archaeology Department, the RKD – Netherlands Institute for Art History, the Watermark Identification in Rembrandt's Etchings Project (WIRE) and independent researchers.



Rembrandt and the Golden Age 2019

This year marks the 350th anniversary of the death of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669). Every reason to celebrate the artist and his work and turn the spotlight on his contemporaries and the seventeenth century. It all comes together in the theme year Rembrandt and the Golden Age, with many exhibitions and activities throughout the Netherlands.

In 2019 NBTC Holland Marketing, the Fries Museum, the Mauritshuis, The Rembrandt House Museum, the Rijksmuseum, Museum De Lakenhal, the Jewish Cultural Quarter, Amsterdam City Archives, Museum Prinsenhof Delft, Het Scheepvaartmuseum and the Amsterdam Museum are collaborating with cities including Amsterdam, Delft, The Hague, Dordrecht, Enkhuizen, Haarlem, Hoorn, Leiden and Middelburg under the title *Rembrandt and the Golden Age 2019*.

Note for editors, not for publication:

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Opening times: daily from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

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