



A Calculated Little Riot? The Restoration of Rembrandt's *Syndics*: A Nineteen-Thirties Cleaning Controversy

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In the nineteenth century, the art world in many European countries, France, England and Germany among them, was shaken by what were known as cleaning controversies – public debates about the cleaning of old master paintings in national collections that were fought out in the press.¹ Many of these debates were instigated or fuelled by artists, but the exact mechanisms behind them have not yet been examined in an international context.² The Netherlands did not experience its first controversy of this kind until the first decades of the twentieth century, when lengthy discussions about the treatment of Frans Hals's large group portraits of civic guard companies and governors of institutions featured in newspapers in Haarlem between 1909 and 1927.³ Paintings by Dutch seventeenth-century artists like Hals and Rembrandt van Rijn have been the subject of cleaning controversies relatively often, in the Netherlands and beyond, because it was generally believed that these artists had used not only oil paint, but also resinous glazes and intermediate varnish layers that dissolve more easily than oil paint.⁴ This belief was strengthened by the popular and often reprinted book *Malmaterial und seine Verwendung im Bilde* by the German artist and restorer Max Doerner (1870-1939).⁵ A complicating factor was that during the nineteenth century and the early

< Fig. 1
REMBRANDT VAN RIJN, *The Sampling Officials of the Amsterdam Drapers' Guild*, known as 'The Syndics', 1662. Oil on canvas, 191.5 x 279 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. SK-C-6. On loan from the City of Amsterdam.

twentieth, paintings by Rembrandt and Frans Hals were especially valued for their golden glow – an aspect of their work caused at least as much by the build-up of multiple layers of old yellowed varnishes as by their painting technique. Shortly after the Haarlem debate, there was a second Dutch cleaning controversy, centring this time on Rembrandt's *Syndics*. The painting was owned by the City of Amsterdam, but had been exhibited in the Rijksmuseum since the beginning of the nineteenth century (fig. 1). In this article the author investigates why a cleaning controversy broke out during the autumn and winter of 1932 about a restoration treatment that had taken place nearly two and a half years earlier, the role Amsterdam artists played in this debate, and how Rijksmuseum director Frederik Schmidt-Degener (1881-1941) dealt with the ensuing challenges (fig. 2).

November 1929: The Restoration

When Schmidt-Degener gave the order to restore *The Syndics* in November 1929, the painting already had a long history of lifting paint. In 1911 this issue had been brought to the attention of the Committee of Supervision and Advice for the Paintings of the City of Amsterdam (the Committee of Supervision), by one of its members, the art historian



Fig. 2
Frederik Schmidt-
Degener at his desk,
1921. Unknown
photographer.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. HA-0025221.

Fig. 3
Photograph of *The
Syndics* (fig. 1) taken
by Adolphe Braun &
Cie, before 1880.
Rijksmuseum
conservation files.

and Rembrandt connoisseur Abraham Bredius (1855-1946).⁶ Earlier that year, Bredius had asked the Hague restorer Carel Frederik Louis de Wild (1870-1922) to advise on the urgency of the need to treat *The Syndics*: 'Would you mind telling me what you think of *The Syndics*? Would lining it now not be wiser than waiting any longer? What good is it if the canvas is still sound, when the paint is starting to lift?'⁷ Although we do not have De Wild's answer, Bredius used it to call for an extra committee meeting to discuss the state of *The Syndics*.⁸ However, the members' initial alarm about the painting's condition was allayed when they compared it with an old photograph (fig. 3) taken around 1875 when the Rijksmuseum was still located in the Trippenhuys. It is likely that this photograph was regarded as a failure when it was taken. The German photographer Adolphe Braun (1812-1877) had not been allowed to take the painting outside and had had



Fig. 4
 Willem Fredrik
 Cornelis Greebe
 at work, 1920.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 inv. no. HA-0024775.



to do what he could with the lighting conditions in the Trippenhuys, which were far from ideal.⁹ Strong raking light had resulted in a photograph showing very little detail apart from the lightest areas, such as the faces, hands, collars and book. More importantly for the Committee of Supervision in 1911, and still relevant today, the raking light photograph also showed large areas of paint that had lifted along the cracks in the paint layers. When the committee members compared the photograph with the painting, their reaction was one of relief. They thought that although the condition of the painting was not good, it had remained unchanged for more than three decades and no immediate action was needed. The only reason the raised paint had drawn attention in 1911 was because the painting had been hung in raking light.¹⁰ After 1911, the Committee of Supervision regularly compared *The Syndics* with the Braun photograph to see if its condition remained stable. The varnish was subjected to some superficial treatments over the next

few years: in 1913 the painting was washed (presumably with water), in 1917 the varnish was regenerated and in 1924 'some varnish' was removed.¹¹

None of these treatments addressed the problem of the raised paint, however, and in 1929 it was decided that structural treatment was needed after all. In November, Rijksmuseum restorer Willem Fredrik Cornelis Greebe (1865-1946; fig. 4) carried out a wax-resin lining.¹² This method, a nineteenth-century Dutch invention, was used quite often, if not as a matter of course, to consolidate loose paint and apply a second canvas behind the original to strengthen it.¹³ The lining process involved applying a warm mixture of melted beeswax, colophony and Venetian Turpentine to the reverse of a painting and ironing it in with heated irons. After the lining procedure, *The Syndics* was treated by Pieter Nicolaas Bakker (1882-1940; fig. 5). Unlike Greebe, Bakker had an artist's background and was responsible for the aesthetic treatment of paintings.¹⁴ When he treated *The Syndics* he only removed the upper part of the multiple



Fig. 5
Pieter Nicolaas
Bakker at work, 1920.
Photographic
Department.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. HA-0024776.

varnish layers covering the painting. The lining and varnish reduction took a mere three weeks.¹⁵ Although supervised by a sub-committee of the Committee of Supervision, it was done with very little publicity, as usual in those days.¹⁶

The sole public mention of the treatment was a newspaper article by Frans Hals Museum director Gerrit David Gratama (1874-1965), published a few weeks after the treatment in January 1930.¹⁷ His detailed – and favourable – account clearly shows that he had either visited the studio during the treatment or had talked at length with those involved. He described the lining process and the removal of excess lining adhesive, wax and copaiba balsam from the front, emphasizing that the multiple varnish layers beneath were left untouched.¹⁸ In other words, although the disfiguring yellow tone of the varnish layers was reduced, there had never been any risk of removing the thin top layers of glazing paint that Rembrandt was believed to have used. After the long-drawn-out cleaning controversy in Haarlem, Gratama may have hoped to prevent another one.

Ironically, it had the effect of angering at least one person: Rijksmuseum restorer Bakker resented the fact that his colleague Greebe was named and praised in the article, whereas his own name was not mentioned.

There was also criticism of the treatment, but not in public at this point. Minutes of the monthly meetings of the voting members of the Amsterdam artist's society *Arti et Amicitiae* in the first months of 1930 reveal strongly opposing opinions on *The Syndics'* 'new' appearance.¹⁹ In the meeting of 28 January 1930 the artist Salomon Garf (1879-1943) declared that the painting had 'lost a very great deal'.²⁰ Exactly what Garf thought the painting had lost was not recorded. On behalf of the four *Arti* members who were also part of the Amsterdam Committee of Supervision, Georg Rueter strongly opposed all criticism. Not all *Arti* members voiced criticism.²¹ Marinus van Raalte (1873-1944) thought the painting was now 'enchantingly beautiful' and declared that 'he could not abide dirty paintings'.²² The *Arti* members decided to send a delegation

to the Rijksmuseum to have a look. They reported back in the next meeting: the painting looked unharmed and Garf's complaints were unfounded.²³ This conclusion provoked even more debate among the members. From the discussions that took place in the *Arti* meetings during this period, it becomes apparent that it was not so much the appearance of *The Syndics* that bothered most members, but the fact that they had not been involved in – had not even been informed of – the treatment. In the past, artists had regularly been called in to restore old master paintings, particularly in the retouching phase. They considered this the most important part of a treatment, for which their knowledge of the old masters was essential.²⁴

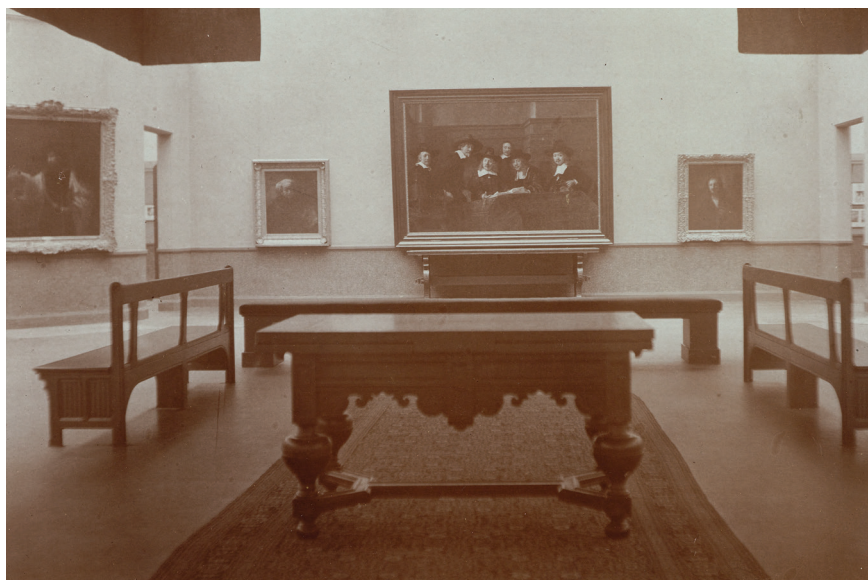
July 1932: The Exhibition

After these internal debates at *Arti*, nothing more was heard about the treatment of *The Syndics* for over two years. Between 11 June and 4 September 1932, the Rijksmuseum hosted a Rembrandt exhibition to commemorate the three hundredth anniversary of the University of

Amsterdam. *The Syndics* was moved from its regular place in the galleries to the newly renovated Eastern Courtyard (fig. 6). Director Schmidt-Degener would later blame this temporary relocation to a place with stronger light and other Rembrandt paintings with varnish that was even more yellow, for the ensuing controversy.²⁵ During the monthly meeting at *Arti et Amicitiae* on 31 May 1932, Félicien Bobeldijk (1876-1964) mentioned the grey appearance of *The Syndics*.²⁶ Herbert van der Poll (1877-1963), according to the minutes, promptly reacted to Bobeldijk's statement with a bitter outcry through which the old resentment at not being consulted resonates:

It [having paintings restored] is simply vanity on the part of museum directors ... The speaker would rather a painting slowly perished than be ruined in this manner. Action should only be taken if the paint comes off the canvas. The speaker believes it is unheard of for the advice of artists not to be sought in the case of a work of great value. It goes without saying that artists should be present during a treatment.²⁷

Fig. 6
Photograph of
The Syndics (fig. 1)
in the Rembrandt
exhibition, 1932.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum, inv. no.
RMA-SSA-F-00492-1.



The *Arti* members agreed that the upcoming Rembrandt exhibition provided a good opportunity to examine *The Syndics* again. The discussion was revisited at the next meeting, when some of the strongest adversaries of restoration in general made themselves heard.²⁸ Lizzy Ansingh (1875-1959), *Arti*'s first female board member, stated that 'restoration is pernicious', while one of Holland's foremost painters of that moment, Jan Sluijters (1881-1957), said that he did not care 'how a painting looked in Rembrandt's day, what matters is how it looks now'.²⁹ Their criticism notwithstanding, there seems to have been no intention to make their opinions public. This changed, however, at the September meeting, when Benjamin Prins (1860-1934) suggested inviting Schmidt-Degener to join their ranks as an *Arti* member, to honour him for the success of the Rembrandt exhibition.³⁰ This caused a storm of protest, focusing on the director's role in restorations at the Rijksmuseum. Again, *The Syndics* was cited as example of what can go wrong during restoration. Concerns about future treatment of Rembrandt's *Jewish Bride* and *Night Watch* prevailed. The chair took up the matter with *Arti*'s Board.

The Board drafted a letter, which was presented to the voting members of *Arti* at the October meeting.³¹ It stressed the importance of getting more painters – specifically more *Arti* members – on the Amsterdam Committee of Supervision. Painters knew best how the old masters had started their work, and how they had finished it, and this knowledge was essential to good restoration. *The Syndics* was presented as an example. The value of the painting, the letter claimed, had been greatly reduced because its unity and harmony had been lost. And there had been complications during the treatment that could easily have been avoided. The draft letter was approved by the members and sent to the Amsterdam mayor and aldermen on 10 November 1932.

December 1932: The Fight – Artists

The letter was forwarded to Schmidt-Degener for a formal reply.³² On 25 November 1932, the director sent a lengthy answer to Emanuel Boekman (1889-1940; fig. 7), Amsterdam alderman of Education and Art since 1931 and *ex officio* also chair of the Committee of Supervision. Schmidt-Degener repeated his 1929 account of the treatment, and referred to Gratama's positive article. He recalled the group of *Arti* delegates who had seen the painting in the spring of 1930 and given their approval afterwards, and he strongly denied that there had been complications during the lining process, as the letter suggested. Schmidt-Degener had no objections to *Arti*'s request for more artists on the Committee of Supervision, proposing Bobeldijk and Gratama as likely candidates. Gratama, in particular, was a diplomatic choice, because he was an artist as well as director of the Frans Hals Museum and a strong opponent of paintings covered with multiple layers of yellow varnish. However, Schmidt-Degener suggested that the Committee would truly benefit from the addition of Angenetis Martin de Wild (1899-1969), Carel de Wild's nephew. De Wild was a restorer and a chemist, who had 'made the study of oils and varnishes his life's work'.³³ The director ended his letter by stressing that he did not think *The Syndics* was damaged; he believed the painting was now 'more impressive and harmonious than ever'.³⁴

The day after Schmidt-Degener's reply to Boekman, the Committee of Supervision – of which Schmidt-Degener and Boekman were both members – held its annual meeting. One of the items on the agenda was the *Arti* letter. The minutes show just how divided opinions on the desirability of yellow varnish on a painting were, even among the committee members.³⁵ Former Rijksmuseum



Fig. 7
Emanuel Boekman
at his desk, 1937.
Unknown
photographer.
National Archives/
Spaarnestad
Collection.

director B.W.F. van Riemsdijk, very conservative in all matters concerning restoration, stated that the whites in *The Syndics* were too white and that he had been promised in 1930 that this was going to be rectified. Schmidt-Degener answered that he regarded 'the use of coloured varnishes as dangerous and a betrayal of the painting'.³⁶ The committee also accepted two new members: the painter Félicien Bobeldijk and the chemist and restorer Martin de Wild. This maintained the balance of artists and non-artists. De Wild was the first restorer on the committee since its establishment in 1878, although he was chosen first and foremost for his skills as a chemist.

This would have been the end of the matter, had it not been for the Amsterdam city councillor Liede Tilanus (1871-1953). Alarmed by the statements in the *Arti* letter regarding *The Syndics*' loss of value and complications during treatment, she asked alderman Boekman for an 'interpellation', a formal request for clarification.³⁷ In the next few days several newspapers took up the story and published all or part of the original *Arti* letter. The daily *De Telegraaf* took the story a step further, however, printing a 'technical exposé' by the painter Thé Lau (1889-1958).³⁸ Like many of his contemporaries, Lau

mistakenly believed that Rembrandt painted with a varnish-containing paint that would dissolve easily in the solvents used by restorers, as described so vividly in Doerner's *Malmaterial und seine Verwendung im Bilde*.³⁹ Lau advocated greater transparency in the decision-making processes before and during the restoration of public art works, and asked that treatment documentation in the form of written reports and photographs should be made available to the public. These requests were quite modern for their time. But *De Telegraaf* focused on the more sensational aspects of the article with the headlines 'Are The Syndics ruined?' and 'Restoration a failure'.⁴⁰

De Telegraaf printed an official reply by Schmidt-Degener.⁴¹ The director rejected Lau's criticism of the treatment and emphasized again that only the upper layers of varnish had been removed and no original paint had been touched, let alone removed. Meanwhile, several other newspapers printed not only Schmidt-Degener's letter (or parts of it), but also other testimonials – Boekman, for example, informed them that the *Arti* members had formally approved the treatment in 1930 – and they concluded that Lau's assertions about the damage to *The Syndics*, must be considered as 'slightly exaggerated'.⁴² *De Telegraaf* however, was not satisfied and canvassed numerous artists, asking a single question: 'Has permanent damage been caused by the restoration of *The Syndics*?' The replies from twenty-three artists were printed in four instalments between 28 December 1932 and 9 January 1933.⁴³ Sixteen were outspokenly critical, four were neutral and only three were positive. The negative comments show how emotionally charged the subject was. Ansingh wrote one line: '*The Syndics* have not survived their operation.'⁴⁴ Cees Bolding (1897-1979) stated that 'the great wonder that touched me has been lost',⁴⁵ while Dirk Nanninga

(1868-1954) said 'all the magic seemed to have left the painting ... It appears to me that it is impossible to restore Rembrandt's late paintings well without causing disasters'.⁴⁶

January 1933: The Fight – Restorers

Almost as an afterthought, *De Telegraaf* asked five restorers the same question. Among them were Bakker and Greebe, who had been responsible for the treatment of the painting in November 1929. Their answers, however, would not appear in print. Of the remaining three restorers, two were quite critical, although less emotional than many of the artists.⁴⁷ Bernardus Johannes van Bommel (1868-1959) wrote that the painting should have been cleaned first and not lined until afterwards, instead of the other way around. To counter the loss of balance in the colours he suggested tempering the whites with a yellow varnish, which could even be made from the varnish that had been removed once it had been purified. The response from Johannes Albertus Hesterman Jr (1877-1955) was much shorter but more adverse. He was certain that the cleaning had been taken too far. 'Because with an artwork all that matters is its spiritual appearance and not its material condition, I consider the harm that has been done to be permanent'.⁴⁸ The Rotterdam restorer Hendrik Gerardus Luitwieler (1876-1953), however, wrote a lengthy, well-informed and positive review.⁴⁹ Luitwieler knew Schmidt-Degener well; he had worked for Museum Boijmans in Rotterdam as a restorer, when Schmidt-Degener was its director.

The replies from the Rijksmuseum restorers Bakker and Greebe were never printed, but copies have been kept in the Rijksmuseum archive.⁵⁰ In 1933 neither restorer still worked for the Rijksmuseum; Greebe had retired on 1 August 1930 and Bakker had left the museum that same year, presumably for health reasons. Greebe wrote to

De Telegraaf that 'restorers of paintings, whether in civil service or private, generally do not talk about their work. ... The purpose of this affair seems to be revenge. But I can say that there were no complications during lining'.⁵¹ It was never printed, probably because it was not regarded as sensational enough.

The six-page letter Bakker wrote is of a very different nature: it is a spiteful account, full of repressed anger and resentment towards Schmidt-Degener. Bakker began by explaining his ideas about Rembrandt's painting technique. Like Lau and so many others, he assumed that Rembrandt had painted in the same way as he himself had probably been taught: using a multiple-layered system of oil paint alternated with thin coatings of varnish made of a resin dissolved in turpentine. The final phase of Rembrandt's paintings – he said – was constructed by putting on even more thin varnish layers, followed by a final layer of thick varnish. Bakker assumed that in succeeding centuries new varnishes had been added to reform the older varnish layers which became cracked and 'blind' (opaque) over time. He wrote that in 1929 he cleaned off all the old layers of varnish from *The Syndics*, including Rembrandt's final and thus original varnish layer. He had done this against his will; the director refused to listen to his protests. But there was more. After he had removed the original varnish layer, Schmidt-Degener had made him take off every original glaze on the painting. Finally, he had made Bakker work on a Sunday, so as to avoid unwanted visitors. On that day he got Bakker to remove some original red brush strokes from the tablecloth. 'If only the director had listened to me more as a professional and seen me less as a subordinate who only had to carry out the will of his superiors, then none of this would have happened'.⁵²

Perhaps because Bakker's letter was so vehement, *De Telegraaf* sent it to Schmidt-Degener first.⁵³ In his answer

the director described Bakker as a 'complainer, who feels misunderstood'.⁵⁴ Schmidt-Degener refused to respond to such obvious and blatant lies. He threatened *De Telegraaf* that if they published Bakker's letter, he would be forced to file a complaint for defamation, both for natural justice and for his own reputation. *De Telegraaf* did not publish the letter.

February 1933:

The Interpellation

Although it was not published, Bakker's letter was discussed by the Amsterdam Committee of Supervision at an extra meeting on 26 January 1933. This meeting was devoted to the upcoming interpellation between committee chair and alderman Boekman and councillor Tilanus.⁵⁵ During this meeting it became clear that the various members held wildly differing views of *The Syndics* affair. Bobeldijk, one of the new members, proved to be one of the fiercest critics of the treatment. On the other hand, De Wild, also a newcomer, who had officially examined *The Syndics* shortly before, declared that the lining had been done very well and that the original paint layers were untouched. Schmidt-Degener gave a detailed account of Bakker's past at the Rijksmuseum, a past he believed had led to his libellous letter. One of the incidents Schmidt-Degener described was when Bakker furiously confronted the director with Gratama's newspaper article in January 1930, because he was not mentioned in it. During that confrontation he had called the treatment of *The Syndics* 'the best work of his life'.⁵⁶ Schmidt-Degener denied the accusations in Bakker's letter concerning the removal of Rembrandt's original varnish layers and glaze. As to the supposed removal of original red brushstrokes from the tablecloth, this was 'too foolish even to deny'.⁵⁷ Apart from a general dissatisfaction with Bakker as an employee, Schmidt-Degener described two critical inci-

dents. In 1924 he had caught Bakker smoking a pipe among flammable solvents, while in 1930 he found him doing extensive private work in Rijksmuseum time. After the last incident Bakker requested a medical examination before Schmidt-Degener had a chance to fire him. He was declared unfit for work, thus avoiding dismissal. The committee meeting ended with several clear statements for chairman Boekman, with which he would be able to answer councillor Tilanus at the upcoming interpellation.

The interpellation took place on Friday, 3 February 1933. While the whole controversy up to that point had largely been confined to the pages of *De Telegraaf*, many newspapers covered the interpellation at first hand.⁵⁸ Taken together, these accounts provide an interesting report of the afternoon. It is clear that Tilanus used Bakker's unpublished letter as her strongest weapon, but Boekman had the upper hand in the debate. At times he even made fun of Tilanus.⁵⁹ The report by De Wild, who was cited as an authority in the field, clearly added considerable weight to Boekman's arguments.⁶⁰ It was a strong and satisfactory end to the whole controversy. Or, as one of the newspapers put it: the whole affair was 'nothing more than a calculated little riot by *De Telegraaf* anyway'.⁶¹

July 1933:

The Conclusion

Several months later, when Schmidt-Degener celebrated his twenty-fifth anniversary as museum director on 15 July 1933, *The Syndics* cleaning controversy had already become a footnote in his impressive career.⁶² The whole affair seemed to have been the result of the changing role of artists in a world where they were losing authority as connoisseurs of old master painting techniques. Their knowledge was being superseded by that of museum directors and curators who had studied art history, as well as by

the emerging profession of paintings restorers and the unique expertise of someone like Martin de Wild with his combined skills of restoration and chemistry. Before the nineteenth century, artists and former artists had generally been responsible for the treatment of paintings, especially the retouching phase, which they regarded as the most significant. Their knowledge of the old masters had been essential, but now the time had come when they were no longer needed, and were not even consulted for their expertise.

The fight might well have remained local, had not *De Telegraaf* seen an opportunity to stir up trouble and made it a national affair. Schmidt-Degener handled the controversy intelligently by providing the press and others involved with satisfactory information and taking a firm stand about the publication of Bakker's libellous letter. His move to get De Wild on to the Amsterdam Committee of Supervision was a shrewd one, asserting the grow-

ing importance of scientific research in the field of restoration. De Wild's authority, as set out by Boekman during the interpellation and reported by the journalists in the subsequent newspaper articles, is undeniable. If Schmidt-Degener can be accused of any misjudgement, it is his failure to share information about the restoration of *The Syndics* with the press and the public at large while the work was going on. Might a more open, public approach to the restoration of *The Syndics* have caused less of a furore? Perhaps, but such openness would have flown in the face of Dutch practice at that time. When *The Night Watch* was restored twenty years later, the Rijksmuseum and the Amsterdam Committee of Supervision seemed to have learned from this event and were much more open about the treatment towards the press and the public. This was evidently a successful approach, because there was no cleaning controversy about the treatment of this most famous of Rembrandt's paintings.

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the reason why a cleaning controversy about the restoration of Rembrandt's *Syndics* broke out nearly two and a half years after the work was completed in 1929 and how Rijksmuseum director Frederik Schmidt-Degener dealt with the challenges. Initiated by local artists from the Amsterdam artist society *Arti et Amicitiae*, the controversy was fuelled by provocative questionnaires circulated among artists and restorers by the daily *De Telegraaf*. A vindictive letter by Rijksmuseum restorer Pieter Bakker, who restored *The Syndics* in 1929, but left the museum on mental health grounds in 1930, fanned the flames still further, even though it was not published in the end. This cleaning controversy was not unique; arguments about the supposed dangers of cleaning paintings were fought out in public in European countries throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. After a cleaning controversy about Frans Hals paintings in Haarlem – which dragged on between 1909 and 1927 – *The Syndics* cleaning controversy was the second in the Netherlands. It was also the last. This previously unexplored episode in the Rijksmuseum's conservation history carries a lesson in open communication regarding the restoration of cultural heritage. It is a lesson that is still valid today.

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- 1 Sheldon Keck, 'Some Picture Cleaning Controversies: Past and Present', *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 23 (1984), no. 2, pp. 73-87; reproduced in David Bomford and Mark Leonard (eds.), *Issues in the Conservation of Paintings*, Los Angeles 2004, pp. 426-40.
 - 2 Susanna Avery-Quash, 'The Art of Conservation II: Sir Charles Eastlake and Conservation at the National Gallery, London', *The Burlington Magazine* 157, 1353 (2015), pp. 846-54.
 - 3 Mireille te Marvelde, Liesbeth Abraham, Herman van Putten and Michiel Franken, 'Past Treatments with a View to the Future: Early 20th-Century Restoration and Scientific Investigation of the Eight Group Portraits by Frans Hals in Haarlem', in Janet Bridgland (ed.), *ICOM-CC 18th Triennial Conference Preprints, Copenhagen, 4-8 September 2017*, Paris (International Council of Museums), article 1909. A more comprehensive publication on this project is forthcoming.
 - 4 Since the last decades of the twentieth century, such theories have been conclusively disproved by scholars and scientists from the Rembrandt Research Project, the National Gallery in London and elsewhere. Karin Groen, *Paintings in the Laboratory: Scientific Examination for Art History and Conservation*, London 2014, esp. chapters 2 and 3; Ernst van de Wetering, *Rembrandt: The Painter at Work*, Amsterdam 2000, esp. chapters 8 and 9; David Bomford et al., *Art in the Making: Rembrandt*, London 1988 (reprinted 1991), pp. 26-29.
 - 5 First published in 1921, the book has been through many revisions and editions, evidence of its popularity, right up to the present day. It has been widely translated. The first Dutch translation appeared in 1977: *Schilderkunst. Materiaal en Techniek*.
 - 6 The other members of the Commissie van Toezicht en Advies voor de Schilderijen der Gemeente Amsterdam in 1911 were A. Roëll (1864-1940, Amsterdam's mayor and committee chair), J.A. Sillem (1840-1912, politician and art connoisseur), C. Hofstede de Groot (1863-1930, art connoisseur and collector), C.G. 't Hooft (1866-1936, artist and curator of Museum Fodor), B.W.F. van Riemsdijk (1850-1942, former Rijksmuseum director), A. Allebé (1838-1927, artist), C.R.H. Spoor (1867-1928, artist), J.F.M. Sterck (1859-1941, historian), N. van der Waay (1855-1936, artist) and J. Six (1857-1926, art historian and secretary of the committee). The committee oversaw the care of the paintings owned by the City of Amsterdam between 1878 and 1973 and met annually. A sub-committee, called the Committee of Preparation [Commissie ter Voorbereiding] consisting of the artist members, inspected all paintings and decided which needed treatment. Femke Hametman, 'Restauratiebeleid in de 19de eeuw. De instelling van een "Commissie van Toezicht en Advies op de schilderijen der gemeente Amsterdam" in 1878', *Cr 1* (2000), no. 3, pp. 20-27.
 - 7 'Wilt U mij nu ook eens zeggen wat U van de Staalmeesters denkt. Is nu verdoeken toch niet wijzer dan nog langer wachten? – Wat helpt t als het doek nog stevig is – wanneer de verf begint op te staan.' [original underlining] The Hague, RKD – Netherlands Institute for Art History, C.F.L. de Wild Sr Archive, inv. no. NL-HARKD.0227. Box 1, file B. The letter is undated but is kept with other letters dating from 1911. On Carel de Wild, see Esther van Duijn and Mireille te Marvelde, 'The Art of Conservation VII: Hopman and De Wild. The Historical Importance of Two Dutch Families of Restorers', *The Burlington Magazine* 158, 1363 (2016), pp. 812-23.
 - 8 Amsterdam City Archives, Commissie van Toezicht en Advies voor de Schilderijen der Gemeente Amsterdam, archive no. 459, inv. no. 2. The meeting took place on 18 February 1911. The minutes suggest that Carel de Wild had advised Bredius that the painting needed to be lined.
 - 9 Saskia Asser and Robert Verhoogt, 'Photogrammen in roode omslagen. Adolphe Braun & Cie in het Rijksmuseum', in Nelke Bartelings et al. (eds.), *Beelden in veelvoud. De vermenigvuldiging van het beeld in prentkunst en fotografie*, Leiden 2002 (*Leids Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, vol. 12), pp. 339-69, esp. 350-52.

- 10 Haarlem, North Holland Archives (NHA), 476. Rijksmuseum en rechtsvoorgangers te Amsterdam 1807-1945, inv. no. 451, report of the sub-committee for city paintings, written in May 1911.
- 11 Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, conservation file SK-C-6.
- 12 Greebe was a liner [verdoeker]: he was responsible for the structural treatment of paintings. Esther van Duijn, 'Changing Views, Altering Practices: A Brief Overview of Nearly Two Hundred Years of Painting Conservation at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam', Janet Bridgland (ed.), *ICOM-CC 18th Triennial Conference Preprints, Copenhagen, 4-8 September 2017*, Paris (ICOM-CC), pp. 1-7.
- 13 Van Duijn and Te Marvelde 2016 (note 7).
- 14 Van Duijn 2017 (note 12), pp. 3, 4.
- 15 The treatment was not documented by the restorers; it was director Schmidt-Degener who wrote an account in the 1929 Annual Report (*Verslagen omtrent 's Rijks verzamelingen van geschiedenis en kunst*, Amsterdam 1929, p. 10). A similar report was written by the Committee of Supervision.
- 16 In 1929 the members of the Committee of Supervision were T.M. Ketelaar (1864-1936, alderman and chair of the Committee), C. Baard (1870-1946, Director of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam), B.W.F. van Riemsdijk, F. Schmidt-Degener, C.G. 't Hooft, J.F.M. Sterck, N. van der Waay, H.J. Wolter (1873-1952, artist), G. Rueter (1875-1966, artist and secretary of the Committee), H. van Dam van Isselt (1895-1972, Amsterdam politician and second secretary of the Committee). The sub-committee was made up of the artist members Rueter, 't Hooft and Van der Waay.
- 17 The article first appeared in the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* (NRC), but was picked up by other newspapers, including *Het Vaderland*, 25 January 1930; *Het Centrum*, 28 January 1930; *De Limburger Koerier*, 8 February 1930 and *The Sumatra Post*, 24 February 1930.
- 18 His information is more detailed than Schmidt-Degener's account for the Annual Report (note 15). Copaiba balsam is an oleo-resin, a naturally occurring mixture of oil and resin; it is brown and remains sticky after application.
- 19 Amsterdam, Archive of *Maatschappij Arti et Amicitiae* (Arti Archive), copybook with minutes of the 1742nd meeting on 28 January 1930 (pp. 23-25), of the 1743rd meeting on 25 February 1930 (pp. 29-30) and of the 1744th meeting on 25 March 1930 (pp. 36-37).
- 20 'zeer veel heeft verloren'. Remarkably, Garf mentioned the Frans Hals paintings in Haarlem as an example of a successful restoration.
- 21 Apart from Rueter, the other *Arti* members who were also members of the Committee of Supervision were Van der Waay, Wolter and 't Hooft. Only Rueter and 't Hooft were present during the January meeting at *Arti*.
- 22 'betoverend mooi'; 'De niet schoongemaakte schilderijen zijn zóó niet meer te genieten.'
- 23 The meeting was on 25 February 1930.
- 24 Van Duijn and Te Marvelde 2016 (note 7), p. 815.
- 25 In the exhibition, *The Syndics* was flanked by *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul* (on the left) and *Christ with a Staff* (on the right). *Self-Portrait* is now held by the Rijksmuseum (inv. no. SK-A-4050), but in 1932 it was still in private hands. *Christ with a Staff*, now part of the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (inv. no. 49.7.37) as the work of a Rembrandt follower, was also still privately owned in 1932.
- 26 Amsterdam, *Arti* Archive, copybook with minutes of the 1768th meeting on 31 May 1932 (pp. 278-79). The meeting took place a week before the exhibition opened. We do not know for certain, but it seems likely that Bobeldijk saw the painting in the new exhibition space before the opening.
- 27 'Het [laten restaureren van schilderijen] is is nu eenmaal een ijdelheid der directeuren. ... Spr. zou eerder wenschen dat een werk langzaam te gronde ging dan dat het op deze wijze bedorven werd. Alleen als de verf van het doek loslaat, moet worden ingegrepen. Spr. vindt het ongehoord dat indien het een werk van groote waarde betreft, het advies van kunstenaars niet wordt gevraagd. Het is logisch dat deze bij het restaureeren aanwezig zijn.'
- 28 Amsterdam, *Arti* Archive, copybook with minutes of the 1769th meeting on 28 June 1932 (pp. 285-86).
- 29 'Restaureeren is verderfelijk'; 'dat het hem weinig interesseert hoe de schilderij ten tijde van Rembrandt is geweest, wel hoe zij zich thans voordoet.'
- 30 Amsterdam, *Arti* Archive, copybook with minutes of the 1770th meeting on 27 September 1932 (pp. 296-99).
- 31 Amsterdam, *Arti* Archive, copybook with minutes of the 1771st meeting on 25 October 1932 (pp. 308-10).
- 32 A copy of this letter and the other sources referred to in the next section, can be

- found in Haarlem, NHA, archive no. 476, inv. no. 400.
- 33 'die een levensstudie gemaakt heeft van olieën en vernissen'.
- 34 'het schildery is indrukwekkender en harmonischer dan ooit'.
- 35 Amsterdam City Archives, Commissie van Toezicht en Advies voor de Schilderijen der Gemeente Amsterdam, archive no. 459, inv. no. 3, minutes of the 115th meeting on 26 November 1932.
- 36 'het gebruiken van gekleurde vernis gevaarlijk en een verraad aan het schildery'. Schmidt-Degener repeated his opposition to the use of tinted varnishes on several other occasions.
- 37 Printed as a short news item on 8 December 1932 in *Algemeen Handelsblad*, *De Telegraaf*, *Het Volk*, *Het Vaderland* and other papers.
- 38 *De Telegraaf*, 21 December 1932.
- 39 See note 5.
- 40 'Zijn De Staalmeesters bedorven?' and 'Restauratie mislukt.'
- 41 *De Telegraaf*, 22 December 1932.
- 42 'lichtelijk overdreven'. *Het Vaderland*, 22 December 1932, *Het Volk* 22 December 1932, *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 22 December 1932.
- 43 *De Telegraaf*, 28 and 31 December 1932 and 2, 5 and 9 January 1933. See also *De Telegraaf*, 29 December 1932 and 3 January 1933 for two additional letters from artists who were not included in the survey, but sent in positive opinions of their own accord.
- 44 'De Staalmeesters hebben hun operatie niet overleefd.' *De Telegraaf*, 28 December 1932.
- 45 'Het groote wonder, dat mij ontroerde, was eruit.' *De Telegraaf*, 28 December 1932.
- 46 'alle toover leek mij uit het werk geweken. ... Het komt mij hoe dan ook ondoenlijk voor Rembrandt's latere werken goed te kunnen herstellen zonder rampen te veroorzaken.' *De Telegraaf*, 5 January 1933.
- 47 *De Telegraaf*, 7 January 1933.
- 48 'Omdat het bij een kunstwerk gaat om zijn geestelijke verschijning en niet om zijn materiele conditie acht ik het toegebrachte nadeel van blijvende aard.'
- 49 *De Telegraaf*, 9 January 1933.
- 50 Haarlem, NHA, archive no. 476, inv. no. 400, dated 6 January 1933 (Bakker) and 10 January 1933 (Greebe).
- 51 'Herstellers van Schilderijen, hetzy ambtenaar of particulier praten gewoonlyk niet over hun doen en laten. ... Het lykt my dat de opzet dezer affaire een wraakneming is. Zooveel kan ik wel zeggen dat zich by de verdoeking geen complicaties hebben voorgedaan.' The letter was dated 10 January 1933. Greebe sent a copy to Schmidt-Degener on 17 January 1933.
- 52 'Had de Directie meer naar my als vakman, geluisterd en my minder beschouwd als een ondergeschikte ambtenaar, die slechts de wil van zyn superieuren heeft uit te voeren, dan ware dit alles niet geschied.'
- 53 The copy of Bakker's letter in the Rijksmuseum Archive is undated, but at the bottom Schmidt-Degener wrote: 'Delivered to me on 6 January 1933 by Mr Kasper Niehaus. Discussed with my legal adviser in the evening.' [Bij mij gebracht op 6 Januari 1933 door den Heer Kasper Niehaus. 's Avonds besproken met mijn gerechtsgeleerde adviseur.] Niehaus (1889-1974) was an artist who regularly worked for *De Telegraaf* as an art critic.
- 54 'een querulant, die zich miskent voelt'.
- 55 Haarlem, NHA, archive no. 476, inv. no. 400.
- 56 'het mooiste werk van zyn leven'.
- 57 'te dwaas om zelfs weersproken te worden'
- 58 *De Telegraaf*, 3 February 1933; *De Tijd*, 3 February 1933; *Het Volk*, 3 February 1933; *Het Vaderland*, 3 February 1933; *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 3 February 1933; *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 3 February 1933; *Amersfoortsch Dagblad/De Eemlander*, 4 February 1933; *De Tribune*, 6 February 1933.
- 59 A journalist for *De Tijd* (3 February 1933) wrote: 'Anyone would have been satisfied with such an answer. Not, though, Madam Tilanus, who just felt piqued after the alderman's reply, because the alderman – and she had a point here – occasionally made a "little joke", which had better been left unsaid.' (Ieder zou na zulk een antwoord bevredigd zijn. Niet Aldus vrouwe Tilanus, die na de repliek van den wethouder zich enkel maar gepiqueerd voelde, omdat de weth. – en dit was niet helemaal onjuist – hier en daar een "grapje" gemaakt had, dat beter achterwege ware gebleven.)
- 60 Several newspapers published De Wild's full report in the days after the interpellation: *Nieuw Rotterdamsche Courant*, 5 February 1933; *Het Vaderland*, 7 February 1933.
- 61 'trouwens niets anders dan een opgezet relletje van De Telegraaf'. *De Tribune*, 6 February 1933.
- 62 The director was even specifically praised for his role in the restoration of the painting in the *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 14 July 1933.



Rembrandt. F. 1661.

