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HANNAH SCHIFMAN'S MASTER'S THESIS DEFENSE:
*REMBRANDT IN THE GALLERIES: BEFORE AND AFTER THE
FINDINGS OF THE REMBRANDT RESEARCH PROJECT*

SLIDE 1

Well, thank you everyone for being here today. I am pleased to start my
master's thesis project presentation titled: Rembrandt in the Galleries:
Before and After the Findings of the Rembrandt Research Project.

I would like to take this moment to thank Dr. Hollander, Dr. Scallen, and Dr.
Camporeale for serving on my committee in each of your capacities. I am
relieved that this day has come, and it wouldn't have been possible without
everyone.

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My love of Rembrandt and the Rembrandt Research Project came to me
when I took a course my last semester at the University of Kansas with Dr.
Linda Stone-Ferrier.

As you may know, Rembrandt van Rijn is known as one of the greatest
artists in the world. His innovative works stand out in art history for their
realism, composition, and light and dark - or chiaroscuro.

With this introduction, I will now discuss my project.

When you think of a Rembrandt painting, you may think of his subjects - taken 'from life' - that reveal their humanism/realism OR perhaps you may think of his great ability to shape light and space to capture a particular moment.

For centuries, connoisseurs examined the painterly qualities of paintings to determine whether or not a painting was actually done by Rembrandt's hand. See, even within Rembrandt's lifetime, attribution was a concern due in part to his pupils. Rembrandt had at least twenty pupils come through his Amsterdam studio. In this practice, it was expected that pupils copied the works and style of their master. Rembrandt would sign his pupils' works in approval for the market, therefore, signatures are not as significant in the identification of authentic Rembrandt paintings.

As a result, Rembrandt-esque paintings emerged during and after Rembrandt's lifetime. These are defined as paintings that closely resemble Rembrandt's painterly and stylistic qualities and techniques, in particular with chiaroscuro and subject portrayal.

For example, which painting is an authentic Rembrandt and which is not?

The painting on the left is a Rembrandt, while the painting on the right is actually the result of an algorithm created after analyzing authentic Rembrandt paintings. Both paintings have Rembrandt painterly qualities that emphasize light, composition, and subject matter, but the object's qualities of the left painting support Rembrandt attribution.

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Nineteenth and twentieth century connoisseurs were inconsistently and unsuccessfully organizing Rembrandt's paintings into a catalogue raisonné, which is a comprehensive - annotated listing of all the known works of an artist in a particular medium. Entries can include the title and title variations, dimension/size, date, medium, provenance, and a list of works attributed, lost, destroyed, and fakes.

Established in 1968, the Rembrandt Research Project (or RRP) was the modern response to centuries of Rembrandt connoisseurs and dispute of Rembrandt's painting œuvre (body of work)

Their goal was 'simple': to produce an accurate catalogue raisonné of Rembrandt's attributed paintings. Decades later, this project has been anything but simple. Across forty plus years between 1968-2015, the RRP produced a catalogue raisonné of six volumes.

In 2015 the RRP formally ended when Ernst van de Wetering retired. Today, their activities are continued by staff at the RKD (the Netherlands Institute of Art History) through their Rembrandt Database.

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My primary research question for this thesis is: How can the attribution findings of the RRP affect the labelling of Rembrandt and REmbrandt-esque paintings in museums?

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My thesis project will examine the effect and scope of findings from RRP's Corpus in relation to public-facing information of museums through three case study institutions

And will evaluate transparency and accountability of all research activities between specialists and museums through wall text, object labels, and exhibition catalogues.

My methodology is drawn from four sources. First, the RRP's *Corpus*. I chose to treat those six volumes as a primary source, even though it is technically a secondary source. Second, the three case study museums' object labels and wall text for the individual paintings I chose to examine. Third, the museum's archives are accessible either online or in physical dossiers. And fourth, exhibition catalogues that include my case study paintings.

In chapters one, two, and three I am focused on three particular international museums for my case studies which are: The National Gallery in London, the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. and the Mauritshuis in The Hague, Netherlands.

All of these nine paintings were selected after examining each museum's collection of Rembrandt/Rembrandt-esque paintings. Each painting has a history of differing attributions between Rembrandt scholars and professionals at each museum. By choosing three museums from different countries, there is an opportunity to study international similarities and differences of attribution.

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The National Gallery in London:
Portrait of Frederick Rihel on Horseback,   about 1663
An Old Man in an Armchair,   1650s
Anna and the Blind Tobit,   about 1630

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National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.:
Lucretia,   1664
A Woman Holding a Pink,   1656
The Mill,   1645/1648

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Mauritshuis in The Hague, Netherlands
Portrait of Rembrandt (1606-1669) with a Gorget, after circa 1629
Saul and David,   c. 1651-1654 and c. 1655-1658
'Tronie' of an Old Man,   c. 1630-1631

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The RRP and their *Corpus* has been the most proficient and detailed source of Rembrandt attribution to date, and those involved with it are considered the 'experts'. A great deal of funding and resources had been dedicated to the RRP.

In the early 1990s, the public grew skeptical of the RRP - particularly with the criticism of the exhibition, *Rembrandt: the Master and his Workshop* that was held in Berlin, Amsterdam, and London. The show failed to determine pupil attributions prior to the opening. As a result, the four eldest members of the group collectively retired. The youngest member, Ernst van

de Wetering reshaped the methodology and approach of the RRP going forward. The 'new' RRP's decisions were shaped by considering both the technical examinations and visual analyses.

However the RRP's intentions were never to serve as an authority figure of Rembrandt attribution, rather- providers of information, arguments, and personal opinions.

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With this thesis project, when I analyzed the labels and public-facing information at each institution, I established a trend of attribution inconsistencies between the host museum and the RRP's work.

It is difficult to point towards a system that best fits the challenges of organizing all of Rembrandt and Rembrandt-esque paintings. However, following these nine case studies across three museums, the process of implementing institutional change involving painting attribution, is not a linear process per se.

I argue that this 'solution' will result in a decision through a collaboration between the RRP and the host institution.

Each object is, and should be, handled differently on a case by case basis, even within the same institution.

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The space capacity and in-gallery experience of object label and wall text should not deter the museum from expanding the scholarship of paintings with questionable attribution. Instead, this information should be provided in additional interpretative tools such as audio guides or the museum's website.

The National Gallery of Art's online entries for Rembrandt paintings are a great example. Each painting's catalogue entry details its technical summary, comparative figures, provenance, exhibition history, and bibliography.

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I chose to not focus on the cultural and/or monetary gains and losses that result from Rembrandt attribution and dis-attribution of paintings.

I excluded private collections due to their lack of accessibility and breadth of resources.

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This thesis project should spark a new conversation at museum institutions that hold collections with paintings of questionable attribution. A conversation framed on the principle of transparency for their audiences via object labels/wall text/online descriptions, rather than presenting complete certainty when there are credible outside parties that may say otherwise.

As shared in my first chapter, in the case of *Anna and the Blind Tobit*, the painting was deemed a Rembrandt **only** after being shown alongside other Rembrandts. However, when the NG chose to exclude *Old Man in an Armchair* from their exhibition, *Rembrandt: The Late Works* {15 October 2014 - 18 January 2015}, the institution was depriving their audience from a questionable attributed painting.

This project can also serve as a tool to initiate or supplement a practice of accountability for collections in ownership of paintings with questionable attribution — as well as an attempt to increase educational access to all audiences. Museums and private collections should consider greater

transparency with the public by increasing access to the process of curatorial decisions, particularly with objects of questionable attribution.

The RRP is an excellent example of engaging museums in having open conversations about attribution. This will in turn encourage museums to be more transparent with their local and global communities.

By introducing these stakeholders to the museum, the needs of systemic change museums will inevitably implement in the future. By beginning these types of changes within a museum's existing collections, a museum can be significantly more prepared to encounter future high-risk opportunities that the institution will be called upon. I anticipate these changes certainly within my lifetime and look forward to the future.

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I'd like to end with the quote by Ernst: "If it resembles a painting that's positively by Rembrandt then it's probably by him."