Viewing between the frames
Considering the display of Rembrandt’s pendant marriage portraits

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Rembrandt’s 1641 Portraits of Nicolaes van Bambeeck and Agatha Bas (figs. 1 & 2) present boundaries that are made to be crossed. The cloth merchant (1596-1661) and his wife (1611-1658) are painted as if they transgress the illusionistic arched frames that surround them and communicate with the space of the beholder. Van Bambeeck leans an arm along the lower edge of the frame, a clutched glove dipping below its border. In the lower right corner, the hand resting on the frame’s edge draws the viewer’s gaze across to where the companion portrait of the sitter’s wife would conventionally have hung. In the woman’s portrait, one hand holds a lavishly painted fan that overlaps the frame with a tromp l’oeil effect, as the thumb of the other hand appears to loop around its side. The portraits were separated in 1814 and now hang in Brussels’s Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten and London’s Royal Collection.

1 Rembrandt, Portrait of Nicolaes van Bambeeck, 1641, oil on canvas, 105.5 x 84 cm, Brussels, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten (photo: © Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels / J. Geleyns / Ro scan)

2 Rembrandt, Portrait of Agatha Bas, 1641, oil on canvas, 105.2 x 83.9 cm, London, Royal Collection (photo: Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2015)