Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait with Gorget: an ongoing debate*

One of the highlights of the recent exhibition *Rembrandt by Himself* was the confrontation between two portraits of the young Rembrandt with gorget—one from the Mauritshuis, the other from the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg (see figs. a and b, pp. 162-163). Until recently the Mauritshuis painting was widely considered one of the key works of the early Rembrandt, and it has very much shaped our image of the young artist (fig. 1). It is hence not surprising that its de-attribution in favour of the Nuremberg painting put forward by Claus Grimm in 1991 and adopted by the Mauritshuis after thorough research of both paintings in 1998 met with considerable disbelief among scholars, witness the article of Eric Jan Sluijter in this issue. However, the present discussion is not entirely new, the authenticity of the Mauritshuis painting had already been the subject of debate in the nineteenth century. This article focuses on the kind of arguments which were presented at that time to distinguish between original and copy and its purpose is to demonstrate how the outcome of this nineteenth-century debate shaped general opinion in the twentieth century before Grimm's challenge.

The Mauritshuis painting owes its reputation partly to its provenance from the famous collection of Govert van Slingelandt (1694-1767). In Gerard Hoet's catalogue of 1752 the painting is described as *Een Jongelings Hoofd (Head of a Youth)* by Rembrandt van Rijn. After Van Slingelandt's death his small but choice collection was acquired by Stadholder William V. During the French occupation the Stadholder's paintings were moved to the Musée Napoléon in Paris, where they remained until 1815. While in Paris, the *Head of a Youth* was not considered a genuine Rembrandt; instead, it was assigned to a certain *Vliet or Van Vliet*, to which an illustration from a catalogue of the Galerie du Musée Napoléon, published in 1804, bears witness (fig. 2). This re-attribution was probably inspired by the prints made by the Leiden engraver Jan van Vliet after designs by Rembrandt, which had been published in Paris as early as the 18th century (fig. 3). When the painting returned to The Hague it regained its traditional attribution to Rembrandt.

From 1822 onwards it was exhibited in the Mauritshuis, where it was seen by Étienne-Joseph-Théophile Thoré (1807-1869) alias William Bürger. In his book on the museums in Amsterdam and The Hague, published in 1838, Thoré-Bürger describes how at first he could not believe it was a Rembrandt: 'It is amazing in its effect, even very strong in its execution, but dry, hard, a bit common, in a gamut of marble-like green, rather strange for Rembrandt' [my translation] and he added that it looked almost like a work by Adriaen van der Werff seen through a lens. His first inclination was to contest its attribution, but when it was taken down from the wall and he could see it in a better light he was prepared to accept it as a Rembrandt—not, however, without pointing out that he knew of only one other

painting by the master done in the same way: a bust of a boy which is nowadays considered a work from Rembrandt’s workshop or his immediate circle (fig. 4).\(^9\) In his own copy of the book, now kept at the Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD), Thoré-Bürger added a handwritten note stressing the quality of the Mauritshuis painting: ‘Il est très pur et émaillé, très beau’.\(^10\) Although evidently most impressed by the painting, Thoré-Bürger nevertheless had trouble fitting it into Rembrandt’s oeuvre.

In 1875 the Mauritshuis painting was compared for the first time with the version in Nuremberg. That same year Alfred von Wurzbach (1845-1915) published an article in the Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst in which he claimed that both paintings