Remarkably all eight children’s portraits from the group of Craeyvanger family portraits retain their original formats of c. 56.5 x 41 cm, and are unlined. Moreover, their tacking edges are also preserved, which is very unusual for seventeenth-century canvas paintings. Not only are the sitters’ names and the date of 1658, possibly applied in the eighteenth century still visible on the reverse, the fact that the paintings are unlined provides the opportunity to investigate the original canvas and carry out manual thread counts directly on the back of the paintings. Counting the number of vertical and horizontal threads per centimetre provides information about the thread density of the fabric support, which together with thread and weave characteristics, are specific for the bolt of canvas from which the paintings’ supports were cut. When assessed together with other features of the support – tacking edges, loom widths, cusping – thread counts may help answer questions regarding the genesis, history, authenticity, dating, format, composition and bolt-mate status of a painting.

Thread counts
For this ensemble, comparison of the thread density, weave structure, cusping and tacking edges makes it possible to confirm that the canvas supports of all eight children’s portraits are identical and that they were cut from a larger piece of primed, plain weave linen (presumed to be flax). Ernst van de Wetering has found that for Rembrandt’s portraits, companion pieces were generally painted on canvases from the same bolt, stretched and prepared in the same way. Moreover, he has shown that supports were frequently cut from larger primed pieces of canvas. In the example discussed here, since the canvas at hand was not wide enough for all the portraits, a narrow strip of fine linen, some twenty centimetres wide, was attached along one edge increasing the overall width to c. 136 cm. Given the dimensions of the portraits, and taking into account the 1.5-2 cm wide tacking edges, the piece of canvas that formed the major part of the support must have been at least 116 cm, which depending on where the linen was made, could be interpreted as either a 1½ or 2 ell strip width. In the seventeenth century cloth was produced in the Netherlands and other Northern European countries in a range of standard loom widths based on the ‘ell’: 1, 1¼, 1½, 2 ell etc. The precise dimensions of the ell, however, varied slightly from country to country and city to city. In the Low Countries depending on where the cloth was produced, this could vary between 65.6 and 75 cm. It was only in 1725 that the Dutch ell was standardized to 69.4 cm.

Magnification reveals that the two pieces of the fabric support were sewn together using a simple overcast stitch, by abutting the woven selvedges together. As a result, a seam runs vertically through the portraits of the two girls, to the right of the figure of Lijsbeth (see p. 12, fig. 9) and to the left of the figure of Naleke (see p. 12, fig. 10). Since cloth would have been available as a two ell strip width (≈ c. 140 cm), one may