

On quality:

The Master's Prototypes versus his Pupil's Variants,
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With his lecture Ernst van de Wetering tried to demonstrate how much imagination and pictorial skills are demanded when a painter embarks on creating a complicated image on a flat surface.

The lecture was based on *A CORPUS OF REMBRANDT PAINTINGS* Volume V Chapter IV with the title: *On quality: Comparative remarks on the function of Rembrandt's pictorial mind* (pp. 283 – 310). (Freely accessible in The Rembrandt Database: www.rembrandt-database.org)

The first example in the lecture was the following:

Abraham's sacrifice: Rembrandt's prototype from 1635 (fig. 1); his sketched revision of the composition (fig. 2); and an unknown pupil's copy of the prototype with the master's proposed compositional changes in 1636 (fig. 3).



Fig. 1 Rembrandt, *Abraham's sacrifice*, 1635,

oil, canvas 193.5 x 132.8 cm.

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg



Fig. 2 Rembrandt, *Abraham's sacrifice*, c. 1635,

red and black chalk, wash and white body colour, 19.4 x 14.6 cm.

The British Museum, London

(his sketched revision of the composition)

The scene: On God's command Abraham is about to sacrifice his son Isaac. At the very last moment he is restrained by an angel. God's command was designed to test Abraham's faith (Genesis 22: 1-13). There are two versions of this painting that are the same size but show significant differences (figs. 1 and 3). For compositional and dynamic reasons, Rembrandt had decided to revise the 'flight path' of the angel. He tried out these changes in a drawing (fig. 2), which, together with Rembrandt's prototype formed the basis for a free copy (fig. 3). It was for a long time thought that both versions were painted by Rembrandt himself. He prepared for the second version with a drawing (fig. 2). We know that the Munich copy originated in Rembrandt's studio as it turned that the painting's canvas comes from the same bolt of linen as those of *Minerva*, (Private Collection New York) and *Belshazzar's feast* (The National Gallery, London). Yet careful comparison of the quality of the two painted versions clearly shows that the copy was executed by a less experienced painter, no doubt one of his pupils.



Fig. 3 Abraham's sacrifice, a free copy by an unknown pupil, 1636

oil, canvas 195 x 132 cm. Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Comparing the figures of Isaac:

- the course of the boundary between light and shadow in his left knee: in the original one sees subtle indications of the anatomy, but not in the copy.
- the way the thorax is continued into the armpit beneath the upper arm: in the original there is the suggestion that the ribcage continues behind the arm; whereas in the copy this looks more like a Teddy bear: the upper arm appears to be fixed to a tapering trunk.
- See how much subtler in the original the light is reflected from the upper arm onto the chest (fig. 1).
- Observe the way the loincloth (fig. 1) disappears round the belly and reappears from under the back. Try to image how this loincloth continues under the back in the copy.

In the heads of the two Abrahams, compare:

- the way Abraham's head is tilted and foreshortened as he twists and looks up.
- In the copy the head is turned more in profile and stretched out: a typical fault of a copyist.

In the angels of the original and the copy compare:

- the way the wings are shaped anatomically and 'aerodynamically'
- how the folds of the angel's gown reflect the speed of flight
- the role played by the light reflected into the angel's face from Abraham's face and from the angel's left hand.

The differences between the two versions indicate that the copy was painted by such an inexperienced painter that he was apparently incapable of grasping the subtleties in the work of the master. That Rembrandt let a pupil execute his new compositional solution gives us an interesting glimpse into Rembrandt's workshop. One often encounters the phenomenon that the copy is more freely executed than the prototype in 17th century painting: there was no intention of realizing extreme precision when copying. It is remarkable that Rembrandt made no effort to improve the 'faults' indicated above in his pupil's work. He also let the pupil add an element from the biblical story that does not appear in Rembrandt's prototype: the ram that Abraham would sacrifice instead of Isaac.

Shortly after the origin of the copy the following inscription was added <Rembrandt. Verandert. En overgeschildert ['painted afresh'] 1636 >.