Towards a digital work environment for Rembrandt research

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Introduction

Consulting contemporary sources is essential for the study of Rembrandt, not only for the attribution of works of art and provenance research, but also for a better understanding of the artist, his environment, the reception of his art, and the wider context in which his art came to flourish, across national borders and over time. The highly diverse documents are preserved in various (local) archives, museums, research institutes, and private collections all around the world. Sometimes documents are hard to find or difficult to access, still unavailable in digital form, and the known documents are not yet arranged as a coherent and interconnected body of material.

The Radboud University Nijmegen has launched, in partnership with the Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands in The Hague and the Rembrandt House Museum in Amsterdam, the Rembrandt Documents Project (RemDoc) in order to provide a much-needed infrastructure for making all original documents and primary source texts relating to Rembrandt accessible. The Huygens Institute has developed a search and filter interface based on the elaborate² work environment. Through this interface (that can be found at www.remdoc.org), all documents can be searched and accessed in a way that is fitting for modern art history. RemDoc is open to the general public but mainly targets academics, museum professionals and students.

RemDoc meets the needs of the modern art historian by offering a sustainable, easily accessible repository of all known documents related to Rembrandt and dating from before 1750, with both existing documentation and new information. For the first time all Rembrandt documents are presented in an integrated, digital environment. This service aims to facilitate research by creating a digital laboratory for art historians.

The content of the RemDoc database

RemDoc is digital collection of primary documents, produced in the 15th to 18th centuries, that relate to the life and works of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669). RemDoc aims to collect and make available all known documents that relate to Rembrandt, as a person and as an artist, as well as to his ancestors and family. Until now, more than 1500 transcriptions of documents have been included in the database. For all documents, extensive metadata is included, and for an increasing number also scans of the original documents and a translation in English.

The list of documents is based on previous publications, such as "Urkunden" by Hofstede de Groot (1906), "The Rembrandt Documents" by W.L. Strauss and M. van der Meulen (1979), and the "New Rembrandt Documents" by M. Roscam Abbing (2006), in addition to as yet unpublished data. We

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² https://www.elaborate.huygens.knaw.nl/
also make new transcriptions of the documents, based on the latest insights from the field of paleography.

The RemDoc project subscribes to a modern and inclusive definition of the term ‘document’. For example, RemDoc includes extracts from baptism, marriage, and burial records; the small number of Rembrandt’s own letters; notarial deeds such as contracts, probate inventories, debt and credit records; as well as inscriptions by Rembrandt or his customers on drawings and etchings. RemDoc also contains advertisements of auctions in newspapers and references to Rembrandt in contemporary poetry.

The heart of the RemDoc infrastructure are original documents from the period between 1475 to circa 1750, though no firm end date is used at present. After 1750, the nature of documents related to Rembrandt changes significantly. Texts become increasingly interpretative rather than factual, and attributions of paintings in auction catalogues rapidly become less reliable. The content of the RemDoc database (scanned images of archival documents and metadata describing these documents) is provided by a range of institutions around the world, mostly archives, the main contributors being the Amsterdam City Archives (Stadsarchief) and the Regional Archives of Leiden (RAL).

In addition, the database records in RemDoc contain references to previous publications that mention, describe or comment on the document. The RemDoc project aims to provide descriptions and comments that reflect the most recent results of the international Rembrandt research.

The RemDoc infrastructure has a dynamic content, so that newly discovered documents and new annotations can be easily added.

Target groups and the RemDoc user interface

RemDoc is primarily intended as an infrastructure for researchers in academia and in museums, yet the project’s results will also be of interest to the general public. Although art historians are the primary target group, several additional other groups may find the application useful, such as historians with questions related to 16th-18th century life, literary scholars, linguists studying 17th century Dutch, genealogists and economists studying the art market in the Golden Age.

The RemDoc interface is user-friendly, with many opportunities for researchers to make use of database information (for instance filtering metadata by facetted search). This makes the RemDoc infrastructure an advanced workbench that supports scholarly research. At the end of this document the interface is illustrated with screenshots.

At this moment the RemDoc database is still under construction. The contents and functionalities of the website are continuously being improved and expanded. The current edition of the website is a beta version, which means that it is still subject to experimentation and adjustments. The following functionalities and properties will be added in the future:

- A searchable index of all (artist) names mentioned in the documents.
- Multiple images (scans of documents) visualized in one entry.
- Depictions of the works of art that are identified in the text.
- Links to official websites of institutions that preserve the recorded works of arts.
- Options to search, not only in the transcription and title, but also in English translation and commentary text.
Future developments

Although RemDoc will continue to develop primarily as a research tool, it will also be a platform for the publication of new Rembrandt material: whether new documents or new information on already known source texts. All documents will be transcribed and annotated, and translated into English. The number of original documents identified for the RemDoc initiative today includes more than 1500 items. RemDoc’s main value, however, is not the size of the document collection, but rather the depth to which the documents will be annotated and the ease with which they will be accessible. RemDoc will also provide links to the art historical literature about Rembrandt published after 1750. Last but not least, RemDoc will be interoperable with existing and future digital research platforms for art historians.

Currently, there are no integrated work benches for digital art history research. That is partly due to discrepancies between the metadata schemes that are being used in libraries, archives and museums. Instead, researchers must constantly switch between independent and partially incompatible applications.

In the RemBench project, which is funded as part of the CLARIN-NL programme and starts 1 April 2013, we will create such an integrated work bench. We build a metadata mapping scheme that will enable art historians to use a professional faceted search system for retrieving data related to the life and works of Rembrandt van Rijn. The data sources that will be connected are: a novel set of digitized documents from before 1750, the databases maintained by the Netherlands Institute for Art History and the OCLC-supported library search system Picarta.

A preliminary version of the work bench will be operational in the fall of 2013. We will run extensive usability experiments, which will result in a final application in the spring of 2014.

References

Demonstration of the RemDoc user interface

The RemDoc user interface. On the top left side is a search box for free text search. The query terms that are entered are matched against the transcriptions of the documents in the database, and the titles of the entries in English.

Below the search box are options for faceted search shown, which allow the user to filter the results based on metadata values.

For the query ‘titus’, 91 results are found in the database.

Filtering on ‘Baptism, Marriage and Burial records’ leaves 8 documents in the result list.
Searching for the query ‘jouderville’ gives 7 results.

Clicking on the first result shows the metadata, transcription and scan of the document. Note that the spelling of the name ‘jouderville’ is very different in the original text than in the English title.