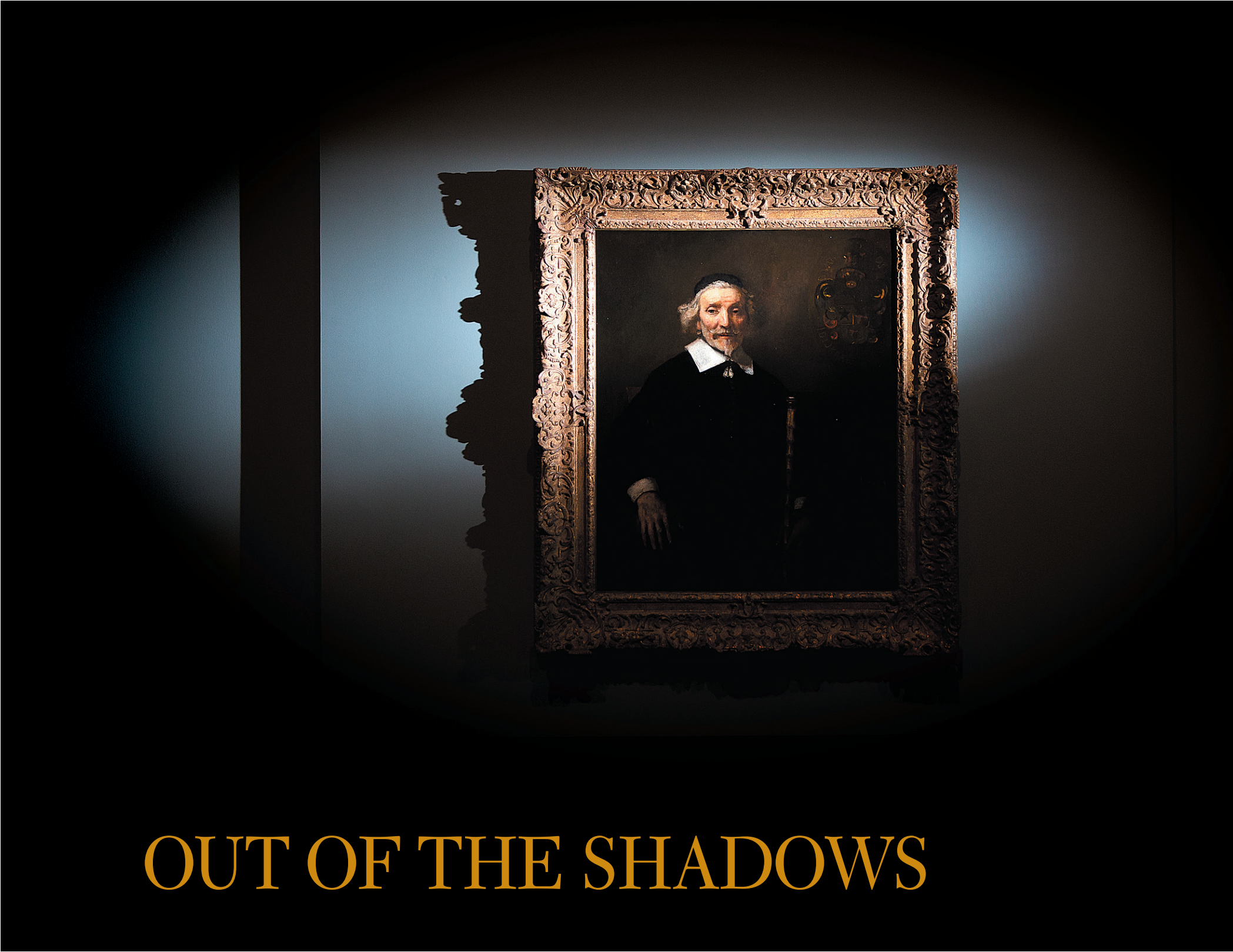


Once a crown jewel of the Joslyn’s collection, this portrait languished in storage for years, its origins in doubt. Only one man could restore it to the spotlight.



# OUT OF THE SHADOWS

By CASEY LOGAN • WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

P ERHAPS THE GREATEST DEFEAT of Harold Parsons’ life came 20 years after his death. • In 1987, following a century of debate among the world’s foremost experts on Dutch master Rembrandt van Rijn, the Joslyn Art Museum made a startling decision. It announced that a portrait in the museum’s collection since 1942 and attributed to Rembrandt was not a Rembrandt at all. • More likely, it was made by one of his many students. It wasn’t fake exactly, but it also wasn’t real — at least not as it had been presented to the public for the previous 45 years.

Expert opinion prompted the Joslyn to re-attribute the painting to the “School of Rembrandt,” a considerable fall in prestige that reached bottom 12 years later when the museum removed it from display and placed it in storage. The Joslyn’s decision to downgrade the painting drew little attention outside Nebraska, mostly because it wasn’t much news. Throughout the world, paintings credited to Rembrandt were being de-attributed to the great 17th century artist. Two years earlier in Berlin, a Rembrandt masterpiece, “The Man With the Golden Helmet,” fell under the same revisionist knife. Not a Rembrandt. In New York, suspicions arose about “The Polish Rider” at the Frick Collection. The fate of the Joslyn painting, “Portrait of Dirck van Os,” was a blip on a trend. Had he still been alive, Harold Woodbury Parsons would have seen it differently. For him, it was personal. Parsons served as the adviser who steered the museum to purchase “Portrait of Dirck van Os” with funds left by its founder, Sarah Joslyn, after her death in 1940. It was his invaluable eye and opinion that led the Joslyn’s board president at the

time to declare the acquisition “the finest Rembrandt in America.” Parsons was a self-confident class of art historian. In 1941, the Joslyn introduced the New York-based art dealer as its new adviser. Parsons assured those assembled he’d have the museum on pace with the country’s finest institutions by decade’s end. He backed his bluster, helping acquire some of the Joslyn’s most prized works, including its holdings by Titian, El Greco and Jackson Pollock. The Rembrandt acquisition alone made good on his reputation. The man the Joslyn hired to stock its galleries was more than an art dealer, greater than an art historian, better than an art adviser. Parsons fashioned himself a *connoisseur*.

This week, “Portrait of Dirck van Os” returns to display a very different painting. Extensive restoration means it will actually look different. It is also different for reasons that have nothing to do with aesthetics. The portrait is a “Rembrandt” again. It car-

Newly restored and re-attributed to Rembrandt van Rijn, “Portrait of Dirck van Os” will return to public view in the Joslyn Art Museum’s Hitchcock Foundation Gallery on Monday. The painting had been placed in storage 15 years ago. For years it was believed simply to be a work from the “School of Rembrandt,” not by the Dutch master himself.

ries one of the most prized attributions in the art world. People respond to it. For museums, a Rembrandt can serve as a magnet that draws visitors, who hopefully then go exploring. “When a museum has a late Rembrandt, it has something very, very, very special,” said the world’s leading Rembrandt scholar. Which is maybe the biggest change of all. The painting is different because that scholar, a 76-year-old Dutch professor named Ernst van de Wetering, says so.

It would be easy to say “Portrait of Dirck van Os” has come full circle, but that is the wrong geometric metaphor. The painting has ridden a wave — up and down, and now up again. It came to the United States in 1898, when a Rembrandt craze shook hands with the Gilded Age, flooding the art market with new players. “All of a sudden, we have American millionaires who are trying to fit into the conventional notions of what it means to be a successful member of society,” said Catherine Scallen, an art historian at Case Western Reserve University. “And that included owning art.” “Portrait of Dirck van Os” left a private collection in St. Petersburg, Russia, and landed for the next few decades in the collection of Boston businessman Frederick Sears. Sears had little reason to doubt its authenticity. Each of the leading Rembrandt connoisseurs of the early 20th century — Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, Wilhelm Bode, Wilhelm Valentiner and Abraham Bredius — gave it a passing grade.

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