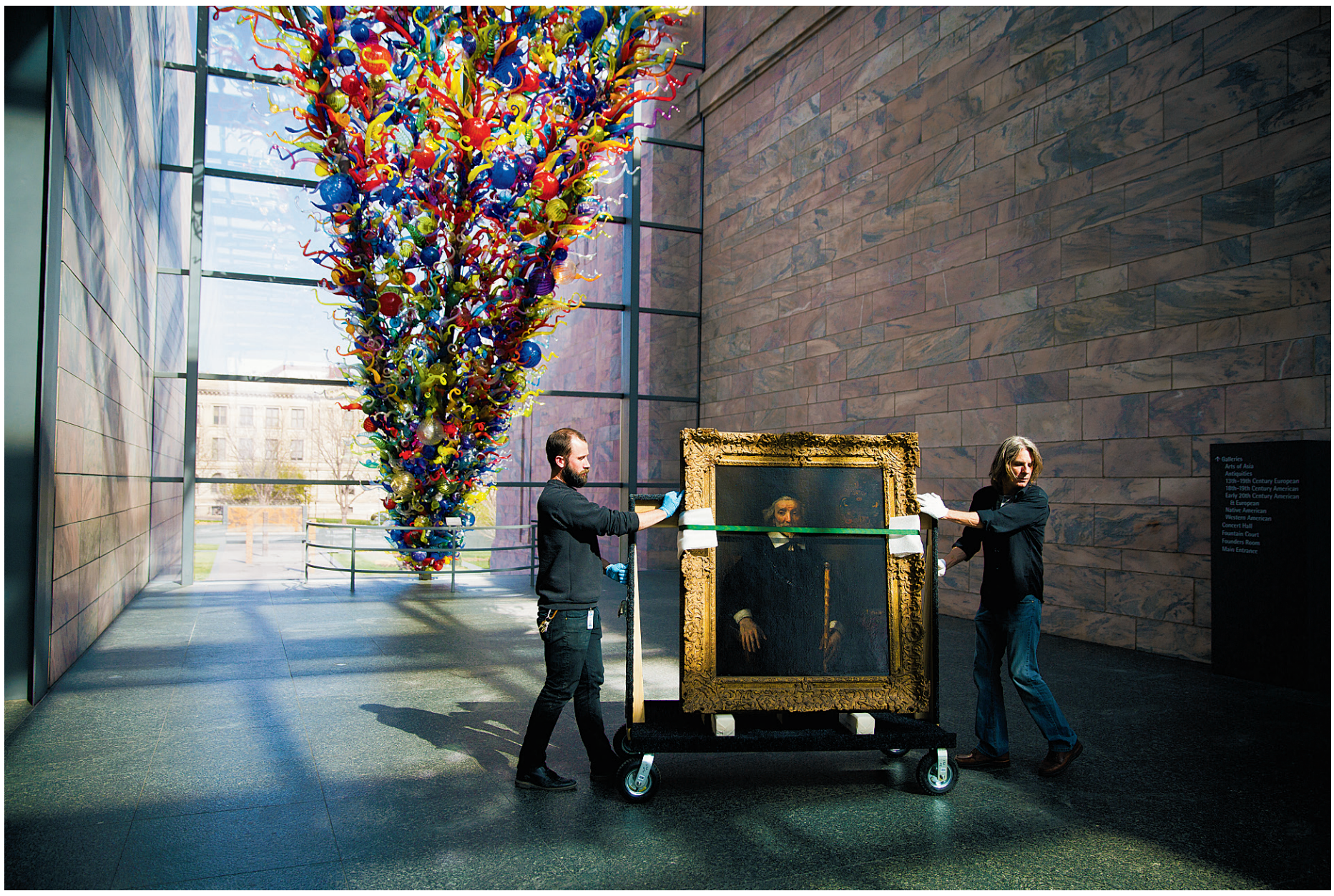

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Joslyn Art Museum preparator Kjell Peterson, left, and Kevin Salzman, installation and design manager, take "Portrait of Dirck van Os" to the Hitchcock Foundation Gallery on April 25. Behind them is the Dale Chihuly glass piece "Chihuly: Inside & Out."

'WHAT IS A REMBRANDT?' NOT A SIMPLE QUESTION

Continued from Page 3

It was a busy time for the connoisseurs. Due in part to the rise in demand, more Rembrandts were put up for sale, emerging from private collections throughout Europe. In 1883, Bode listed around 350 Rembrandt paintings in his corpus, or catalog, of the artist's work.

By 1905, he counted 595. The trend reached peak Rembrandt around 1923, when Valentiner attributed more than 700 paintings to the artist.

Scallen wrote about this inflation in her 2003 book "Rembrandt, Reputation and the Practice of Connoisseurship." In researching the subject, she became fascinated by a 1923 polemic written by the art historian John C. Van Dyke, who blasted the Rembrandt connoisseurs for their improbable attributions. Reviews of Van Dyke's book — some written by the same men he targeted — dismissed him as an intrusive crank, and that rebuttal stuck.

Scallen wondered why. Why were some opinions held valid and others laughed off? She found the answer in a single word, the one slipped into the middle of her book's title: reputation.

"Certain people were networked with other people, other Rembrandt connoisseurs," she said, "and through that process they began to validate each other's opinions."

Those opinions held sway for the next 30 years. Then, around 1956, the status quo started to crumble.

In Amsterdam, exhibitions were planned for the 350th anniversary of Rembrandt's birth. A new generation of scholars took a closer look at the chronology of the artist's career and saw a problem: There were too many Rembrandts.

And the justifications for attributing all those works to Rembrandt seemed weak. They were based largely on the instincts of a select few connoisseurs.

"People do have gut responses," Scallen said, "but then you do have to follow that up with a far more cautious process of connoisseurship."

The answer to this dilemma arrived in the form of a committee dubbed the Rembrandt Research Project. Well-funded by the Dutch government, the team of historians had a deceivingly simple mandate: determine which paintings in the style of Rembrandt should be attributed to the man himself.

When the group commenced in 1968, it seemed like a logical effort. Soon the veneer wore off.

"Life is short and art is too long for anyone to learn all of it," Harold Parsons once said. "The only infallible basis for selecting works of art is connoisseurship … that experience over many years of comparing similar things until you can distinguish good, better, best."

In theory, the Rembrandt Research Project began as a rejection to that early 20th century way of thinking. The group would support its intuitions with evidence, argument and consensus. But it found itself subjected to the same criticisms thrown at the traditional connoisseurs, along with some new ones.

The group's work proved arduous, the process slow. More than a decade passed before the committee published its first volume, addressing only Rembrandt paintings produced from 1625 to 1631. Two more volumes followed, in 1986 and 1989, but by then the project had come under serious attack.

The world expected a reduction in paintings attributed to Rembrandt, but many observers said the committee was going too far. If the project continued on the same path, the number of Rembrandt paintings would fall to around 300.

"They absolutely brought our level of scholarship to a far greater extent than it previously had been," said Arthur Wheelock, a longtime curator at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and professor of art history at the University of Maryland who specializes in Dutch and Flemish art. "But at the same time it became clear that this was not entirely scientific and there were prejudices."

One major issue centered on the nature of Rembrandt's studio. The artist had many students and apprentices. The challenge was not distinguishing between paintings by Rembrandt and derivative works decades later. The chore was parsing what happened within the artist's workshop.

What if Rembrandt worked on a piece with assistants? Or what about his patrons? Did they expect every brushstroke was his? Or did they understand (as historians now believe) that a workshop like his included delegation?

How could the committee decide what is or is not a Rembrandt when the definition of "a Rembrandt" was debatable?

Despite the criticisms, the project held sway as the final word on the artist. And other experts outside the group followed its lead, questioning previously accepted paintings.

Museums with multiple Rembrandts and institutional muscle pushed back. Others saw the writing on the wall.

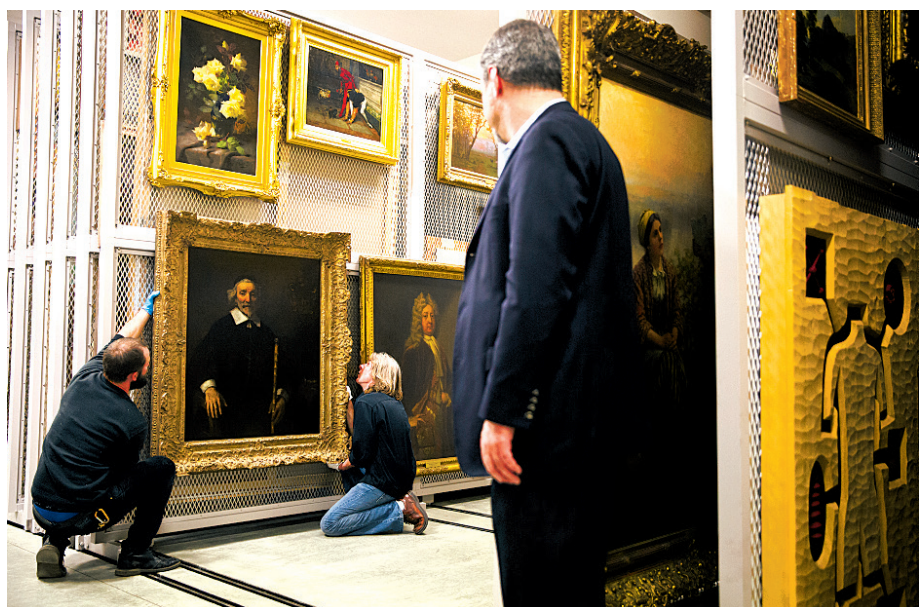
In Omaha, the preliminary opinion of two committee members and the doubts of another established expert, Horst Gerson, prompted the Joslyn to reconsider the painting in its collection.

The Rembrandt world was shrinking, and "Portrait of Dirck van Os" was no longer in it.

Art authentication is a tricky business in part because the stakes are so high — often the difference between a painting worth millions and one worth thousands — and because the methods of arriving at such a judgment can appear so subjective.

A connoisseur is by definition a person whose knowledge and devotion to a specific era or artist, built over years of research, yields an almost preternatural instinct about a work of art's authenticity. They know it when they see it.

That type of innate understanding is still generally accepted. The difference now is that connoisseurs are expected to provide a solid case to support their intuitions. Experts have long cited a work's provenance, or history of ownership, as well as how a piece demonstrates the artist's style and technique. Today, they might seek out specialists of a certain attribute on display, such as the clothing of a given person in a particular time and place, and they increasingly rely on technology to provide a forensic analysis of a painting's entire life.



RYAN SODERLIN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Rembrandt's "Portrait of Dirck van Os" is removed from storage at the Joslyn Art Museum. From left are preparator Kjell Peterson; Kevin Salzman, installation and design manager; and Toby Jurovics, chief curator and Richard and Mary Holland Curator of American Western Art.

The big money at stake in the art market also makes good-faith authentication difficult. A couple of years ago, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts made headlines when it ended its practice of authenticating works attributed to the pop artist icon. The mere threat of litigation and the multi-million-dollar liability it posed became too much to bear.

The foundation's decision shows what hangs in the balance when a work of art is investigated. For a private seller, even a rumor of inauthenticity can cast a painting into damnation.

For museums, it's a bit different. A questioned work instead falls into a kind of purgatory. Even a painting like "Portrait of Dirck van Os," which no one ever suspected of forgery, only that it didn't come directly from the hand of Rembrandt, becomes locked in limbo.

Which is where John Wilson found the painting when he arrived at the Joslyn in 2005 as the museum's new curator.

Wilson looked into the museum's curatorial file and discovered, to his surprise,

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