

Elements that were added to the portrait over the years have been removed, and previous efforts to restore the Rembrandt have been corrected.

# A BEAUTIFUL WORK EMERGES

WHEN THE JOSLYN Art Museum unveils the restored “Portrait of Dirck van Os” (ca 1658) this week, the painting will look different from how it has looked for the past few centuries. Elements added after Rembrandt’s time have been removed and previous efforts at restoration corrected.

The painting was a mess, said Dutch scholar Ernst van de Wetering, head of the Rembrandt Research Project, who oversaw the conservation effort. But it had hope.

“There was just enough left of the original that it could be a presentable and beautiful late Rembrandt.”

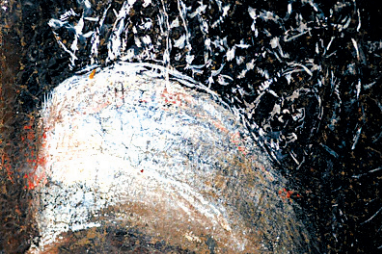
The task of conserving the painting landed with Martin Bijl, former head of restoration at the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam and renowned conservator of Dutch paintings. Bijl has restored more than 20 Rembrandt paintings in his career, along with pieces by Vermeer, Rubens, Lievens, Frans Hals, Jordaens and van Ruysdael, among others.

The painting arrived at Bijl’s studio outside Amsterdam in March 2012. It returned to Omaha in September 2013. In between, it underwent extensive cleaning and conservation, with Bijl essentially breaking the painting down and then building it back up.

A before-and-after comparison of the painting reveals several noticeable differences. The story of the effort, however, rests below the surface. — Casey Logan



**BEFORE:** Embellishments were added by others to the portrait: lace on the collar and cuffs, gold buttons, a ribbon on the cane, a gold chain with a cross.



### ADDING BY SUBTRACTION

As early as the late 17th century, others sought to improve on Rembrandt’s work. Various embellishments — some might call it “bling” — were added to Dirck van Os’ clothing, including lace along his collar and cuffs, gold buttons down the front of his costume, a ribbon on his cane and a gold chain with a cross roped over his shoulders. To the upper right of the painting, a coat of arms appeared. Such accouterments were deemed inconsistent with Rembrandt’s style and too clumsy to have come from his hand. Further analysis by Bijl showed that these additions were applied over dried paint and contained a quality of white lead that did not exist during Rembrandt’s career. The conservator removed much of these additions, though Bijl kept the coat of arms for its possible historic value.



**AFTER:** Layers of varnish, dirt and the embellishments have been removed, and the painting has been painstakingly retouched under magnification.

### OUT WITH THE OLD

Bijl started by removing layers of old varnish with alcohol. Damage to “Portrait of Dirck van Os” came early. Beneath decades of dirt, grime and retouchings were restoration efforts dating back as early as the 18th century, which had removed some of the original paint.

### LOOK CLOSELY

Under the right light, viewers of the restored “Portrait of Dirck van Os” will notice remaining traces of the chain formerly draped over his shoulders and chest.

### RESTORER’S TOUCH

Once Bijl removed the old varnish and additions, he set to the painstaking task of retouching the painting, looking at the portrait under magnification and using Rembrandt’s original paint as his guide.

### A NEW DISCOVERY

At least once in the 20th century, and perhaps twice, restorers replaced the canvas on which the portrait rests. One effort, by a Kansas City conservator in the 1950s, was compared to a surgical procedure. Nonetheless, some of the original binding medium applied to Rembrandt’s initial canvas remains. Bijl detected ground quartz within that layer, an element considered unique to Rembrandt’s studio.

### AUTHENTICATION

“The whole painting had been treated very badly,” said van de Wetering, referring to centuries of work done to “Portrait of Dirck van Os.” But he noted evidence of Rembrandt right away — primarily in the face and hands. Viewers will notice them, too, as they’ve been lightened considerably during the conservation process.

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