Karel van der Pluym
1625 - Leiden - 1672

Tronie of a Man with a Tall, Fur-Edged Red Cap

Oil on panel
22 x 19 cm.

Provenance:
Belgium, private collection

This small panel depicts the bust of an old man with a long grey beard and a striking red cap, set against a dark, neutral background. The figure is rendered frontally, the face built up with broad, direct brushstrokes, illuminated in strong chiaroscuro. The handling of the beard and cap is painterly and paste-like, while the facial features are summarily but effectively modelled. The lack of a detailed setting and the modest scale suggest the work was conceived not as a commissioned portrait, but as a study or *tronie*. A character study of a head or figure type rather than an identifiable individual – became especially popular in the Rembrandt circle during the mid-seventeenth century. Such works often depict elderly men or women, emphasizing expressive physiognomies and exotic or picturesque costume elements. The motif of an old man with a red cap can be traced directly to Rembrandt van Rijn's atelier practice and was widely adopted by his pupils, among them Karel van der Pluym.

Karel van der Pluym (1625–1672) was a Leiden-born painter who received his artistic training in the circle of Rembrandt van Rijn. While little documentary evidence survives regarding his apprenticeship, stylistic affinities between his paintings and drawings and those of Rembrandt's studio strongly suggest direct exposure to the master's methods. The 1650s were a formative decade for Van der Pluym, during which he developed an idiom closely aligned with Rembrandt's workshop practice while beginning to articulate his own independent style.

Van der Pluym's tronies from this period—small-scale studies of old men and women—reveal both his debt to Rembrandt and his divergence from him. Like Rembrandt, he favoured expressive heads, dramatic chiaroscuro, and the depiction of elderly models in exotic or picturesque costume. Yet his handling is generally looser and less psychologically penetrating, relying on broad, paste-like brushstrokes and a warm, earthy palette. Infrared studies of his panels often reveal minimal underdrawing, pointing to a working method that mirrored Rembrandt's preference for direct execution in paint.

Within Rembrandt's circle in the 1650s, Van der Pluym appears to have occupied a position distinct from more prominent pupils such as Govert Flinck or Ferdinand Bol. Whereas these painters quickly established successful careers with history paintings and commissioned portraits, Van der Pluym concentrated on smaller, more intimate works. His tronies served both as studies and as marketable commodities, catering to a clientele that appreciated the Rembrandtesque idiom without requiring the master's hand. In this context, a painting such as The Lilian painting can be understood as a product of Van der Pluym's early maturity: firmly rooted in Rembrandt's workshop model yet asserting an independent painterly manner. Its exploratory brushwork and minor pentimenti exemplify the experimental spirit of the 1650s, when Rembrandt's influence in Leiden and Amsterdam continued to shape the visual language of his students and followers.[1]

Several other paintings by Rembrandt van Rijn and his circle are connected to the present work. The full-length painting by Rembrandt van Rijn *Old Man with a Red Cap* in the Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, shows an old man seated wearing similar garments and holding a long wooden staff (fig. 1).[2] The Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth (Texas) houses another related painting after that painting by Rembrandt van Rijn *of An Old Man in an Armchair*, which crops the figure just below his knees.[3]

A painting by Workshop of Rembrandt van Rijn, preserved in the Clowes Collection, Indianapolis, reveals striking iconographic parallels (fig. 2). Both depict an elderly man with a red cap, but the execution differs. These stylistic and technical evidence underscores important

differences. The Lilian painting displays a vigorous, paste-like handling of paint, warm reddish-brown tonality, and minor pentimenti in the outline of the cap and beard—indications of a searching hand working out the composition directly on the panel. By contrast, technical analysis of the Clowes panel has revealed no pentimenti or adjustments, suggesting a more replicative approach consistent with workshop production.

The technical and stylistic evidence suggests that The Lilian painting is best regarded as an early work by Karel van der Pluym.[4] The panel's vigorous brushwork, subtle pentimenti, and warm tonalities correspond closely with other tronies attributed to Van der Pluym, while distinguishing it from the more mechanical repetitions typical of the broader Workshop of Rembrandt. In contrast, the related panel in the Clowes Collection, Indianapolis - executed without pentimenti and with smoother, more restrained brushwork - remains more convincingly a product of the workshop.

The recent restoration of The Lilian painting has significantly enhanced both its legibility and its aesthetic impact. The cleaning has revived the intensity of the red cap, revealing its original vibrancy and the nuanced impasto that characterises its surface. The flesh tones of the face now display greater subtlety and variation, contributing to a more vivid expression. The beard, formerly obscured by surface dirt and discoloured varnish, shows a rich range of greys, ochres, and whites.

Equally important, the treatment has clarified the brushwork. The vigorous, paste-like application in the cap and the exploratory strokes in the beard and robe are now distinctly visible. These painterly qualities—together with the minor pentimenti observable in infrared reflectography—reinforce the attribution to Karel van der Pluym as an independent hand within Rembrandt’s circle, and distinguish the work from more mechanically executed studio copies.

Another important point of comparison is a drawing attributed to Karel van der Pluym in the collection of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (fig. 3). It depicts a group of figures gathered in front of a building, among them an elderly bearded man wearing a tall, fur-edged cap. The

physiognomy of this figure—elongated face, full beard, and contemplative expression—closely resembles the type encountered in The Lilian painting. The parallel suggests that Van der Pluym employed a repertoire of recurring character types across media, reinforcing the attribution of the painted tronie to his hand.

Fig. 1
Rembrandt van Rijn, *Old Man with a Red Cap*, oil on canvas, 52.4 x 37 cm., circa 1650, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, accession number 828I.

Fig. 2

Workshop of Rembrandt van Rijn, *Old Man with a Tall, Fur-Edged Cap*, circa 1650, oil on panel (with additions), 28.7 x 24.3 cm., The Clowes Collection, Indianapolis, no. 2016.164

Fig. 3

[1] Infrared reflectography of the present painting made by Studio Redivivus in July 2025 reveals no elaborate underdrawing, but rather a direct application of paint, with minor adjustments visible in the contour of the cap and beard.

[2] For further reading on this painting see: E. van de Wetering, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 6, *Rembrandt's Paintings Revisited: A Complete Survey*, 2015, no. 230, pp. 620-623

[3] Dated after 1655, oil on panel, no. ACF 1960.01

[44] Dendrochronological analysis dates the present painting on panel to circa 1650