



MUSEUMS, COLLECTIONS AND SOCIETY

YEARBOOK 2023

Holly O'Farrell and Pieter ter Keurs (eds)



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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Research in progress: Weissenbruch or forgery?

Anna Tummers, Matthias Alfeld &
Sander Paarlberg¹

Introduction

The depot of the Dordrechts Museum contains a small city view on panel: *The Church Street in Rhenen* (fig. 1). It was bequeathed to the museum in 2003 but never hung on display in the museum galleries. If we are to believe the signature at the lower left, it is a work by the famous nineteenth-century painter Jan Weissenbruch (1822-1880). Known as one of the best painters of cityscapes of his time, Weissenbruch has also been called “the Vermeer of the 19th century”. He painted many sunlit and carefully balanced, picturesque townscapes with strong light-dark contrasts, such as his *Courtyard at the Town Hall in Culemborg* (fig. 1).

¹ The research described in the article was funded by a Museum Collections and Society Grant 2023 awarded by prof. dr. Pieter ter Keurs, Leiden University. The authors wish to thank a number of colleagues for supporting and enabling the research: director Femke Hameetman, curator Quirine van der Meer Mohr, head of collections Manon van der Mullen, conservator Lidwien Speleers and registrar Malou Koster at the Dordrechts Museum; conservator Giulia de Vivo, project assistant Conservation & Science, and Karin Liefink at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; head of collections Anna Bülow and registrar Jette Hoog Antink at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; minor coordinator Miguel Mira and Ph.D. student Luis de Almeida Nieto at the TU Delft; René Gerritsen for the infrared reflectography (IRR) as well as all the students who participated in part B of the minor: Larissa Bakker, Johan van den Berg, Babette van den Broek, Florentine de la Court, Sanne Dolk, Karolina Erni, Sophie Hemels, Lotus de Hertog, Sophie Kunst, Sophie Manintveld, Ismel Rahou, Diede van Rheege, Nienke Ridderikhoff, Britt Scheggetman, Benthe Spin, Fleur Steeman, Karolina Wróbel and Marieke de Wijk.



Fig. 5.1: The contested painting and two reference works in the restoration studio of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, from left to right:

- Jan Weissenbruch (?), *The Church Street in Rhenen*, 16.9 × 19 cm, Dordrechts Museum.
- Jan Weissenbruch, *The Church Street at Rhenen (Straatje te Rhenen)*, 38 × 54 cm, 1875 (signed lower left), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
- Jan Weissenbruch, *Courtyard at the Town Hall at Culemborg*, 80 × 58.7 cm, before 1860 (signed lower left), Dordrechts Museum.

Whether or not the small painting in the Dordrecht Museum can be considered part of Weissenbruch's oeuvre, however, is unclear. Curator Sander Paarlberg of the Dordrechts Museum is keenly aware of the attribution issues surrounding this type of popular painting in the nineteenth century. Together with his colleagues Liesbeth van Noortwijk, Quirine van der Meer Mohr and Manon van der Mullen at the Dordrechts Museum, he is preparing an exhibition to open in spring 2024 which focuses on the lower end of the art market in the nineteenth century when so-called "pot boilers," dealers bent on quick profit, encouraged artists to produce cheaply on a large scale. Paarlberg: "Although this practice is well known among experts, the general public has little idea of the variety of paintings produced during this



Fig. 5.2: The small painting from the Dordrecht Museum (left) and Weissenbruch from the Stedelijk Museum, both deframed:

- Jan Weissenbruch (?), *The Church Street in Rhenen*, 16.9 x 19 cm, Dordrechts Museum.
- Jan Weissenbruch, *The Church Street in Rhenen (Straatje te Rhenen)*, 38 x 54 cm, 1875 (signed lower left), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

time and of the scientific challenges involved in distinguishing the many copies, imitations and forgeries of this period.”

The small painting of the Church Street in Rhenen is a case in point. At first sight, it seems to fall short of Weissenbruch’s usual quality of work. Moreover, it could be a scaled-down repetition of a well-known composition by Weissenbruch: *The Church Street at Rhenen (Straatje te Rhenen)* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (fig. 2). The question therefore arises if the small painting in the storage of the Dordrecht Museum could be a forgery.

Thanks to a generous grant from the research group Museum, Collections and Society, BA3 students from the new Leiden-Delft Erasmus minor *Authenticity and Art Crime. Methods, Materials, and the Market* are able to study the picture in-depth under the guidance of Anna Tummers (Leiden University) and Matthias Alfeld (TU

Delft).² In order to gain more insight into the attribution of the painting, it is examined in detail and compared in depth to two well-known, authentic reference works: Weissenbruch's *Courtyard at the Town Hall in Culemborg* in the Dordrecht Museum and his *The Church Street at Rhenen (Straatje te Rhenen)* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Both the Dordrechts Museum and Stedelijk Museum generously agreed to have their paintings transported, deframed, photographed in detail and researched with a variety of instruments specifically for this case study. The analyses include careful stylistic comparisons, provenance research and material-technical analyses. The research fits well with the priorities of Museums, Collections and Society. This project deals with the classification and representation of works in museums and collections (priority 3) and also provides insight into the collection history through provenance research, which is also part of the case study (priority 1).

Relationship to the new minor Authenticity and Art Crime

This research project plays an important role in the new Leiden-Delft-Erasmus minor *Authenticity and Art Crime* and aligns neatly with its priorities. Part B of the minor, in fact, consists of a Challenging Case Study, that is: new research on a current issue such as a possible forgery or controversial attribution following the principles of Challenge Based Learning (CBL): *Engage, Investigate* and *Act*. Having completed three introductory courses on respectively 'authenticity research in the humanities,' 'physical and chemical analyses of art works,' and 'crime and disruption in the art market,' the students focus in part B on sharpening their research skills and cross-disciplinary communication. Through a series of assignments, the students deepen their knowledge and skills by collaborating in small groups and applying the methods learned and tested in part A to a real-life case study in part B, in this case the potential Weissenbruch forgery. Each group includes students from different universities in order to let them discover and experience working together in an interdisciplinary team. In the first CBL phase (*Engage*), after an introductory session and thorough visual analyses, the groups are encouraged to formulate their research questions (*Essential questioning* in CBL) and construct their own method of approaching the larger topic and specific issues surrounding this suspected forgery. A peer-review method helps to rephrase questions and revise their approach where needed.

Subsequently, in phase two (CBL *Investigate*) each week, the students receive small assignments that help them analyze and discuss the case-study under investigation. These small assignments focus on a specific aspect or discipline to be considered while doing these kinds of investigations (e.g. one session and assignment focus on a particular type of visual or chemical analysis or provenance research). This helps to make sure that the students will use their obtained knowledge in part A adequately.

2 For more information on the minor, see <https://www.globalheritage.nl/education-training/authenticity-and-art-crime-methods-materials-and-the-market>, consulted on Dec 19th 2023.

Moreover, it not only helps them get acquainted with performing thorough technical and visual analyses combined with research in databases, but it will also teach them how these different types of data can be linked and interpreted as a whole to understand the provenance of the case study. This will help them unveil whether or not this artwork is a forgery and the way(s) in which this can be tested step by step. Again, presentations and a peer-reviewing method will be used to not only check on the group's process and whether their method works, but seeing the process of fellow students also reveals how their different questions and approaches might lead to different insights. The assignments will be collected in a Portfolio which will be graded at the end of the course.

Lastly, in phase three (CBL *Act*) the students are encouraged to actively use and apply their developed method to the case-study. They formulate possible solutions, conclusions and recommendations for future research based upon their experiences and results. On December 13th, the students presented their findings to the curator Sander Paarlberg, conservator Lidwien Speleers, head of collections Manon van der Mullen and director Femke Hameetman of the Dordrechts Museum (fig. 3), which gave them an opportunity to further study the paintings in the flesh, test their preliminary conclusions and get valuable feedback. All in all, the students thus engage with a concrete challenge in the field, the students and teachers investigate the object through in-depth visual analyses, profound chemical analyses



Fig. 5.3: Students Johan van den Berg and Larissa Bakker presenting their findings at the Dordrechts Museum on December 13th 2023.



Fig. 5.4: All the students of the course *A Challenging Case study* (note 1) with Allesandra Marocchesi (far left) Matthias Alfeld (third from the left) and Anna Tummers (eighth from the left) and at the far right: Lidwien Speleer, Yaël Speck, Liesbeth van Noortwijk and Sander Paarlberg from the Dordrechts Museum.

and detailed provenance research in order to better understand the (suspected) forgery and how it differs from comparable reference material and, in the case of anomalies, subsequently search for similar cases and (criminal) patterns with the aim of analyzing these where possible. The students will reflect on the results of the different analyses, the various disciplinary perspectives involved as well as the added value of cross-disciplinarity, and their own role and interaction in the groups in the individual Portfolio, which will be handed in at the end of the course.

In-depth visual analysis, provenance research and material analyses

In order to prepare the students for the case study, they first attended a *Vermeer/Van Meegeren: Recognize the hand* workshop at the Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD) in The Hague, taught by Hans Wijergang. It provided a solid training in visual analysis with the aim of recognizing forgeries as well as an introduction into provenance research and the many different types of sources available at the RKD. Their subsequent research at the RKD yielded a number of other versions of *The Church Street in Rhenen* and other related works, as well as some relevant information on their provenance.

Meanwhile, the teachers had collected new technical information on the contested painting and the two reference works for the students to study. Thanks to the Museums, Collections and Society grant, all three paintings were transported to the Rijksmuseum Ateliergebouw in Amsterdam (fig. 1). Rijksmuseum conservator Giulia de Vivo kindly deframed and handled the paintings so that they could be analyzed with the different instruments. First, the paintings were analyzed with macroscopic X-Ray Fluorescence imaging spectroscopy (MA-XRF, fig. 5). Upon excitation with a primary X-ray beam materials emit characteristic fluorescence X-radiation, which allows us to identify the chemical elements present in that spot. The painting is scanned with an X-ray beam of a fraction of a millimeter in diameter and so pixel by pixel elemental distribution images are acquired. As the X-rays penetrate through the surface layers this provides on the one hand “color X-ray radiographs” of the painting that allow to compare the visual impression with paint under the surface of the painting (fig. 7). Knowing the chemical elements to be present in a spot, in combination with the color impression allows us to identify the pigments most likely used in the painting. Furthermore, two techniques were applied in Amsterdam and the depot of the Dordrecht Museum: Infrared Reflectography (IRR) and Reflectance Imaging Spectroscopy (RIS). In RIS a photograph of the painting is taken, but instead of 3 color channels in the visible range (380-700 nm) the data set has 204 channels between 400-1000 nm. This means that for each pixel an entire reflectance spectrum in the visible and near infrared range is detected. By themselves these spectra say little, but by comparing them to reference spectra like a fingerprint, the identification of pigments is possible (fig. 9). Beyond that, RIS can be used for the generation of false color images of the painting that highlight features with enhanced contrast. IRR uses infrared radiation of higher wavelength/lower energy. This radiation is absorbed less by the pigments in the painting but is reflected by the white ground of the painting. This generates an image with changed contrasts, compared to a normal photograph, but the fact that it penetrates till the ground layer also means that often the preparatory drawing is visible, if it is not covered by strongly absorbing or high contrast paint. This allows us to compare the final painting with an initial sketch and subsequent changes (fig. 8).

Furthermore, the two most similar paintings were photographed in great detail by Alessandra Marocchesi (fig. 4), who is writing a Ph.D. dissertation on a low-cost system for technical photography: Puzzle-HR, supervised by Prof. dr. Robert G. Erdmann.³ With an automated system she determined the ideal depth of field and collected hundreds of individual photographs. Using a complex algorithm that she will make freely available (open access) once her dissertation is completed, Marocchesi subsequently stitched the hundreds of different photographs into one

³ This research project is funded by the Horizon2020 programme of the European Union. Grant # 813789.



Fig. 5.5: MA-XRF scanning at the Rijksmuseum Ateliergebouw on September 20th 2023, by Luis De Almeida Nieto (left), Giulia de Vivo (right) and Matthias Alfeld (far right).

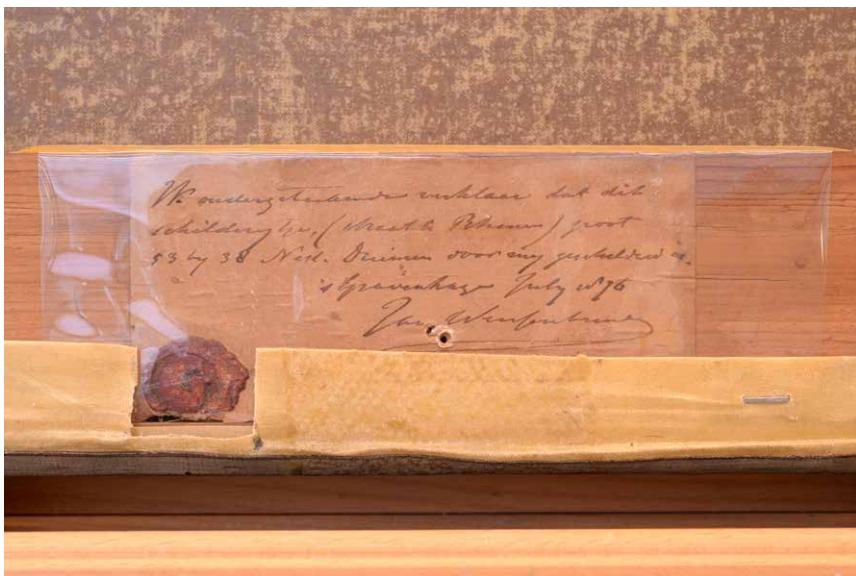


Fig. 5.6: The hand-written label at the back of Weissenbruch's *The Church Street in Rhenen* at the Stedelijk Museum.



Fig. 5.7: Jan Weissenbruch (?), *The Church Street in Rhenen*, 16.9 × 19 cm, Dordrechts Museum, as photograph and elemental distribution images of lead (Pb), mercury (Hg) and Chromium (Cr). Lead is present throughout the painting in the form of lead white, a common pigment before the mid 20th century. Mercury is present in the red pigment cinnabar. Chromium is present in the form of yellow or orange chromates or green chromium oxides. These industrially produced pigments are characteristic for the 19th century. The shape indicates the detail shown in the IRR in Figure 8.

composite and highly detailed online image of each painting, which allowed the students to compare the paintings in great detail and side by side online (https://images.erdmann.io/viewer.html?prefix=/LDE/Weissenbruch/&pointer=0.288,0.000&i=Weissenbruch-large_VIS_8.28-um;_https://images.erdmann.io/viewer.html?prefix=/LDE/Weissenbruch/&pointer=0.272,0.001&i=Weissenbruch-small_VIS_8.28-um).

First revealing finding and future presentation of the conclusions

During the physical inspection of the paintings a hand-written label at the back of one of the reference works, *The Church Street in Rhenen* at the Stedelijk Museum stood out and underscored the relevance of the case study (fig. 6). It reads: 'I the undersigned declare that this little painting (street in Rhenen) measuring 53 by 38 inches is painted



Fig. 5.8: Detail of Jan Weissenbruch (?), *The Church Street in Rhenen*, 16.9 × 19 cm, Dordrechts Museum. In the Infrared reflectogram (right) the original sketch line is clearly visible above the edge of the roof, as opposed to the conventional photograph.

by me. *The Hague, July 1876 Jan Weissenbruch.*⁴ Even though the painting is already signed at the front and was apparently sold by the artist himself to the *Vereniging tot het Vormen van een Openbare Verzameling van Hedendaagse Kunst* (Association to Create a Public Collection of Contemporary Art), a collection that was incorporated into the Stedelijk Museum when it was founded in 1895, there was apparently also a need to guarantee its authenticity with a written paper statement sealed to its back. The need for an additional guarantee may be a direct result of the art market practice described at the start of this article: the fact that the so-called *pot boilers* (dealers) encouraged artists to produce cheaply and on a large scale, which resulted in a multitude of different versions and imitations, that could be very hard to distinguish. It indicates that determining the authenticity of a painting like the one in the Dordrecht storage room was already considered challenging at the time in which the undisputed original and most similar picture at the Stedelijk Museum was created.

While the students of the minor are still working on their Portfolios, the Dordrecht Museum will shortly determine how the research done in the context of the minor can be incorporated in their upcoming spring exhibition. Once the research is completed, the conclusions will be presented in an article in the Dordrechts Museum *Culture magazine*, and the technical findings will be presented in-depth at the X-ray fluorescence imaging (MA-XRF) and reflectance imaging (RIS) meeting 2024 in Washington D.C. in June 2024.

4 In Dutch: *Ik ondergetekende verklaar dat dit schilderijtje (straat te Rhenen) groot 53 bij 38 Ned. duimen door mij geschilderd is. 's Gravenhage, July 1876 Jan Weissenbruch.*

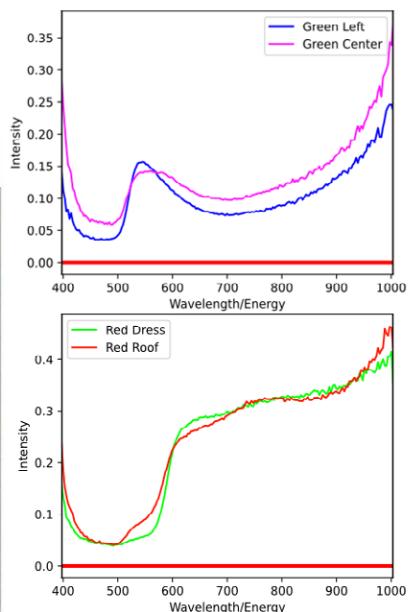


Fig. 5.9: Reflectance spectra selected from Weissenbruch (?), The Church Street in Rhenen, 16.9 × 19 cm, Dordrechts Museum. Two green and two red spectra from different areas of the painting. All spectra result from a mixture of pigments, but "Red Dress" has the characteristic raise in reflectance related to the band gap of vermillion, while "Red Roof" has features reminiscent of red iron oxides. "Green Left" is in good agreement with Chrome oxide green, while the "Green Central" is a mixture of yellow and blue pigments.

