

Weeding out Rembrandt fakes not nearly as easy as it sounds

By John Zorovich
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A research project that tries to determine the authenticity of Rembrandt paintings was explained Thursday in Eau Claire by Alfred Bader, a millionaire chemist, philanthropist and art collector.

Bader, founder of the Aldrich Chemical Co. in Milwaukee, is an avid collector of 17th century Dutch art — particularly the paintings of Rembrandt and his pupils.

These paintings were the subject of a slide presentation to about 100 people in the Fine Arts Center at the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire.

At question is the authenticity of hundreds of works attributed to the 17th century painter. The Rembrandt Research Project is a Dutch initiative established to determine if the works are genuine.

The project began in the early 1960s when a team of seven Dutch art experts was assigned the arduous task of analyzing the paintings. The undertaking continues to this day.

Over the years, Bader said the project has created three tomes of analysis on 300 paintings originally attributed to Rembrandt. Of these, more than half have since been attributed to other artists.

The group determines the authenticity of the paintings using a variety of techniques — from analyzing



Bader

brush strokes, determining the painting's age and scrutinizing the artist's signature.

The task is complicated by Rembrandt's pupils whose styles, in certain instances, bear a striking resemblance to his own.

"An honest signature is not an assurance that the painting was painted by Rembrandt," Bader said, explaining that Rembrandt sometimes signed his students' work.

In other cases, artists would forge Rembrandt's signature to increase the value of their product.

During his slide presentation, Bader demonstrated the great significance certain art collectors attach to the artist's name, rather than to the work.

Bader recounted a story of an authentic, yet poorly conceived Rembrandt self-portrait that sold at a Christie's auction for the equivalent of \$7 million.

"There's no accounting for taste," Bader said.

Bader uses the weight of the project's opinions to his advantage. On several occasions he has bought less expensive paintings — originally believed to be painted by Rembrandt's students — only to have the group determine they were painted by the master himself.

For Bader, art isn't about the significance that the artist's name carries.

So what determines a good painting?

"I feel good when I look at it," Bader said matter-of-factly. "That's what pictures are supposed to do."

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