





# Rembrandt's *Joseph Telling his Dreams*

and its Former Owner August Wilhelm Volz (1873-1944)

• GUIDO M.C. JANSEN •

As soon as I took up my post as curator in the then Department of Paintings headed by Wouter Kloek in September 1992, it became clear that Rembrandt would be occupying a great deal of my time. On my very first day at work, the *Portrait of Johannes Wtenbogaert* arrived from the United States under conditions of the utmost secrecy. Negotiations were under way to purchase the work for the Netherlands. At the same time, Martin Bijl and Manja Zeldenrust of the restoration studio were hard at work on a major project involving the restoration of six late paintings by Rembrandt. Wouter and I provided the art historical support for this project. A few months later, quite remarkably and thanks to the immense efforts of Henk van Os, these works were joined in the workshop by the newly acquired Wtenbogaert portrait.

The painting discussed in this article, Rembrandt's *Joseph Telling his Dreams* (fig. 1), was not part of the restoration project because it dates – as, incidentally, does the Wtenbogaert – from 1633, and is therefore not a late work. It was taken in hand in the studio a few years later, before it went out as part of a major travelling exhibition of Rembrandt etchings in the Rijksmuseum's collection in 2000.<sup>1</sup> It is an oil sketch painted by the artist as a

Fig. 1  
REMBRANDT  
VAN RIJN,  
*Joseph Telling his  
Dreams*, 1633.  
Oil on paper,  
510 x 390 mm.  
Rijksmuseum,  
Amsterdam  
(inv. no. SK-A-3477).

preliminary study for the 1638 print of the same name (B 37). The oil sketch, a grisaille painted on paper pasted on to card, has been part of the Rijksmuseum collection since 1945. The museum was able to acquire it thanks to the generosity of the former owner, August Wilhelm Volz (1873-1944), and the Board of Governors of the Rembrandt Society, of which Volz was a member for many years. The way the painting was transferred to public ownership is described in the Rembrandt Society's annual report for 1945.<sup>2</sup> Another important work in the Volz Collection, the *Portrait of a Man* by Michael Sittow, at the time still attributed to Jan Gossaert, went to the Royal Picture Gallery 'Mauritshuis' in The Hague in the same way. The man who had two such important paintings in his collection was seen in his own time, quite rightly, as 'a famous collector and patron of the arts in The Hague'.<sup>3</sup> So who was he – this almost forgotten collector who was so generous to the nation?

August Wilhelm Volz was born in Batavia in 1873. He was the oldest son of a German father, after whom he was named, and a Dutch mother, who moved in free-thinking, liberal circles.<sup>4</sup> Volz Senior was born in Heilbronn in 1829 and went to Batavia around 1860,



where he served as, among other things, the Consul of Baden and Bavaria. It was there that he met and married his Dutch wife, Marianne Diederichs (1840-1926). Soon after the birth of young August Wilhelm in 1875, the family left the Dutch East Indies. After stays in Baden-Baden and Baarn in the Netherlands, they finally settled in London in 1884. Volz Senior died in 1895 during a trip to Sweden. Young August Wilhelm thus spent most of his formative years in London, and in 1892 the whole family were naturalized in England. Volz retained his British nationality until his death.

In 1893 young Volz took a job as a salesman with Wellenstein, Krause & Co., a trading firm with branches in London and Batavia. Another important contact for the Rijksmuseum, the Fraser family, also had relations with this firm. In 1896, Wellenstein's sent Volz back to the town of his birth, where he became deputy manager and then, in 1910, managing partner. It was on Java that he met Diederika Wilhelmina Soeters (1876-1944), whom he married in 1898. She was the daughter of Henri Soeters (1842-1920), the president of the Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij (NHM) in Batavia. The marriage produced four children, all born in Batavia. From 1911 to 1913 the family lived in London; between 1913 and 1916 they were back in Batavia. Moving back from the Indies again, they were in London from 1916 to 1918. Finally, in 1919, they settled permanently in The Hague, where they lived in Villa Demangan, a large, imposing house in Andries Bickerweg, which Volz renamed Villa Totila. It is still there: since 1945 it has housed the Russian Embassy. Volz established his own company, Volz & Co., in The Hague. This firm, which like Wellenstein, Krause & Co. traded in sugar and other commodities, had its offices in Noordeinde and remained in business until 1940. In the Netherlands Volz was regarded as an author-

ity in sugar production; from 1923 to 1940 he wrote articles about trends in the sugar sector for the *Economisch Statistische Berichten*. In April 1940 August Wilhelm and his wife fled the Netherlands, travelling by way of England to the Dutch East Indies. Despite this, they were overtaken by the Second World War and both died on Java in December 1944, separated from each other in the Japanese internment camp at Solo.

Volz began to collect seriously as soon as he settled permanently in The Hague. In 1919, for instance, at the sale of the Langerhuizen Collection at Frederik Muller's auction house in Amsterdam, he bought some fifty old master drawings, the nucleus of his collection of works on paper. Never again was he to add to it on such a scale. The very next year, the enthusiastic Volz experienced his *annus mirabilis* as a collector. In 1920 he bought no fewer than ten paintings, among them the three works that are now in Dutch museums, thanks to him. On 29 June 1920 he bought the Rembrandt oil sketch at the sale of part of the Six Collection at Frederik Muller's; he left the bidding for the Rembrandt to the auctioneer, which probably explains the strange anomaly in the literature – Volz is only recorded as the owner of *Joseph Telling his Dreams* from 1928 onwards.<sup>5</sup> A week later, on 3 July 1920, he bought the intimate *Head of a Girl* by Matthijs Maris, a small work that he left to the Haags Gemeentemuseum.<sup>6</sup> On 1 November of the same year he bought Sittow's *Portrait of a Man*, then still attributed to Jan Gossaert, probably from the Cassirer Gallery in Amsterdam.<sup>7</sup> Volz's account book has survived, so we are very well informed about the growth of his holdings.<sup>8</sup> He had already started to build up his extraordinarily eclectic collection, in which old and modern Oriental and Western art came together, while he was in the Indies. It ranged from an



Indian *Mahaparinirvána*, a reclining Buddha with his ten disciples dating from AD 549, to an 1887 painting by Vincent van Gogh.

The Paul Cassirer Gallery, which had branches in Berlin and Amsterdam, played an important role in the creation of the Volz Collection. The German art historian Helmuth Lütjens (1893-1987) was largely responsible for this, and it may well be that Volz's serious approach to collecting old masters can be attributed to his influence. Lütjens was August Wilhelm's nephew, the son of his older sister Louise (1863-1945), who had married the Singapore merchant Hans Lütjens (1845-1920) in London in 1885. Helmuth gained his doctorate in 1921 with a dissertation on Rembrandt. Although Lütjens did not settle in the Netherlands for good until 1923 (at the same time as Franz Koenigs and

his collection of drawings<sup>9</sup>), when he became Cassirer's manager in the Netherlands, he did stay with his uncle in The Hague from 25 May to 25 August 1920 – the precise period when Volz bought his Rembrandt oil sketch and Lütjens himself was researching his thesis on Rembrandt and was in regular contact with the great Rembrandt scholar, Cornelis Hofstede de Groot.

A photograph dating from 1934 reveals how the Rembrandt was displayed in the interior of the Villa Totila (fig. 2). The oil sketch is shown standing on an easel in one of the drawing rooms. Among the pictures on the rear wall we can identify Michael Sittow's *Portrait of a Man* and a number of other early Flemish paintings. Some of the Chinese ceramics have been arranged on small tables.

Fig. 2  
Interior of the  
Villa Totila with the  
Rembrandt on an  
easel. Photograph  
dating from 1934.  
Private collection.







Fig. 3  
DICK VOLZ,  
*My Father*, c. 1930.  
Woodcut,  
private collection.

The interior of the Villa Totila has also survived in other forms. There is a particularly charming woodcut by Volz's son Dick, titled *My Father*, in which August Wilhelm is shown writing at a desk, above which hangs the Gossaert/Sittow (fig. 3). Dietrich Heinrich (Dick or Dirk) Volz (1901-84) trained as a painter and printmaker at the academy in The Hague and was for some time keeper of the print room at the Haags Gemeentemuseum.

A collection of top-flight art in private hands like this one inevitably attracted many art historians and collectors to the Villa Totila. Thanks to the surviving visitors' book, we know who they were. Abraham Bredius, Wilhelm Martin, Max Friedländer, Jakob Rosenberg, Georg Swarzenski, Friedrich Winkler, Horst Schneider and Otto Benesch came into the first category; Frits Lugt and his wife, F.W. Freiherr von Bissing and Mr and Mrs Veltman-Nienhuijs into the second. In 1938 the collection even attracted a delegation of twenty-two Swedish and Danish collectors and museum directors.

Visitors to the Villa Totila could not necessarily count on all the works of art actually being at home to them when they called: Volz was extraordinarily generous when it came to lending works and wanted everyone to be able to share his pleasure in his art. As a consequence the Rembrandt, in particular, was more often out than in and that is probably the reason that the sketch did not have a distinguished place on the wall. As early as 1922, *Joseph Telling his Dreams* was part of the Christmas exhibition staged by the Museum Boymans in Rotterdam, after which it was loaned to the Mauritshuis in The Hague in 1925, along with the 'Gossaert'. In 1929 Rembrandt's painting was sent to the prestigious *Dutch Art Exhibition* at the Royal Academy of Arts in London and in 1931 it and ten other works from the Volz Collection were again shown in Museum Boymans's Christmas exhibition. In 1932 the Rembrandt oil sketch made its first appearance in the Rijksmuseum, at the Rembrandt exhibition of that year. In 1935 the painting went to Brussels as part of the World's Fair. In 1937 the work was hanging in the Haags Gemeentemuseum on the occasion of the exhibition *Oude kunst in Haags bezit*, only to turn up a year later in *Masterpieces of Three Centuries 1400-1800*, again in Museum Boymans in Rotterdam. In 1939, finally, the Rembrandt was once more a guest at the Rijksmuseum, this time in an exhibition titled *Bijbelsche Kunst*.

A.W. Volz was a passionate patron of art. Because of the art he owned, he was much in demand as a member of exhibition organizing committees and he was also very active on the boards of cultural bodies. In 1927, for instance, he was a member of the organizing committee for the *Exhibition of Islamic Art* in the Haags Gemeentemuseum, followed a year later by a seat on the board of the Society for the Establishment of a Museum of Modern Art in



The Hague. In 1932 he was – of course – a member of the honorary committee of the Rembrandt exhibition in the Rijksmuseum, followed in 1935 by a stint as treasurer of the Association of Friends of The Hague Museum, membership of the honorary committee for the Maris exhibition at the Haags Gemeentemuseum and the chairmanship of the main board of the Nederlandsch Kunstverbond. In 1936 he became a member of the board of the Rembrandt Society and a member of the honorary committee for the Hieronymus Bosch exhibition in Museum Boymans; in 1937, finally, he was a member of the working committee for the *Old Art in The Hague* exhibition. It is safe to say that during his lifetime the culture-loving Netherlands was already greatly indebted to A.W. Volz.

To Volz and his fellow board members of the Rembrandt Society, it was self-evident that Dutch museums had to be supported. Volz's most inspiring example in this respect has to have been Charles Joseph Drucker and his wife Maria Lydia Fraser, whom he must often have met during his years in London: the firm that belonged to Maria Fraser's father had been a partner of Wellenstein, Krause & Co since it was established in Batavia in 1882. The Druckers' huge donation to the Rijksmuseum in 1909 certainly inspired Volz to bequeath his most important paintings to the national art collection by way of the Rembrandt Society. The oil sketch *Joseph Telling his Dreams* in the Rijksmuseum is an enduring testimony to his patronage.

## NOTES

- 1 Erik Hinterding et al., *Rembrandt the Printmaker*, cat. Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam 2000, pp. 159–61, at cat. no. 31.
- 2 *Vereeniging Rembrandt tot behoud en vermeerdering van kunstschaten in Nederland; verslag over het jaar 1945*, (s.l., 1946), p. 4 'Under the terms of his will, the late member of our Board, Mr A.W. Volz, made it possible to acquire two important paintings on very reasonable terms, while his heirs facilitated the execution of this intention by a favourable interpretation of the provisions. For this, we are most grateful to both Mr Volz and his heirs.' For the acquisition see also: P. Hecht, *125 jaar openbaar kunstbezit: met steun van de Vereniging Rembrandt*, Zwolle 2008, p. 109.
- 3 It was in these words that Volz was introduced as the new president of the Nederlandsch Kunstverbond in 1935; see Carla Craft, *Kunst in nood*, Delft 2008, p. 27.
- 4 All the information about A.W. Volz and his collection that follows is taken from documents in the Volz family archives. They include the accounts book and the visitors' book.
- 5 For example in: J. Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, volume 2, The Hague 1986, pp. 289–97, no. A 66.
- 6 Cat. Maris exhibition, Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, 1935–36, no. 9.
- 7 For the *Portrait of a Man*, attributed to Michael Sittow since 1968, see Ben Broos et al., *Portraits in the Mauritshuis 1430–1790*, Zwolle 2004, pp. 244–47, no. 55.
- 8 The amassing and dispersal of the collection of Western art in particular is described at length in G. Jansen and R. Volz, *August Wilhelm Volz (1873–1944): 'een bekend verzamelaar en kunstbeschermer in Den Haag'*, Bergen 2009. This work was published in a very limited, non-commercial edition.
- 9 To all intents and purposes, Lütjens was the curator of the Koenigs Collection. It was he, for instance, who wrote the catalogue when a wide-ranging selection of the French drawings were shown in Museum Boymans. See: H. Lütjens, *Catalogus van de tentoonstelling van oude Fransche teekeningen uit de verzameling F. Koenigs*, Rotterdam (Museum Boymans), 1934–35. A year later he was responsible for the catalogue of paintings from Koenigs's collection when they were exhibited in Museum Boymans.