



Consistent Choices

A Technical Study of Johannes Cornelisz Verspronck's Portraits in the Rijksmuseum

• ANNA KREKELER, ERIKA SMEENK-METZ, ZEPH BENDERS AND
MICHEL VAN DE LAAR •

In memory of Manja Zeldenrust (1952-2013)

In 2008 the Rijksmuseum acquired four portraits painted by the Haarlem-born artist Johannes Cornelisz Verspronck (c. 1601/03-1662).¹ The Rijksmuseum now owns eight portraits by him painted between 1641 and 1653, the best-known being the *Portrait of a Girl Dressed in Blue*.

Two of the four paintings that were acquired, the *Portrait of Maria van Strijp* and the *Portrait of Eduard Wallis*, had been part of the Rijksmuseum's collection on long-term loan since 1952, before they were permanently added to the collection along with two other portraits of members of the same family. The purchase allowed the authors the opportunity to undertake thorough research into both painting technique and condition, and to restore them.² The other four portraits by the artist in the Rijksmuseum's collection were also researched to gain more in-depth knowledge of Verspronck's painting style. The authors also had the opportunity to study the *Portrait of a Man* and the *Portrait of a Woman* in the Rijksmuseum Twente³ and three portraits of women painted by Verspronck in the Louvre.⁴

The thorough research by Ella Hendriks into Verspronck's painting technique and Haarlem studio practices in general and Rudi Ekkart's

Detail of fig. 1

fundamental publications on the artist's life and oeuvre were indispensable in enabling the authors' own conclusions to be put into context.⁵

Alongside Frans Hals and Jan de Bray, Johannes Cornelisz Verspronck was one of the most successful portraitists in seventeenth-century Haarlem, yet we know comparatively little about him. He most probably learned the trade from his father Cornelis Engelsz (c. 1575-1650), who had been a pupil of Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem and of Karel van Mander.⁶ Verspronck joined the Haarlem Guild of St Luke in 1632. He died in 1662 and was buried in the Grote Kerk in Haarlem. His oeuvre – the earliest dated work is from 1634, the last 1658 – contains, as far as we know, at least a hundred portraits. We only know of one history painting, one genre work and one still life, all painted in his early period.⁷

The four recently acquired portraits are of members of the Wallis and Van Strijp families and come from the collections of the subjects' descendants.⁸ The pendants of the married couple, Eduard Wallis (1621-1684) and Maria van Strijp (1627-1707), were painted in 1652 (figs. 1, 2). The earliest portrait in the group acquired is that of their mother-in-law and mother respectively, Adriana



Figs. 1 and 2

JOHANNES CORNELISZ
VERSPRONCK,
*Portrait of Eduard
Wallis and Portrait
of Maria van Strijp*,
1652.

Oil on panel,
98 x 76 cm.
Amsterdam, Rijks-
museum, inv. nos.
SK-A-4999, SK-A-5000;

purchased with the
support of the
BankGiro Loterij, the
Fonds Cleyndert, the
Stortenbeker Fonds
of the Vereniging
Rembrandt and the
Rijksmuseum Fonds.
Photograph taken
after the 2009
restoration.



Fig. 3

JOHANNES CORNELISZ
VERSPRONCK,
*Portrait of Adriana
Croes*, 1644.

Oil on canvas,
92 x 75 cm.
Amsterdam, Rijks-
museum, inv. no.
SK-A-4998; purchased
with the support of
the BankGiro Loterij.
Photograph taken
after the 2009
restoration.

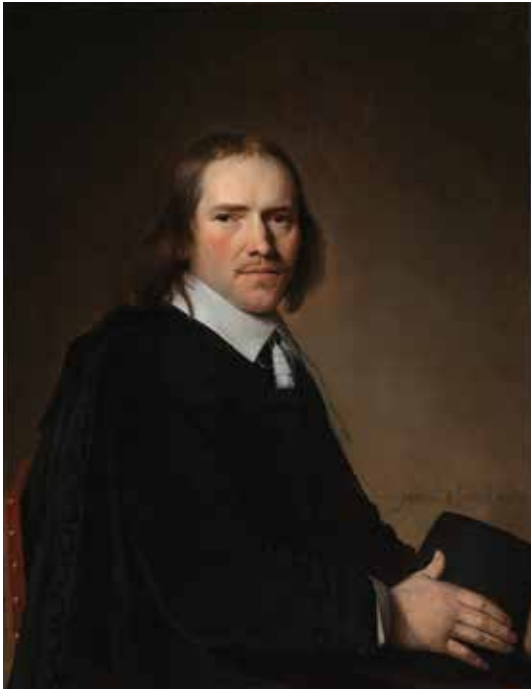
Croes (1599-1656), painted in 1644 (fig. 3). After the death of her husband Hendrik Pietersz van Strijp in 1639, she was left with five young daughters. Three of them later married sons of the Wallis family, a Scottish Presbyterian family of textile merchants. The fourth painting, *Portrait of a Man of the Wallis Family* (fig. 4), was painted in 1653 and is probably of one of Eduard Wallis's brothers.⁹

The most popular work in Verspronck's oeuvre is the *Portrait of a Girl Dressed in Blue* painted in 1641 and purchased in 1928 (fig. 5). We do not know who she is, but judging by her



Fig. 5
JOHANNES CORNELISZ
VERSPRONCK,
*Portrait of a Girl
Dressed in Blue*, 1641.
Oil on canvas, 82 x 67 cm.
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. SK-A-3064;
purchased with the
support of the Vereniging
Rembrandt.

Fig. 4
JOHANNES CORNELISZ
VERSPRONCK,
*Portrait of a Man of the
Wallis Family*, 1653.
Oil on panel, 85 x 66 cm.
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. SK-A-4997;
purchased with the
support of the BankGiro
Loterij. Photograph taken
after the 2009 restoration.



expensive clothes we may assume that she came from a well-to-do family. She would probably have been from Haarlem, as almost everyone who sat for Verspronck and has been identified came from there or was connected to the city in one way or another.¹⁰ Thanks to Ekkart's provenance research, we know that the girl was most likely a daughter of the subjects in the *Portrait of a Man* and *Portrait of a Woman* in the Rijksmuseum Twenthe's collection (figs. 6, 7).¹¹

In 1641 Verspronck painted the portrait of Pieter Jacobsz Schout (1570-1645), which the Rijksmuseum bought at auction in 1858 (fig. 8). Until this sale the work was still owned by Schout's descendants. Schout came from a Haarlem family of regents and between 1608 and 1616 was burgo-master of the city on five occasions. He also held senior ranks in the civic guard (St George's Militia). His career came to an end in 1618, when Prince Maurice decreed that Remonstrant families would no longer be allowed to occupy high office.¹²



Fig. 6

JOHANNES CORNELISZ
VERSPRONCK,
Portrait of a Man,
1641.
Oil on canvas,
82 x 67 cm.
Enschede, Rijks-
museum Twenthe,
inv. no. 515.
Photo:
R. Klein Gotink.

The portrait of Johan van Schoterbosch (c. 1564-1654) was painted in 1647 and came into the Rijksmuseum's collection in 1885 (fig. 9). This painting was also owned by the family until the museum acquired it. Van Schoterbosch likewise held high rank in the Haarlem civic guard (Kloveniers Barracks) until he too was dismissed by Prince Maurice in 1618.¹³

Little more is known about the *Portrait of a Man*, painted in 1646, other than that it was donated to the Rijksmuseum in 1940 (fig. 10). The provenance prior to 1929 and the sitter's identity are unclear.

Painting Technique Supports

At the beginning of the seventeenth century wood was the most common support for paintings, but canvas was used with increasing frequency as the century progressed.¹⁴ Hendriks reports that the use of canvas as a support in Haarlem probably gained popularity in the 1590s, beginning with Cornelisz

Fig. 7

JOHANNES CORNELISZ
VERSPRONCK,
Portrait of a Woman,
1640.
Oil on canvas,
82 x 67 cm.
Enschede, Rijks-
museum Twenthe,
inv. no. 514.
Photo:
R. Klein Gotink.

Cornelisz van Haarlem.¹⁵ For instance, although Verspronck's famous contemporary Frans Hals, who also lived and worked in Haarlem, used panels for small portraits throughout his career, in general he painted much more on canvas.¹⁶ This does not, however, apply to Verspronck, who seems to have done completely the opposite in his later career (fig. 11).¹⁷ The paintings researched for this article attest to this pattern; the eight portraits on canvas date from between 1640 and 1646, the five panels between 1647 and 1653.

Almost all the single figure portraits by Verspronck are around 70 to 90 centimetres high and 60 to 70 centimetres wide regardless of the nature of the support.¹⁸ The portraits researched also fall roughly within this range (h. 76-92 cm, w. 62-68 cm), the somewhat larger portraits of Maria van Strijp and Eduard Wallis excluded.¹⁹ Yet even this slightly larger size is also occasionally found in Verspronck's oeuvre.

The pendants of Eduard Wallis and Maria van Strijp and the *Portrait of a*

Fig. 8
 JOHANNES CORNELISZ
 VERSPRONCK,
*Portrait of Pieter
 Jacobsz Schout*, 1641.
 Oil on canvas,
 77 x 64 cm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 inv. no. SK-A-380.



Fig. 9
 JOHANNES CORNELISZ
 VERSPRONCK,
*Portrait of Johan van
 Schoterbosch*, 1647.
 Oil on panel,
 76 x 62 cm.
 Amsterdam, Rijks-
 museum, inv. no.
 SK-A-1253; gift of
 Jonkheer J.S.R. van
 de Poll, Arnhem.



Fig. 10
 JOHANNES CORNELISZ
 VERSPRONCK,
Portrait of a Man,
 1646. Oil on canvas,
 86 x 66 cm.
 Amsterdam, Rijks-
 museum, inv. no.
 SK-A-3352, gift of
 Mr and Mrs Kessler-
 Hülsmann, Kapelle
 op den Bosch.



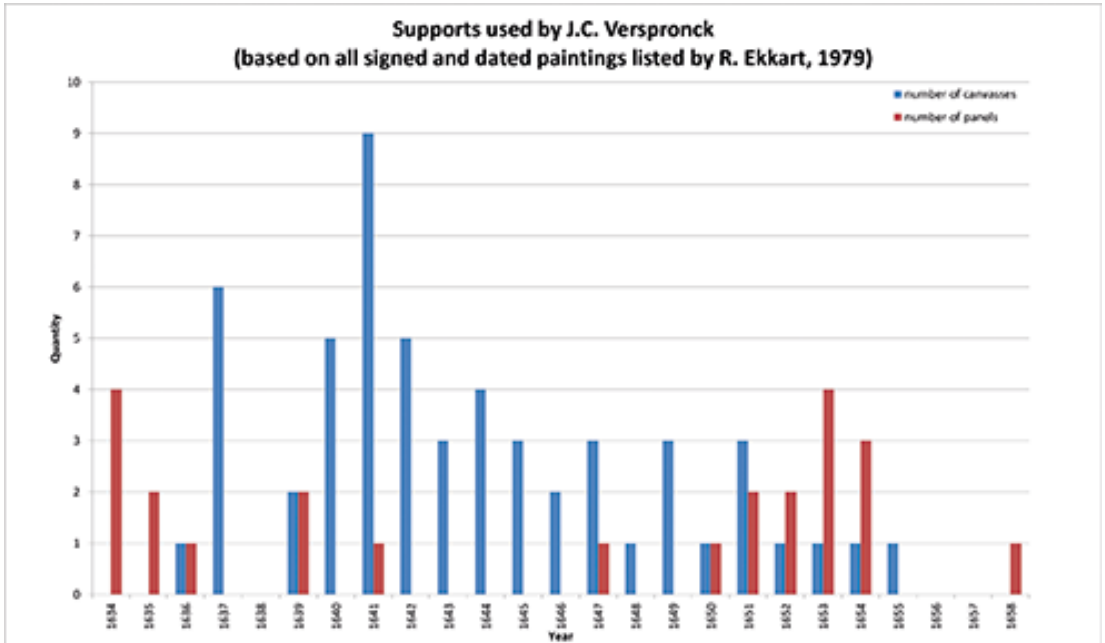


Fig. 11

Supports used by Johannes Cornelisz Verspronck, based on all currently known signed and dated paintings.

Man of the Wallis Family are still in their original frames – a rare stroke of luck.²⁰ There were also standard measurements for frames corresponding with those of the supports.²¹ The *Portrait of a Girl Dressed in Blue* and the portraits of her presumed parents were painted on canvases of exactly the same size, which lends credence to the suggestion that they were once portraits of family members hanging together as an ensemble (see figs. 5-7). This in contrast to the two independent portraits of the Wallis/van Strijp family which, given their difference in size and types of supports, were probably not made to hang together with the pendant couple.

a. Panel

All the panels researched are of good quality and retain their original size. The four panels in the Rijksmuseum collection were subjected to dendrochronological examination.²² This proved that they were all made from oak planks from the Baltic, as were the vast majority of Dutch and Flemish

panel paintings in the first half of the seventeenth century. This changed around 1650, when the vital routes for the timber trade across the Baltic were severed as a consequence of the Second Swedish-Polish War (1655-60).²³ The pendant portraits of Eduard Wallis and Maria van Strijp of 1652 and the *Portrait of a Man of the Wallis Family* of 1653 were likewise still painted on wood from the Baltic.²⁴ Hendriks states that dendrochronological research indicated that Verspronck painted his last known work, *Portrait of Pastor Bloemert*, in 1658 on an oak panel, only the middle plank of which came from the Baltic; the side planks came from Central Europe.²⁵ Evidently the panel maker from whom Verspronck bought his panels still had a stock of Baltic timber from before the time when the trade routes to the Baltic were severed, or perhaps Verspronck bought a number of panels just before then.

Dendrochronological research also revealed that the middle planks of the panels of Maria van Strijp and Eduard

Fig. 13

Back of the panel of the *Portrait of Maria van Strijp* (fig. 2) showing a detail of the groove and traces of saw marks in raking light.

Wallis came from the same tree. The two panels were probably made by a panel maker as a set. The use of planks from the same tree in a single panel and for pendants has been pointed out before.²⁶ Two of the three planks in *Portrait of Johan Schoterbosch* also came from one tree.

The construction of all the panels examined is virtually identical: three oak planks with a vertical grain were butt joined. Most of the planks are between 21 and 31 centimetres wide, with the exception of three planks around half as wide which were in all cases placed at the sides. The widest plank was often used in the middle so that the joins between the planks do not run through the figures' faces. This structure is common in seventeenth-century portraits and corresponds with Hendriks's findings on the panels used in Haarlem.²⁷ It was a means by which Verspronck and other artists anticipated the effects of a joined panel's ageing when they chose their support. Over time the glued joins can become evident, interfering with the faces. This specific panel construction for portraits is also found, for example, in the oeuvre of Michiel van Mierevelt (1566-1641).²⁸

While the backs of the panels used for the *Portrait of Johan van Schoterbosch* and the *Portrait of a Man of the Wallis*



Fig. 12
Back of the panel of
the *Portrait of a Man
of the Wallis Family*
(fig. 4).

Family were bevelled on all sides (fig. 12), the portraits of Maria van Strijp and Eduard Wallis are only bevelled at the top and bottom. However, all four panels are still the original size. The paint and ground layers run over the edges and the portraits of Maria van Strijp and Eduard Wallis still have their original frames. On the backs, the regular saw cut traces indicate production in a sawmill.

There is a singular X-shaped groove at the top of the middle plank on the back of the portrait of Maria van Strijp – the only panel with a mark (fig. 13). The role this groove played in the panel's history is not clear. Since the groove does not cross the glued joints the possibility that it was used to align the separate planks precisely before gluing can be ruled out.²⁹



b. Canvas

All eight canvases consist of one piece and were woven in a simple plain weave: alternating one warp thread over one weft thread. Automated Thread Counting (average number of threads per centimetre) was used on the X-radiographs of the canvases of the *Portrait of a Girl Dressed in Blue*, the *Portrait of Pieter Jacobsz Schout*, the *Portrait of Adriana Croes* and the *Portrait of a Man* to determine the density of the canvases.³⁰ This revealed that none of the canvases came from the same roll.

The *Portrait of Adriana Croes* proves to have been painted on a rather more densely woven canvas than the others, which are all roughly the same density.³¹ During her research in 1988 Hendriks was unable to find any canvases originating from the same roll, and commented on how much variation was found in the canvases Verspronck used. This suggests that Verspronck did not keep a stock of canvas in his studio but more likely purchased the support separately for each portrait commission.³²

Fig. 14
X-ray of the *Portrait of Pieter Jacobsz Schout* (fig. 8).
Cusping is clearly visible along all sides.





Fig. 15
Detail of the stretcher edge of the *Portrait of an Elderly Lady* with a piece of string stitched into it to reinforce the tacking edge, c. 1642-45. Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. RF 2135.

The clear evidence of cusping along all edges of the canvases researched shows that Verspronck used canvases that were stretched to the required size and primed individually (fig. 14). Artists could also choose to paint on canvases that were cut from a larger piece of pre-primed canvas and then stretched, but evidently Verspronck did not use them.

Over the course of time all the canvases researched had been lined. Many of the original tacking edges were cut off, probably during the lining. The left tacking edge of the *Portrait of a Girl Dressed in Blue* is still present. It is a selvedge, like the right and left tacking edges of the *Portrait of a Man* and the *Portrait of a Woman* in the Rijksmuseum Twenthe. The bottom tacking edge of the *Portrait of an Elderly Lady* in the Louvre has a piece of string rolled in and stitched along the outer edge of the canvas (fig. 15). In the seventeenth century tacking edges that had no selvedges were often reinforced with such a hem, with or without a piece of string. This meant that the canvas could be stretched on a wooden stretcher with the aid of tacks, wooden nails or, again, a piece of string, without risk of tearing along the tacking edge. The stretched canvas was then prepared with size and given a priming coat.

Priming


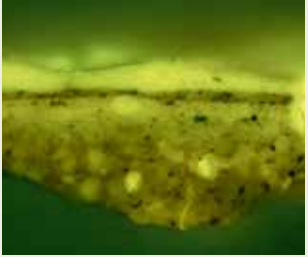


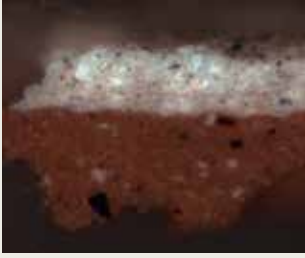
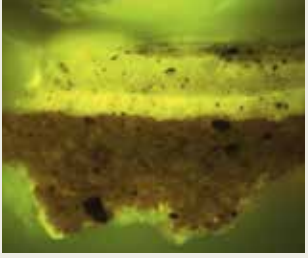
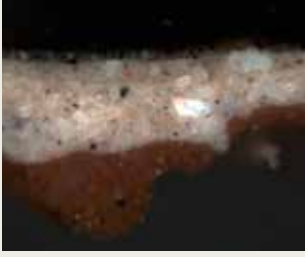
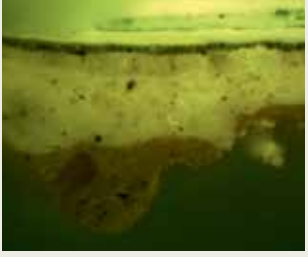

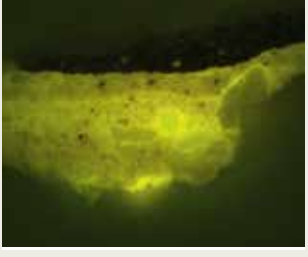
Seventeenth-century artists could size and prime their supports themselves or opt to buy their canvases or panels

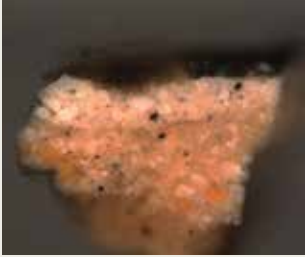
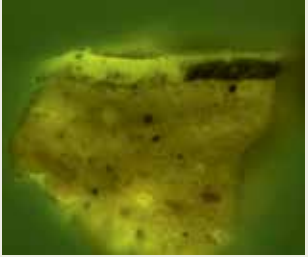



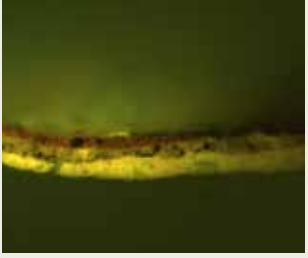

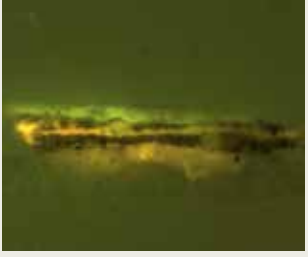

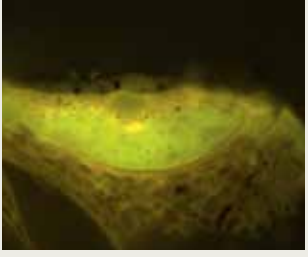
already prepared by a *primuurder*. The similar pinkish priming coats found in works by Verspronck and his Haarlem contemporaries, among them Frans Hals and Judith Leyster, might suggest that they bought their primed supports from the same *primuurder*.³³

In order to compare the priming and paint layers, two minuscule paint samples were taken from along the edges of each painting studied, with the exception of the three paintings in the Louvre collection. The paint cross-sections were studied under a microscope using normal light and ultraviolet light (uv) to get an insight into the layer build-up and the composition of the layers (fig. 16).

The priming coats found on the panels generally consist of a maximum of two layers and are often so thin that they barely fill the wood grain (see fig. 16, sample *Portrait of a Man of the Wallis Family*). No more than three priming layers were found on the paintings on canvas. Verspronck painted the portraits of Pieter Jacobsz Schout and the girl in blue, both dating from 1641, on an almost identical three-layer ground. Whereas most of the ground layers in the Verspronck paintings researched are made up of one or more light layers (pinkish, ochrish, whitish),³⁴ here the bottom layer is brick-red. The second and third layers are different shades of pink. The bottom layer of the *Portrait of a Man*, also dating from 1641 and most likely the father of the girl in the *Portrait of a Girl Dressed in Blue*, also has a brick-

Fig. 16

Overview of the cross-sections of ground and paint layers.			
PAINTING	DATE	SUPPORT	GROUND LAYER(S) (photos: 320x magnification, left: vis, right: uv)
<i>Portrait of a Woman</i> (RM Twenthe, inv. no. 514)	1640	canvas	 
Two ground layers: 2 whitish pink (see 1, with more fine white, blue and tiny red particles) 1 light pink (earths, coarse and fine white and fine black particles)			
<i>Portrait of a Man</i> (RM Twenthe, inv. no. 515)	1641	canvas	 
Two ground layers: 2 whitish pink (fine earths, red, black and some fine and coarse white particles) 1 brick red (fine red and some coarse white, black and transparent particles)			
<i>Portrait of a Girl Dressed in Blue</i> (RMA, inv. no. SK-A-3064)	1641	canvas	 
Three ground layers: 3 whitish pink (see 2, with slightly more white particles) 2 light pink (fine and coarse white and some fine earths, red and black particles) 1 brick red (fine red and some coarse white, black and transparent particles)			
<i>Portrait of Pieter Jacobsz Schout</i> (RMA, inv. no. SK-A-380)	1641	canvas	 
Three ground layers: 3 whitish pink (see 2, with slightly more white particles) 2 light pink (fine and coarse white and some fine earths, red and black particles) 1 brick red (fine red and some coarse white, black and transparent particles)			
<i>Portrait of Adriana Croes</i> (RMA, inv. no. SK-A-4998)	1644	canvas	 
Two ground layers: 2 whitish pink (fine earths, some black, blue and fine and coarse white particles) 1 beige (earths, black, some coarse white and transparent particles)			

Overview of the cross-sections of ground and paint layers.			
PAINTING	DATE	SUPPORT	GROUND LAYER(S) (photos: 320x magnification, left: vis, right: uv)
<i>Portrait of a Man</i> (RMA, inv. no. SK-A-3352)	1646	canvas	 
Two ground layers: 2 whitish pink (fine earths, some black, blue and fine and coarse white particles) 1 beige (earths, black and coarse white and transparent particles)			
<i>Portrait of Johan van Schoterbosch</i> (RMA, inv. no. SK-A-1253)	1647	panel	 
Two ground layers: 2 off-white (more particulate thin layer with white, some fine earths and black) 1 off-white, translucent layer			
<i>Portrait of Eduard Wallis</i> (RMA, inv. no. SK-A-4999)	1652	panel	 
One (or two) ground layer(s): 2 whitish pink (fine earths, some black and fine and coarse white particles) 1 missing in cross-section (?)			
<i>Portrait of Maria van Strijp</i> (RMA, inv. no. SK-A-5000)	1652	panel	 
One (or two) ground layer(s): 2 whitish pink (fine earths, some black and fine and coarse white particles)(?) 1 missing in cross-section (?)			
<i>Portrait of a Man of the Wallis Family</i> (RMA, inv. no. SK-A-4997)	1653	panel	 
Two layers: 2 off-white (more particulate thin layer with white, some fine earths and black) 1 off-white, translucent layer (barely fills grain of wood) o wood			

red priming layer. The second and top layers are beige-pink (cf. fig. 16). The lowest priming layers are often red in seventeenth-century paintings from Utrecht (for example by Hendrik ter Brugghen) or Amsterdam (for example Rembrandt and his circle) but this does not appear to have been popular in Haarlem.³⁵ Until now there was no indication that Verspronck painted on grounds with red priming. In his study of similar ground layers encountered in Rembrandt's paintings, Ashok Roy states that earth pigments may have been used for the first priming layer, which was necessary to fill in the interstices in the canvas, because they were reasonably cheap. It was the second ground layer containing lead white that ultimately determined the surface texture and colour.³⁶

The pendants from Enschede were painted in different years and the make-up of their ground layers differs. The *Portrait of a Woman* of 1640 has a ground layer consisting of two slightly different pink layers. The ground of the *Portrait of a Man* of 1641, as

described above, has a brick-red layer first and then a pink layer. The colours of the top ground layers of the two paintings are again very similar. In any event, the red in the first ground layer appears to have had no role in the finished painting. For the next stage in the painting process – the translucent brown under-modelling – Verspronck needed a light ground instead. In applying the top pink layer, was Verspronck trying to harmonize the man's canvas with the woman's? Did he apply both priming coats himself or did he buy the double-primed canvas (first red, then pink) ready-made from a *primuurder*? How Verspronck actually worked remains unclear.

Underdrawing

Before Verspronck picked up his palette, he adhered to the traditional method of sketching a dark underdrawing on the light ground – the guideline for the portrait – using two different materials, a dry and a liquid medium. The dry medium was probably black chalk, the liquid was thin

Fig. 17

Infrared reflectogram of the *Portrait of Johan van Schoterbosch* (fig. 9) showing a detail of the underdrawing of the face.

Fig. 18

Infrared reflectogram of the *Portrait of a Woman* (fig. 7) showing a detail of the underdrawing of the face and hair.



black paint.³⁷ Interestingly, no underdrawing has been found in the work of his contemporary, Frans Hals. He evidently chose to prepare his portraits just with under-modelling in dark paint, or perhaps the material he used for his underdrawing is invisible under infrared light.³⁸

Infrared reflectography gives us an idea of Verspronck's spontaneous and efficient underdrawing style.³⁹ He drew the shape of the faces and the position of the eyes, nose and mouth with the dry medium in flowing lines, often in clusters (fig. 17). The hair was also indicated with this dry medium in swift undulating or curling lines (fig. 18).

Paradoxically, it is from the infrared reflectogram of the *Portrait of a Man* that we get a clear idea of Verspronck's underdrawing for a woman's portrait. The original underdrawing on the primed canvas of this painting was of a woman wearing a millstone ruff and a cap (fig. 19). To the right of the man's face, Verspronck used swift lines to sketch in the shape of her face and the position of her eyes, nose and mouth.

He evidently rejected this first design and decided to reuse the already prepared support for the *Portrait of a Man*. Given that the drawing of the woman differs in position on the canvas from that of the man, her underdrawing is almost unaffected by the subsequent underdrawing and final painting of the man's portrait.

With the exception of one questionable case, there are, as far as we know, no surviving preparatory drawings by Verspronck.⁴⁰ It is likely, and already remarked upon by Hendriks, that the quick, spontaneous drawing style in the underdrawing process suggests that Verspronck drew at least the sitter's face straight on to the canvas from life and not on paper first.⁴¹

The paint used for the sitters' predominantly black clothes contains carbon, which makes it impossible to see any underdrawing in these passages with infrared reflectography. The blue paint layers of the dress in the *Portrait of a Girl Dressed in Blue*, however do not interfere with the infrared examination. In this case it

Fig. 19
Infrared reflectogram
of the *Portrait of a
Man* (fig. 10) showing
a detail of the man's
face with the under-
drawing of a woman
to its right.





Fig. 20
Infrared reflectogram
of the *Portrait of a
Girl Dressed in Blue*
(fig. 5) showing a
detail of the
underdrawing of the
dress (dry and fluid
media visible).

is easy to see that Verspronck used both a dry and a liquid medium for the initial indication of the clothes (fig. 20). To the right of the figure, parallel to the present outline, we can make out an earlier outline of the dress executed in a liquid medium – black paint. Verspronck subsequently concealed



this line under the background. The increasing transparency of the paint layer that has occurred over time means that this former outline is now visible to the naked eye. Discarded outlines like this can also be seen to the right of the figure of Adriana Croes and in other portraits by Verspronck. The hands often have similar outlines in black paint (fig. 21); the use of dry medium has never been revealed in the hands. The final painting largely follows the underdrawing.

Paint Layers

In general it can be said that Verspronck laid in his paintings from back to front; the figures were reserved in the application of the background, which was built up of two layers of paint. This method can be seen in many of the paint cross-sections and from a visible light gap along the outline of most figures (fig. 22). He began by applying a layer of light brown paint, following the drawn outline of the figure. Later, usually after blocking-in the figure, he applied a layer of a darker, translucent paint. By varying the thickness of the darker paint layer, he achieved a smooth transition between the illuminated and shaded passages in the background. The lighter part of the background is always to the right of the figure, regardless of the direction of their position or pose. In all cases, the light comes from the left.

Verspronck began painting by indicating the volumes of the figures with under-modelling in translucent brown paint. The faces were then built up further in flesh tones and grey. Sometimes the brown under-modelling is still visible in some places in the finished faces, above all in shadow pas-

Fig. 21
Infrared reflectogram
detail of the *Portrait
of Adriana Croes*
(fig. 3) showing the
hands.



Fig. 22
Light edge along the
outline of the *Portrait
of Eduard Wallis*
(fig. 1).

sages and in the transitions from the face to the hair. A deep red lake glaze was used in a number of faces, for example for the dividing line between the upper and lower lip. Finally Verspronck placed the highlights. The X-radiograph of the *Portrait of Eduard Wallis* shows that Verspronck took no fewer than three attempts to find the right position for the highlight in the sitter's right eye (fig. 23).

The hands were usually painted with somewhat coarser brushstrokes than the faces and were not as detailed.



Figs. 23 a, b
There are three
highlights visible in
the eye in the *Portrait
of Eduard Wallis*
(fig. 1). Detail in
normal light (a);
X-radiograph detail
(b).

In general the hands were reserved by the initial painting of the clothes. Verspronck let different shades of grey and black flow into each other 'wet-in-wet' for the dark clothes. Lastly, he applied strokes and dabs of intense, medium-rich, deep black paint for the deepest shadows to suggest extra contrast and depth.

Most of the portraits examined have fine lines that must have been incised into the paint with a narrow, blunt implement while it was still wet.⁴² In the clothes, these incisions could be decorative or descriptive or served to indicate the position where the last embellishments were to be placed. The latter were often over-painted wholly or in part, for example



Figs. 24
Details of the dress
in the *Portrait of*
Adriana Croes (fig. 3)
showing incised lines
in the wet paint.

with lace trimmings or buttons (fig. 24). Decorative incised lines were used for example in the collar of the *Portrait of a Girl Dressed in Blue* and the *Portrait of a Woman*, where they contribute to the expression of surface and texture.

The thumbnail in the *Portrait of a Man of the Wallis Family* was loosely incised into the still wet paint, as were a number of fine hairs on the forehead in the *Portrait of a Woman* (figs. 25, 26). The ribs of Maria van Strijp's fan were

Fig. 25
Detail of the thumb
in the *Portrait of*
a Man from the
Wallis Family (fig. 4)
showing incised lines
in the wet paint.



Fig. 26
Detail of the forehead
in the *Portrait of*
a Woman (fig. 7)
showing incised lines
in the wet paint.



also indicated by incisions in the wet paint. The fan was intentionally painted over the fingers; then, by scraping away the still wet paint in some places, the artist revealed the underlying index finger again to emphasize the translucency of the fan (fig. 27). Although incisions in the wet paint can quite often be found in seventeenth-century paintings, for example in works by Rembrandt and his circle, and also in some paintings by Frans Hals, Verspronck's are nevertheless very specific to him.⁴³ With their thin, sometimes double lines they echo his loose, succinct underdrawing. Using incisions to indicate the position and shape of embellishments in the garments that were partially painted over later is also highly unusual, if not unique.

Figs. 27
Detail of the fan in
the *Portrait of Maria*
van Strijp (fig. 2)
showing incised lines
in the wet paint.



The paint surfaces in Verspronck's portraits are almost entirely smooth. Sometimes a light brushstroke is visible in the paint, usually following the shape and so subtly contributing to the illusion of three-dimensionality. The painter did, though, use more pastose touches of paint to depict highlights, the lace collars and details in the jewellery. With this varied handling of the paint, combined with incisions in the wet paint, Verspronck effectively used light and form to create a restrained playfulness. An unusual example of

Verspronck's subtle manipulation of the paint surface is found in *Maria van Strijp's* ring finger and little finger. Here, two of Verspronck's fingerprints remain, where he toned down and softened the last highlights while the paint was tacky (fig. 28).

Another example of variation in Verspronck's paint handling can be seen in the collar in the *Portrait of a Man* (fig. 29). He began by painting the collar wet-in-wet in white and grey. He then worked up the lace border of the collar in three different ways: in the middle where most light falls on it, he meticulously painted the pattern of the lace with white paint on the slightly darker background; to the left of this he painted the lace in 'negative' form, as it were, by indicating the openings in the pattern of the lace with darker dabs of grey. On the right, in the shadow, he incised fluid little curls in the wet, dark grey paint layer to expose the lighter background.

Figs. 28
Detail of the fingers
in the *Portrait of*
Maria van Strijp
(fig. 2) showing two
fingerprints in the
wet paint.



In some paintings Verspronck introduced a few changes during the painting process. These can often be seen with the naked eye because of the increasing transparency of the top layers of paint, with age, or can be discovered on the X-radiographs and infrared reflectograms. Usually these changes are minor adjustments – widening or narrowing an outline or collar or painting out a curl of hair. A more uncommon and radical change for Verspronck can be seen in the X-radiograph of the *Portrait of Eduard Wallis*. The hat in the sitter's hand was originally much smaller and placed further to the right (fig. 30).

Conclusion

The results of the research into the eight portraits painted by Verspronck in the Rijksmuseum and the pendants in the Rijksmuseum Twenthe substantiate in all particulars the findings that were published earlier by Hendriks and Ekkart. This article should consequently be regarded as an addition to the existing body of research. The lack of substantial new findings does appear to

be a confirmation of the artist's technique as published: consistent, founded strongly on tradition, experienced and always well planned, from the choice of support and format to a painting finished in meticulous detail. Verspronck does not appear to have made any innovations or significant changes to his technique during his career.

Despite the routine studio practice, Verspronck's approach nonetheless provides small surprises here and there. The use of ground layers with an initial red layer, as found in the *Portrait of a Man* (Rijksmuseum Twenthe), the *Portrait of a Girl Dressed in Blue* and the *Portrait of Pieter Jacobsz Schout* (all dating from 1641) seems to be rather unusual, not just for Verspronck, but for Haarlem at that time.

Verspronck's increasing use of wooden supports, running counter to the growing trend for canvas, is characteristic of his approach, as is the spontaneous, concise and meticulous underdrawing revealed by the infrared reflectograms. The three-quarter-length



Fig.29
Detail of the collar in the *Portrait of a Man* (fig. 10) showing the variation in paint handling.

Figs. 30
 Changes to the hat
 in the *Portrait of*
Eduard Wallis (fig. 1).
 Detail in normal light
 (a); X-radiograph
 detail (b).



pose of the figures against empty backgrounds that become subtly lighter towards the right and the systematic build-up of the dark clothes in different shades of grey, with final deep black accents, are also typical. And finally, there is the effective way he manipulated the paint and subtly combined different painterly effects, such as incising in the wet paint to convey the texture of lace and hair, to mark the position of later embellishments or to create a realistic depiction of a fan. Verspronck's individuality as an artist has to be sought in the detail, where it is found in abundance.

All these aspects contribute to the impression of restraint and punctiliousness creating the tranquil atmosphere that the portraits evoke, often referred to in the literature. Some authors conclude that Verspronck's approach was dull and old-fashioned, and the oft-cited contrast between his style and the sketchier and more expressive painting of his contemporary Frans Hals reinforces this idea. It is perhaps the contrast between the spontaneity and expressiveness of the underdrawing – unknown to the non-expert viewer – and the modesty and refinement of the finished painting that most fascinates the authors.

NOTES

- 1 Correction of the year of birth (from 1597 to 1601/03) by I. van Thiel-Stroman, 'Biographies 15th-17th Century', in N. Köhler et al. (eds.), *Painting in Haarlem 1500-1850: the Collection of the Frans Hals Museum*, Haarlem 2006, pp. 99-363, esp. pp. 146-48, pp. 323-24.
- 2 Layers of yellowed varnish and old discoloured retouches were removed. All damaged areas were retouched with a synthetic retouching medium. New varnishes – likewise made of reversible, stable synthetic materials – were applied. For more detailed information about the treatment of the paintings, please refer to the restoration documentation in the Rijksmuseum.
- 3 With thanks to Ingeborg Smit, paintings restorer at the Rijksmuseum Twenthe, for her help.
- 4 The three ladies' portraits in the Louvre are the *Portrait of Anna van Schoonhoven* (1641, canvas, 81 x 68 cm, inv. no. RF 1944), the *Portrait of a Woman* (1650, panel, 92 x 70 cm, inv. no. RF 2135), and the *Portrait of an Elderly Lady* (c. 1642-45, canvas, 82 x 67 cm, inv. no. RF 2863). The latter is the only one of the portraits studied that is not signed and dated. With thanks to Blaise Ducos, conservator of Flemish and Dutch paintings at the Musée du Louvre.
- 5 R.E.O. Ekkart, *Johannes Cornelisz. Verspronck. Leven en werken van een Haarlems portretschilder uit de 17de eeuw*, Haarlem 1979; E. Hendriks, 'Johannes Cornelisz. Verspronck: The Technique of a Seventeenth Century Haarlem Portraitist', in *Leids Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek. Looking through Paintings*, no. 11 (1998), pp. 227-67; E. Hendriks, 'Haarlem Studio Practice', in Köhler et al. (eds.), op. cit. (note 1), pp. 65-96; R.E.O. Ekkart, *Johannes Verspronck en het Meisje in het blauw*, Amsterdam 2009.
- 6 Ekkart 1979, op. cit. (note 5), pp. 13, 15.
- 7 Ekkart 2009, op. cit. (note 5), pp. 9-11, 20.
- 8 The works came from the estate of Dorothea Storm de Grave, Jonkvrouw van Reenen (1916-2006), and were acquired with support from the BankGiro Loterij, the Fonds Cleyndert, the Stortenbeker Fonds of the Vereniging Rembrandt and the Rijksmuseum Fonds. See T. Dibbits, 'Vier Portretten door Johannes Cornelisz Verspronck', in *Jaarverslag Rijksmuseum 2007*, Amsterdam 2008, pp. 54-58.
- 9 Ekkart 2009, op. cit. (note 5), pp. 47-51.
- 10 Dibbits, op. cit. (note 8), p. 56, 57.
- 11 Ekkart 2009, op. cit. (note 5), pp. 7-8, 35-38.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 14 E. van de Wetering, 'The Canvas Support', in J. Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings Volume II*, Dordrecht et al. 1986, p. 15.
- 15 Hendriks 2006, op. cit. (note 5), pp. 70-71.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69 and K. Groen and E. Hendriks, 'Frans Hals: a Technical Examination', in S. Slive et al., *Frans Hals*, exh. cat. Washington (National Gallery of Art)/London (Royal Academy of Arts)/Haarlem (Frans Hals Museum) 1989-90, pp. 109-27, esp. p. 109.
- 17 The chart is based on all signed and dated paintings listed in Ekkart 1979, op. cit. (note 5), including two paintings that Rudi Ekkart was able to add to Verspronck's oeuvre in 2008: *Portrait of Willem Buys* (1644) on canvas and *Portrait of Josias van Herrewijn* (1635) on panel. See R.E.O. Ekkart, 'Portretten door Johannes Verspronck in meervoud', *De Nederlandsche Leeuw* 125 (2008), pp. 153-55. As far as is known, Verspronck did not paint on any supports other than wood or canvas.
- 18 Hendriks 1998, op. cit. (note 5), pp. 229-30.
- 19 For the exact dimensions of the portraits in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam and the Rijksmuseum Twenthe see figs. 1-10; for the one in the Louvre see note 4.
- 20 P.J.J. van Thiel and C.J. de Bruyn Kops, *Framing in the Golden Age: Picture and Frame in 17th-Century Holland*, Zwolle 1995, p. 85, fig. Q6.
- 21 E. van de Wetering, *Rembrandt: The Painter at Work*, Amsterdam 1997, p. 15.
- 22 The dendrochronological examination was carried out by Professor Peter Klein, 15 May 2009.
- 23 P. Klein, 'Dendrochronological Analyses of Panel Paintings', in *The Structural Conservation of Panel Paintings: Proceedings of a Symposium at the J. Paul Getty Museum*, April 1995, p. 46.
- 24 *Portrait of Eduard Wallis*: '... creation is plausible from 1651 upwards'; *Portrait of Maria van Strijp*: '... creation is plausible from 1650 upwards'; *Portrait of a Man of the Wallis Family*: '... creation is plausible from 1655 upwards'. See Klein, op. cit. (note 23).
- 25 Hendriks 1998, op. cit. (note 5), p. 233.
- 26 Hendriks 2006, op. cit. (note 5), p. 66.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp. 66-69.

- 28 J. Verhave, 'Het productieproces in het atelier van Mierevelt', in A. Jansen et al., *De portretfabriek van Michiel van Mierevelt (1566-1641)*, exh. cat. Delft (Museum het Prinsenhof) 2011, pp. 85-107, esp. p. 91.
- 29 Grooves of the same kind have been found on oak, specifically the high-quality wainscot, which was exported from the Baltic to the Low Countries and Northern Germany until around 1650. These marks can come from various stages of timber production and trade, for example as timber merchants' or suppliers' marks, but were also used as quality marks. It has further been observed that these kinds of grooves were never encountered on planks with traces of saw cuts on the back. The back of the *Portrait of Maria van Strijp* does show clear regular traces of saw cuts. Cf. M. Rief, 'Eingekerbte Hausmarken auf baltischen Wagenschott-Brettern des 14.-16. Jahrhunderts', *Zeitschrift für Kunsttechnologie und Konservierung* 20 (2006), no. 2, pp. 309-24, and J. Wadum, 'Historical Overview of Panel-Making Techniques in the Northern Countries', in *The Structural Conservation of Panel Paintings: Proceedings of a Symposium at the J. Paul Getty Museum*, April 1995, pp. 149-77, esp. p. 162.
- 30 The Automated Thread Count research was carried out by Robert Erdmann, Thread Count Automation Project (TCAP), University of Arizona.
- 31 *Portrait of Adriana Croes*: average thread density 13.9 (horizontal) x 13.9 (vertical) th./cm, *Portrait of a Girl Dressed in Blue*: average thread density 12.9 (horizontal) x 13.5 (vertical) th./cm. In the *Portrait of a Girl Dressed in Blue* the weft runs horizontally, whereas in the *Portrait of Adriana Croes* it runs vertically, see Hendriks 1998, op. cit. (note 5), p. 235: 'direction of the warp ... ran vertically in all single portraits examined'. Research as part of the TCAP: thread count reports by R. Johnson, D. Johnson and R. Erdmann, July 2011; see also D.H. Johnson et al., 'Weave Analysis of Paintings on Canvas from Radiographs', *Signal Processing (Special Issue on Image Processing for Digital Art Work)*, vol. 93, March 2013, pp. 527-40.
- 32 Hendriks 1998, op. cit. (note 5), p. 235.
- 33 Hendriks 2006, op. cit. (note 5), p. 77.
- 34 Hendriks 1998, op. cit. (note 5), p. 240, and M. Neumeister with a contribution by S. Knobloch, *Fokus auf Johannes Verspronck: Bildnis einer Frau im Sessel, um 1642-1645*, exh. cat. Frankfurt (Städel Museum) 2006, p. 36.
- 35 Hendriks 2006, op. cit. (note 5), pp. 75-77.
- 36 A. Roy, 'Rembrandt's Material and Technique – The Ground Layer: Function and Type', in D. Bomford et al., *Art in the Making: Rembrandt*, London 2006, p. 29.
- 37 Ella Hendriks was able to demonstrate the use of black chalk for the *Portrait of Sara van Herrewijn* (1653) in the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem; see Hendriks 1998, op. cit. (note 5), p. 243. The black paint must have contained a carbonaceous pigment like charcoal black because the strokes are visible in the infrared reflectograms.
- 38 Hendriks 2006, op. cit. (note 5), p. 85.
- 39 The infrared reflectography of all the Verspronck portraits in the Rijksmuseums (Amsterdam and Twenthe) was carried out in 2008-10 with an Osiris IRR camera (Opus Instruments, InGaAs, operation wave length: 900–1700 nm).
- 40 In the print room of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin there is a drawing of the head of a woman (inv. no. KdZ 2852), which is said to be a preliminary study by Verspronck for the portrait of a woman in the collection of the Städel Museum in Frankfurt. Ekkart states that the drawing is a copy of the head (Ekkart 1979, op. cit. (note 5), p. 95); Neumeister describes the drawing as an autographic preliminary study for the portrait of a woman (Neumeister, op. cit. (note 34), pp. 26-27). After studying the drawing we are inclined to share Rudi Ekkart's opinion.
- 41 Hendriks 1998, op. cit. (note 5), pp. 243-45.
- 42 These incised lines are found in both portraits in the Rijksmuseum Twenthe (*Portrait of a Man* and *Portrait of a Woman*) and in seven portraits in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (*Portrait of a Girl Dressed in Blue*, *Portrait of Pieter Jacobsz Schout*, *Portrait of Adriana Croes*, *Portrait of a Man*, *Portrait of Eduard Wallis*, *Portrait of Maria van Strijp* and *Portrait of a Man of the Wallis Family*).
- 43 Groen and Hendriks, op. cit. (note 16), p. 120. A painting in the Rijksmuseum by Frans Hals, *The Merry Drinker* (inv. no. SK-A-135), for example, shows an incision in the beard on the right beside the mouth.