Abstracts public lecture Watermarks & Computational Art History

Date: 16 May 2025
Time: 14:30-17:00
Location: Lecture hall of Teylers Museum, Spaarne 16 in Haarlem

Assisting Dating of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Drawings Using Watermark Matches
Rick Johnson

The first talk provides an introduction to the digital analysis of watermarks in early modern prints and drawings. Since the end of the 19th century the exact match of watermarks has been accepted as a required feature for declaring a pair of sheets of paper as made on the same mold within a limited time period of proximally two years. By the last decade of the 20th century the desired procedure for confirmation of an exact match was to fabricate a physical overlay of the two similar watermarks being judged for the exactness of their match. The increase in the inclusion of watermarks in printed and online catalogs of 17th-century Dutch drawings and prints and the creation of large online databases of watermarks in European laid paper converts the need for physical overlay procedures to digitally computed overlays accommodating differences in image resolution, size, and physical placement in the available image.

Since 2021, Johnson has undertaken a hunt for exact matches between watermarks in 17th-century Dutch drawings, which are often difficult to date, and watermarks in other 17th-Dutch drawings, prints, and documents. This effort has produced a corpus of 110 17th-century Dutch drawings with such watermark matches. This talk presents examples from this corpus of the use of these tools in assisting the dating of Dutch 17th-century drawings. These digital tools are applicable to a much broader class of inquiries regarding drawings, prints, manuscripts, music scores, and documents with European laid paper supports.

About the speaker
Prof. Rick Johnson is the Geoffrey S.M. Hedrick Senior Professor of Engineering Emeritus at Cornell University. The last years Johnson has focused his research on the emerging field of computational art history. His approach has been to apply his engineering background in digital signal processing to the advancement of art history scholarship. The primary focus has been on the development and application of digital tools for hunting and confirming matches of manufactured patterns in art supports, in particular the canvas of paintings and the laid paper of prints and drawings of European Old Masters.

Watermark Matches in Rembrandt's Drawings: A Preliminary Report
Rob Fucci

Among the significant number of watermark images gathered and analyzed by Rick Johnson, we have already found 22 drawings by Rembrandt (i.e., drawings securely attributed to him by Peter Schatborn in his 2019 corpus) in which the watermarks are shown to match precisely with other watermarks using the new digital techniques developed by Prof. Johnson. These sheets are shown to have been made on the same batches of paper with: 1. other drawings by Rembrandt, 2. drawings by artists in his circle, 3. prints by Rembrandt and artists in his circle, and 4. dated archival documents in the Zeeland archives as documented by Theo and Frans Laurentius in

their watermark atlases. Some of these exact watermark matches were already known or suspected by previous scholars, but the majority of them are newly discovered, and presented here for the first time.

This wealth of data yields a number of insights with art-historical consequences. These watermark matches sometimes serve to confirm the opinions of scholars who, in the past, developed chronologies of Rembrandt's drawings using traditional means of connoisseurship. Other times, however, the matches point to new and quite plausible date ranges for some of his more difficult to assess drawings, or for those about which scholars often disagree regarding their date or function. Aspects of paper use will also be considered, for example the possibility that Rembrandt did not make much distinction between the papers he used for his drawing and printmaking practices.

About the speaker
Dr. R.L. (Rob) Fucci is a lecturer in Early Modern Art History at the University of Amsterdam. He received his Ph.D. in 2018 from Columbia University with a dissertation on the landscapes and ruins of Jan van de Velde II. He authored the exhibition catalogues *Rembrandt's Changing Impressions* (2015); and *Drawn to Life* (2022), a selection of 17th-century Dutch drawings from the Peck Collection in the Ackland Art Museum that was also on display at the Rembrandt House Museum in 2023. His exhibition and related catalogue, *Vermeer's Love Letters*, will soon appear in the newly renovated Frick Collection, New York, this summer (June 18 -September 8, 2025).