

# The Delight of Rembrandt's Painting and the Controversy around the Anatomical Errors of Content and Perspective: Commentary on "Dr. Nicolaes Tulp's Anatomy Lesson"



## O Deleite da Pintura de Rembrandt e a Polémica sobre os Erros Anatômicos de Conteúdo e Perspetiva: Comentário sobre "A Lição de Anatomia do Dr. Nicolaes Tulp"

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Figure 1 - "Dr. Nicolaes Tulp's Anatomy Lesson", Rembrandt, 1632, Oil on canvas, 1695 × 2165 mm. Photography: Mauritshuis Museum.

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**Palavras-chave:** Anatomia/história; Pessoas Famosas; História do Século 17; Medicina na Arte; Pintura.

Anatomy is a science to be learnt and practised. It has always been this way and it will continue to be so, despite the important added-value brought about by virtual means, namely imaging and simulation, made available through technological development. The ones who know how to, do

it well. The ones who portray it, risk inaccuracies and scientific error, mitigated by current methods of image reproduction. The 'artist's soul', however, cannot be quantified by science, as it is transcendent and immeasurable.

Anatomy and Art have always been closely related,

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especially at the time of the Renaissance painters Leonardo da Vinci (1452 - 1519) and Michael Angelo (1475 - 1564). These famous painters, contemporaries of the distinguished professor of Padua Anatomy, Andreas Vesalius (1514 - 1564), expressed their art based on anatomical knowledge. This was the beginning of experiential scientific knowledge, deeply anchored in anatomy. A time that witnessed the emergence of the 1<sup>st</sup> Anatomical Theatre in Padua (1595) and the spread of knowledge throughout Northern Europe, which included the Netherlands of Rembrandt and Nicolaes Tulp (1632).

Rembrandt's painting shows Adriaan Adriaans' dissected body, a thief who was hanged for stealing, also known as Aris Kint.

The image portrays an 'Anatomy Lesson', where "an Anatomy Professor, in this instance Dr. Nicolaes Tulp, practises human cadaveric dissection in close proximity to his students". This differs from previous times, when the "Lens & Prosectors had distinctive roles and were separated by the cadaverous odor". By then, as it is still desirable today, teaching was done face-to-face, in close proximity and eminently practical. In the hand of the student standing closest to Dr. Tulp, we can see a piece of paper with the names of all those attending, starting from Dr. Nicolaes Tulp.

The detailed observation (inspection) of the structures and their correlation, as is common in Anatomy, make us think about the possibility of "anatomical scientific content error, or an error of perspective" by painting the superficial flexor digitorum (held by the clamp), as originating from painting, in the lateral epicondyle of the left humerus when, in reality, it originates from the medial epicondyle of the referred humerus.<sup>1-4</sup>

Consensus has not been reached, however, in the muscle isolated by the clamp.

The controversy around this matter meant that surgeons at the University of Groningen (Netherlands) attempted to replicate the same image live, choosing the forearm of an old corpse identical to Aris Kint, also dissected. They found that the angle (perspective) shown in the painting and after the section of the flexor radial carpal muscle and palmar long, a procedure done to raise the clamp and push away the superficial flexor digitorum stands in the same place as the picture depicts.<sup>1,2</sup> It is important to note that each artist, in their time, presents an innovative brand of their own, as with Rembrandt, representative of their vision of reality and perhaps not in line with the scientific perspective of the

same exposed reality. It is therefore important to consider the possibility of an error of perspective in the interpretation of the message in Rembrandt's painting.

There are also those who consider that the left arm cannot be that of Aris Kint, given the alleged disproportion in size, as it is significantly larger than the right one. These art critics admit that a transposition of a painted image from another corpse dissected by Dr. Nicolaes Tulp may have been carried out.<sup>1,2</sup>

One other detail pointed out by the same art scholars, refers to the fact that the nails painted on the right hand in the picture appear to be well groomed, an unusual situation in the case of thieves, which supports the hypothesis, allegedly confirmed by x-ray, in a later painting by Rembrandt, of an amputated hand even before Aris Kint had suffered the death penalty.<sup>3,4</sup> In our opinion, this hypothesis could also be contested, to the extent that the painter's artistic perspective would not allow him to conceive a hand that was not well cared for.

In conclusion, let us consider the following:

1. Before criticising Art, it is necessary to view and appreciate it for its infinite and timeless beauty.
2. When criticising Renaissance Art, it is important to doubt that it may have errors of a scientific nature since, at the time, Art was supported or inspired by the knowledge of Cadaveric Dissection Anatomy.
3. Finally, do not forget that a scholar and art critic's perspective can also introduce a significant error of perspective that needs to be considered.

All this is possible and it is demonstrated in today's "Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp" painted by Rembrandt oil in 1632.

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#### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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