Rembrandt’s “Night Watch” - Analysis

A. V. Grigorov

Abstract:
Rembrandt’s painting “The Night Watch” spells out the names of the two front figures.

According to wikipedia, the full title of Rembrandt's painting is Militia Company of District II under the Command of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq, also known as The Shooting Company of Frans Banning Cocq and Willem van Ruytenburch.

A lot of controversy has existed over the meaning of the two (three!) figures immediately to the left of the Captain; they are the only people in the painting who aren't actual real people who are members of the militia company. The first are two girls - the one in the foreground has a hen/rooster on the belt, and the one in the background (behind the first girl) holds a boiling pot. The second (third) figure is a soldier shooting a gun.

I am going to suggest that these figures spell the names of Frans Banninck Cocq and Willem van Ruytenburch.

"Frans" means "French" in Dutch - this is the royal looking girl with the rooster on the belt; the rooster is the symbol of France, and France was a monarchy at the time. I don't speak Dutch and I don't know what "Banninck" (or "Banning") would have meant to the artist and how it might have sounded to a 17th century Dutchman, so this is a weak spot in the theory. "Kok" means "cook" in Dutch. This is the boiling pot that is being held by the girl in the background (pointed at by a glove), which makes her a cook.

Willem is short for "Wilhelm" which comes from "will" (same in Dutch) and "helm" ('helmet', or 'to protect'). This is the "willful" posture of the soldier with the gun and the helmet on his head. "Ruytenburch" is a misspelling of "Ruytenburg". "Ruyten" means "to raid" and "burg" is a small fortified place or town, i.e. he is a "town-raider" which roughly means "a brigand". Brigands "take" (steal) by the force of arms. This is the hand underneath the barrel of the gun, coupled with the barrel of the gun which points towards the Lieutenant.