

Rembrandt

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Leiden Years

Rembrandt was born in 1606, the 9th child of Harmen, a miller who belonged to the Reformed Church, and Neeltgen, a member of one of the leading families in Leiden and steadfast in the Roman Catholic faith. She was well-off, owning half the nearby malt mill as well as other properties. When she died in 1640 her estate was worth 10,000 guilders, which was shared by her four surviving children. From this comfortable background Rembrandt emerged to become the pupil of Jacob van Swanenburg of the leading artistic family in the city. But Rembrandt's 6-month stay with Pieter Lastman in 1624 in Amsterdam had a stronger impact, developing a taste for biblical subjects in compositions with lively gestures and bright colours. Rembrandt started like this with six scenes from the bible culminating in *Tobit and Anna*, "universally regarded as the artist's first masterpiece (Brown)."



Rembrandt, *Tobit and Anna*, 1626

The young artist shows meticulous depiction of materials, especially the pattern over the folds of Anna's head-dress and the weave of the wicker-basket. Rembrandt soon moved away from Lastman's style to a world of muted tones and deep chiaroscuro.



Rembrandt, *Rich Man from the Parable*, 1627

The cast shadows are rendered carefully; those thrown by the cord of the bag onto books and by the frames of the spectacles onto the rich fool's face. The work was inspired by Gerrit van Honthorst's similar study.

Over the next few years, Rembrandt's chiaroscuro would deepen and the subjects, taking a step back, appeared in colossal and dimly lit interiors. *Judas* begins this trend. The colours, setting and glinting highlights on the right were used in other works. *Judas* shows the apostle returning the pieces of silver to the chief priests who had led him into evil (the account of the betrayal differs between gospels) once Judas realised that Christ would be crucified. Rembrandt shows their reactions skilfully; scorn, indifference and greed but depicts Judas as worthy of compassion - a man repenting his sin. This sentiment recurs in Rembrandt's art, most notably with his final painting.



Gerrit van Honthorst, *Old Woman Examining a Coin*, 1623



Rembrandt, *Judas returning the Pieces of Silver*, 1629

Judas is important. Constantijn Huygens, secretary to the Prince of Orange, Frederick Henry, loved it, and he arranged important commissions from The Hague for Rembrandt. Perhaps Rembrandt felt he was making his way, for around 1629 he produced a self-portrait; vibrant and proud artist. Rembrandt used shadows to soften his bulbous nose.



Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait*, c 1629 (Nuremberg)



Jan Lievens, *Portrait of Rembrandt*, 1628

His friend, Jan Lievens, painted a less flattering portrait – nose and all; middle-of-the-road bachelor. Rembrandt's faces are usually solemn with understated expressions. In his self-portraits, he creates various moods (pride, aggression, anguish, pain, eternal patience, steadfastness), and there is also a sense that the viewer is being watched, even judged.

Amsterdam and Success

Rembrandt met Hendrick van Uylenburgh, a prominent art dealer in Amsterdam who offered studio and living space to young artists. Uylenburgh arranged Rembrandt's first portrait commission in Amsterdam; *Nicolaes Ruts*, a Calvinist merchant who traded with Russia. Rembrandt depicts Ruts as an intelligent, stable and trustworthy man. The paintwork is smooth with a meticulous finish on fur and ruff, and the bare background recalls Italian Renaissance portraits. This was very much to the taste of Amsterdam society which seems to have preferred stately and polished portraits: Frans Hals, who was regarded as the greatest portrait painter in Haarlem, had almost no patrons in Amsterdam.



Rembrandt, *Portrait of Nicolaes Ruts*, 1631

This portrait was well-received but the portrait commission that established Rembrandt's fame in Amsterdam was *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp*. Tulp was the Chief Lecturer of the Surgeon's Guild. Much like militia companies, the Guild occasionally commissioned a group portrait. Just as Frans Hals had transformed militia group portraits, Rembrandt would revolutionise those of the Surgeon's Guild. Typical works before Rembrandt are those featuring the previous Chief Lecturer, Dr Sebastian Egbertsz; the first one shown was painted in 1603, the second in 1619.



These compositions were far too mundane for Rembrandt. He depicts Tulp giving a public dissection in the Guild's amphitheatre; the corpse being that of a convicted criminal who had been hanged earlier in the day.

Rembrandt focusses attention on Tulp by giving his robes the deepest black and by his hat: originally the man at the back was also painted in headgear, but that detracted from Tulp. The large hat and the pure white collar (in contrast to the ruffs of the rest) highlight Tulp's face. Light also falls on the corpse, as if to say the dead can teach us lessons.



Rembrandt, *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Tulp*, 1632

Rembrandt was overrun with portrait commissions, from all ranks of society and tailored his style accordingly. Martin Soolmans and Oopjen Coppit were very wealthy; Oopjen was from one Amsterdam's regent families. Life-size full-length portraits (these are more than two metres in height), previously done only for kings and princes, became popular with the very rich. Rembrandt painted the couple in their finery to celebrate their marriage. The ring appears on Oopjen's necklace and Marten holds a glove, the handing over of which from bride's father to groom was a symbol of the transfer of authority.



Rembrandt, *Martin Soolmans and Oopjen Coppit*, 1634

A very different double portrait was painted for Jan Rijcksen and his wife. They were wealthy, but were not members of Amsterdam's regent families. Jan designed and built ships for the Dutch East India Company, in which he was share-holder. The portrait is much less formal and also celebrates the importance of the Republic's fleet. The invention of the bulging Dutch *fluyt* (shown on the paper on the table) in 1600 allowed bulk loads to be carried economically. The Dutch were master traders and carriers; only very rarely did merchant ships use ballast as they were usually packed with goods. Rembrandt received a few commissions from officials of the Dutch East India Company.



Rembrandt, *The Shipbuilder Jan Rijcksen and his Wife Griet Jans*, 1633

Herman Doomer was a member of the artisan class. He was an ebony furniture maker from whom Rembrandt bought picture frames. Rembrandt depicts Herman as a man of honest simplicity.

The superficiality of the Soolmans' appearance is replaced by an inner portrayal, largely achieved by the shadowed face. Shadows alternate over the face with the most subtle around the eyes, which immediately grab the attention, helped by the tiny specks of white which give them moisture. This technique explains why the gaze of Rembrandt's sitters seems so piercing. The finish here is less smooth; the lively face is produced by a variety of brushwork, from tangible impasto to thin glaze.

While portraits threatened to fill his time, Rembrandt was keen to continue history paintings and was helped by the commission obtained by Constantijn Huygens to paint religious pictures for Frederick Henry, Prince of Orange.



Rembrandt, *Herman Doomer*, 1640

Ten years older than Rembrandt, Huygens had been a distinguished diplomat in Venice and London (knighted by James I) and from 1625 Secretary to Prince Henry. Huygens served the House of Orange until his death over 60 years later. He arranged many portrait commissions from The Hague, thus complementing Uylenburgh, but the *Passion Series* was the most important.

After Huygens had seen *Judas* in 1629, he suggested to Prince Henry, who was a big fan of Rubens, that Rembrandt should be commissioned to paint small versions of Rubens' altarpieces *The Descent from the Cross* (1612-14) and *The Raising of the Cross* (1610) then in Antwerp cathedral.

Rubens' *Descent* was known through an engraving by Lucas Vorsterman. Rembrandt transformed "*Rubens' pathos into approachable drama* (Westerman)." He abandoned Rubens' diagonal scheme in favour of a pyramid, better suited to the quiet tragedy of the scene. Rembrandt arranges his figures in evening light and shadow (eschewing Rubens' colour) and portrays Christ as a pitiful dead mass (unlike Rubens heroic body).



Rembrandt, *Descent from the Cross*, 1633 (Munich)

The realism is heightened by the expression and action of the men devoutly concerned with the painful and difficult job of lowering the corpse from the cross. Mary, barely visible, faints into the arms of her companions in the left foreground. Rembrandt paints himself on the ladder clutching the arm of Christ. Rembrandt was paid 1200 guilders for the pair of paintings from this commission, both completed in 1633. Prince Henry was impressed and got Huygens to commission three further works from Rembrandt in the *Passion Series*.

Despite the iconoclasm in the Netherlands, religious subjects were in demand among private collectors. The old regent families in Dutch cities were and remained, like Rembrandt's mother, Catholic. The absence of the Roman Catholic church as patron for altarpieces and frescoes was a severe blow to the financial well-being of artists. Roman Catholic places of worship were allowed in the Dutch Republic in buildings which had to be no different externally from places of residence, but only small devotional pieces were permitted. Unusually Rembrandt devoted most of his time to religious subjects. New Testament paintings, like the *Passion Series*, featured Christ. *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee* was painted in the same year as the two pieces for Prince Henry, but in contrast to them, it is a highly finished work.



Diagonals convey the power of the storm. The arcs of the sail, the side of the boat and the curl of the wind-blown piece of rigging provide a contrast to the straight lines. Rembrandt shows a variety of emotions among the men endangered: Jesus is calm, others are afraid, one pilgrim is being sea-sick but many of them are straining hard to gain some semblance of control. The silhouette of the man grimly tending the rigging provides depth. The figure looking out at us seems curiously indifferent to the peril – the face resembles Rembrandt's. The work was stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston in 1990.

To Calvinists the Old Testament was a source of inspiration. They felt a bond with Jewish people who had to fight for their religion. Tobit, who we met earlier, had his possessions seized and was exiled because he insisted in proper burials for Israelites, and then God later blinded him to test his faith.

Rembrandt, *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, 1633



Rembrandt, *Belshazzar's Feast*, c 1635

Religious paintings for Protestants therefore often featured Jewish heroes and heroines. Rembrandt celebrated Daniel in *Belshazzar's Feast*, a dinner served on gold and silver vessels looted from the temple in Jerusalem. Belshazzar invoked false gods and the inscription warns him that his time is nigh. Protestants placed great stress on the First and Second Commandments (against false gods and graven images). The painting was restored and remounted, but with a slight anticlockwise twist, so the wine from the ewer on the right does not fall vertically and the front table edge is not horizontal. As a result, Belshazzar starts back in a more pronounced fashion, which Brown reckons was the reason the canvas was remounted as it was.

Rembrandt celebrated Samson - one of Israel's leaders who set out to slay the Philistines - in four paintings (1630-38) of scenes from Samson's life. His most gruesome work is *The Blinding of Samson*, the only depiction of the event in art. In a touch appreciated by Protestants, Rembrandt shows the lavishly-attired whore Delilah together with the golden wine jug and luxurious bedding - verily, the sensual will lead to one's downfall.



Rembrandt, *The Blinding of Samson*, 1636

Prince Henry bought the first of the series, *Samson and Delilah* (1629-30), in 1632. He also bought two of Rembrandt's mythological scenes. *Minerva* and *The Abduction of Proserpine* (both 1631 and now in Berlin). The Prince was not the only patron of this type of history painting. Jacques Specx, who opened trade between the Netherlands and Japan and Korea, commissioned *The Abduction of Europa* when he was Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies. Rembrandt includes an exotic carriage on the shore, perhaps as homage to his patron's interest, and uses the carriage and horses to start a receding diagonal (then making its mark in Dutch landscapes) to lead us to the harbour and the merchant ships.



Rembrandt, *The Abduction of Europa*, 1632

Specx owned four other paintings by Rembrandt. *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee* was in his collection when he died in 1652.

Clearly, Rembrandt was fantastically busy in the 1630s, but he had time to find a wife and paint her portrait several times. He had spent so much of 1632 in Amsterdam painting portraits that he moved into Hendrick van Uylenburgh's house and it was there that Rembrandt met Saskia Uylenburgh, Hendrick's niece.

Saskia had become an orphan at the age of 12 and was brought up by an aunt. She went to Amsterdam in 1631. Soon after meeting, she and Rembrandt fell in love and were engaged in June 1633. Rembrandt drew a portrait of his intended, her face (beautifully drawn) looking very sweet under her hat and holding a flower, with the inscription, "This is drawn after my wife, when she was 21 years old, the third day after we were betrothed – 8 June 1633."



They were married a year later. She was from a prominent and wealthy family, of much greater status than Rembrandt's. Her father, Rombertus, was a lawyer and burgomaster of Friesland. He was sent to Delft on a political mission in July 1584 and had dinner with William the Silent of Orange, after which he heard the shots that killed William on the stairs outside dining room. He was in the delegation sent to Elizabeth in 1585 to plead for support and recognition of the Netherlands. She obliged through the Treaty of Nonsuch (named after the palace in which it was signed) – an act which Philip II of Spain regarded as a declaration of war and led to the Armada. Saskia is considered to be the model for Delilah in *The Blinding of Samson* and for the woman to Belshazzar's right. Rembrandt painted her four times as heroine from 1633 to 1635: *Bellona*, *Minerva*, *Flora* and *Artemisia* (now called *Judith at the Banquet of Holofernes*). Saskia and Rembrandt were happy but had a wretched time as parents. Their first son Rombartus (baptised in December 1635) lived for only two months and their first daughter, Cornelia, died three weeks after her baptism in July 1638.

Despite these grave losses, the 1630s was a wondrously successful decade both professionally and personally for Rembrandt. We can see what he made of it in his self-portrait of 1639 with his locks of hair and pointed beard so like Bernini's busts, in a synthesis of Titian (the ledge and the placement of the signature comes from *Ariosto, Man with a Quilted Sleeve*) and Raphael (the dress and lighting from *Baldassare Castiglione*). The result is an exemplary portrait of a successful and talented artist.

Rembrandt attended the auction in Amsterdam in April 1639 at which *Baldassare Castiglione* was bought by Alphonso Lopez, a Portuguese-Jewish merchant, for 3500 guilders. Titian's *Ariosto* had also been acquired by Lopez by 1641, and Rembrandt must have seen it a few years before.

Perhaps the engraving was an attempt to link his name with those two supreme Italian masters. Evidently there was a competitive nature to Rembrandt. He was a voracious collector of prints of master artists. In 1638 he bought at auction Durer's etched series of the *Life of the Virgin* and then, as Bevers notes, "set out to surpass him." Rembrandt's *Death of the Virgin* is much larger in size (409 x 315 mm v 295 x 210 mm) than Durer's, and there are new elements.



Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait Leaning on a Stone Sill*, 1639 (Etching and drypoint, State 2 of 2)

Technical aspects of engravings, which are a large part of Rembrandt's work, will be covered later, but increasing the size of the plate compounds the risk of mistakes. Rembrandt introduces to Durer's scene a more modern look, with a doctor taking the pulse. The figure of a priest accompanied by server on left replaces Durer's apostles. The worship of Virgin was forbidden by Calvinists, so aside from proving Rembrandt's superiority to Durer, this work must have been aimed at Catholics in Amsterdam. Rembrandt was exploring engraving in the 1630s. *Death of the Virgin* is based on loose and light marks, particularly in the angels and folk around the bed, while the earlier *Annunciation to the Shepherds* (362 x 289mm) is much more painterly.



Rembrandt, *Death of the Virgin*, 1639 (Etching & drypoint, State 3 of 3)



Rembrandt, *Annunciation to the Shepherds*, 1634 (Etching & drypoint, State 3 of 3)

As befitted a man of his status at the end of the decade, Rembrandt bought a prominent newly-built house in the rich quarter of Amsterdam which was full of substantial residences. The contract of 3 January 1639 shows Rembrandt purchased the house (now his museum in Amsterdam) for 13,000 guilders – a quarter to be paid within a year and a day of the transfer of the house on 1 May 1639 and the rest to be settled “*within 5 or 6 years as he pleases*” at 5% interest.

In 1640, as he and his lovely wife settled into their splendid new home, Rembrandt must have been happy. His reputation had been made and he was much in demand. More importantly, perhaps, Saskia was again pregnant. Rembrandt’s self-portrait of that year, repeating the synthesis of Titian and Raphael but more reserved and august than the earlier engraving, must be an accurate reflection of his mood – a man settled and of substance.



Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait at the Age of 34*, 1640

Tragedy and Change

While Rembrandt was enjoying his new house, the militia companies of Amsterdam were settling into the spacious new wing of their elegant meeting place, the Kloveniersdoelen. Between 1638 and 1644 each company commissioned a group painting. In 1639 Rembrandt received the order to paint *The Company of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq and Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenburch*. Completed in 1642, the work was hung in its intended place in the new wing, opposite the windows overlooking the River Amstel. In 1715 the painting was moved to Amsterdam Town Hall where it was cut down at the top and quite a lot on the left to fit between two doors. Gerrit Lundens’ copy of the original is in the National Gallery in London.



Rembrandt, *The Company of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq and Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenburch* ("Night Watch"), 1642

Rembrandt depicts the company getting ready for a parade and conveys convincingly the mild chaos of the preparations. Such a parade would have taken place during the day. Extensive cleaning after WWII removed so much heavy varnish and dirt, that journalists dubbed the painting "The Day Watch". Marie de Medici (in exile from France after Richelieu's triumph in the Day of Dupes) visited Amsterdam in 1638. The Dutch laid on a grand ceremony, as the visit of the Queen Regent was seen as a diplomatic triumph - formal recognition of the Republic by a Catholic monarch. All the militia companies would have taken part, so the decorating their new building with portraits of the men involved makes eminent sense.

Rembrandt's highly animated composition was discussed in a handbook published in 1678 by one of his pupils, Samuel van Hoogstraten; *"it is so painter-like in thought, so dashing in movement, and so powerful that according to some, all other pieces there [in the Kloveniersdoelen] stand beside it like playing cards."* The work has great depth, helped immediately in the foreground by Cocq's hand and its shadow on van Ruytenburch's gold tunic, as well as the weapon held by van Ruytenburch (the tips of other weapons help too). These two figures are the focus, their colours echoed by the man with gun and the girl on the left.

While Rembrandt worked on *Night Watch* he suffered terrible losses. A daughter born in July 1640 survived only two weeks. Rembrandt's mother died in 1640 and in the following year came the death of Saskia's constant companion, her sister Titia, who had helped her nurse and grieve over her children. The birth of a healthy boy, Titus (named after Saskia's sister), in September 1641 must have felt like a vast change in fortune. But the worst tragedy was still to come; aged only 29, Saskia died in June 1642.

Amid all this turmoil, Rembrandt continued to receive portrait commissions. In 1641 he painted a couple of his new neighbours, the prosperous cloth merchant and member of the elite, Nicolaes van Bambeeck and his wife Agatha Bas, member of a regent family. As the decade wore on, however, his portrait commissions from the high merchant and diplomatic class dwindled, his sitters were less wealthy but still notable merchants and intellectuals: *Mennonite Preacher Cornelis Claesz Anslo & his wife* is a fine example.

Mennonites were Protestants who advocated a modest sober life but chose to be guided by gifted members of their congregation rather than ordained ministers. Anslo was a cloth merchant and shipowner, with a compelling speaking style, which Rembrandt portrays vividly. He shows his skill too with stuff; the rich tablecloth with its tassels, the fur, the stiffer sateen of Aeltje's dress, the delicate lace and book leaves. But surmounting all are the clear convincing expressions of the preacher, whose power of pronouncement is emphasised by his clenched fist on the table, and the sense of dawning realisation in his listener.



Rembrandt, *Mennonite Preacher Cornelis Claesz Anslo & his wife Aeltje Gerristdr Schouten*, 1641

Rembrandt received fewer portrait commissions from the upper class because they began to prefer van Dyck-like portraits with smooth brushwork, grand poses and bright colours. During the early 1640s this taste caught on quickly in The Hague. Amsterdam soon followed. Bartholomeus van der Helst, a gifted portraitist influenced by Hals and Rembrandt, adopted van Dyck's style and immediately gained patrons. Two of Rembrandt's pupils, Ferdinand Bol and Govert Flinck, adapted their styles to the new fashion.

Two personal issues may have contributed too. First, Rembrandt seems to have lost his sponsor in The Hague, Constantijn Huygens. Huygens continued to manage the *Passion Series* commissioned by Prince Henry and the progress is detailed in seven letters written by Rembrandt (which are, despite the fraudulent claims of BBC documentaries, the only words of Rembrandt's that have come down to us). The first painting ordered to follow the *Raising of the Cross* and *Descent from the Cross* was finished in 1636 and was sent to Huygens by Rembrandt for Huygens to see before it was passed on to Prince Henry. The final two (*Entombment* and *Resurrection*) were ready in early 1639, as Rembrandt wrote:

"because of the great zeal and devotion which I exercised in executing well the two pictures which His Highness commissioned me to make ... these two pictures have now been finished through serious application."
Rembrandt asked, *"whether it would please my lord that the two pictures should first be delivered at your house as was done on the previous occasion ... and as my lord has been troubled in these matters for the second time, a piece 10ft long and 8ft high shall also be added as a token of appreciation, which will be worthy of my lord's house."*

Huygens did not wish to accept the gift (thought to be *The Blinding of Samson*), but Rembrandt sent it anyway, together with a plea for Huygens to ask Prince Henry, referred to by Rembrandt as “His Highness”, for almost twice as much money for the last two paintings than had been agreed. Rembrandt felt these, “*will be considered of such quality that His Highness will now even pay me not less than a thousand guilders each. But should His Highness consider they are not worth this, he shall pay me less according to his pleasure.*”

Silence met this request, so Rembrandt wrote again – at the time he was arranging the purchase of his new house, “*I would request you my lord that whatever His Highness grants me for the two pieces, I may receive this money here as soon as possible, which would at the moment be particularly convenient to me.*” Rembrandt wrote again (with a note of peevishness), “*If His Highness cannot in all decency be moved to a higher price, though they are obviously worth it ... I will be happy for 600 guilders each [the original agreed price] plus 44 guilders for ebony frames and crate.*” Payment followed Rembrandt’s final plea, “*I pray you my kind lord for my well-earned 1244 guilders.*”

Huygens, ace diplomat, seems to have been dismayed by Rembrandt’s forwardness, for there are no further portrait commissions arranged by him for Rembrandt from The Hague after 1639. The second personal issue was the alienation of the Uylenburghs. Saskia’s family was alarmed at how much money Rembrandt spent at auctions and accused her of allowing her inheritance to be frittered away. After Saskia’s death Rembrandt’s behaviour deepened the Uyenburgh’s suspicions. Faced with a busy schedule of painting while looking after a baby boy with no wife or sister-in-law to help, Rembrandt understandably took on a nurse; Geertje Dirckx. Perhaps equally understandably, he soon started sleeping with her. Rembrandt gave Geertje presents, including a rose ring set with diamonds and an uninscribed marriage medallion which had belonged to Saskia. These gifts and the extra-marital sex came to public light after Rembrandt engaged the younger Hendrickje Stoffels as a live-in housekeeper, transferred his affections to her, and in 1647 sacked Geertje with a pension of 60g a year. Geertje promptly took Rembrandt to the Court of Arbitration claiming a breach of promise to marry. The court denied the case, but ordered an increase in compensation to 200g. The Uylenburghs, already alarmed by Rembrandt’s home life, now discovered that Saskia’s belongings were given as gifts to the help. Rosenberg and Westermann both say that because of Rembrandt’s behaviour Hendrick van Uylenburgh stopped arranging portrait commissions for him, giving them to Flinck instead. How much this was due to disgust with Rembrandt and how much to the new fashion for van Dyck’s style is not clear. But some portrait commissions were lost to Rembrandt because he upset his two earliest supporters.



Rembrandt, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1647

Rembrandt now had more time for history paintings, almost all of them religious in the 1640s. The emphasis was on emotion rather than dramatic action. Rembrandt's *Susanna and the Elders* is not a scene of violence but a vivid portrayal of Susanna's helplessness. Either she submits to rape (which she says in the Bible "is death to me") or she will be executed for adultery on the Elders' false testimony. She gazes grief-stricken to heaven. Her vulnerability is stark in her pose and the paleness her body, which is emphasised by the contrast of the dark landscape scene and the bright red of her cloak. The greasy lust of the grasping Elder is evident in his leer and his rude hand gesture (often seen in genre paintings). In the year the painting was completed, Rembrandt was paid 500 guilders for the work by a merchant, who may have commissioned it.

Rembrandt's religious works have echoes of his personal life in the 1640s; "works which mark his preoccupation with man, his sins and the need for forgiveness (Haak)." This is the theme of *The Woman taken in Adultery*.

The huge ornate throne is emphasised. Evidently senior clerics are undisturbed by their own greed but quick to condemn the sin in others. The woman's purity is marked by her simple white dress which stands out against the rich robes surrounding her. The light which drenches her is easily imagined as heavenly forgiveness.

Kitson thinks the work was commissioned. It was in the inventory of 1657 of the famous Amsterdam art dealer, valued at 1500g. This is not a surprising price. Despite the shenanigans over the last two *Passion Series* paintings, Prince Henry in 1646 commissioned two depictions from the childhood of Christ from Rembrandt – *Adoration of the Shepherds* and *Circumcision* (this is now lost). Huygens was not involved. Frederick Henry paid 1200g for each of them.



Rembrandt, *The Woman taken in Adultery*, 1644

If *The Woman taken in Adultery* is a plea for understanding of his circumstances with the live-in nurse, some of Rembrandt's other works may be personal too. During the 1640s, his desire for tranquillity is manifest in his landscape drawings, made on his favourite walks along the Diemerdyke and down the Amstel River to Ouderkerk. Rembrandt had long been drawn to this area. *Landscape with Stone Bridge* has the spire of the church in Ouderkerk and the bridge over the Bullewyk. The work shows the variety in Rembrandt's handling of paint; thin in the dark areas and thinnest of all in the sky, but thick impasto where the sunlight hits the trees as well as the highlights on the branches above the inn. Brown thinks the painting depicts the pilgrimage of life. The man with the staff strides towards the church, ignoring the delights of the inn and the storm which will soon beset him.



Rembrandt, *Landscape with a Stone Bridge*, 1638

The drama of *Stone Bridge*, painted before Rembrandt's troubles in the 1640s, can be compared to the peace of *The Rest on the Flight to Egypt*, painted while his domestic affairs were in highest turmoil. One can sense the calm and quiet enjoyed by the weary couple by the fire, and how the artist might have longed to share their safe harbour. Although the mood is different, Rembrandt repeats the impasto of the *Stone Bridge* – the fire is painted in thick strokes of paint, as are the flickers on the foliage and the reflection on the pond. Light glimmers from lantern of approaching shepherds and the windows of the castle.

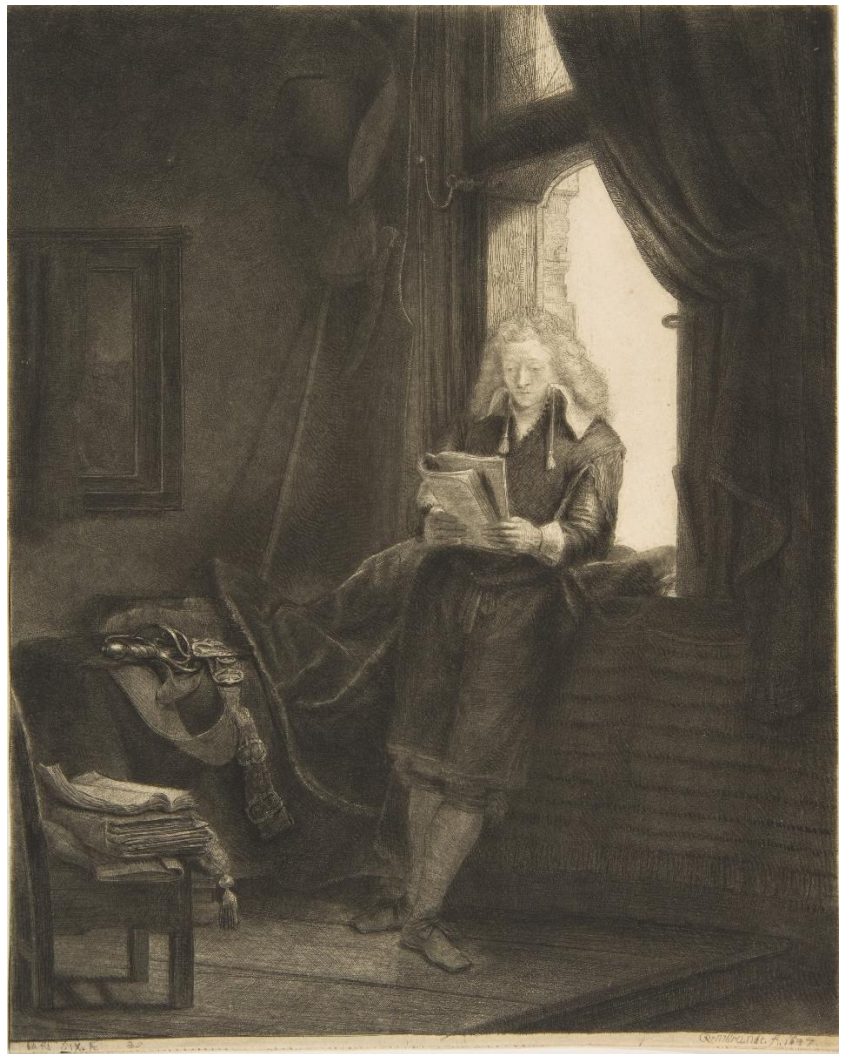


Rembrandt, *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, 1647

During the 1640s and for the rest of his life, Rembrandt spent more time on drawings and on making prints than painting, including a series of portrait prints in 1646 and 1647 of friends. The most important was of Jan Six, a noble from a Huguenot family which had fled France after the St Bartholomew Massacre and set up a textile trade and silk dying business in Amsterdam. Jan was more of an intellectual than a merchant, and very keen on the arts.

Rembrandt made several models for this portrait and discussed them with Jan; they settled on a version focussing on Jan's erudition. Rembrandt also produced drawings and etchings for poems published by Jan in 1648 and for a later work on Pandora.

The window (created by leaving a portion of the metal plate completely unmarked) leads the viewer to Jan's face, framed by a heavy curtain a traditional motif associated with worthiness. The work is of a high standard. The fine areas of hatching produced by burin and drypoint give a velvety finish.



Rembrandt, *Jan Six*, 1647 (engraving, etching and drypoint)
State 1 of 4 on Japanese paper (244 x 191 mm)

Prints made Rembrandt famous outside the Netherlands. Rembrandt's were novel. Soon after this portrait he published his most famous print, regarded as his best work. Before moving to that, some technical information.

Engraving uses a burin directly on the metal plate to make relatively deep incisions. The technique, known since 1430, produces clear lines but does not give painterly effects. **Etching**, a labour-saving form of engraving, comes from Durer in 1510. The metal plate is covered with a thin coat of wax, into which the image is drawn using a steel needle, which removes the wax, exposing the metal. The needle does not penetrate the metal, instead the plate (with the remaining wax) is bathed in acid which eats into the exposed metal, creating the desired lines. Lines are thicker because the acid leaves slightly ragged edges and so gives more painterly effects than engraving. Rembrandt obtained nuances of tone, by multiple biting of a plate or using acids of different intensity, so lines were bitten to different depths. Re-biting is risky, and Rembrandt often used **Drypoint** on an etched plate instead. Drypoint uses a sharply pointed tool (sometimes diamond tipped) to scratch incisions directly on the plate. This leaves a burr along lines which was usually scraped off but Rembrandt found that the burr when coated with ink produces velvety lines.

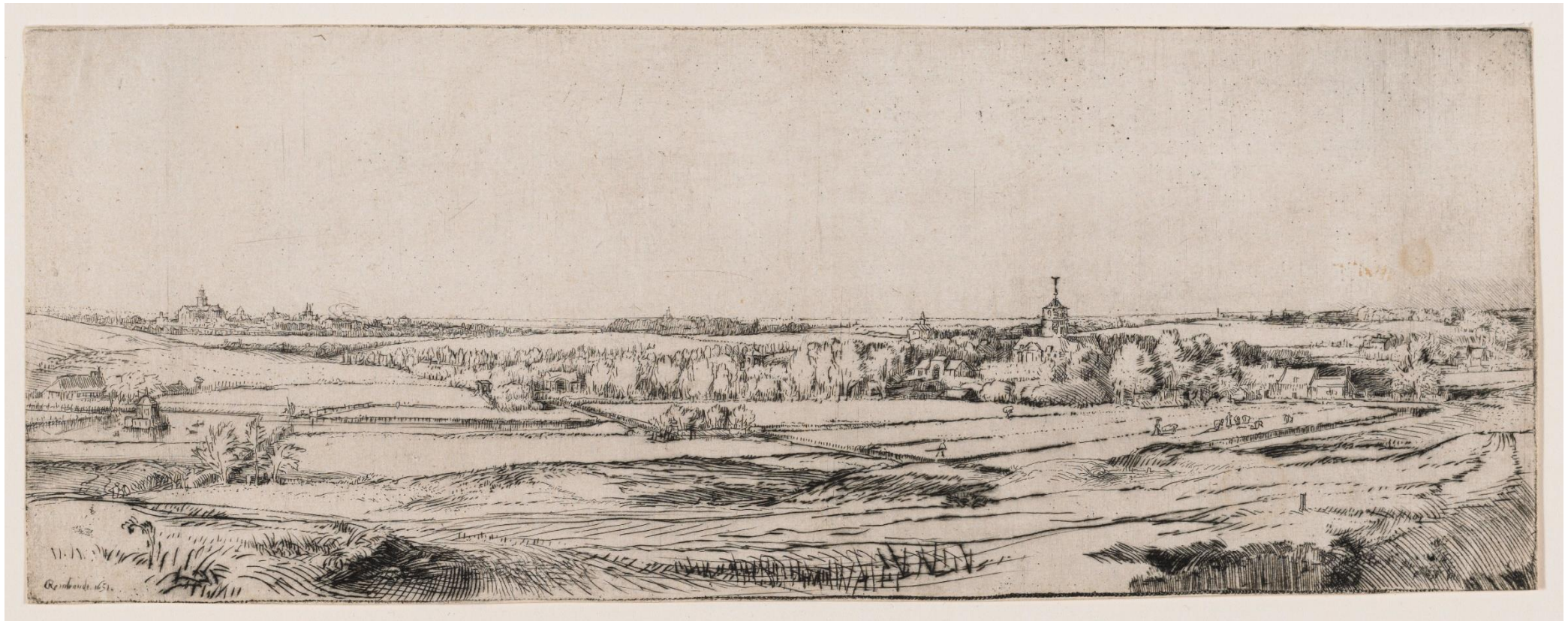
Plates with the shallow marks of drypoint yield only about 15 good quality prints: an etched plate will produce about a 100; an engraved plate several hundred. Worn plates can be re-worked. Each new edition of a plate is called a state. Printing papers affect tones. Bright white paper yields sharp lines and dramatic chiaroscuro. Shiny off-white Japanese paper gives a warmer look. Rembrandt sometimes used high-absorbency papers (vellum or light brown oatmeal) to soften impressions because they allow the ink to bleed slightly.



Rembrandt, *Hundred Guilder Print*, 1647/9 (etching, drypoint and burin) (278 x 388mm) State 2 of 2

The Hundred Guilder Print, as it became known in the 18th century, is Rembrandt's finest work in the medium. Scenes from *Matthew Chapter 19* are shown in one composition as Christ heals the sick, blesses children and punishes those who hinder them, even while scribes sneer at those who have faith in Him and Pharisees (upper left) argue among themselves. These episodes are depicted in varying chiaroscuro and detail, created by a combination of techniques.

There is very little difference between this state and State 1; just more cross-hatching on the donkey's neck and the far wall of the archway. An inscription on the back of a State 1 print in Amsterdam includes the comment "*there have been, according to the report that has been made to me, very few impressions, none of which has ever been sold but distributed among his friends by Rembrandt*". It was deduced from this that the print was not produced for the market (it is unsigned) but as a present for friends. Within a few years, evidently a few friends had sold their copy for in a letter received by the Bishop of Bruges in 1654 mention is made of, "*the rarest print published by Rembrandt, in which Christ is healing the sick, and I know that in Holland [it] has been sold various times for 100 guilders and more.*"



Rembrandt, *Goldweiger's Field*, 1651 (etching and drypoint) State 1 of 1 (120 x 319mm)

Bankruptcy

In 1651 Rembrandt made the plate for the print above which later was mistakenly thought to show the home of a gold-weigher. In fact, the work was a harbinger of Rembrandt's financial demise. The purchase price of his house (13,000 guilders) should have been paid in full by 1646, but by 1649 Rembrandt had paid only 6000 guilders and had made no payments since. The 1651 print has Haarlem on the horizon on the left with, to the right, the church of Bloemendaal amidst trees surrounding the country house of Saxenburg belonging to Christoffel Thijs. This is the man from whom Rembrandt had bought his house in Amsterdam, and to whom he still owed a great deal of money. Perhaps the print of his home appeased Thijs, for he took no action against Rembrandt for a further two years.

Any plans Rembrandt may have had for paying off the debt were ruined by the outbreak of the Anglo-Dutch war in 1652, which devastated international trade and brought the Dutch economy to standstill. Rembrandt's income was reduced further in 1653 by building work shoring up the party wall which Rembrandt's house shared with a neighbour: *"for months he was prevented from painting because of demolition, sawing, carpentering and bricklaying and the only known painting from 1653 is Aristotle for which he was paid 500g on delivery in summer of 1654 (Brown)."*



Rembrandt, *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer*, 1653

Rembrandt spent time in 1653 arranging loans, for Thijs, who had now seen no payments for four years, presented him with the bill of 8470g owed on the house. Although Amsterdam had the Exchange Bank, this was for trade and banking was in its infancy. Those needing loans approached friends and family. Rembrandt arranged short-term loans of 4180g from Dr Cornelis Witsen and 4200g from Isaac van Heertsbeeck, but struggled to collect money owed him for prints and paintings in the economic depression gripping Amsterdam. Finally, Jan Six lent him 1000g for which Rembrandt got a friend to stand as guarantor.

Rembrandt's situation was so parlous that he could not afford to attend the famous artists' festivals of the Amsterdam guild in 1653 and 1654. Amid these troubles, Rembrandt painted the "most brilliant of his portraits (*Haak*)", with free, broad brushstrokes. *Jan Six* is very different to Rembrandt's impasto. The work has an even, thin, surface of paint splotches and marks which can be appreciated in reproduction – very much like Frans Hals' style.

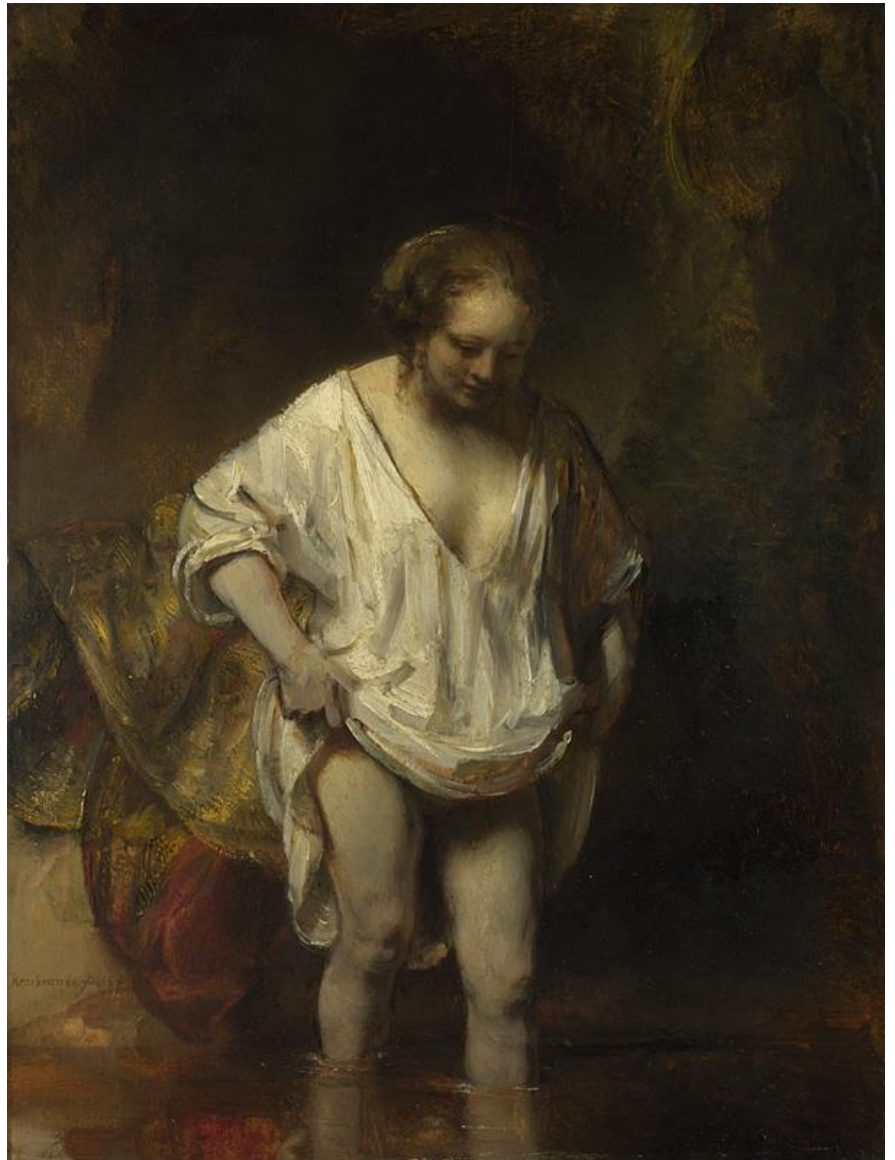


Rembrandt, *Portrait of Jan Six*, 1654

A Woman Bathing of the same year, shares the dashing approach of *Jan Six*, apart from the impasto on the white of her shirt. She steps carefully, cautious of uneven ground below the water. The water, rendered in the manner of watercolour, appears remarkably fluid, but with great flickering of light on the surface around her legs. Some thought the work unfinished, but it is signed. Houbraken said he had seen paintings by Rembrandt, "in which some parts were worked up in great detail, while the remainder smeared as if by a coarse tar brush ... Rembrandt maintained that a work is finished when the master has achieved his intention in it."

Jan Kelch suggests the woman might be Bathsheba as the dress of gold brocade on the bank is very similar that in Rembrandt's *Bathsheba at her Bath*, also painted in 1654. King David saw her bathing from his palace and was filled with lust. Eventually he killed her husband so he could marry her.

Some modern critics think she is modelled on Hendrickje Stoffels, who was having an eventful year herself. By June it was clear she was pregnant and that became public when the Council of the Reformed Church accused her of "*having committed whoredom with Rembrandt the painter*" and summoned her to appear before them. She ignored them three times, but then went, admitting fornication. The Council admonished her and banned her from communion. However, when the child was born in October she was christened (Cornelia) in the Old Church and entered in the register with her parents in the normal way. Even with this scandal, Rembrandt enjoyed steady patronage in Amsterdam. Doctor Jan Deyman, who had succeeded Tulp in 1653 as lecturer in anatomy, conducted in 1656 the dissection of Joris Fonteijn van Diest who had been hanged for armed robbery.



Rembrandt, *A Woman Bathing*, 1654

The Surgeon's Guild returned to Rembrandt to mark the event and hung the resulting painting alongside the previous commission. The Guild's portraits in the Anatomy Theatre in St Margaret's Hall are mentioned by a 1693 guidebook to Amsterdam, noting especially the "*two by the celebrated Rembrandt, which excel all others.*" The Guild moved to new premises in the late 17th century where the work was largely destroyed by a fire in 1723. The fragment which remains (about a sixth) shows Rembrandt clearly had Mantegna in his collection of prints.



Catrina Hooghsaet was the wife of successful merchant in the bleaching and dying of cloth. Rembrandt may also have painted a companion portrait of her husband. They were Mennonites. She wears the typical dark sober dress. Although they did not belong to the highest social class, Catrina acts as if she does, in a confident but relaxed air. The handkerchief is a touch of informality (as well as a symbol of purity of morals) as is the parrot. In contrast to *Jan Six* and *Woman Bathing* the work is highly finished, particularly those accoutrements of wealth; the silk of the dress, head-dress with hair pin and gold cap, ring and table covering. A reminder that Rembrandt would bend his style to the wishes of his sitters.

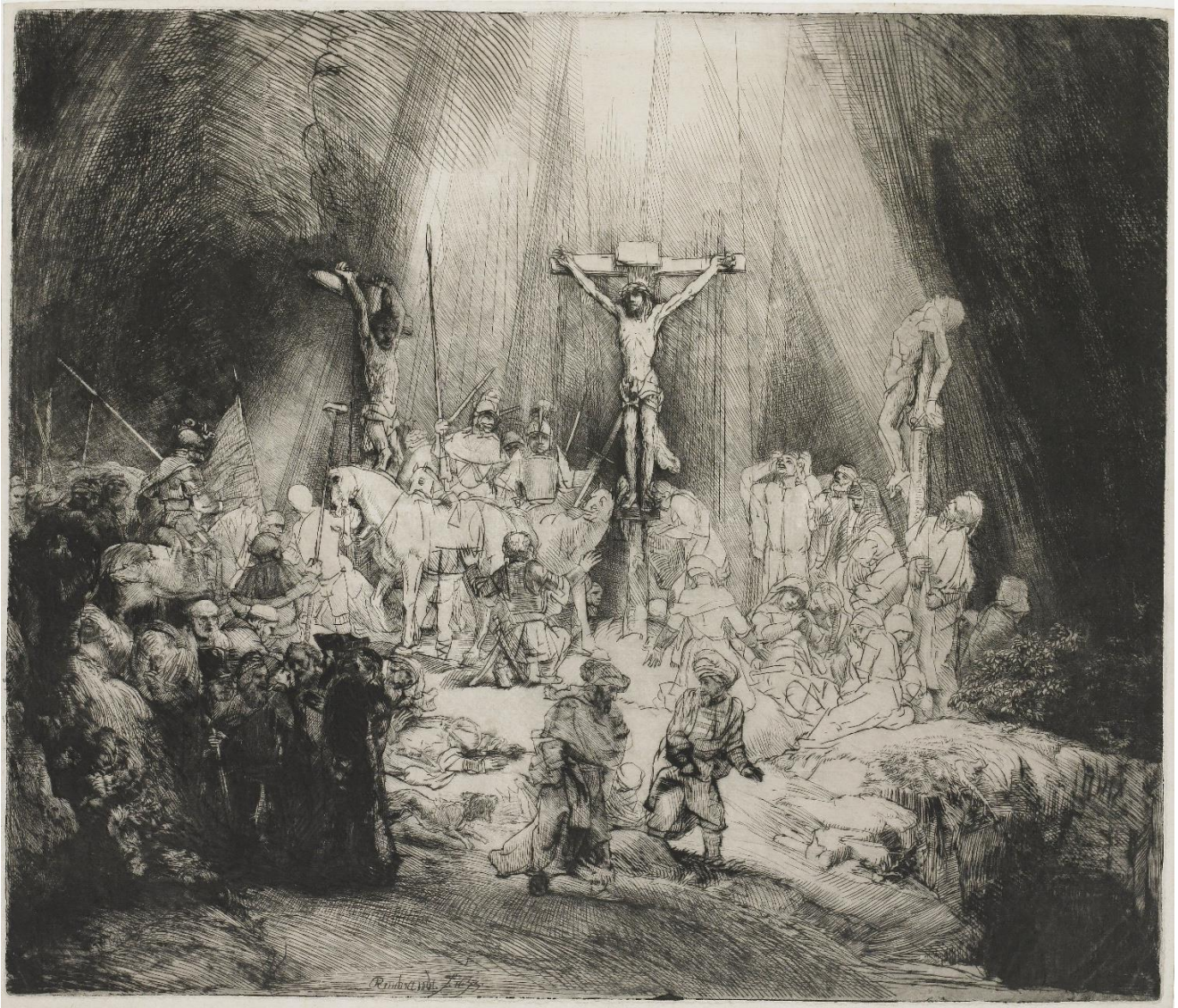


Rembrandt, *Portrait of Catrina Hooghsaet*, 1657

These commissions, however, did not alleviate Rembrandt's financial problems and he slipped into bankruptcy. Faced with having to repay the two 4000g loans, he arranged for an exhibition of his paintings followed by public auctions in December 1655 and January 1656. These sales didn't raise much money. In June 1656 Rembrandt transferred the title of his house to Titus and then filed for bankruptcy citing "*losses suffered in the trade as well as damages and losses at sea.*" This phrase likely refers to the collapse of the art market and the Anglo-Dutch War which may have caused Rembrandt to lose artefacts and prints bought from Italy and his own paintings sold abroad.

His assets were transferred to the Chamber of Insolvent Estates. An inventory compiled in July 1656 of the contents of the house included his vast collection of exotic artefacts and large numbers of folders of prints from Mantegna, Carracci, Reni, Ribera, Titian, Raphael, Schongauer, Cranach, Durer, Lucas van Leyden, Bruegel, Rubens, van Dyck and Jordaens. Alongside these were 70 paintings by Rembrandt – an enormous number, really, which has drawn little comment from historians. How had so many works been left unsold over the years? Anyhow, from September 1656 to September 1658, the Chamber of Insolvent Estates arranged auctions of Rembrandt's possessions.

Surprisingly, no engraved plates were listed in the 1656 inventory. Bevers believes the majority of Rembrandt's plates were still in his studio during his last years, because in the 1660s an Amsterdam print publisher and art dealer acquired 74 plates, spanning Rembrandt's career, and the dealer made impressions from them after the artist's death in 1669. The absence of plates in the inventory is mysterious given that Rembrandt had recently finished two "triumphant masterpieces": *Three Crosses* and *Ecce Homo*.



Rembrandt, *Three Crosses*, 1653 (drypoint and burin) State 3 of 5 (385 x 450mm)

Both scenes were perhaps planned as parts of a Passion cycle, which was unfinished, but included *Descent from the Cross*, *Presentation in the Temple*, *The Entombment* and *Christ at Emmaus* for wealthy Catholic merchants in the Netherlands. They also allowed Rembrandt to demonstrate that he was able to surpass his great Dutch predecessor, Lucas van Leyden, whose two most important works Rembrandt had acquired for "a vast sum in 1637." Lucas was revered in Rembrandt's home town. In 1614 the Humanist scholar Petrus Scriverius said of Leiden, "This city has been praised as much through Lucas's fame/ As for the wools and linens that also bear its name." Bevers reckons "the appreciation of Lucas as a virtually unsurpassable engraver was a provocation to artists." And to rub salt into the wound, in 1651 Lucas' leading fan Scriverius chose Bartholomeus van der Helst – thief of Rembrandt's commissions – to paint his portrait.

Three Crosses was evolved from the large scene of Calvary by Lucas van Leyden of 1517. The crowded scene is described in *St Luke*; Longinus on his knees, converted, in front of Jesus, Mary fainting into the arms of a companion, John pressing hands to head in dismay and Mary Magdalene embracing the cross. A cone of light is centred on Jesus, who is lightly modelled and silhouetted. Rembrandt signed and dated State 3, an indication that the work was finished and intended for sale.

State 4 (finished perhaps in 1661) shows how plates could be re-worked to produce alterations. Rembrandt polished parts of the plate and then used drypoint and burin. Powerful hatching lines steep the scene in deep darkness and Christ is modelled in more detail. Longinus disappears virtually, replaced by a Centurion on horseback.



Rembrandt, *Three Crosses*, State 4 of 5



Rembrandt, *Ecce Homo*, 1655 (drypoint) State 1 on Japanese paper (383 x 455mm)

Ecce Homo started from the 1510 Lucas van Leyden print, re-using the building on the left and the crowd. Rembrandt's setting is more compact and focussed. Statues of Justice and Fortitude watch over Pilate (in the turban and carrying a judicial rod) presenting Christ, with Barabbas behind. Pilate's wife is in the window to left. The characters on the platform are larger than those in foreground crowd – a crucial difference to Lucas' print in which they have little impact. The first version (States 1-5) was not signed but many impressions survive so this may have been the final composition for sale. Only 8 impressions of State 1 on expensive Japanese paper (as shown here) survive. The second version (States 6-8) is very different. Rembrandt repolished the plate to replace the crowd with cellar arches, and reduced the height slightly, so bringing the main figures closer.



Rembrandt, *Ecce Homo*, 1655 (drypoint) State 8 (358 x 455mm)

Why were no engraving plates listed in the 1656 inventory? They certainly existed for Rembrandt produced few new ones after 1660. Perhaps they were given to Titus or Hendrickje. Around this time, Rembrandt set up a company with them as directors. For the rest of his life, the company paid Rembrandt a salary and provided him board and lodging, in return owning his art works and the revenue from them. This prevented claims against him in the future from unsatisfied creditors. This turned out to be necessary. The Chamber of Insolvent Estates commanded Rembrandt's house be sold – the transfer to Titus being dubious legally. That fetched 11,218g in February 1658, while the auctions arranged by the Chamber produced a little under 5000g. Because of the terms of Saskia's will, Titus was regarded by the Chamber as the preferential creditor, but he received only 6,952g; a pretty poor sum compared to Saskia's half of the estate at her death of around than 20,400g. Numerous creditors got no money; among them Isaac van Heertsbeeck (who had lent 4200g). Jan Six sold his IOU of 1000g at a loss to a merchant in 1655. The merchant then extracted the full amount from Rembrandt's friend who had stood in as guarantor of the original loan. Rembrandt promised to reimburse his friend within three years, but proved stubborn over payments.



Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait with Beret and Turned-up Collar*, 1659

Rembrandt's behaviour dismayed folk – one was supposed to pay one's debts, not avoid them. Cornelis Anslo (whose portrait Rembrandt painted – above) had a son who got into difficulties in 1643. Cornelis settled the 60,000g debt even though he was not legally bound to do so. Rembrandt, honour diminished, repaired to live in a house he rented for 225g a year amid artisans and shopkeepers. Does his self-portrait of the time reflect his difficulties or evince a sense of defiance?

The Last Decade

Despite the blows to his reputation Rembrandt was not without commissions (for example, the portrait of the immensely wealthy Jacob Trip and more compositions for Don Antonio Ruffo). *The Sampling Officials of the Amsterdam Draper's Guild* was the largest portrait commission of the last decade. The syndics judged the quality of cloth.



Rembrandt, *The Sampling Officials of the Amsterdam Draper's Guild*, 1662

Seated is chairman Willem van Doeyenburg, member since 1649. The man rising from his chair is Volckert Jansz, a Mennonite appointed in 1660. To his left is the Roman Catholic Jacob van Loon, his small collar marking him as old-fashioned. The other two, Aernout van der Mye and Jochem de Neve, were Roman Catholic and Remonstrant. The painting is a reflection of Amsterdam's tolerance. The open palm of the chairman with thumb raised is a gesture of honesty and responsibility. The beacons burning in the watchtower on the upper right symbolise the syndics' role as guardians. The painting bears two signatures, the one on the carpet being genuine.

Rembrandt other public commission for the New Town Hall, received unexpectedly when Govert Flinck died suddenly in 1660, was not a success. He devoted a lot of work to the 20ft by 18ft painting, but it was rejected and brought him no money.

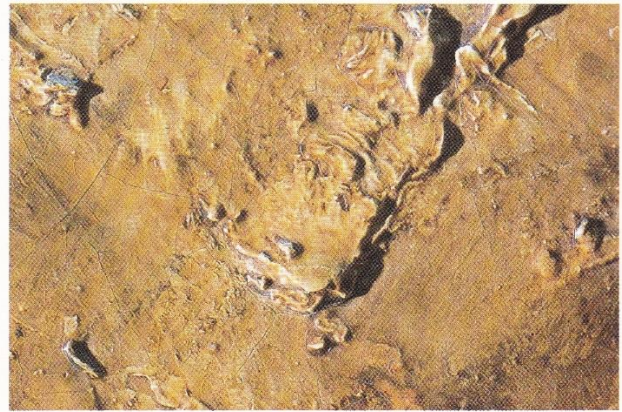


Rembrandt, *Isaac and Rebecca (The Jewish Bride)*, c 1667

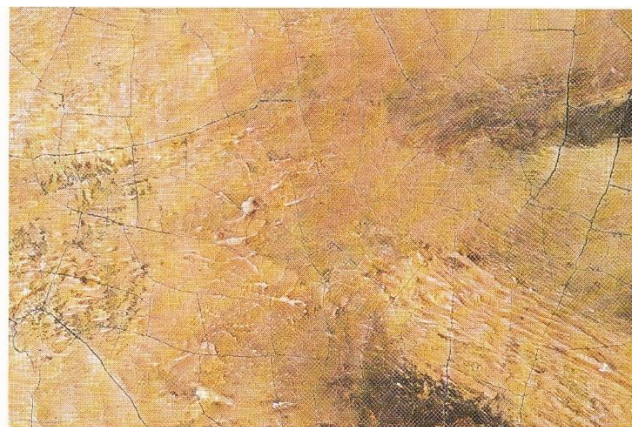
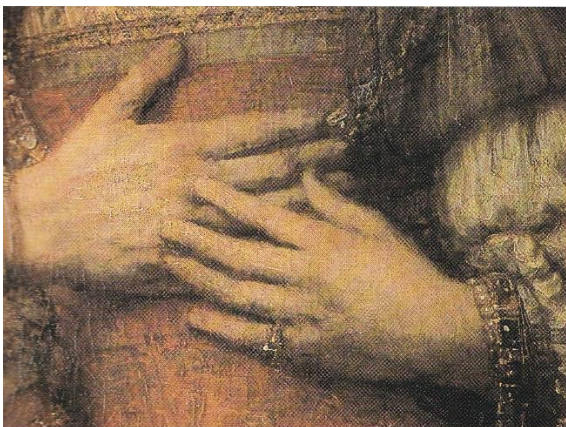
In late works Rembrandt applied and re-applied paint, scraping it off, adding layers. *Isaac and Rebecca*, known since the 19th century as *The Jewish Bride* is the best example. In the autumn of 1885 Vincent van Gogh visited the newly-opened Rijksmuseum with a friend. Vincent stopped in front of *Isaac and Rebecca* and stayed there a long time, saying when his friends returned;

"Would you believe it – and I honestly mean what I say – I should be happy to give ten years of my life if I could go on sitting here in front of this picture for a fortnight with only a crust of bread for food."

Vincent struggled to understand how Rembrandt had achieved the impasto effects, which are almost impossible to see in reproduction. Ernst van de Wetering published photographs showing a couple of them. The texture of the man's sleeve was created apparently by pieces of blue mineral or other material being added to the paint.



Standing in front of the work, the fingers of Rebecca laid over Isaac's hand stand out, as her flesh is different and more vibrant than his. Rembrandt used thicker paint for her fingers and then with a stiff brush created furrows which can be seen in the tip of one of her fingers (bottom right in van Wetering's photograph below). The furrows catch and reflect light, giving hand terrific life.



The use of impasto to make objects stand out was an important discovery of Rembrandt. Gerard de Lairese, the Dutch painter and art theorist who influenced 18th century artists, wrote a treatise on painting in 1707 which spoke of suggesting light and shadow, gleam and reflection but without modifying the smooth consistency of paint. Much later Heinrich Wölfflin in *Principles of Art History* discusses painterly techniques, but only in terms of the absence of contours and by using patches of paint – more akin to the *sprezzatura* of *Jan Six* than impasto. Neither grasped Rembrandt's point:

“perceptibility alone makes objects appear close at hand and conversely that smoothness makes them withdraw, and I therefore desire that that which is to appear in the foreground be painted roughly and briskly and that that which is to recede be painted more neatly and purely the further back it lies.”

This is why Rembrandt paints the light catching the trees in *The Stone Bridge* and the fire in *Rest in the Flight* in heavy impasto. In *Nightwatch* the blue and white cloth on Ruytenburch's weapon is rendered in thick paint, again with pieces of material embedded much like Isaac's sleeve, and this helps the illusion (when standing in front of the painting) that the tip projects out of the picture.



Some of the rich impasto of the Kenwood House self-portrait has been flattened by harsh treatment, but the head is least affected. The face, with the highlight on the nose and the band of light on the forehead which continues down the edge of the right eye and onto the upper cheek is similar to the first self-portrait of 1629 shown above. But the technique is very different; some parts sketchy – the hands because their position was changed. Originally Rembrandt held the brush up to the canvas (which is shown in a thin sliver down the upper right edge) with his left hand with other brushes, palette and maul stick in his right hand. The head scarf is also sketched in quickly. As ever, the focus is the face, and here one can sense the resilience of the man – in a life marked with a great deal of loss, his art continued undiminished.

Rembrandt lost Hendrickje in the plague year of 1663. Titus got married in 1667, but he succumbed to plague 7 months after the wedding. Six months after his death his wife, Magdalena gave birth to his daughter.

Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait*, c 1667 (Kenwood House)

Rembrandt's financial situation continued grim. He had to pay the rent from the savings of his daughter Cornelia and Magdalena complained bitterly that he was also spending his grand-daughter's inheritance. He even had to sell Saskia's grave, which would have raised at most a year's rent and he was still borrowing money with paintings and sketchbooks as surety. Rembrandt died in 1669 and was buried on the 4th October in a rental plot.

Earlier that year, he finished his last work and a famous masterpiece. *The Return of the Prodigal Son* is a fitting close, portraying the Christian act of mercy. The son, clearly ruined and repellent, head bare, clothing tattered returns home, having wasted his heritage in long and sinful wandering. Yet the outcast is received with love and tenderness. Rembrandt vividly captures the solemn moment of the sorry son leaning against father who bends over to protect him. There is little dramatic emotion, simply (as Honour and Fleming) note,

“the humble repentance and tender fatherly forgiveness, of homecoming as a metaphor for death and man's innermost contact with the divine.”



Rembrandt, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1667-9

There are shades of Caravaggio in the way Rembrandt was treated in the ensuing centuries. Crimes against decorum damned Caravaggio. Gerard de Lairese had been a fan of Rembrandt (who painted his portrait) but became strongly influenced by taste at the French court of Louis XIV. He then dismissed Rembrandt's work as bourgeois – a death-knell term in 18th century Europe dominated by French taste. The Romantics rejuvenated Rembrandt. Before them, art critics assessed a painting solely on its appearance, but the Romantics considered sincerity a better yardstick: Goethe asked, “*was the artist true to his own inner vision and experience, was he sincere?*” Rembrandt's interest in the poor, the old and Jews, “*which had been condemned as undignified, now marked him out as the champion of the downtrodden and the oppressed. His broad brushwork and disregard of the rules of proportion and anatomy, which had been thought ignorant and eccentric, were now interpreted as a refusal to sacrifice his convictions for the sake of easy fame (Kitson).*” And so, Rembrandt is now regarded as a great master.

That rehabilitation came largely from a change in view of Rembrandt's subjects. True artists marvelled more over his technique, as we have seen in the reaction of Van Gogh. Earlier another master signalled his reverence. In one of the many battles between them, Ingres' derision of the “*blasphemous*” habit of comparing Rembrandt with the great Italian master, drew the retort from Delacroix, “*people will discover one day that Rembrandt was as great a painter as Raphael.*”

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