

Rembrandt

Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606 – 1669) was a Dutch draughtsman, painter, and printmaker. A prolific and versatile master across three media, he is generally considered one of the greatest visual artists in the history of art and the most important in Dutch art history. Unlike most Dutch Masters of the 17th century, Rembrandt's works depict a wide range of style and subject matter, from portraits, self-portraits, to landscapes, genre scenes, allegorical and historical scenes, biblical and mythological themes as well as animal studies. His contributions to art came in a period of great wealth and cultural achievement that historians call the Dutch Golden Age when Dutch Golden Age painting, although in many ways antithetical to the Baroque style that dominated Europe, was extremely prolific and innovative, and gave rise to important new genres in painting.

Rembrandt never went abroad, but he was considerably influenced by the work of the Italian old masters and Netherlandish (Low Countries) painters who had studied in Italy, like Pieter Lastman, the Utrecht Caravaggists, and Flemish Baroque Peter Paul Rubens. Having achieved youthful success as a portrait painter, Rembrandt's later years were marked by personal tragedy and financial hardships. Yet his etchings and paintings were popular throughout his lifetime, his reputation as an artist remained high, and for twenty years he taught many important Dutch painters.

In his paintings and prints he exhibited knowledge of classical iconography, which he molded to fit the requirements of his own experience; thus, the depiction of a biblical scene was informed by Rembrandt's knowledge of the specific text, his assimilation of classical composition, and his observations of Amsterdam's Jewish population. Because of his empathy for the human condition, he has been called "one of the great prophets of civilization."



***Self Portrait in a cap,
with eyes open wide*** 1630 etching



A Young Rembrandt c1628.

At one time about ninety paintings were counted as Rembrandt self-portraits, but it is now known that he had his students copy his own self-portraits as part of their training. Modern scholarship has reduced the autograph count to over forty paintings, as well as a few drawings and thirty-one etchings, which include many of the most

remarkable images of the group. Some show him posing in quasi-historical fancy dress, or pulling faces at himself. His oil paintings trace the progress from an uncertain young man, through the dapper and very successful portrait-painter of the 1630s, to the troubled but massively powerful portraits of his old age. Together they give a remarkably clear picture of the man, his appearance and his psychological make-up, as revealed by his richly weathered face.



The Prodigal Son in a Tavern, self portrait with Saskia c1635

At the end of 1631 Rembrandt moved to Amsterdam, then rapidly expanding as the new business capital of the Netherlands, and began to practice as a professional portraitist for the first time, with great success. He initially stayed with an art dealer, Hendrick van Uylenburgh, and in 1634, married Hendrick's cousin, Saskia van Uylenburgh. Saskia came from a good family: her father had been a lawyer and the burgemeester (mayor) of Leeuwarden. When Saskia, as the youngest daughter, became an orphan, she lived with an older sister in Het Bildt. Rembrandt and Saskia were married in the local church of St. Annaparochie without the presence of Rembrandt's relatives. In the same year, Rembrandt became a burgess of Amsterdam and a member of the local guild of painters. He also acquired a number of students, among them Ferdinand Bol and Govert Flinck.

Rembrandt ran a large workshop and had many pupils. The list of Rembrandt pupils from his period in Leiden as well as his time in Amsterdam is quite long, mostly because his influence on painters around him was so great that it is difficult to tell whether someone worked for him in his studio or just copied his style for patrons eager to acquire a Rembrandt.



Saskia as Flora 1635

In 1635 Rembrandt and Saskia moved into their own house, renting in fashionable Nieuwe Doelenstraat. In 1639 they moved to a prominent newly built house (now the Rembrandt House Museum) in what was becoming the Jewish quarter; then a young upcoming neighborhood. The mortgage to finance the 13,000 guilder purchase would be a primary cause for later financial difficulties.



The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp 1632

Anatomy lessons were a social event in the 17th century, taking place in lecture rooms that were actual theatres, with students, colleagues and the general public being permitted to attend on payment of an entrance fee.

Dr. Nicolaes Tulp is pictured explaining the musculature of the arm to medical professionals. Some of the spectators are various doctors who paid commissions to be included in the painting. The more central figures (in this case, Dr. Tulp) probably paid more, even twice as much

The event can be dated to 31 January 1632: the Amsterdam Guild of Surgeons, of which Tulp was official City Anatomist, permitted only one public dissection a year, and the body would have to be that of an executed criminal.

Rembrandt was commissioned for this task when he was 26 years old, and newly arrived in Amsterdam. It was his first major commission in Amsterdam.

Rembrandt's anatomical portrait radically altered the conventions of the genre, by including a full length corpse in the center of the image (using Christ-like iconography) and creating not just a portrait but a dramatic *Mise-en-scène*. Rembrandt's image is a fiction; in a typical anatomy lesson, the surgeon would begin by opening the chest

cavity and thorax because the internal organs there decay most rapidly.

The corpse is that of the criminal Aris Kindt, who was convicted for armed robbery and sentenced to death by hanging. He was executed earlier on the same day of the scene. The face of the corpse is partially shaded, a suggestion of umbra mortis (shadow of death), a technique that Rembrandt was to use frequently.

The French art historian Jean-Marie Clarke points out that the navel of the corpse has the shape of a capital R



Belshaza's Feast 1635

The story of Belshazzar and the writing on the wall originates in the Old Testament Book of Daniel. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar looted the Temple in Jerusalem and has stolen the sacred artefacts such as golden cups. His son Belshazzar used these cups for a great feast where the hand of God appeared and wrote the inscription on the wall prophesizing the downfall of Belshazzar's reign.



Susanna 1636



Susanna and the Elders 1647

In a letter Rembrandt offered the only surviving explanation of what he sought to achieve through his art: the greatest and most natural movement, ("emotion" or "motive.") Whether this refers to objectives, material or otherwise, is open to interpretation; either way, critics have drawn particular attention to the way Rembrandt seamlessly melded the earthly and spiritual.

Rembrandt frequently sought his Jewish neighbours to model for his Old Testament scenes. Although they were by now affluent, the couple suffered several personal

setbacks; their son Rumbartus died two months after his birth in 1635 and their daughter Cornelia died at just three weeks of age in 1638. In 1640, they had a second daughter, also named Cornelia, who died after living barely over a month. Only their fourth child, Titus, who was born in 1641, survived into adulthood.

Saskia died in 1642 soon after Titus's birth, probably from tuberculosis. Rembrandt's drawings of her on her sick and death bed are among his most moving works.

During Saskia's illness, Geertje Dircx was hired as Titus' caretaker and nurse and also became Rembrandt's lover. She would later charge Rembrandt with breach of promise (a euphemism for seduction under [breached] promise to marry) and was awarded alimony of 200 guilders a year. Rembrandt worked to have her committed for twelve years to an asylum or poorhouse, after learning she had pawned jewelry that had once belonged to Saskia and that he had given to her.



Bathsheba at her Bath 1654

In the late 1640s Rembrandt began a relationship with the much younger Hendrickje Stoffels, who had initially been his maid. In 1654 they had a daughter, Cornelia, bringing Hendrickje a summons from the Reformed Church to answer the charge "that she had committed the acts of a whore with Rembrandt the painter". She admitted this and was banned from receiving communion. Rembrandt was not summoned to appear for the Church council because he was not a member of the Reformed Church. The two were considered legally wed under common law, but Rembrandt had not married Hendrickje. Had he remarried he would have lost access to a trust set up for Titus in Saskia's will.



Woman Bathing in a Stream 1655

Rembrandt lived beyond his means, buying art (including bidding up his own work), prints (often used in his paintings) and rarities, which probably caused a court arrangement to avoid his bankruptcy in 1656, by selling most of his paintings and large collection of antiquities. The sale list survives and gives us a good insight into Rembrandt's collections, which, apart from Old Master paintings and drawings, included busts of the Roman Emperors, suits of Japanese armor among many objects from Asia, and collections of natural history and minerals. But the prices realized in the sales in 1657 and 1658 were disappointing. Rembrandt was forced to sell his house and his printing-press and move to more modest accommodation on the Rozengracht in 1660. The authorities and his creditors were generally accommodating to him, except for the Amsterdam painters' guild, which introduced a new rule that no one in Rembrandt's circumstances could trade as a painter. To get around this, Hendrickje and Titus set up a business as art dealers in 1660, with Rembrandt as an employee.



Slaughtered Ox 1655

The work follows in a tradition of showing butchery.

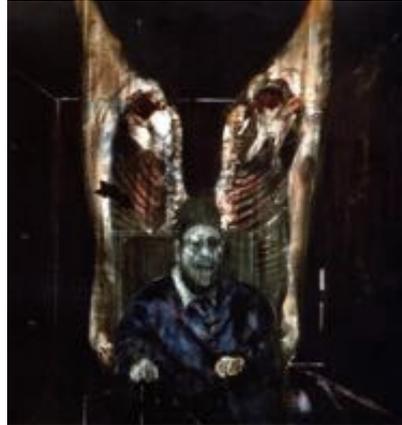
It shows a butchered carcass of a large bovine, a bull or an ox, hanging in a wooden building, possibly a stable or lean-to shed. The carcass is suspended by its two rear legs, which are tied by ropes to a wooden crossbeam. The animal has been decapitated and flayed of skin and hair, the chest cavity has been stretched open and the internal organs removed, revealing a mass of flesh, fat, connective tissue, joints, bones, and ribs. The carcass is carefully coloured, and given textures by impasto. In

the background, a woman's head and body of a woman appear at a door, lifting the painting from still life into a genre painting, a scene of normal everyday life. It is sometimes considered a vanitas or memento mori; some commentators make references to the killing of the fatted calf in the biblical story of the Prodigal Son, others directly to the Crucifixion of Jesus.

The work's muscular meatiness inspired a series of works the French painter Chaim Soutine, and in turn the English painter Francis Bacon, most particularly Bacon's *Figure with Meat*



Soutine 1925



Bacon *Figure With Meat* 1954



***The Night Watch* 1642.**

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***, but commonly referred to as ***The Night Watch***

This picture was called De Nachtwacht by the Dutch and The Night Watch by Sir Joshua Reynolds because by the 18th century the picture was so dimmed and defaced that it was almost indistinguishable, and it looked quite like a night scene. After it was cleaned, it was discovered to represent broad day—a party of musketeers stepping from a gloomy courtyard into the blinding sunlight.

The painting is renowned for three characteristics: its colossal size (363 cm × 437 cm (11.91 ft × 14.34 ft)), the effective use of light and shadow (tenebrism) and the

perception of motion in what would have traditionally been a static military portrait.

One of the most important aspects of the Night Watch is that the figures are nearly human size. Rembrandt gives the illusion that the characters jump off the canvas and into real space.

The work has inspired musical works in both the classical and rock traditions, including the second movement of Mahler's 7th Symphony.



The Polish Rider 1655

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Alfred von Wurzbach suggested that Rembrandt's student Aert de Gelder might have been the author, but his opinion was generally disregarded. Throughout most of the twentieth century, there was general agreement that the painting was indeed by Rembrandt and even Julius S. Held, who at one time questioned its Polish connection, never doubted Rembrandt's authorship. However, in 1984, Josua Bruyn, then a member of the Rembrandt Research Project tentatively suggested that certain characteristics of the work of Willem Drost, another student of Rembrandt, could be observed in the painting. Though the mysterious and somewhat solemn expression on the Rider's brilliantly painted face point to Rembrandt, *The Polish Rider* is unlike Rembrandt's other work in certain other ways. In particular, Rembrandt rarely worked on equestrian paintings, the only other known equestrian portrait in Rembrandt's work being the *Portrait of Frederick Rihel*, 1663 (National Gallery, London).

Those few scholars who still question Rembrandt's authorship feel that the execution is uneven, and favour different attributions for different parts of the work. A 1998 study published by the RRP concluded that another artist's hand, besides that of Rembrandt, was involved in the work. Rembrandt may have started the painting in the 1650s, but perhaps he left it unfinished and it may have been completed by someone else.

Subject of the painting.

The idealised, inscrutable character has encouraged various theories about its subject, if the picture is a portrait. Candidates have included an ancestor of the Polish-Lithuanian Ogiński family Marcjan Aleksander Ogiński, as asserted by the 18th-century owners of the painting and the Polish theologian, Jonasz Szlichtyng. Others believe that the outfit of the rider, the weapons and even the breed of horse are all Polish. Dutch equestrian portraits were infrequent in the 17th century and traditionally

showed a fashionably dressed rider on a well-bred, spirited horse, as in Rembrandt's Frederick Rihel.

Historical characters have also been suggested, ranging Old Testament David to the Prodigal Son and the Mongolian warrior Tamerlane, or the Dutch medieval hero, Gijsbrecht IV of Amstel. A "soldier of Christ", an idealistic representation of a mounted soldier defending Eastern Europe against the Turks, or simply a foreign soldier have been suggested. The young rider appears to many people to face nameless danger in a bare mountainous landscape that contains a mysterious building, dark water and in the distance evidence of a fire.

In a 1793 letter to King Stanislaus Augustus of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the painting's owner Michał Kleofas Ogiński identified the rider as "a Cossack on horseback", and the king recognized the subject as a member of the irregular Polish military unit known as Lisowczyk. In 1944, the American Rembrandt scholar Julius S. Held contested the claim that the subject was Polish and suggested the rider's costume could be Hungarian. Two Polish scholars suggested in 1912 that the model for the portrait was Rembrandt's son Titus.



The Jewish Bride 1667

The painting gained its current name in the early 19th century, when an Amsterdam art collector identified the subject as that of a Jewish father bestowing a necklace upon his daughter on her wedding day. This interpretation is no longer accepted, and the identity of the couple is uncertain. The ambiguity is heightened by the lack of anecdotal context, leaving only the central universal theme, that of a couple joined in love. Speculative suggestions as to the couple's identity have ranged from Rembrandt's son Titus and his bride, or Amsterdam poet Miguel de Barrios and his wife. Also considered are several couples from the Old Testament, including Abraham and Sarah, or Boaz and Ruth. The likeliest identification, however, is that of Isaac and Rebekah, as described in Genesis 26:8, and is supported by a drawing by the artist of the same theme.

According to Rembrandt biographer Christopher White, the completed composition is "one of the greatest expressions of the tender fusion of spiritual and physical love in the history of painting."



The Three Crosses 1653

etching state III of V



The Three Trees 1643 etching.

By the late 1630s Rembrandt had produced a few paintings and many etchings of landscapes. Often these landscapes highlighted natural drama, featuring uprooted trees and ominous skies (*Cottages before a Stormy Sky*, c. 1641; *The Three Trees*, 1643)



The Hundred Guilder Print

In the etchings of his maturity, particularly from the late 1640s onward, the freedom and breadth of his drawings and paintings found expression in the print medium as well. The works encompass a wide range of subject matter and technique, sometimes leaving large areas of white paper to suggest space, at other times employing complex webs of line to produce rich dark tones.



Portrait of Titus 1657

Rembrandt outlived both Hendrickje, who died in 1663, and Titus, who died in 1668, aged 27, leaving a baby daughter. He died within a year of his son, on 4 October

1669 in Amsterdam, and was buried as a poor man in an unknown grave in the Westerkerk. It was in a numbered 'kerkgraf' (grave owned by the church) somewhere under a tombstone in the church. After twenty years, his remains were taken away and destroyed, as was customary with the remains of poor people at the time.



***Self Portrait with Beret and Turned up Collar* 1659**

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***Self Portrait with Two Circles* 1660**

Unlike other late self-portraits, in *Self Portrait with Two Circles*, Rembrandt, with one hand on his hip, appears confrontational and even defiant. The impression is that of a master solemnly asserting his genius.

The meaning of the background has generated much speculation. The flat surface

behind Rembrandt has been interpreted as either a wall or stretched canvas. Among the theories explaining the significance of the arced lines is that they are drawn on a wall, or that they represent hemispheres in a map of the world, a common design feature of Dutch homes; however, the circles contain no geographical references and are placed rather far apart. It has been suggested that the circles represent the *rota aristotelis* — the Aristotelian idea of the true form of the world — or have kabbalistic significance. It has also been theorized that the circles symbolize perfection of artistic skill, as in the story of the Italian master Giotto being summoned by the pope to demonstrate his artistry and responding by drawing a perfect circle in a single motion. A similar story involves Apelles, court painter to Alexander the Great, and fellow artist Protogenes, each engaged in drawing "perfect" lines. That the circles may serve a compositional function, that of geometric structure, is also a possibility.



Self Portrait 1669

In his last years, Rembrandt painted his most deeply reflective self-portraits (from 1652 to 1669 he painted fifteen)

In his portraits and self-portraits, he angles the sitter's face in such a way that the ridge of the nose nearly always forms the line of demarcation between brightly illuminated and shadowy areas. A Rembrandt face is a face partially eclipsed; and the nose, bright and obvious, thrusting into the riddle of halftones, serves to focus the viewer's attention upon, and to dramatize, the division between a flood of light—an overwhelming clarity—and a brooding duskiness.