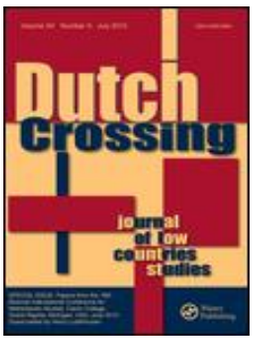

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The Ruins of Rembrandt

Benjamin Binstock

Abstract. Who would dare to defend the 'Romantic myth' that Rembrandt's Nightwatch *caused a scandal in its time? I would. Beginning with Alexander Korda's film* Rembrandt, *I argue that Romantic accounts are historically more accurate and aesthetically more sophisticated than current explanations, and more relevant, since they can accommodate our own relation to Rembrandt's art. Romantic constructions can also be traced back to Rembrandt's innovations. Conversely, confusion about Rembrandt's autograph oeuvre results from the efforts and investments of later commentators, not Rembrandt. Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Aloïs Riegl, I propose that Rembrandt's works can be understood as 'ruins,' or historical phenomena of artistic significance to our time, understood belatedly, in an ongoing, imperfect process.*

These issues are directly relevant to reception studies. In my view, the meaning of Rembrandt's work does not necessarily reside in the perspective of his contemporaries, whereas other forms of reception, such as later commentaries or popular consumption and commercial use of his art, offer insights inaccessible to current scholarship. Indeed, art historical scholarship is itself reception, the unfolding of the meaning of historical art in the present. Instead of limiting the work to its ostensible historical function, our task should be to understand how the work makes possible our present concepts of art and art history, which we must continue (philosophically) to rethink and to refine.

The First Modern Artist

> Rembrandt: Be honest, what do you think of the picture? What do you think of it?
> Citizen: I can't say. I don't understand it. I can't see anything in it.
> Rembrandt: You can't see anything...

> Citizen: I can see nothing but shadows, darkness, and confusion. You surely don't expect us to take this as serious art? You must paint a fresh picture. It's really beyond a joke.
> Rembrandt: I agree with you it is.

Rembrandt was the first modern artist, at least according to the 1936 film *Rembrandt*, directed by Alexander Korda, based on a screenplay by Carl Zuckmayer. Korda's Rembrandt is the prototype of the modern artist as rebel and prophet, willing to sacrifice his financial and social status for the sake of his artistic ideals. In the scene of the unveiling of Rembrandt's *Nightwatch*, the gentlemen and ladies gathered in the new musketeers' guildhall break into riotous laughter, while the painter, played by Charles Laughton, waits outside. He grills a departing citizen, resulting in the dialogue cited above, and storms into the hall to confront his audience (Figure 1). At stake in this episode is the shocking or disturbing quality of Rembrandt's painting, comparable to Manet's *Olympia* or Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* for their earliest audiences. One could also cite prior examples of such controversy, yet Rembrandt represents a symbolic transition in the history of art and the artist.

Most contemporary scholars reject the idea of Rembrandt as rebel and the scandal of the *Nightwatch* as anachronistic, 'Romantic myths.' Jan Emmens first formulated this argument in his classic study *Rembrandt and the Rules of Art*.[1] His title is significantly borrowed from the late seventeenth century art theorist Andries Pels, who claimed Rembrandt neglected the "rules of art" in his technique, conceptions, and behavior, as "the first heretic of painting," which sounds very much like "the

Figure 1 Still from *Rembrandt* (dir. Alexander Korda, 1936); unveiling of the *Nightwatch*

first modern artist." According to Emmens, Pels and other critics writing shortly after Rembrandt's death arbitrarily seized on him as the leading artist of his time for their own polemical purposes, whereas Romantic critics later inverted these critiques in a positive sense for their own agendas. Subsequent art historians have adopted Emmens's argument, and insist that the *Nightwatch* was well received in its time.

In this essay, I will argue that the historical evidence supports the Romantic 'myth.' But the historical reception of Rembrandt's painting is not necessarily our primary concern. The crucial issue is the purpose of art history, or awareness of what we are trying to do. The effort to explain the painting is already anachronistic, since we are far more interested in Rembrandt's art than his contemporaries were, and precisely because of its artistic qualities. These priorities were still obvious to the Romantics and their successors, including Korda, who thought of Rembrandt as their contemporary. Recent commentators employ the term 'Romantic' disparagingly, yet the writers and philosophers of the Romantic period arguably had far more sophisticated perspectives, and contributed in important ways to our concepts of art and art history. Their constructions can also be traced back in turn to Rembrandt's innovations. Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Aloïs Riegl, I will argue that Rembrandt's works can be understood as 'ruins,' or historical phenomena of artistic significance to our time, understood belatedly, in an ongoing, imperfect process.

These issues are specifically relevant to reception studies. In my view, the meaning of Rembrandt's work does not necessarily reside in the perspective of his contemporaries, whereas other forms of reception, such as later commentaries or popular consumption and commercial use of his art, offer insights inaccessible to current scholarship. Art historical scholarship is itself reception, the unfolding of the meaning of historical art in the present. Instead of limiting the work to its ostensible historical function, our task should be to understand how the work makes possible our present concepts of art and art history, which we must continue (philosophically) to rethink and to refine.

The True Myth of the *Nightwatch*

There are several reasons to believe that the *Nightwatch* caused a scandal in its time. Firstly, Rembrandt's own student Samuel van Hoogstraten states that his master "went too far, making more work of the overall subject he preferred to depict than the individual portraits he was commissioned to do."[2] Van Hoogstraten also acknowledged Rembrandt's extraordinary achievement, yet

even this is qualified by "no matter how much it deserves criticism." Secondly, as the turn of the century art historian Aloïs Riegl first recognized, Bartholomeus van der Helst's Company of *Captain Roelof Bicker of 1643* is a 'pictorial critique' of the *Nightwatch*, adapting its elements to a more conventional, orderly composition.[3] Thirdly, the notion that Rembrandt's painting caused a problem is in keeping with everything we know about his career. His numerous portrait commission in the sixteen-thirties dwindled in the following decades and his former students progressively abandoned his artistic example in order to embrace the more popular neo-classical style. Several were awarded commissions for the new Town Hall of Amsterdam, the most ambitious art project of the Dutch Golden Age, whereas Rembrandt was given none. He was only asked to paint the *Oath of the Batavians* in 1660 after the unexpected death of his former student Govaert Flinck. Yet the burgomasters ultimately demanded that Rembrandt repaint his composition, or "paint a fresh picture," which he refused to do.

Most importantly, there is the visual evidence of the *Nightwatch* itself (Figure 2). The painting is shown here *in situ* in the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum, among other reasons, to parallel Korda's scene. Van Hoogstraten already complained about the darkness of Rembrandt's composition, confusion is evident in the grouping of the figures and details such as the gun going off behind lieutenant Ruytenburgh, whereas the shadow cast by captain Banning-Cocq's left hand across the groin of his lieutenant is downright uncanny.[4] The female figure to the left, or "fairytale maiden in the sunbeam" as Riegl calls her, has been explained as a reference to the children accompanying militia parades in contemporary prints, and her features associated with the artist's wife Saskia.[5] Other scholars see her as a sutler, a prosti-

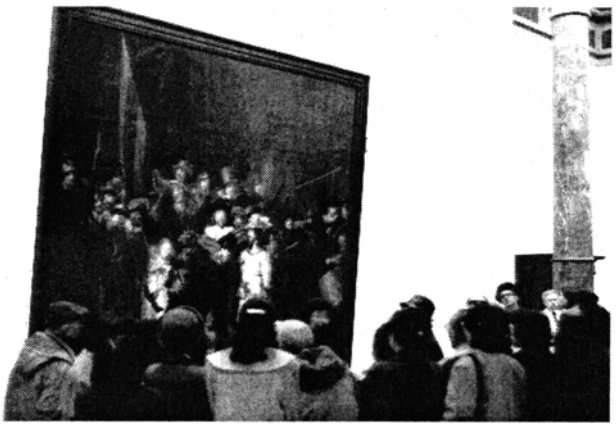

Figure 2 The painting is shown here *in situ* in the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum

tute-cook who accompanied militias on their journeys, with her attributes of chicken and purse, also traditional erotic symbols, hanging from her belt.[6] The prominent claws of the fowl have been identified as a reference to the talon-emblem of the musketeers' or *kloveniers* guild.[7] But the substitution of a chicken for an eagle seems inappropriate or sarcastic, particularly given its other symbolic connotations. Such elements likely contributed to the criticism reported by Van Hoogstraten and his assertion that Rembrandt "went too far."

In the scene from Korda's film captured in the still, captain Banning-Cocq informs the artist his painting is "a monstrosity... Do these look like gentlemen of rank and position?" Rembrandt-Laughton appears hurt at first, protesting that he "wanted to paint men. Soldiers of a company marching out," but he quickly turns to rage:

> Your nose is painted with bad liquor! Your mouth is reeking from bawdy kisses! Vanity and stupidity are written all over your face! The only thing pretty about you are your roughs and your breastplates, and the only thing distinguished about you are your hats.

Where, we might ask, do these images come from, if not from the *Nightwatch*? The dialogue serves as a displaced *ekphrasis* or interpretive description of Rembrandt's painting. The corresponding figures are easy enough to find in his composition. But the film goes the further step of translating Rembrandt's painting into a narrative, representing his genius and tendency to "go too far" through Rembrandt-Laughton's eloquent oratory and outrageous behavior. More specifically, the scene turns Rembrandt's painting into a tableau vivant, with the militiamen and their wives advancing on the painter (Figure 1). The parallel is reinforced by the way the shot cuts off the heads of the figures in the painting on the wall behind and by the forward striding movement of captain, which echoes the legs of his painted counterpart just above. Rembrandt-Laughton with his back to us doubles our own position as viewers, a motif familiar from Dutch painting, such as Vermeer's turned back in *The Art of Painting*, although Rembrandt competes for attention with his own painting, like an iconoclastic tour guide.

There was probably no laughter or hurling of insults at the original unveiling of the *Nightwatch*, if there was an unveiling at all. The scene is presented as an historical reconstruction, but it is also about our own reception of Rembrandt's painting, and self-consciously so. As a picture within a (moving) picture, the scene corresponds to what André Gide first termed a *mise en abyme*, a literary or pictorial motif that self-reflexively stands for the work as a whole, its aesthetic system, and later criticism.[8] We are watching an audience respond to a work of art

and we are watching a work of art by the artists Korda, Zuckmayer, and Laughton. The film also corresponds to the Romantic conception of myth, articulated by Friederich Schelling, as an aesthetic truth for an earlier time, which only seems 'false' to us because we don't understand.[9] Rather, recent accounts of the successful historical function of the *Nightwatch* are false, not only on historical but also aesthetic grounds, since this ostensible function has no relation to our present interest in the painting. The *Nightwatch* was and still is a problem; that's what makes it a masterpiece.

The Birth of the Author

The perspective evident in Korda's film is both more significant than recent commentators recognize and closer to home than they would like to admit. The film reflects a fundamental strategy of art history, most familiar from Irving Stone's historical novels *Lust for Life* and *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (themselves made into films), but implicit in all 'life and work' monographs, up to and including the most recent books on Rembrandt. The artist's life is invoked as a means to explain his work, or in a more crude form, his work is approached as an illustration of his life. The scene of the unveiling of the *Nightwatch* is emblematic of this tendency insofar as Rembrandt-Laughton displaces his own painting in the attention of his audience (Figure 1).

Roland Barthes famously attacked this recourse to the author as the origin of the meaning of a work, mockingly proclaiming the "death of the author" and the "birth of the reader."[10] Michel Foucault elaborated on this critique, examining the discourses that contribute to what he called the "author function."[11] These outlooks are adopted in self-consciously theoretical studies such as Mieke Bal's Reading "Rembrandt," in which the artist's name is placed in quotes to indicate a "cultural text" rather than historical reality, allowing the living author of the book to pursue freely her own agendas.[12] Yet conservative commentators share this distaste for the artist and genius in their emphasis on patronage and the ostensible historical function of the art work. One might ask whether these modern accounts are more compelling or illuminating than their Romantic precursors.

As suggested above, Romantic perspectives are far more sophisticated than recent commentators would have us believe. Marcel Proust, the high priest of the Romantic religion of art and cult of genius, was at pains to complicate a direct correspondence between author and empirical person, or art and life, without negating one side of the equation.[13] More recently, Jacques Derrida has among other strategies explored Nietzsche's play on his own name and signature as a

means of examining the author as his own construction.[14] The name and signature are related to Derrida's analysis of the role of the (physical or conceptual) frame, without which the art work cannot exist, although the frame is supplemental, neither fully inside nor outside the work. "Deconstruction must neither reframe nor dream of the pure and simple absence of the frame."[15] The author is equivalent to the frame; proclaiming his death is to dream of his absence; announcing "the birth of the reader" or the "author function" is reframing him. We are instead caught in what Derrida calls a "double-bind" between author and reader.

Like the advent of the modern artist, the birth of the author can be traced in part to Rembrandt's innovations. Many of the elements associated with Rembrandt's biography, and the idea of the inextricable connection between his life and work, are derived from his own pictures. Korda's film provides privileged access to this conceptual complex. The film opens in a painter's supply shop, where the artist is urged by his 'agent' to paint a group portrait of the civic guard. "I don't like their faces," Rembrandt-Laughton petulantly replies. "Now leave me alone, I'm busy painting Saskia." He eventually gives in, because he needs money to buy his wife extravagant jewelry. Later, he shares a beer with the militiamen in a tavern, where he recounts a vision:

> A creature half-child, half-woman, half-angel, half-lover brushed against him. And of a sudden he knew, that when a woman gives herself to you, you possess all women... Gaze upon her as you'd gaze upon a thousand women but never call her yours, for her secrets are inexhaustible, you'll never know them all. Call her by one name only; I call her Saskia.

The painter's speech is rudely interrupted by a messenger who requests he return to his home, where he learns of Saskia's death. At her subsequent funeral banquet, he is conspicuously absent and eventually discovered in his studio, painting her profile portrait.

On the most obvious level, the biographical narrative follows a thread left by Rembrandt. His posthumous portrait of Saskia (now in Kassel) was an attempt to recapture in art a presence no longer extant in life, a connection made explicit in the film through the anecdote of his absence from her funeral. On a more complex level, the scene is a displacement of an earlier moment, when he painted Saskia into the *Nightwatch*, invoked in his tavern speech as "a creature half-child, half-woman, half-angel, half-lover." Saskia died on June 16, 1642. Rembrandt is assumed to have completed the *Nightwatch* shortly thereafter. We can understand his desire to pay tribute to his wife or preserve her fading memory. But Rembrandt's idea was controversial. The motif is in fact displaced into three or

four separate elements in Korda's film: the profile portrait, the tavern speech, and the scandal at the unveiling of the *Nightwatch*, anticipated by Rembrandt's resistance to the commission at the outset of the film. To paraphrase both Van Hoogstraten and the film, instead of the individual portraits he was commissioned to do, Rembrandt preferred to depict his wife. A similar displacement is evident in Arnold Houbraken's anecdote that Rembrandt painted his dying pet monkey into a family group portrait; the patrons objected, but he refused to remove the animal and kept the work for himself.[16] Rembrandt may never have owned a pet monkey, but he does appear to have painted his dying wife into a group portrait.

Jean Genet already mischievously proposed that Rembrandt "killed" Saskia.[17] His many drawings of her sick in bed and monumental etching of *The Death of the Virgin* suggest he was more concerned with her role in his art than his role in her death. This idea is also hinted at in the opening of Korda's film by one of the customers in the painter's shop, who admonishes Rembrandt that "Saskia needs every consideration." But this perspective leaves intact the causal relation between life and work, only reversed. I would propose that Saskia's death was less significant as a biographical fact than as an artistic motif. After all, we know of her death, and care, primarily because of Rembrandt's art. He does not construct his art from his biography, nor his biography from his art, but constitutes his art as a form of biography, as the most crucial part of his life. The same principle applies in the case of his self-portraits, which are usually interpreted as records of his aging and increasing self-knowledge, whereas they are more accurately understood as records of his transformation of this genre, allowing such ideas to be recognized. The *Nightwatch* includes a fragmentary self-portrait at the back, a single eye looking up as if constructing his composition from within. This curiously detached 'empirical' author is juxtaposed with the Saskia-maiden as a metaphorical representation of the author, a symbol of his tragic muse, inexhaustible secrets, and artistic fate. The painting does not stage the death of Rembrandt's wife so much as his ongoing birth as author and modern artist. We are still struggling to comprehend this world art historical event.

Ruins

In *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin put forward a theory of art that has profound relevance for art history and the study of Rembrandt. Addressing German Trauerspiel or "mourning-plays" of the Baroque period, and elaborating on Romantic aesthetic philosophy, Benjamin proposes a distinction between the historical content of the allegory, which has to be laboriously recon-

structed through recourse to abstruse symbolism, and the philosophical or aesthetic content and present significance of the art work. The passage of time and subsequent history of the work serve not only to separate the masterpieces from the mediocre, but also the inessential, historical meaning from the essential, lasting interest. The art work becomes a ruin, which exists merely for the philosophical or aesthetic truth embodied in it.[18] As an aesthetic truth for our time, the ruin is a corollary of the Romantic conception of myth.

Derrida proposes that the paradox invoked by Benjamin should not be limited to Baroque allegory, nor to the effect of the passage of time:

> The ruin is not in front of us; it is neither the abandoned yet still monumental fragment of a totality, nor, as Benjamin thought, simply a theme of baroque culture... The ruin does not supervene like an accident upon a monument that was intact only yesterday. In the beginning there is the ruin. Ruin is that which happens to the image from the moment of the first gaze.[19]

As I understand Derrida's argument, which closely follows Benjamin's, the art work is always mediated by some kind of perception, representation, reproduction, or frame (Figure 2).[20] The very understanding of the work as 'art' involves a belated (philosophical or aesthetic) perspective, but one based on the work itself. Our concept of art derives from Kant's philosophy and Romantic criticism, but these cannot be dismissed merely as modern inventions. There is no access to the history of art without the frame of art history, which cannot simply be fixed or removed. The concept 'art' frames the work as a ruin, a remnant from an earlier period of interest to us. But the concrete work ruins art as a frame, since the work was always already art, before or in the absence of this term or art historical discourse. In short: a double-bind of 'work' and 'art' (or art and history).

As it turns out, Benjamin's discourse on the ruin can be traced back to art historical foundations. In his essay on "the modern cult of monuments," Riegl first introduced a distinction between historical and aesthetic value, which correspond to Benjamin's historical content and philosophical or aesthetic content.[21] As with Benjamin's ruins, the tension elucidated by Riegl applies from the outset, since all monuments (a term that can be extended to "masterpieces" – Benjamin's word) were always already both 'historical' and 'aesthetic.' In the case of Rembrandt's *Nightwatch*, art historians seek to reconstruct the historical function of the painting through recourse to abstruse symbolism (iconography), but in the process end up denying its aesthetic content and present significance as art. Scholars like to point out that the title 'Nightwatch' is erroneous and anachronistic, since Rembrandt did not depict the guard at night. But this objection is itself anachro-

nistic, since titles are modern creations of art history and museums. Renaming the painting 'The Company of Captain Frans Baning-Coq' merely denies its status as Rembrandt's masterpiece. From the outset, the *Nightwatch* was a ruin, at odds with its context, among the conventional and mediocre militia pieces by his peers. The ruin-character of the painting is also evident from its subsequent history. After a period of neglect during which the canvas was cut down in order to fit into a smaller space, it was eventually installed in its own room at the end of long 'gallery of honor' at the center of the newly built Rijksmuseum. The painting was framed by caryatids on columns personifying night, day, dawn, and dusk, symbolizing Rembrandt's mastery of *chiaroscuro*, and the walls decorated with his and Saskia's monograms, in the manner of their joint tomb, a modern, secular shrine. Even this was not enough for the artist's most zealous admirers, who insisted that an annex be constructed on the back of the museum, where the painting was placed in complete isolation in natural southern light. The tragedy of the historical reception of the painting was repeated as farce in what was popularly called the 'pimple' on the Rijksmuseum.[22] The painting was eventually moved back to its previous location, where it remains today, with toned down decorations, including the caryatids, one of whose columns is seen in my photograph (Figure 2). The museum has also set up a small exhibition in the room to the left which denies the Romantic myth that the *Nightwatch* was controversial in its time.[23] Ironically, this denial of the historical failure of the painting robs it of its Romantic triumph as art; we are left with an ostensible historical function that is difficult to believe and without a concrete aesthetic relation to the work in our own time. Conversely, the painting serves as a *mise en abyme* of the museum, embodying the ineradicable traces of the cult of genius at its physical and conceptual core, which also constitute the (ruined) foundations of art history (Figure 2).

The ruin-status of Rembrandt and his art is particularly evident from current debates about his autograph oeuvre. Over several decades, the Rembrandt Research Project has sought to establish Rembrandt's authorship of individual paintings through scientific testing, with inconclusive results.[24] Svetlana Alpers claims this follows from Rembrandt inventing the "master's touch" as a "marketing device" disseminated among his students.[25] Bal dispenses with the attempt to distinguish between master and pupil altogether. What is lacking in these accounts is the history of scholarship. The effort to delimit Rembrandt's oeuvre begins with the nineteenth century catalogues of Cornelius Hofstede de Groot and Abraham Bredius. Both were connoisseurs who carefully examined the visual evidence, rather than scientific tests. Yet their over-generous attributions to Rembrandt of works by his students were bound up with economic factors, related to the owners of paintings, the prestige of institutions, and the cultural caché of Rembrandt's name, factors which continue to play a role in the ongoing failure to resolve these

problems. As Derrida insists, the ruin is there in the beginning. Rembrandt was never a totality or intact, but always already misunderstood, belated, and incomplete. Rembrandt's oeuvre is arguably the ruin par excellence, since the unprecedented confusion about his historical authorship is largely a function of the presumed aesthetic and monetary value of his works today.

Of course, art historians and museums are not simply villains or culprits, but absolutely necessary and therefore necessarily subject to critique. And the same goes for philosophers. A critique can be ventured in this regard of Derrida's own response to the 'debate' between the art historian Meyer Schapiro and the philosopher Martin Heidegger concerning Van Gogh's painting of shoes. In his seminal essay on "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger described a painting by Van Gogh as a pair of peasant's shoes, whereas Schapiro sought to specify which painting and identified this as a picture of the artist's shoes. Derrida mocks Schapiro's crude attempt to "trap" the philosopher in this way, although Derrida in my view unfairly lets Heidegger off the hook in one passage where he is presented as a German peasant tour guide who gets "worked up" while lecturing a group of Japanese tourists.[26] Derrida makes several questionable assumptions here. Leaving aside his division of cultural labor between West and East, Japanese tourists normally listen to Japanese tour guides (Figure 2). Nor is Heidegger plausibly presented as a tour guide. He did not get worked up about the painting. Rather, he had little knowledge of or passion for the visual arts. Heidegger was the (German) tourist. He got on a train to Amsterdam to visit an exhibition where he saw the "famous painting by Van Gogh." Aesthetics involves a joint venture between philosophy and art history. Art historians have to employ given conceptual structures, and philosophers have to address given art works. Each group is dependent upon the other, each field can deconstruct the assumptions of the other, much as Derrida has demonstrated of the relation between philosophy and literature.

Reception 'is' Us

Reception is usually taken to mean one of three things. In the narrowest sense, reception indicates the responses of an artist's contemporaries to his work, as with the event staged in Korda's film. More commonly, reception refers to studies of later commentaries, such as Emmens's book, which claims that these accounts are a function of the commentators' own concerns.[27] A third meaning of reception designates popular consumption or commercial uses of art. All are implicitly opposed to our own transparent and objective scholarly interpretations. This opposition needs to be deconstructed. Art historical scholarship is also reception. There is no outside of reception, or as Derrida says, "there is nothing outside of

the text."[28] This does not mean that all interpretations are arbitrary or equivalent. Rather, we assess these for their relative value, and elaborate on those we find compelling in proposing our own accounts, a process aided by awareness of previous interpretations and the stakes involved.

A commercial example of reception is the *Dutch Masters* cigar box, which adapts Rembrandt's *Staalmeesters* as its emblem. More specifically, the figures and the table before them are cut out in a crude reproduction of the painting, found on the inside cover of a recent incarnation of the box (Figure 3). Rembrandt's painting was chosen as an emblem of craftsmanship and quality control, which is appropriate, since his sitters served to ensure quality control for the cloth-makers' guild as 'sample-masters,' judging and pricing samples of cloth.[29] They were also ordinary merchants who chose Rembrandt to paint their group portrait because of his own craftsmanship and quality, in contrast to the elite group of regents, who favored the mediocre classicism of Rembrandt's students. Even the name 'Dutch Masters' is appropriate to Rembrandt's painting as a depiction of sample masters by a master painter. The traditional English title, the 'Syndics,' is less appropriate, since syndics are appointed for negotiations, whereas Rembrandt's sitters did not perform this function and have wrongly been interpreted as negotiating with an unseen audience.

Henri van de Waal first pointed out this error. In keeping with the conventional approach to reception outlined above, he rejects earlier accounts as a Romantic myth and identifies the scene as "simply five men who are just sitting to have

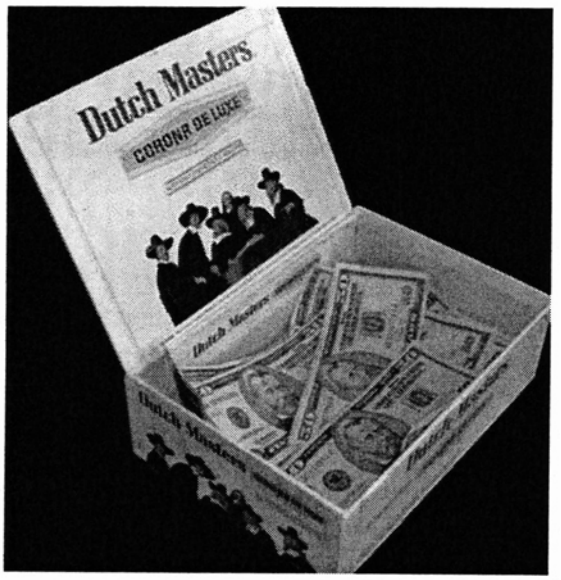

Figure 3 *Dutch Masters* cigar box

their portrait painted," an interpretation embraced by all subsequent scholars.[30] I have argued that, despite their errors, earlier accounts are essentially correct: Rembrandt's sitters visually engage their audience. More specifically, they are portrayed looking out at Rembrandt and up from his preparatory drawings of two of them that he made on pages of their account book, depicted lying on the table before them. The invisible portrait-drawings serve as a *mise en abyme* of the painted group portrait. The narrative of the exchange between sitters and artist-viewer makes explicit Rembrandt's implicit role as viewer in the *Nightwatch*, which is staged in a different way in Korda's film (Figure 1). The *Staalmeesters* thus depicts its own reception, both the original interaction between the sample-masters and Rembrandt, recreated as a fictional narrative, and their relation to all subsequent viewers who come to take Rembrandt's place. Romantic commentators, who were still open to their own reception or experience of the painting in the present, implicitly understood these circumstances, as did those who adapted the painting as the Dutch Masters emblem to engage their commercial audience.

Cigar boxes are commonly kept after the cigars have been smoked to store other things. I store tax receipts in my box, but in my photo I replaced these with dollars to suggest a metaphor for the relation between the art work and money. Rembrandt painted the sample-masters because he was paid to do so, and they were purchasing a product. Money is a *sine qua non* of art, and art gives meaning to money. Rembrandt signals these circumstances through the account book, which serves as a vehicle of exchange between business and art, and which stands in a comparable relation to the composition as the money in the cigar box does to the painting on its lid. Art can be used as a container for money, as an investment or commodity, or used to sell products. Scholarship claims to be disinterested, but there is always money involved, in museums, at universities, in publication.[31] And yet art retains an aesthetic dimension. We only have to see ourselves in it.

A second example is an old Rembrandt *koektrommel* or cookie tin (Figure 4). Such tins were intended for use after the contents were eaten. I use the tin for dog biscuits, hence my dog, Minnie, who also indicates scale and the furthest reaches of visual culture, since she recognizes that the Rembrandt cookie tin contains her biscuits. Minnie's face is also the only one in my illustrations that looks directly out at and engages us in the manner of a Rembrandt portrait, and her chubby cheeks, furrowed brow, and intense, 'hungry' eyes arguably resemble Rembrandt's: her master's gaze. The *Nightwatch* is reproduced on the top of the tin, framed by a decorative gold border which, intentionally or not, allows for the fact that the original painting was cut down. The *Staalmeesters* is found on the front and back, and on either side what was once considered a self-portrait of Rembrandt in a gorget

Figure 4 Rembrandt cookie tin and Minnie the Pug

and velvet beret, now in the Hague, labeled 'Rembrandt.' The artist's two best-known masterpieces are thereby bracketed with their author, his face, and name.[32]

The cookie tin embodies the cult of genius in the form of a poor-man's portable altarpiece or reliquary, which are perhaps its closest visual analogies. It also offers a metaphor for Rembrandt's reception. Many people today see masterpieces, old masters, and the Western canon as 'old hat,' in Dutch *oude koek* (old cake). A Dutchman once told me he was not interested in Rembrandt because, although he "could paint with his toes," the *Nightwatch* "was the kind of thing they put on koektrommel." The tin further manifests the dynamic history of scholarship, since the masterpieces are juxtaposed with a work now recognized as not by Rembrandt, although no argument has been made for its attribution to another artist. The image nevertheless remains a popular motif in modern imitation Delft-ware plates and tiles. As noted above, such errors are bound up with questions of value, and specifically with money – the cookie tin too can serve as a money box – and what could be called the 'Rembrandt industry,' as opposed to what Alpers calls 'Rembrandt's enterprise.' But all commentary is implicated in this industry, which also has positive purposes. The author, the masterpiece, and genius are vulnerable cultural constructions, but we cannot do without or step outside them. There is nothing outside of the tin. Rather, one has to read (or deconstruct) the tin.

The 'self-portrait' reproduced at the sides was in my view painted by Rembrandt's student Govaert Flinck, who easily assimilated, and to an extent caricatured his master's approach and ideas. Flinck's paintings lack their own style and content

and are for this reason easier and more accessible, which is why he was more popular in his time than Rembrandt, and why his early works continue to haunt Rembrandt's reception today. The mistaken use of a Flinck 'self-portrait' of Rembrandt as an emblem of Rembrandt's art is not limited to old cookie tins. Comparable examples were recently employed as cover illustrations for an international Rembrandt exhibition catalogue and a major monograph on Rembrandt. There is fundamental work to be done on these problems, which reach into the heart of what constitutes Rembrandt's art, its value, and significance.

A final example from Korda's film brings together all the issues touched on in this essay. After his bankruptcy, Rembrandt-Laughton meets an old beggar on Amsterdam's central dam square and convinces him to come back to his studio to model as King Saul together with Rembrandt's son Titus as the young David. The painter recounts the biblical story, and the beggar is so moved he takes hold of the curtain to wipe a tear from his eye, as in the painting in *The Hague* (Figure 5). The beggar's reaction to Rembrandt is presumably meant to echo the film audience's reaction to the moving scene, and the viewers' reaction to Rembrandt's moving painting. This reverse *tableau vivant*, which could also be called *tableau morte*, since the painting is 'killed' and absorbed into the film's narrative in a kind of cinematic taxidermy, represents the grossest excess of the art-life equation. Still worse, the painting is now recognized as not by Rembrandt. Even the actors appear to find the experience unpleasant, trapped inside an ugly composition they are forced to act out for no apparent reason. The cult of genius here becomes a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing, a ruin beyond redemption.

Figure 5 Still from Korda's *Rembrandt*: staging of *David and Saul*

Even at its schlockiest, however, Korda's film merely reflects the heart of darkness of art history. *Saul and David* was first donated to the Mauristhuis museum and hailed as a masterpiece by its owner, the Rembrandt scholar Bredius.[33] The painting was then cited as an illustration of the aged Rembrandt's profundity by subsequent commentators, including Alpers, although after the authorship of the painting was questioned she labeled this 'Rembrandt' in quotes, providing grist for Bal's mill. On the other hand, scholarship can also provide a way out of this impasse. I have argued that *Saul and David* in The Hague was painted by Rembrandt's student Willem Drost, who combined an adaptation of Rembrandt's early composition of this theme with a crude imitation of his late style. Like Flinck, Drost caricatures and simplifies Rembrandt's work in a way that appealed to both popular and scholarly taste. The painting does not herald the death of the author, the masterpiece, or genius, but instead reflects Drost's reception of Rembrandt, just as our reception of Drost's painting reflects (the inadequacies of) our reception of Rembrandt. Fortunately, it is not too late to rethink all of these works and issues, which is also the endless task and meaning of art history.

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Notes

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1. Emmens, Jan. *Rembrandt en de regels van de kunst.* Utrecht, 1968.
2. As cited and translated in Haverkamp-Begemann, Egbert. *Rembrandt: The Nightwatch.* Princeton, 1982, p. 67.
3. Riegl, Aloïs. "Excerpts from The Dutch Group Portrait" trans. B. Binstock, October, 27 (1995), p. 33–35. Scholars have misdated Van der Helst's painting to before the *Nightwatch*: see Binstock, Benjamin. *Aloïs Riegl in the prosence of the Nightwatch,* October 74 (1995), p.40.
4. On this last point, see Binstock, "Riegl in the presence of the Nightwatch," p. 41.
5. Haverkamp-Begemann, *Rembrandt: The Nightwatch,* p. 95–97, 100 n. 88.
6. Tümpel, Chistian. "Beobachtungen zur Nachtwache" in *Neue Beiträge zur Rembrandt-Forschung,* ed. O. von Simson & J. Kelch. Berlin, 1973, p. 168–169.
7. Schmidt-Degener, Frederick. "Het genetische probleem van de Nachtwacht (III)," *Onze Kunst* XXX (1916), p. 45–7.
8. Gide, André. *Journal 1889–1939.* Paris, 1948, p. 41. See also Dällenbach, Lucien. *The Mirror in the Text* trans. J. Witteley. Cambridge, 1989, p. 7–8.

9. See Koerner, Joseph Leo. *Die Suche nach dem Labyrinth. Der Mythos von Dädalus und Ikarus.* Frankfurt, 1983, p. 10–11.
10. Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author" in *Image, Music, Text.* New York, 1977, p. 142–148.
11. Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?" in *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology.* New York, 1998, p. 187–205.
12. Bal, Mieke. *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition.* New York, 1991, p. 8.
13. Proust, Marcel. *In Search of Lost Time.* Trans. A. Mayor and T. Kilmarton. London, 1992, vol. VI ("Time Regained"), p. 440–445.
14. Derrida, Jacques. "Otobiographies. The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name" trans. A. Ronell in *The Ear of the Other. Otobiography, Transference, Translation.* New York, 1985.
15. Derrida, Jacques. "The Parergon" in *The Truth in Painting* trans. G. Bennington and I. Mcleod. Chicago, 1980, p. 73.
16. Cited most recently in a volume whose title was inspired by the anecdote, Erftenmeijer, Antoon. *De aap van Rembrandt: kunstenaarsanekdotes van de klassiek oudheid tot heden.* Haarlem, 2000, p. 140.
17. Genet, Jean. "Le secret de Rembrandt" reprinted in *Rembrandt.* Paris, 1995, p. 33.
18. Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* trans. J. Osborne. New York, 1977, p. 182. This summary of Benjamin's argument is indebted to the lucid essay by Rosen, Charles. "The Ruins of Walter Benjamin" in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections,* ed. Gary Smith. Cambridge (MA), 1988, p. 140–141, 151.
19. Derrida, Jacques. *Memoirs of the Blind. The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins.* trans. P. Brault and M. Naas. Chicago, 1993, p. 68–69.
20. Benjamin probably did not consider the ruin "simply a theme of Baroque culture." As with Derrida's analysis of other authors such as Kant or Rousseau, he exaggerates Benjamin's position in order to combat a certain misreading of him, or emphasizes a "blind spot" in Benjamin which was necessary for his own discourse. The same principles apply in the case of Benjamin's often cited but poorly understood essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in that "aura" is always already lost or "reproduced," mechanically or otherwise, as soon as the work is perceived as "art." Rosen, "Ruins of Benjamin," 151, significantly proposes essentially the same interpretation, in an inverted formula: "The Origin of German Trauerspiel has an esoteric secret, nowhere stated directly although implied at many points and inescapable from a close reading. Benjamin believed that every work of art in order to retain its essential nature had to become a ruin. This could – and generally does – happen in history, but it is a potential of all art works... As a ruin, the Trauerspiel is an allegory of art in general."
21. Riegl, Aloïs. "The Modern Cult of Monuments; its Character and its Origin" (1903) trans. K. Forster and D. Ghirardo, *Oppositions* 25 (1982), p. 21–50. Benjamin acknowledged his debt to Riegl's *Spätrömische Kunstindustrie,* but never mentioned Riegl's monuments essay.

22. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum. *All the Paintings of the Rijksmuseum.* Maarssen, 1976, p. 31–35.
23. The Rijksmuseum is presently undergoing reconstruction and has provisional exhibitions throughout, including the room to the left, although the *Nightwatch* retains its place of honor.
24. Bruyn, Joshua *et al. A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings* 3 vols. to date. The Hague, 1982-
25. Alpers, Svetlana. *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market.* Chicago, 1984.
26. Derrida, Jacques. "Restitutions or the truth in pointing (*pointure*)" in *The Truth in Painting*, p. 293.
27. A similar approach is evident in a recent study of nineteenth century accounts of Rembrandt: Boomgaard, Jeroen. *De verloren zoon. Rembrandt en de Nederlandse kunstgeschiedschrijving.* Amsterdam, 1995.
28. Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology.* trans. G. Spivak, Baltimore, 1974, p. 158.
29. *Dutch Masters* cigars originally had high standards of craftsmanship and quality, but are now made of inferior materials, much like the box itself. I thank the gallerist and aficionado Ivan Karp for calling this history to my attention.
30. Van de Waal, Henri. "The Syndics and their Legend" in *Steps Toward Rembrandt*, trans. P. Wardle and A. Griffiths. Amsterdam, 1974, p. 256, 260.
31. My photograph of the *Nightwatch* not only shows the mediation of the museum installation, tour-guides, and so on, as opposed to a conventional cropped reproduction of the "painting itself" – which I have scrupulously avoided in this essay – but also avoids reproduction fees for the latter. The Rijksmuseum is itself a "money-box" in this sense. Both the *Nightwatch* and The *Staalmeesters* are also arguably over-reproduced and under-thought (perhaps there is a relation between these factors).
32. A more recent incarnation of a Rembrandt-tin, used for Rosenberg chocolates, reproduces only the *Nightwatch* on top, with Rembrandt's name and (incorrect) birth and death dates at the back, with the company's name and its 'birth date' on the front. The older example, which is perhaps better called an 'antique cookie tin,' was given to me by Hanneke Grootenboer as a means to return my scarf and to thank me for putting her up, and I thank her in turn.
33. The issues touched on in this paragraph are discussed at greater length in Binstock, Benjamin. "Rembrandt's Paint," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 36 (1999), p. 150–152.

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