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# REMBRANDT AND HIS CONTEMPORARY CRITICS<sup>1</sup>

BY SEYMOUR SLIVE

## I

The Dutch have a quality which, according to an axiom of the atelier, makes them the ideal audience for the painter: they enjoy paintings with their eyes, not with their ears. They prefer to look at pictures rather than to write, read or talk about them.

J. Huizinga, the Dutch historian of culture, views his countrymen as nominalists engaged in speechless, sceptical contemplation. This accounts, he adds, for their predilection for the picture as a means of expression as opposed to the word and explains the relative absence of drama, novels, memoirs and good personal letters in Holland. The Dutch seem to feel little need to put their personal experiences into closed intellectual or literary forms; they care little for ceremony or the formal compliment.

These national characteristics, if one is permitted today to speak of national characteristics, certainly help to explain part of the joy which the seventeenth-century Netherlander must have received from the numerous still lifes of every description, from the landscapes, seascapes, town views, genre scenes and portraits which he painted or saw and bought, but about which he seldom wrote or theorized. He was satisfied simply to paint a picture or to look at one; he felt no urge to use it as a point of departure for refined theoretical speculation. Moreover, we shall see that the kind of painting in which most Dutch artists excelled—still lifes, landscapes, genre scenes—did not lend itself to pre-eighteenth-century general discussions on painting.

Frits Lugt, the Dutch connoisseur and art historian, gives additional evidence for the Dutch antipathy toward closed systems in the field of art. He points out that in spite of Ploos van Amstel's advocacy in the eighteenth century of a Dutch equivalent for *Kunstwissenschaft*, not even the word ever took hold. The word *Kunstgelehrter*, so popular in neighboring Germany, has no Dutch equivalent. The Dutch use only the nouns *kunsthistoricus*, art historian, and *kunstkennner*, connoisseur. And Mr. Lugt, the Netherlander, does not attempt to generalize on his observations. He merely says, "This is very significant."

<sup>1</sup> Material used in this essay has been included in a study of *Rembrandt and His Critics: 1630-1730* submitted to the University of Chicago as a doctoral dissertation, which will be published in *Kunsthistorische Bijdragen* of the Utrecht University Institute of Art History. The author gratefully acknowledges the invaluable assistance he received from Prof. Ulrich Middeldorf, Prof. J. E. van Gelder, Prof. Wolfgang Stechow and Mr. K. G. Boon.

At any rate, there can be no doubt that the people of the Netherlands were unusually inarticulate during their Golden Age of painting. Houbraken, the Dutch Vasari, did not publish his lives of the Dutch painters until 1718, almost half a century after the death of most of his country's great masters. No Dutch Leonardo left copious notes on his works and thoughts. More than a century's diligent research has not turned up a note written by Hals, Steen, Ruisdael or Vermeer. How different this period is from the twentieth century, when the manifesto of many contemporary artists is as important in a gallery as a scorecard is at a ball game.

No libretto was needed for most seventeenth-century Dutch painting, and although all painting is mute it is possible to speak of the unique silence of Dutch painting. One need only recall that seventeenth-century Dutch painters developed the first great school of still life painting, the most silent of all genres of painting. Dutch landscapes are hushed, too. It is impossible to acknowledge tremendous skies or vast vistas if there is chatter. Silence reigns everywhere. Emanuel de Witte found it in church interiors; genre painters in kitchens, bed rooms or drawing rooms. Occasionally a lute or a spinet is heard; but much more often we are in a silent interior watching an old woman praying, a servant girl peeling apples, a physician taking the pulse of a young girl, or a lace maker busy at her pillow. The children painted by these artists show all the qualities which make them children except that of making noise. Their deportment, like their clothing, is a replica of that of their parents. However, the greatest master of silence, Vermeer, as the father of eleven children, apparently had little faith in the talent of children for silence; none appear in any of his genre scenes. Only Steen's children howl; they compensate for the reserve of their numerous peers.

A relative silence is found even in Dutch taverns and bordellos. Ostade, in his youth, had his Brouweresque moments; but in his middle and late works he tempered his initial noise and wildness. When we leave the carousers and drinkers for the streets and town views of a Berckheyde or Van der Heyden we find them full of space, light and air; we then encounter a few scattered pedestrians, but never clamorous crowds. The marine painters prefer quiet, or at most moderate seas to gales. Only a few represented battles at sea. Among the thousands of painters, and there were thousands, who worked in Holland during the seventeenth century, only a handful depicted clashing armies. The horrors of a bloody war of independence just won or of an insurrection just quelled did not attract the quiet brush of the painter nor the contemplative eye of the patron.

As striking as the silence in seventeenth-century Dutch painting is the reticence of the huge public which bought and hung pictures

in Holland during the seventeenth century. This must be borne in mind when the criticism of Rembrandt by his Dutch contemporaries is examined. However, the small number of references to art by seventeenth-century Dutch writers, artists and patrons must not be dismissed as merely an inherent cultural inhibition. There were a great many reasons for the numerous fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian and seventeenth-century French discussions on art. One of them was certainly the struggle of the artist to prove that he was engaged in a liberal, not in a manual, art. These discussions were part of the artist's struggle for status. But the Dutch seventeenth-century artist who made revolutionary strides in the use of tonal painting and who dismissed the pomp and rhetoric of traditional history painting still worked within the medieval framework of the guild. Even in Utrecht, the Dutch town which was closest to Italy from the point of view of religion and style, it was not until 1644 that the painters' guild of St. Luke petitioned to have its name changed to *Schilders-College* because this name was more noble. This was only a request for the change of a name. The first group of Dutch artists to show dissatisfaction with the old guild organization did so only fourteen years before Rembrandt died, when a group of artists in the Hague in 1655 petitioned for exemption from the guild of St. Luke, in order to form an Academy. Before this time the Dutch artist, who was also frequently a stocking salesman, tavern keeper or tulip bulb specialist, was content with his membership in the guild which also protected the embroiderer and wood carver. He was more interested in protecting his traditional rights and privileges than in theoretical discussions about the nature of art.

## II

The relative reticence of both artist and patron in seventeenth-century Holland is the main cause for the difficulty of arriving at definitive conclusions about what Rembrandt's contemporaries thought of his work.

One might ask: does it matter to us if Rembrandt was praised or pooh-poohed by his contemporaries? Is the question a relevant one? Is not the important question: what does Rembrandt mean to us today? After all we have his works and it is through the study of them that we must find the formal qualities which are the basis for our understanding of any work of art as an aesthetic object. The conditions under which an art object came to be, its history, its effect upon the generation for which it was produced or upon succeeding generations are outside of the work of art *qua* work of art. Agreed. However, even the formal qualities which are distilled out of a work of art must be interpreted, and an analysis of what Rembrandt's con-

temporaries saw in his work will help us see it against the organic whole of the culture in which it was produced. Without attempting this task we run the danger of not seeing the work of art at all.

Although a formidable army of scholars and archivists has been busy for more than a century correcting the errors made by seventeenth-, eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century biographers of Rembrandt, there is still great confusion about the work, life and character of Holland's greatest artist. To be sure, we no longer find it necessary to debate whether or not Rembrandt van Rijn was ever christened Paul. We can also categorically assert that Rembrandt was not in Venice in 1638; and, thanks to the recent research of Rembrandt students who have proved that he was never in England, we can even cautiously state, that as far as we know, Rembrandt never left his homeland.

Public museums and private collections opened to the public have made amateurs as well as specialists familiar with all phases of his work. Although there is no consensus on all aspects of his stylistic development, there is certainly general agreement on its direction, from his early carefully finished works to his deeply moving and personalized paintings of the late fifties and sixties. With our highly refined historical sense we have no difficulty comparing him with Caravaggio, Rubens, Poussin or his Dutch peers, in order to set off the nature of his achievement. The literature devoted to Rembrandt would fill a good-sized library. But the monumental catalogues raisonnés written on his paintings, etchings and drawings, the monographs devoted to his iconography as well as to his style, and the careful studies which have been made of the composition of the paint and types of varnishes he used have done little to explode the legends which surround Rembrandt and his work.

The Ur-myth on Rembrandt states that Rembrandt was a howling success and amassed a tremendous fortune in Leiden and Amsterdam until 1642, when he painted the *Night Watch*, a group portrait of the civic guards who served under Captain Cocq. All Amsterdam was shocked, runs the tale, when Rembrandt delivered this painting. Such audacity! Rembrandt dared attempt to change the traditional Dutch group portrait! The men who had commissioned the painting were outraged by this unseemly hoax. Had they each paid Rembrandt one hundred guilders to be depicted as a dim piece of animated shade? No, this picture was unacceptable. The honest Dutchmen demanded that Rembrandt change the picture, or paint a new one, or refund their money. Stubborn Rembrandt refused to listen to any of the complaints or suggestions of his patrons. He was satisfied with his painting. He knew it was great. Of course, there was a tremendous scandal; therefore, from 1642 until his death in 1669 Rembrandt re-

ceived few if any commissions. The *Night Watch* was cut down and hung on some obscure wall. This did not induce Rembrandt to change his way of painting. He realized that he was a misunderstood genius and refused to prostitute his art by catering to the tastes of the stupid backward public. He spent his last years in the same fashion as Van Gogh, that other great Dutch master, spent his life—misunderstood, without a friend or a guild, or even a good piece of herring.

This biography makes a wonderfully romantic story and perhaps it finds wide acceptance today because of the current belief that it is in the nature of things that any artist worth his salt must be misunderstood by his contemporaries. There are good reasons for believing that the artist of today is suspect if he is popular. But is it impossible for us to imagine that there were periods in history when there was not an unbridgeable chasm between the artist and his public?

It is true that Rembrandt's *Night Watch* broke many traditions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch group portrait painting; but there is absolutely no evidence to support the assumption that his patrons were dissatisfied with the picture, and that it caused a tremendous shift in his fortune and social life.

Julius Held called attention to this fact in the February, 1950, issue of *Art News*. However, the art world does not like such news. When the Cleveland and St. Louis museums bought late Rembrandt canvasses in Autumn, 1950, *Time Magazine* of course referred to them as products of Rembrandt's dirt-poor, friendless last years. Do away with the Rembrandt myths and he is no longer excellent copy.

At this point it is worth noting that the *Night Watch* did not receive its title until late in the eighteenth century. Before that time it was simply referred to as the portrait of Captain Cocq and his civic guards. When in 1947 it was cleaned and stripped of its dark varnish and dirt it was promptly baptized the Day Watch. Seventeenth-century writers called it neither the Night or the Day Watch, for a very good reason: the men portrayed in the picture did not go out on night or day watches. They were members of a militia who were supposed to be ready to defend Amsterdam if the city was attacked. Dutch militia groups saw action during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. During the seventeenth they were seldom needed for defense purposes. However, they did not dissolve, but continued as social organizations, and their time seems to have been divided between target practice and activities around a festive board.

None of the meagre evidence we have regarding the opinions of Captain Cocq and his guards on their group portrait indicates that they were displeased with their picture. Cocq had a water color made

of the painting for his family album around 1653. No adverse comment was entered in the album; the picture was merely described. Another small contemporary copy of the picture was made, which is now in the National Gallery in London. Copies are usually an indication of a work's popularity. However, more substantial evidence can be submitted to demonstrate that the romanticized Rembrandt biography which uses the so-called *Night Watch* as its keystone is apocryphal.

In 1658 or 1659 Bronchorst and Cruysbergen, two men portrayed in the painting, testified before a notary that each man who figured in the composition had paid Rembrandt about a hundred guilders—depending upon his position in the picture. Their testimony was given in order to support Rembrandt's contention that an assessment he had made of his estate was fair and just and not too high. Their testimony makes three points clear. Rembrandt was well paid for this group portrait—about 1600 guilders. Secondly, those who were in the picture knew what place they were going to occupy because they paid according to their position in the picture. There was, and is, nothing unusual about the subject of a portrait paying the artist according to whether a head, bust, half length or full length portrait has been executed. And finally, if Bronchorst and Cruysbergen were dissatisfied with their portraits, or if the members of their militia group were unhappy with the picture, they would not have testified for Rembrandt.

We also know that the painting was not hidden on some obscure wall. It was in a large new guild hall made for the civic guardsmen, with five other group portraits made by popular painters of the period, from the time it was finished in 1642 until it was moved in 1715 to the Town Hall of Amsterdam. No wall in either building can be considered obscure.

Although not all late seventeenth-century critics applaud the *Night Watch* without reservation, available evidence proves that it received more praise than condemnation. No evidence proves that it was responsible for a great shift in Rembrandt's popularity in 1642.

Then we may ask, just what did Rembrandt's contemporaries think of his work? Fortunately, there are some data which indicate how this question should be answered.

### III

The man who has the honor of having written the first extensive account of Rembrandt as a painter is Constantin Huygens, the famous Dutch diplomat, poet, musician, athlete and dilettante of the arts. He began an autobiography around 1630, when he was 34 years old, and in it discussed painting. As young artists worthy of special attention he singles out Rembrandt and Jan Lievens, who worked together

in Leiden until 1631, when Rembrandt left for Amsterdam. What did the young polished diplomat who was at home in the courts of Europe think of the miller's son, Rembrandt, and the embroiderer's son, Lievens?

Huygens wrote that the two artists were already on a par with the most famous painters and would soon surpass them. High praise for the two young painters who were not yet 25 years old. This commendation becomes even more impressive when one learns how familiar Huygens was with the painters of his time and how conscious he was of the great change which took place in Netherlandish painting during the first decades of the seventeenth century. He wrote that late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century Dutch mannerists depicted clearly outlined subjects, while the new generation of painters could render movement and the transitory quality of appearance. The young painters can even introduce the impression of the warmth of the sun and moving air into their pictures. It is obvious that Huygens recognized the possibilities of tonal painting and was not appalled by the change from a linear to a painterly style.

This shift in the style of Dutch painting had its complicated roots in Italy, where a similar change had taken place two or three decades before Huygens wrote his autobiography.

Italian Seicento writers on painting also recognized this change in discussing the relative merits of the Carracci group as opposed to the followers of Caravaggio. But no Seicento author, not even the most balanced amongst them, could admit that the followers of Caravaggio could possibly surpass the Carracci. Of course, when *Caravaggismo* was differentiated from *Carraccismo* in seventeenth-century Italian texts, it was not done on the basis of mere stylistic analysis. All seventeenth-century writers on art accepted implicitly or explicitly a hierarchy of kinds of painting: biblical and historical subjects crowned this hierarchy. The Italian critics insisted that a particular style of painting, that of the Carracci, was most suitable for rendering serious, imaginative historical compositions, while the other style, that of Caravaggesque painters, was more suitable for unpretentious genre pieces.

Huygens also accepted the hierarchy of subjects in painting; but what is singular in his account is that he does not demand a certain *style* for historical pictures. Although Rembrandt and Lievens used a Dutch version of *Caravaggismo* in their early history paintings Huygens did not condemn the young artists. In fact, he applauded their style.

Huygens makes much of the humble origins of both painters. He feels their low birth is superb proof against the argument that "noble



blood" is superior to "ordinary blood." He adds that a group of doctors dissected the corpse of a nobleman in order to examine his blood and discovered it did not differ from that of an ordinary farmer. He also insists that the artists are not indebted to their parents for their talent. It would be a mistake to conclude that Huygens underlined their humble origins because of unique democratic currents in seventeenth-century Dutch thought. Biographers of artists have been content to accept the fact that nature can distribute artistic gifts without checking the income or social status of the recipient, at least since Ghiberti wrote that Cimabue discovered Giotto drawing the sheep he was tending for his poor father. Huygens adds that Rembrandt and Lievens owe nothing to their teachers. They would have gone far and achieved as much if they had had no teachers. They owe everything to their natural talent. Huygens considered this high praise. Fifty years later Rembrandt critics will argue that because Rembrandt did not have professors of art to give him the essential rules he failed to reach the summit of painting.

Huygens considered Rembrandt's early work superior to that of Lievens in judgment and in the representation of lively emotional expression. Although he has great praise for Lievens, he singles out a painting by Rembrandt for analysis: *Judas Returning the Pieces of Silver*. This picture shows, writes Huygens, Rembrandt's superior ability to convey the expression of emotion in a small carefully worked out painting. Huygens is generous with his compliments: the picture can stand comparison with any Italian or ancient picture; in it the beardless son of a Dutch miller has surpassed Protogenes, Apelles and Parrhasius. Even if we discount the propensity of a man with Huygens' humanistic background to summon the name of the ancient painters at the drop of a brush, there can be no doubt that he admired this painting. Huygens congratulated Rembrandt for his treatment of expression, gesture and movement—all indispensable talents for a history painter. He wrote that the central figure of Judas is beside himself, bewailing his crime, imploring the pardon he dares not hope for, his face a vision of horror, his hair in wild disorder, his clothes rent, his arms contorted, his hands pressed fiercely together. Prostrate on his knees, his whole body seems ravaged and convulsed by his hideous despair.

Thus Rembrandt won his first recognition as a painter of history pictures—the most important type of painting to seventeenth-century man. Before the turn of the eighteenth century some Rembrandt critics will conclude that this is his weakest genre.

The great praise and respect which Huygens, the man of the world and the man of means, had for the self-made artist who was made of different flour than his father, was not limited to the written word.

He also helped Rembrandt get commissions. Rembrandt made portraits of members of his family, and it is difficult to imagine that Huygens, who was the secretary of Stadholder Prince Frederick Henry of Orange, did not have something to do with the portraits Rembrandt made of the Prince and his wife around 1632. However, the faith which Huygens expressed in Rembrandt's future development was not based on the artist's ability as a face painter. Huygens' faith in the young artist as a great painter of historical compositions turned into a choice commission in the 1630's: a Passion series of five pictures painted for the Prince of Orange.

From seven letters which Rembrandt sent to Huygens, we learn that he also acted as the artist's agent for this commission. From the same letters we also learn that Rembrandt rewarded Huygens with his painting of the *Blinding of Samson* for services rendered.

The Passion series has been severely criticized by some twentieth-century Rembrandt students for its crude pathos and gruesome design; but it is significant to learn that the series pleased one of Holland's most important patrons—the Prince of Orange. He ordered an *Entombment*, *Resurrection* and *Ascension* after the first two, the *Elevation* and *Descent from the Cross*, had been delivered. If the Prince was not satisfied with the *Elevation* and *Descent* he would not have ordered the other three pictures. Huygens, who considered the *Judas* a work which could stand comparison with any picture, must have applauded the obvious depiction of expression, dramatic action and lighting in the five scenes. Would Rembrandt have rewarded Huygens with his *Blinding of Samson*, his most gruesome and most violent picture, if he did not think there were qualities in it which would please him? It is an error to think that Rembrandt never considered the tastes of his patrons. During the thirties he showed no sign of the insolent independence and deliberate disregard of his patrons' wishes so often associated with his approach to his work. He, himself, in a letter to Huygens dated January 12, 1639, wrote that in the *Entombment* and *Resurrection*, in order to please his Excellency the Prince, he concentrated upon expressing the greatest amount of inward emotion (*die meeste ende die naetuerelste beweeghelicckheit*).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The letter is transcribed in C. Hofstede de Groot, *Die Urkunden über Rembrandt* (The Hague, 1906), No. 65. The interpretation of the phrase *die meeste ende die naetuerelste beweeghelicckheit* has been the cause of discussion among Rembrandt scholars. H. E. van Gelder, "Marginalia bij Rembrandt—De natureelste beweeghelicckheit," *Oud Holland*, LX (1943), 148–151, suggests that Rembrandt referred to "inner" not "outer" movement when he used the word *beweeghelicckheit*, because that was the sense of the word during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Therefore, when Rembrandt wrote that he gave special attention to *die meeste ende die naetuerelste beweeghelicckheit* he had in mind "the greatest inward emotion."

[Note 2 continued at foot of next page]

We can infer that the inward emotion Rembrandt strove for would win approval from his patron. It was part of the current idiom of the high Baroque, which depicted dramatic events with an intensification of movement, expression and the effects of light.

By the time the Passion series was completed in 1639 Rembrandt's reputation as a successful and popular painter was well established. His portrait commissions were legion and he already had a considerable reputation as a teacher. His fame also extended beyond the borders of Holland. Two of his paintings were already in England around 1640, in the collection of Charles I. His early etchings of old men, Jews, Orientals and beggars were an immediate success. Soon after they were printed they found their way into the studios of publishers who issued sheets bearing portraits of famous and infamous men and women. Rembrandt's anonymous character studies were baptized with the names of popular emperors, kings, philosophers, soldiers, and villains. François Langlois, a Parisian print publisher, employed engravers in the thirties to make copies after Rembrandt's etchings. Interesting transformations took place. A copy of a laughing man after an etching of Rembrandt became Democritus; Judas was turned into Heraclitus; two Orientals became Mohammed and Philo Judaeus. Sometimes the same head was used for more than one character. Langlois turned Rembrandt's *Old Man with a Flowing Beard and a Fur Cap*, dated 1630, into Plato; Moncornet, another Parisian print publisher, used the same old man for his portrait of Marcus Agrippa. The possibilities of these transformations were infinite and were exploited by German as well as French publishers.

By the early forties artistic circles in France were familiar with more than Rembrandt's etchings and coarse copies of them. When the French painter, Claude Vignon, wrote to the above-mentioned Langlois from Paris, in November, 1641, he told him to give his best regards to Van Dyck when in London. He also asked him to give his best wishes to Rembrandt when in Amsterdam and to be sure to buy some of his work. Vignon also asked Langlois to tell the Dutch

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Jakob Rosenberg interprets the phrase quite differently in his *Rembrandt* (Cambridge, 1948), I, 116; 226, note 29. He writes that it means "the greatest and most natural movement" of the figures, and rejects Professor van Gelder's interpretation as unconvincing because it "seems to be contradicted by the pictures themselves, in which outer movement in the Baroque sense still dominates, and by the aesthetics of the period." Professor Rosenberg is correct when he maintains that Professor van Gelder's interpretation seems to be contradicted by the *Entombment* and *Resurrection*; however, the author believes that Baroque art theory confirms rather than contradicts Professor van Gelder's interpretation. The principle that the bodily movement of the figures in a painting should express human emotions and passions was articulated as early as the fifteenth century, and no seventeenth century theorist or painter would have thought of denying this notion. This interpretation of the phrase is expanded in the study cited in note 1 above.

painter that Signor Lopez had bought his painting of *Bilaam's Ass*, painted in 1626. He added that this picture would be sold with Lopez' collection in December. Thus here in 1641 we find Rembrandt's name in excellent company. He is mentioned by a Frenchman in the same breath with Van Dyck, and we learn that Alphonso Lopez, Richelieu's colorful agent and a shrewd collector, who owned Raphael's *Castiglione* and Titian's so-called *Ariosto* and *Flora*, also bought Rembrandt's work.

If Langlois did see Rembrandt when he arrived in Amsterdam in 1641 or 1642, he saw Rembrandt working on pictures quite different from *Bilaam's Ass*. In 1642, it will be recalled, the *Night Watch* was delivered.

Rembrandt's merits did not go unsung in his homeland in the forties. In 1641, J. Orlers, the burgomaster of Leiden, took pleasure in pointing with pride to Leiden's illustrious son. In his biography of the artist, which was the first written, he called him "one of the most famous painters of our century."

Philips Angel in the same year and in the same town gave an address on St. Luke's Day in Praise of Painting. He summoned Rembrandt's name and his painting of *Samson's Wedding Feast*, painted in 1638, to demonstrate that painting can and should teach. This idea was a hoary old commonplace; its ancient and respectable lineage can be traced back at least to Horace's simile *ut pictura poesis*. It had been found in books on painting since the fifteenth century, when Leone Battista Alberti wrote his *Della Pictura*, the first Renaissance treatise on painting. Since it was assumed that any painter worthy of the name must depict subjects taken from Biblical or ancient history, it is not surprising to find writers frequently reminding painters that if they want to attain perfection in their art they must have more than a nodding acquaintance with the Scriptures, ancient history, poetry and fables.

Angel pointed to the *wijt beruchten* Rembrandt as a shining example of a painter who makes excellent use of the study of history. His *Wedding Feast of Samson* reveals his diligent spirit and the careful thought which he has given to the passage in *Judges*. This is first of all apparent in the way he has depicted the guests at the table. They are reclining, not seated. This is the way the ancients conducted themselves at table and the way the Turks still do. Angel's aside about the Turks shows his own preoccupation with learning; it must be remembered he gave his address in Leiden, an university town.

In order to show that this is no ordinary feast, Rembrandt has placed long-haired Samson in the foreground posing his riddle to some of the Philistines. His gesture is a very natural one and proves that he is posing a riddle. In short, Rembrandt has accomplished two

things in this painting: he has shown us how wedding feasts were once celebrated and that this a unique wedding. He has achieved this, Angel concluded, by a precise reading of the Bible and by carefully thinking about what he has read.

Angel's praise was not simply a eulogy of a renowned son of Leiden given to a Leiden audience on the day of the patron saint of painters. His praise was based on a logically constructed argument, not rhetoric.

Many late seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and early nineteenth-century critics will continue to believe that history painting is the noblest occupation of an artist and that a knowledge of the appropriate gestures, manners and customs of the people depicted is an indispensable branch of painting; but they will not award Rembrandt the palm for his accomplishment in this field. Some will even claim he was illiterate and thus could not even pretend to wear the mantle of a history painter. But all the critics who discussed his work before 1642 applauded him exactly for his work as a history painter. And there does not seem to have been a shift in Rembrandt's reputation after he completed the *Night Watch*.

Constantin Huygens' remarkable sons, for example, when still at a tender age followed in the footsteps of their father in their admiration for Rembrandt. Christian Huygens, when but 16, wrote to his brother Lodewijk in 1645 that he had made a copy in oil of a head of an old man by Rembrandt that is so good that it is difficult to distinguish it from the original. In the same letter he writes that he and his brother Constantin are currently working with pastels and if Lodewijk saw the results obtained by stumping with this medium he would no longer use graphite. It is not too far-fetched to assume that Christian's letter is an indication that Dutch amateurs and dilettantes around the middle of the seventeenth century were still pleased with the tonal and painterly effects which the elder Huygens had praised twenty years earlier. Rembrandt's style, his use of broken and lost outlines and his exploitation of tone rather than line, and the potentialities of pastels are closely related. Young Christian was enthusiastic about both Rembrandt and pastels. A preference for pastels meant a predilection for Rembrandt. One can also invert the proposition.

The two brothers who discovered the wonders of pastels when students continued to show an interest in the arts when they reached maturity. Constantin wrote to his brother Christian in Paris, in 1633, to sketch a Carracci drawing in Jabach's famous collection in Paris, because he wanted to compare the disposition of the figures in Jabach's sheet with one owned by Rembrandt, which he also believed was by Carracci because of *l'hardiesse de la plume*.

This letter shows that Rembrandt was in good relations with members of the distinguished Huygens family from the beginning

until the end of his career. It is also of interest to know that Christian could be called upon the year he was elected to the Royal Society—and after he had already discovered a satellite to Saturn and perfected the pendulum clock—to make a sketch of a Carracci drawing. Here is proof that at least a fraction of the audience acquainted with Rembrandt during his last years was sensitive and cultivated. It is not difficult to imagine Constantin and Rembrandt discussing “l’hardiesse de la plume” of a drawing; not in French to be sure, but certainly the cautious connoisseur and the artist were able to communicate and understand each other.

However, proof that Rembrandt did not fall into oblivion or was looked upon only with contempt after he painted the *Night Watch* does not rest merely upon letters written by school boys and sons of an old friend.

Rembrandt not only continued to receive portrait commissions in Amsterdam during the forties, fifties and sixties; there is ample evidence that important collectors outside of Holland were interested in his work. In Italy Don Antonio Ruffo, the great Sicilian collector, began ordering portraits of ancient heroes from Rembrandt in 1652. In 1654 Rembrandt sent his *Aristotle* to Ruffo in Sicily. The Italian also gave Rembrandt commissions in the sixties, when he ordered an *Alexander*, now lost, and a *Homer*. In 1669, the year Rembrandt died, Ruffo asked the artist to send him some of his etchings. 189 Rembrandt prints were sent to the fortunate collector! Cosimo de' Medici, later Cosimo III, was in Rembrandt's studio December 29, 1667. Certainly not an indication of oblivion. Cosimo probably bought the self-portrait of Rembrandt, dated around 1655, which was in the Medici collection and is now in the Uffizi, when he was in Holland. It would be tedious to list all the prominent European collectors who owned Rembrandt's works before he died; let us return to comments his countrymen made on his work after he painted the *Night Watch*.

Poems and epigrams praising Rembrandt's paintings, etchings and drawings began to appear in Holland during the forties and continued to be published until his death. Poetic references come easily to the Dutch; chambers of rhetoricians were organized in the Netherlands as early as the fifteenth century by burghers and artisans. They flourished during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and in the course of the eighteenth were gradually superseded by baroque grand opera and drama. They were composed of artistically minded members of a number of different craft guilds, just as in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* a tailor, a joiner, a carpenter and other artisans perform a play together. The artistic merits of much of what the rhetoricians wrote is questionable. Most of them should have been content

with being contemplative nominalists; however, if nothing else, they did develop a facility in composing verse for their own meetings and for all kinds of festive occasions. In fact they placed a premium upon facility. The kneeling man with a bald head in Jan Steen's painting of the important patriotic festival, *Prince's Day*, in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, is a rhetorician. He is not kneeling because he is doing homage to the prince; he is merely lifting his glass to his lips after having recited a poem which, in accordance with a custom of the rhetoricians, he has composed on his knees as proof of his facility in improvisation.

All the seventeenth-century Dutch strophes which were dedicated to Rembrandt may not have been composed while the poet was on his knees; but even if they were composed in a sitting or standing position their depth and insight are not extraordinary. We must not look for a Baudelarian sensitivity among seventeenth-century Dutch rhetoricians.

Four lines of a poem by Lambert van den Bos published in 1650 in praise of Martin Kretzer's collection, which contained paintings by Titian, Bassano and Rubens as well as by Rembrandt, give us an idea of the tenor of this poetry:

I will not attempt your fame  
O Rembrandt, with my pen to scrawl  
For the esteem you receive in every hall  
Is known when I merely mention your name.

It is safe to assert that this is not great poetry. Nor does Van den Bos attempt to articulate what Rembrandt's great fame rests upon. He mouths what can be taken for granted: the mere mention of the painter's name in 1650 is sufficient to bring to mind the honor the painter has received. Since the poem is written in praise of Kretzer's cabinet we can infer that the poet considered the possession of a work by Rembrandt proof of the collector's good judgment.

During the sixties Dutch poets continued to eulogize him. Jan Vos, in a poem praising Amsterdam, printed in 1662, listed Amsterdam's leading painters: Rembrandt, Flinck, De Wit, Van der Helst and others. He wrote that these painters spread Amsterdam's fame as far and wide as her ships sail the seas. The metaphor is a favorite one of Dutch poets of the time. Rembrandt heads the list of Amsterdam's great painters; he is the flagship.

Jeremias de Decker in 1667 dedicated a poem to the painter in appreciation of a portrait Rembrandt had made of him. He is pleased that the Apelles of his time has painted him and would like to put into words Rembrandt's art and spirit, but alas he lacks the wisdom of a Vasari or Van Mander, he writes. The poet consoles himself with

the thought that it is really not necessary to versify the nature of Rembrandt's greatness, for it is known wherever Dutch ships sail. And it is even known in Rome, where it equals the art of Raphael and Michelangelo. This poem, published two years before Rembrandt died, repeats some of the ideas Huygens had expressed thirty years earlier in his autobiography. De Decker also wrote a poem praising a painting by Rembrandt of *Christ and Mary Magdalene*. He praises what earlier critics found laudable, Rembrandt's ability to translate the Biblical text accurately into paint and his ability to create an illusion. It seems, he writes, as if Christ is speaking to Mary. He adds a most significant comment: the shadow of the rocks, which Rembrandt painted very high for artistic reasons, enhances the picture and gives it majesty. Thus not all of Rembrandt's late contemporary critics disapproved of his use of shadows, nor were late nineteenth-century critics the first to discover the poetry of his chiaroscuro.

We have briefly traced Rembrandt's reputation from the beginning to the end of his career and have not yet cited a contemporary word of censure of his work. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that all of the artist's contemporaries were sensitive Rembrandt connoisseurs. For example, J. Boogaard in 1660 and Jan Vos in 1662 dedicated lines to Rembrandt's portrait of Coppenol, the master calligrapher of Amsterdam, and concluded that Coppenol's calligraphy was more worthy of praise than the artist's depiction of the writing master.

One may very well ask, and should ask, what did Joost van den Vondel, generally recognized as the greatest poet of seventeenth-century Holland, have to say about Rembrandt? He only mentioned him in two of his poems, once in four lines he wrote on a portrait Rembrandt had done of Anslø, the Mennonite preacher, in which the poet admonishes Rembrandt to paint Anslø's *voice*, for he who wants to see Anslø must hear him (this poem was published in 1644 and probably refers to a double portrait of Anslø and his wife or to an etching of Anslø, both dated 1641), and again in a poem which praises Coppenol. Vondel also wrote a verse on a portrait Rembrandt had painted of Jan Six's mother; in these lines his name is not even mentioned. Vondel was a friend of many of Rembrandt's patrons and friends—he knew Huygens and Jan Six—and yet he never had the painter do his portrait. Nor did Vondel, who wrote memorial poems for many of his friends and for many of Amsterdam's leading citizens, write a memorial poem to Rembrandt when the artist died.

There are good reasons for the silent treatment Vondel gave Rembrandt during the last three decades of his career. The poet's tastes, as Schmidt-Degener has pointed out, tended toward the polished pomp and rhetoric of the official Flemish and Italianate Dutch painters rather than the personal style worked out by the late Rem-



brandt. Govaert Flinck was Vondel's favorite painter. To be sure Flinck was a Rembrandt pupil; but after he left Rembrandt's studio he acquired an elegance and finish which Rembrandt never achieved. In 1653 he painted Vondel's portrait. When the authorities of Amsterdam decided to decorate their new classicistic town hall in the late fifties with a series of eight historical paintings depicting events in Holland's early history, Flinck, not Rembrandt, was given the commission. Flinck made studies for the series which showed the uprising of the Batavians under Julius Civilis against their Roman rulers; but Flinck died in 1660 before he could execute his sketches. The commission was then distributed among a number of artists. Rembrandt was asked to paint a picture for this series: a scene taken from Tacitus depicting the *Conspiracy of Julius Civilis*. The painting was executed and put in place in 1662. For reasons which Rembrandt specialists are still debating the painting was removed. Because the Julius Civilis painting was never returned it has been frequently assumed that the authorities were not pleased with the manner in which Rembrandt achieved an unprecedented monumentality based upon a unique use of chiaroscuro. However, there is no concrete proof that the painting was rejected because the municipal authorities had a different conception of what the style of an official historical painting should be.

If we examine the work of Rembrandt pupils such as Flinck, Maes, Bol and Hoogstraten we can find indications of what can be considered a change in taste suggesting that Rembrandt's work was not considered *à la mode* in all circles. Their early works used Rembrandt's chiaroscuro and subjects, and they were concerned with translating the work of their master into their own idiom. In the fifties and sixties they attempted to translate a *mélange* of Italian, Flemish and French into Dutch. But the change in attitude toward Rembrandt first finds written form in a biography of the artist written in 1675, six years after his death, by Joachim von Sandrart, a German painter and prolific writer on art and artists. He had been in Amsterdam from 1637 until 1645, and he must have known Rembrandt, for he painted one of the militia pieces which decorated the guild hall where Rembrandt's *Night Watch* hung. As early as the thirties Sandrart was in Italy, and by the time he writes his lines on Rembrandt he has the glibness and aplomb of an academic doctrinaire. He writes that Rembrandt missed true greatness because he never visited Italy where the ancients and the theory of art may be studied. It is worth noting that none of Holland's great masters of her golden age of painting—Hals, Van Goyen, Ruisdael, Steen, Vermeer or Rembrandt—made the trip across the Alps. This defect was all the more serious, continues Sandrart, because Rembrandt could hardly read. This remark would have

puzzled Philips Angel, who in 1641 praised Rembrandt for his careful study of the Bible and historical texts. Rembrandt's cardinal sin, according to Sandrart, was that he opposed and contradicted the rules of art, such as anatomy, proportion, the study of classical statues and Raphael's drawing. He was guided by nature, not by rules. Andries Pels, a countryman of Rembrandt's, took up this theme as early as 1681 when he wrote:

If he painted, as sometimes happened, a nude woman  
 He chose no Greek Venus as his model  
 But rather a washerwoman or a treader of peat from a barn  
 And called this whim "imitation of nature"  
 Everything else to him was idle ornament. Flabby breasts  
 Ill shaped hands, nay, the traces of the lacings of the corsets on the stomach,  
     of the garters on the legs,  
 Must be visible, if nature was to get her due.  
 This is *his* nature, which would stand no rules  
 No principles of proportion in the human body.

Sandrart also criticized Rembrandt for not using clean outlines. Thirty-five years earlier Huygens congratulated Rembrandt's generation for graduating from outlines; but the academic classicists insisted that line was more important than color or chiaroscuro. Sandrart takes Rembrandt to task for not having *the* proper style; his criticism is based upon the assumption that one mode of artistic expression is *per se* better than another. Although other modes of artistic expression have been substituted for the one Sandrart accepted, his assumption is still very much alive today.

Not all of Sandrart's criticism of Rembrandt is negative. As a painter Sandrart was sensitive to what he called the "universal harmony" of Rembrandt's light and shadow. He praised his color and the manner in which he rendered with vigor the simplicity of nature, his portraits and his little pieces. The latter is a reference to Rembrandt's early highly finished paintings which could be compared favorably with the then popular *Feinmalerei* of a Dou, Schalken or Mieris. Even Pels, who was so upset by Rembrandt's naked instead of nude women, agreed that Rembrandt had a tremendous talent; it was just too bad that he did not follow the rules.

One other point that Sandrart makes about Rembrandt must be mentioned. Sandrart complains that the miller's son did not know how to keep his station. This is severe criticism, for those who subscribed to the doctrines of the academy not only wanted to achieve beauty by rules, but also wanted to raise the social status of the artist. He was a blot on the profession: "er hat seinen Stand gar nicht wissen zu beachten und sich jederzeit nur zu niedrigen Leuten gesellet." Later critics will expand this theme; they will point out that Rem-

brandt did not wear velvet and a gold chain when he painted; and he even wiped his brushes on his clothes. The legend of Rembrandt the Slob has its origins in Sandrart.

The subjection of Rembrandt's work to academic criteria did not send Rembrandt into an artistic limbo. Hoogstraten, a former pupil of Rembrandt's who adopted much of the classicistic esthetic in his painting and writing, could still praise Rembrandt in 1678. He wrote that the *Night Watch* would outlive all its rivals because it is so original, artistic and forceful that it makes other Dutch group portraits look like playing cards. However, he adds—and one can almost detect a sigh—that it could have been less dark.

Late seventeenth-, eighteenth- and many nineteenth-century critics will find much to censure in Rembrandt's paintings, etchings and drawings; but even those who believed that his stylistic language made him *a priori* a bad artist found aspects of his work worthy of commendation. What these critics chose to laud or deplore throws light upon many facets of Rembrandt's work which we, as mid-twentieth-century observers, would tend to overlook. Each generation of critics constructed their own Rembrandt. The Rembrandt they saw tells us much about their critical frame of reference and their way of looking at the world. Some only saw the Rembrandt Pels saw: that which is seen so clearly in the artist's etchings of a nude woman made around 1631 (Bartsch, 198). Others overlooked that aspect of his work completely and only saw the Rembrandt who painted the *Self-portrait* in 1658 in the Frick collection. Writers will borrow, embellish or invent tales to prove Rembrandt was a realist interested only in low subjects, or will borrow, embellish or invent tales to prove he was never interested in the subject he represented and only used the subject to exercise his interest in light and shadow.

It is not difficult to understand why Eduard Kolloff, who in 1854 published in a book-length article in Friedrich von Raumer's *Historische Taschenbuch*, the first biography of Rembrandt based on the artist's works and seventeenth-century documents, complained that the list of errors made by previous Rembrandt biographers is longer than Don Juan's list of mistresses.

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