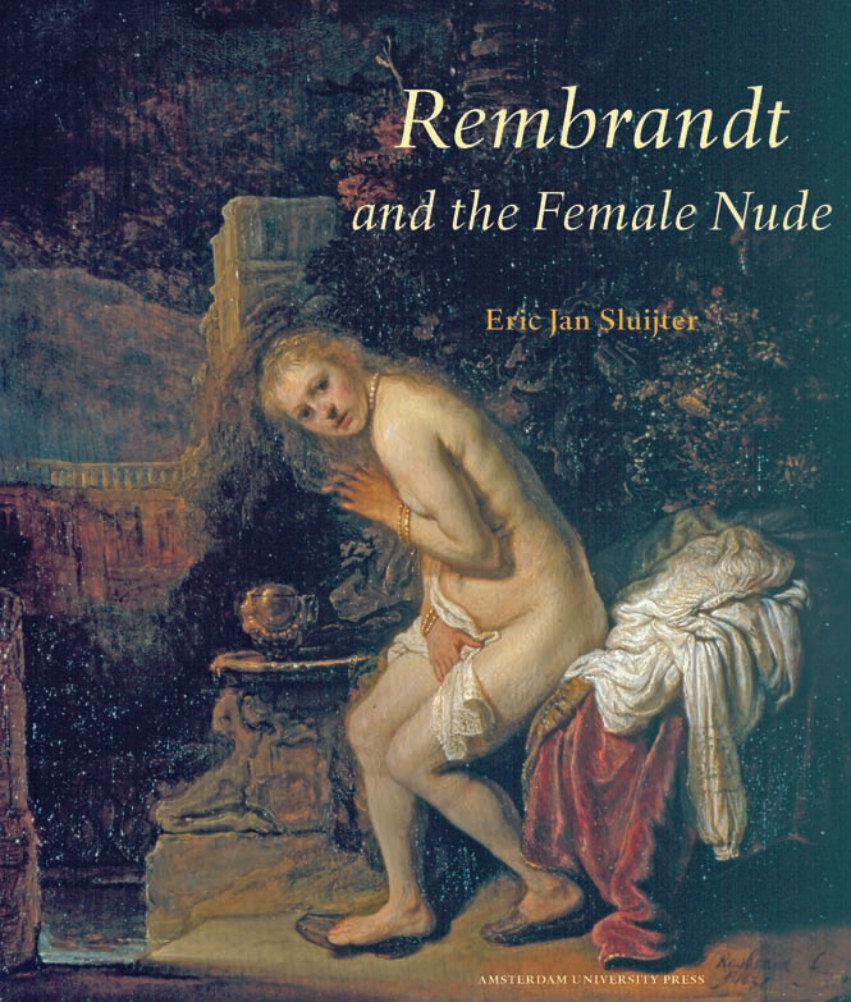


Rembrandt and the Female Nude

Eric Jan Sluiter



Rembrandt
and the Female Nude

*Rembrandt
and the Female Nude*

Eric Jan Sluiter

AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

The publication of this book is made possible by a grant from XXX

Coverdesign and layout: Suzan Beijer, xxx

Frontcover: Rembrandt, Suzanna, xxx

Backcover: xxx

ISBN 13 978 90 5356 837 8

ISBN 10 90 5356 837 9

NUR 654

© Amsterdam University Press, 2006

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the written permission of both the copyright owner and the author of the book.

Table of Contents

	<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	9
I	<i>Introduction</i>	?
II	<i>Andromeda Chained to the Rock</i>	?
	<i>Andromeda</i> by Hendrick Goltzius and his circle	?
	The image of Andromeda's plight as metaphor	?
	Rembrandt and <i>Andromeda</i>	?
III	<i>Intermezzo Rembrandt and the Depiction of the Passions in the 1620s and 1630s</i>	?
	Rembrandt, Huygens, rhetoric, and antiquity	?
	Samuel van Hoogstraten and Rembrandt's <i>lijdingen de gemoeds</i>	?
	A theatrical analogy	?
	Rembrandt, Rubens, antiquity, and the passions: a case study	?
IV	<i>Susanna and the Elders</i>	?
	<i>Susanna</i> in prints of the sixteenth century	?
	<i>Susanna</i> in the early seventeenth century	?
	Rembrandt's <i>Susanna</i> of 1636	?
	Rembrandt's <i>Susanna</i> of 1647	?
	Some other Amsterdam <i>Susannas</i> of c.1640-1660	?

v	Intermezzo <i>Images of the Nude: Moral Disapproval and Erotic Impact</i>	?
	Religious outrage	?
	Moralizing disapproval	?
	Erotic amusement	?
	A 'virtual reality'	?
	Playful erotic wit in images and texts	?
	Paintings with nudes in private homes	?
vi	<i>Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon and the Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy</i>	?
	<i>Diana Surprised by Actaeon</i> in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries	?
	<i>The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy</i> in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries	?
	Rembrandt's painting of <i>Diana and Her Nymphs</i>	?
	Seventeenth-century interpretations of the two fables and Rembrandt's invention	?
vii	Intermezzo <i>Rembrandt and Notions about Art: 'Coloring' and the 'From Life' Ideology</i>	?
	Arnold Houbraken and Andries Pels	?
	Jan de Bisschop and Joost van den Vondel	?
	Giorgio Vasari and Karel van Mander	?
	Karel van Mander continued	?
	From Rome to Holland: debates in the first half of the seventeenth century	?
	Joachim von Sandrart	?
viii	<i>Danaë</i>	?
	Legendary paintings of <i>Danaë</i>	?
	Titian's <i>Danaë</i> of 1545	?
	Goltzius's <i>Danaë</i> of 1603	?
	Ketel, Wtewael, and Bloemaert	?
	Back to Rembrandt's <i>Danaë</i>	?
	Rembrandt's contemporaries	?

IX	<i>Intermezzo Imitation, Artistic Competition, and Rapen</i>	?
	Van Mander, Angel, Van Hoogstraten, and Houbraken on the subject of <i>rapen</i>	?
	Imitation as part of the learning process and beyond	?
	Artistic competition	?
X	<i>Prints and Related Drawings: Modeling the Nude</i>	?
	<i>The Diana and the Nude Woman Seated on the Mound</i>	?
	<i>Sleeping Woman Approached by a Satyr</i>	?
	<i>The Artist Drawing from the Nude Model ('Pygmalion'): Apelles Drawing Victory?</i>	?
	<i>Cleopatra and Adam and Eve</i>	?
	Studies from the nude model, 1646-1661	?
	<i>Jupiter and Antiope</i>	?
XI	<i>Intermezzo The Nude, the Artist, and the Female Model</i>	?
	The nude and the naked: 'ideal' versus 'real' from Kenneth Clark to the seventeenth century	?
	Fictions about the artist and the nude female model	?
	Drawing after the nude female model	?
	Rembrandt's models: Hendrickje?	?
XII	<i>Bathsheba Contemplating King David's Letter</i>	?
	The pictorial tradition	?
	Rembrandt's images of <i>Bathsheba</i> before 1654	?
	Some paintings of <i>Bathsheba</i> of the 1640s and 1650s by Rembrandt's colleagues	?
	Rembrandt's <i>Bathsheba</i> of 1654	?
	Bathsheba, the sense of sight, and the depiction of beauty	?
	The biblical Bathsheba	?
	Rembrandt's <i>Bathshebas</i>	?
	<i>Notes</i>	?
	<i>Bibliography</i>	?
	<i>Index</i>	?

Preface and Acknowledgments

An entirely unimportant event in 1976, the year that, after four years at the Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD), I began my academic career at the Institute for Art History at Leiden University, is indelibly printed in my memory. At a reception a colleague introduced me to a curator in modern art of a local museum and told him that I had just been appointed as assistant professor and was specializing in Dutch art of the early modern period. ‘Oh, Rembrandt, I suppose,’ the man said condescendingly. I hastened to explain that I was not much interested in Rembrandt and was mainly engaged with late seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century art (these were indeed the areas I was in charge of at the RKD). At that time it was ‘out’ to study the masters of the old canon: every artist was equally important and painters that had been looked at with disdain by former generations of art historians were precisely for that reason all the more interesting. Since I still remember so vividly my rash react-

ion, I must have felt it as a betrayal – not only of Rembrandt, but also of my teacher, professor Henri van de Waal and of my aunt Titia Bouma, 20 years before me also a disciple of Van de Waal; she taught me how to look at Rembrandt’s art at the huge 1956 Rembrandt exhibition (101 paintings!) in the Rijksmuseum, when I was an excited ten-year-old kid. Perhaps I have always had the feeling that I had to make amends.

It took a long time before I ventured to study the work of Rembrandt. At first I considered it my main task to bring to the fore neglected works of art, from painted wall hangings by unknown eighteenth-century artists, via depictions of mythological themes, to the art of the Leiden ‘fine painters’ and works by Hendrick Goltzius. For many years I did not dare to study an awe-inspiring figure like Rembrandt. However, during the research for my dissertation on subjects from classical mythology in Dutch seventeenth-century painting, each time I was

faced with works by Rembrandt I experienced that, within the framework of my approach, there was so much more to say about his paintings than about the works of his colleagues. This approach consisted in the first place of tracing pictorial traditions and iconographical conventions of those subjects, and of examining the ways in which artists were involved in a continuing dialogue with these traditions and conventions. It was then that I discovered the intensity and profoundness with which Rembrandt sustained this dialogue. Within the context of the dissertation I could only elaborate upon this in the chapters on *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon and the Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy*, when discussing Rembrandt's combination of the two subjects in his painting of 1634.¹ This was the first time that I wrote with some detail about a work by Rembrandt. One of the chapters of the present book deals with this painting (chapter v) and expands on the research I did in the early 1980s on this subject.

A review of Gary Schwartz's monograph was my first separate publication on Rembrandt.² When writing this, I became aware of the fascinating role of Huygens in the formation of the young Rembrandt (see chapter III). Subsequently there followed, as a hesitant beginning of a series of studies on Rembrandt's female nudes, the publication of a paper on the *Andromeda* and the *Susanna* in the Mauritshuis, read at a symposium in Stockholm (1992), to which I was invited by Görel Cavalli-Björkman.³ This led to Ann Jensen Adams's proposal to write an essay for a book entirely devoted to Rembrandt's 1654 *Bathsheba* in the Louvre. Because of several setbacks in the production of this book, the article, for which I did the research and wrote the text in 1993, did not appear before 1998, together with several highly divergent interpretations of this painting.⁴

In the meantime, it was also *Danaë's* turn, first in lectures I gave in 1997 and 1998: I have fond memories of the lecture I presented on 15 April 1997 as one of my two Julius Held Birthday Lectures at the Clarke Institute in

Williamstown (the other was on the *Art of Painting* by Vermeer – in which I ventured for the first time to study the other luminary of Dutch art). This resulted in a substantial article published in *Simiolus*: 'Emulating Sensual Beauty: Representations of *Danaë* from Gossaert to Rembrandt,' which I dedicated to Julius Held, who has been a great inspiration for me.⁵ The above-mentioned publications were adapted, expanded, and elaborated upon in the chapters II, IV, VIII, and XII of this book. The chapter on Rembrandt's etchings and drawings with the female nude, for me a much less familiar field than his paintings, came into being in 2005. A few years earlier a skeleton for this book was composed when Julia Lloyd Williams asked me to write an essay on Rembrandt's paintings of the female nude in the catalogue accompanying the magnificent exhibition she mounted, *Rembrandt's Women*, held at the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, and the Royal Academy, London (2001).⁶ The fundamentals for the *intermezzo* on Rembrandt and notions about art (chapter VII) were laid in the middle part of that essay.

The other *intermezzi* received their shape in the last two years; some of them are based on earlier research, in particular chapter V on erotic and moral concerns, which expands partly on research for the last chapter of my dissertation and partly on information and ideas employed in the article 'Venus, Visus en Pictura,' published in the *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* on Hendrick Goltzius (1993).⁷ Parts of several chapters (especially III and VII) grew out of an essay 'Antiquity through Rembrandt's Lens,' which I wrote in 2001 on the invitation of Mariët Westermann for a book on Rembrandt in a series on great artists that was to be published by the Cambridge University Press, but which was suddenly discontinued because of a cutback. A paper on 'Huygens, Rembrandt and Rhetoric,' read during study days at the Rembrandthuis in 2002,⁸ was the basis for chapter III. Finally, a request by Elmer Kolfin and Jeroen Janssen to give a keynote lecture at a conference on imitation, or-

ganized in the spring of 2004 under the aegis of the Center for the Study of the Golden Age of the Universtiy of Amsterdam, compelled me to write a paper on seventeenth-century views on *rapen* and emulation. This resulted not only in a publication in *De Zeventiende Eeuw*, but it was also the basis for chapter IX.⁹ The last *intermezzo* ('The nude, the artist, and the female model') was written in 2005. Some aspects of it have their origin in the article 'Venus, Visus and Pictura' (1993), already mentioned above. This chapter is still somewhat rhapsodic – more research should be done on this subject – but it was necessary as a transition between the chapter on prints and drawings (chapter X) and the one on *Bathsheba* (chapter XII).

Although this book may seem to have had a haphazard and even accidental genesis, in fact the plan to write a book that would bring together the various aspects of what has interested me in Rembrandt's depictions of the female nude has been in place since 1993 and played a role in my research for the above-mentioned papers and articles. In the end, the chapters – which were, in their present form, written in 2004 and 2005 (publications that appeared in 2006 have not been incorporated) – together constitute a coherent and cumulative sequence. However, the chapters have been written in such a way that they can also be read as separate essays. I tried to take into account that, in practice, scholars rarely read a book from cover to cover. The consequence is that the reader will sometimes come across small overlaps, while often references to other chapters are included.

To translate such a book into English is never the easiest part. The chapters VII and IX were entirely translated from the Dutch with her usual aplomb and exactitude by my favorite translator Diane Webb. Because she translated the article on *Danaë* in 1998/9, she also edited chapter VIII, into which part of her original translation has been incorporated. Thus, these three successive chapters are consistent in their use of the English language and, in

that respect, doubtlessly different from, and certainly much better than, the chapters I-VI and X-XII, which I wrote in English myself. A difference everyone will soon notice is that Diane translated Dutch verse into English verse (such as lines by Van Mander, Cats, Vondel and Vos). Naturally, I am not able to do that, which means that in the other nine chapters, lines of verse are translated in prose.

The English of the chapters which I wrote myself in that language was corrected and edited by Jacquelyn Coutré and William Worth Bracken. I am forever grateful for their immense help. If one realizes how difficult it is to write well in one's native language, it seems conceited to write in a language that is not one's own. However, especially time constraints – it takes a long time to get subsidies for translations – compelled me to do so. Jacquelyn and Worth have kept me from making idiomatic and grammatical mistakes and employing wrong words; they saw to it that it became a readable text, while I benefited greatly from their critical comments. However, the inevitable shortcomings of writing in another language – a more restricted vocabulary and a stilted style – are entirely due to my limitations.

I was able to do a large part of the research that found its way into this book in the second half of the 1990s thanks to the support of NWO for the research program Pictorial Tradition and Meaning in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Netherlandish Art, which I, together with Reindert Falkenburg, supervised; during three years I received funding for replacement of part of my teaching load at Leiden University (a task excellently pursued by Huigen Leeftang), so that I could devote myself to the depiction of the female nude in Netherlandish art and to Rembrandt in particular, apart from the attention which, at that time, was also claimed by my growing interest in the relations between artistic and economic competition in the art market, which, however, left little traces in this book.¹⁰

Many colleagues and students have contributed to the genesis of this book in some way or another. Diane, Jacquelyn and Worth have already been mentioned, as were the names of Görel Cavalli-Björkman, Ann Jensen Adams, Julia Lloyd Williams, Mariët Westermann and Elmer Kolfin, who edited articles and essays on which several chapters of this book are based. To those should be added Ilja Veldman and Peter Hecht, editors of my Danaë article for *Simiolus*. I am grateful for their support and comments. Because of the long period over which parts of the research of this book were carried out – beginning with the work for my dissertation – many will not even remember that they contributed in any way. For instance Anton Boschloo: I have always considered myself fortunate that he was the supervisor of my dissertation, as well as my boss and colleague for twenty-five years at Leiden University; he still gives me advice when I need it in my present position. For that reason I dedicate this book to him.

A considerable number of students, some of whom have disappeared from my view, contributed in seminar papers and unpublished Master's theses to my knowledge of and insight into the subject. Of special importance for this study were theses by Rika Broere (1988),

Erna Kok (2005), Jan Kosten (1988), Judith Noorman (2006), Loes Overbeke (1988), and Nicôle Spaans (1991). Discussions with, and papers by, students participating in seminars – at Leiden University, Yale University, the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University, and the University of Amsterdam – sharpened my thinking about this subject; sometimes I have made grateful use of information they came up with in papers, to which I refer in footnotes. My understanding of seventeenth-century art theoretical concepts was considerably deepened by supervising what was for me the highly instructive dissertation of Thijs Weststeijn on Samuel van Hoogstraten's important treatise (Weststeijn 2005).

I am grateful to Marringje Rikken, who was, especially because of her knowledge of prints and book illustrations, an indispensable help with looking up, scanning and ordering photographs. Anniek Meinders and Christine Waslander supervised the production of this book from the start with contagious enthusiasm. Finally, there is the inspiring support of Sophietje (at the moment I write this, she is purring softly while draped on my desk) and the ever-present help of Nicolette, who, during the past half-year, put the work on her own book about Cornelis van Poelenburch on the back burner while helping me with editing this book.

VOORSTEL VAN SUZAN IS OM HIER EN OP
VOLGENDE OOK EEN DETAIL TE PLAATSEN
DAT NERGENS ANDERS VOORKOMT

I

Introduction

In his biography of Rembrandt, Arnold Houbraken devoted a passage to the master's portrayals of the female nude. Before stating how disgusting he finds Rembrandt's depictions of them, Houbraken, who had been a pupil of two of Rembrandt's own pupils, informs the reader that nude women were 'the most glorious subjects of the artist's brush, to which all renowned masters had set themselves with great diligence since time immemorial.'¹ After this assessment of the prestige generally attached to this subject, Houbraken gives a devastating critique of Rembrandt's nudes, followed by a long digression on Rembrandt's misguided principle of working only 'from life.'² This is one example of how time and again – from Vasari's discussion of Titian's *Danaë* to the criticism of Manet's *Olympia* – the debate on working from life versus selecting the beautiful raged most fiercely when fueled by depictions of the female nude. In the case of Rembrandt's nudes, the criticism of Jan de Biss-

chop and Andries Pels had already preceded Houbraken, and over the next three centuries numerous authors would follow.³ The tension between the prestigious position of the nude and the anxieties caused by the sexual overtones implicit in the portrayal and observation of the nude female body by men – aggravated when it was the artist's explicit purpose to represent the greatest possible lifelikeness – made the female nude a field that was traditionally full of pitfalls. Ninety years before Houbraken's biography of Rembrandt we find this tension strongly expressed by the Haarlem city chronicler and minister Samuel Ampzing (1628). At the end of his extensive praise of Haarlem's renowned artists, he suddenly attacks artists who depict nudes (and his readers would have realized that he had an important part of the oeuvres of Hendrick Goltzius and Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem in mind): '... why do you paint those parts of the body / Which reason and nature command us to conceal,

/ And feed an unchaste fire in the hearts of youths? / For you, the highest aim of art lies in [the depiction of] nudes. / But why is your heart not more inclined toward God?'⁴ From Ampzing's words we may conclude that in the earlier decades of the seventeenth, as in the early eighteenth century, many artists considered the depiction of nudes to be the highest aim of art (as, by extension, did the connoisseurs who admired their paintings). However, for Ampzing the erotic effect of such paintings was reason enough to denounce them unequivocally.

Statements like those by Houbraken and Ampzing contain, explicitly or implicitly, many issues explored in this book: the specific nature of Rembrandt's paintings and etchings with 'ugly' female nudes and the connected 'from life' ideology; the controversies caused by rival views about selection of the most beautiful versus following nature in all her contingencies; the notion that depictions of the female nude constituted a category within history painting to which celebrated artists had devoted their greatest skills and which was therefore a pre-eminent theme for artistic competition; the moral concerns caused by the erotic charge of such paintings – these will be discussed throughout this book. In Rembrandt's works these aspects are all indissolubly linked. However, to attain insight into the how-and-why of Rembrandt's depictions of female nudes, I will – in addition to discussing these works in separate chapters – also examine the thematic issues that I believe to be of special interest in chapters that are inserted as *intermezzi*. These constitute links between the chapters on the paintings and are of direct relevance for these works, but cut across the specific subject matter examined there. Moreover, often these *intermezzi* have a more general significance for Rembrandt's art and Dutch history painting.

In this book the paintings, etchings and drawings with female nudes are lifted out of Rembrandt's oeuvre and studied as a group. This raises the question of whether

Rembrandt and the audience for which such works were made would have experienced them as a special category within history painting.⁵ The statements of Houbraken and Ampzing quoted above – the one spoke of 'the most glorious subjects of the artist's brush', the other of 'the highest aim of art' – indicate that this, indeed, would have been the case for Rembrandt and many of his contemporaries. That there are more reasons to justify studying these works as a coherent group may become apparent in the course of this book. Rembrandt's pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten made clear that all the artist's capacities in painting and drawing converge in the depiction of the nude, when he stated that 'these two [drawing and natural coloring] never meet in a more wonderful way than in the human nude, in which nature did everything in its power, so it seems, to bestow that beautiful shape with noble coloring and skin tones as seems to belong to this masterpiece of the all-knowing Creator.'⁶ Moreover, it appears that, according to Van Hoogstraten, the masters of 'coloring' in particular – and we shall see that Rembrandt was a passionate adherent of this approach to painting, which was strongly associated with the great Titian – were the ones who devoted their best efforts towards the nude: 'Therefore, all great masters who have held the art of 'coloring' ['wel koloreeren'] in high esteem, have revealed in nudes and tronies all its power to imitate nature especially in this respect', adding that, according to Pliny, Apelles himself had tried so very hard to do this that it seemed 'as though he wanted to challenge nature itself to do battle with him.'⁷

In 1567 Ludovico Guicciardini articulated the notion, repeated by Giorgio Vasari and Karel van Mander, that the depiction of 'historie & poesie con figure nude' ('histories and poetical subjects with nude figures' – 'poesie' referring specifically to mythological subjects taken from the poetic fables of antiquity) had been transferred from Italy to the Netherlands by Jan Gossaert in the first decades of the sixteenth century.⁸ Although ever since the art of Jan van Eyck the depiction of nudes has had just

as long and fascinating a history north of the Alps as in Italy,⁹ in the course of the sixteenth century the nude as a particular motif in history painting became directly associated with the art of the Italian Renaissance and, through the works of the most renowned Italian masters of that period, with the art of classical antiquity, which was seen as being revived in their paintings and sculpture; this association of the nude with Italy has remained true until the present day. Rembrandt, too, must have been highly conscious of the fact that when depicting subjects with nudes he was situating himself within a prestigious tradition that was based on Italian models (including the ‘Italian’ models of Rubens and Goltzius), as appears from his continuous dialogue with Italian art.

The special position which the female nude occupied as a highly regarded artistic phenomenon within the representation of the human figure, must have been due to the fact that the bench-mark of artistic excellence, the legendary art of Apelles – the painter who, as Pliny stated, had surpassed all the artists before him, as well as those coming after him – was celebrated in particular because of the representation of female beauty and grace. The most often-repeated anecdotes about Apelles are all concerned with images of female nudes, especially of Venus – female beauty personified. The most familiar one, about Apelles falling in love with Campaspe while painting her in the nude as Venus, incorporates the theme of the erotic implications of observing and portraying the female nude, while the anecdote about another painting of Venus, which remained unfinished because of Apelles’s death, addresses the theme of the art of painting outdoing nature (and thus inciting its jealousy and causing his demise).¹⁰ The well-known anecdote about the cobbler who should stick to his last, which demonstrates that only a painter can truly judge the anatomy and proportions of the human figure, was, according to Van Mander, supposed to refer to a depiction of a nude Venus as well.¹¹ Every ambitious painter aspired to be praised as the Apelles of his time; indeed, since the eulo-

gies on Raphael in Italy and Jan Gossaert in the Netherlands, no laudatory poem or text of praise would lack the comparison with Apelles. Rembrandt, too, was called the Apelles of his age by his friend, the poet Jeremias de Decker, while his first admirer, the illustrious Constantijn Huygens, already held the young Rembrandt to be the one who surpassed Apelles (and Parrhasios and Progenes).¹² The constant repetition indicates how fundamental such comparisons were for the ambitious artists of the time. If one accepts Apelles as the greatest painter and as the exemplum of what the art of painting is capable of (as Van Mander most emphatically does in his biography of Apelles), then one has to accept nude female beauty as paradigmatic of the art of painting. As I argued elsewhere, the figure of Venus – the image of nude female beauty – was often related to, and sometimes even conflated with, the allegorical figure of *Pictura* herself.¹³ However, to pursue this ‘Apellic’ art had many implications, often going hand-in-hand with complications. These implications and complications, in particular where they concern the art of Rembrandt, play a significant role in this book.

Since the nineteenth century, the nude has been considered not just a special category connected to a variety of subjects in history painting, as it was in the early modern period, but a distinct form of art. This was most decisively formulated by Kenneth Clark in his well-known book titled *The Nude. A Study in Ideal Form*. Now and then I will refer to Clark’s book, because it brilliantly represents an approach to the nude that has taken root and, especially among a wider public of museum visitors, has not lost its appeal. For Clark, an important point of departure was the distinction between ‘nude’ (the ideal form) and ‘naked’ (the figure without clothes).¹⁴ This distinction would not have made sense for a seventeenth-century viewer; therefore, I will use the word nude without such specific connotations. Characteristically, in Clark’s discussion of the nude, the subject matter in

which the nude figure had been depicted was completely ignored (as in most books about the nude). Such an approach implies that the choice of subject matter is of entirely secondary importance and does not have a fundamental role in the response of the viewer – a response which, for Clark, was of an almost exclusively aesthetic nature.¹⁵ However, the way of approaching such works was totally different for the seventeenth-century artist and viewer. For Rembrandt, the specific context of subject matter in which the nude figure functioned, with all its emotional, moral, and erotic connotations, determined the nature and the effect of the nude. As will be argued, Rembrandt's choice of subject matter for his paintings containing female nudes – all of which deal with subjects that involve looking at the nude female body and arousing love and lust in the one who observes it – gives us insight into his particular approach to the nude figure. To challenge viewers to become intensely involved with the scene depicted – which they, on their side, expected to view as a 'virtual reality' (a way of viewing which, since the nineteenth century, has been considered a mistaken way to approach art) – must have been crucial for Rembrandt.¹⁶ Because of this, the subjects in which Rembrandt portrayed the female nude will constitute the point of departure for my examination of these works.

But, one may ask, if Rembrandt was well aware of the special prestige enjoyed by this 'Apellic' tradition, and if rivalry with celebrated painters of the past was such an important stimulus to Rembrandt as regards to this kind of theme in particular, why, then, did the outcome vary so much from the prevailing conventions, with the result that for centuries his nudes were found distasteful? And were Rembrandt's nudes a subject of controversy already in his own day? Or, as has been repeatedly stated in recent decades, did they become controversial only after his death, by which time theoretical views of art and beauty had changed? I will try to answer such questions

by carefully studying his works against the foil of his subjects' formal and iconographic conventions, as well as the conventions regarding the portrayal of nudes within these subjects. I undertake this in order to get a grasp on the conventional, as well as the specific, aspects of Rembrandt's works in relation to paintings and prints by other artists, especially with regard to the use of motifs, composition, relation to texts, the type of nude, the technique of painting and the ways in which all such means are employed to involve the viewer in the scene depicted. Thus, I hope to lay a foundation for gaining insight into facets of Rembrandt's choices when creating these works and the responses of the informed viewers for whom they were intended.

Simultaneously I will explore the views on art that were of special interest for artists and connoisseurs at that time, and for Rembrandt and his audience in particular. I try to deepen such insights by exploring the functioning of artistic competition, as well as other means through which viewers were activated, including the ways in which the expectations that determined their moral and sensual reactions were manipulated. I discuss such issues in the chapters on the separate subjects as well as in the *intermezzi* by deducing relevant views from a combined study of images and texts of the time, striving to examine the works of art, as far as possible, in historically valid terms. It is my aim to understand something of the choices artists made from the 'image banks' stored in their memories and on paper, and from the techniques and artistic ideologies available to them, choices that were determined by many factors, including: their intellectual and professional training; the traditions of their art and their profession; their ambitions as artists and their intended positions vis à vis colleagues and predecessors; the functions their works had to fulfill; their knowledge of, experience with, and attitude towards the expectations of the audience for whom these works were produced; and, last but not least, the particular talents that guided them. 'Influence', a vague and passive con-

cept that approaches a work of art from the wrong side and has plagued art history for more than a century, has conclusively been expelled by Michael Baxandall; here, too, it is rigorously banished.¹⁷

A thorny problem when discussing depictions of the female nude is the use of gendered language. In this study I try to shed light on aspects of artistic decision-making and audience reception for a specific body of material which deals on various levels with the erotic potential of viewing images of the female nude. The artists who produced the paintings, prints and drawings that I examine in this book were men, and it is safe to assume that these works were made primarily for men. Naturally, women looked at these images as well. However, within the framework of this study, it has been necessary to refrain from speculation on the female perception of such works, since my sources – the images themselves and the texts that might tell us something about the attitudes of viewers towards such artworks – reflect the views and responses of men.¹⁸ Therefore, in keeping with the overwhelmingly gender-specific nature of the material upon which I rely, I consistently use gender-specific language throughout this study. This is not to suggest that contemporary female viewers had no stake at all in this material, but different methodologies would be needed than those which I employ here to explore their possible responses.¹⁹

Since Hendrick Goltzius, Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, Abraham Bloemaert, and Joachim Wtewael produced a large number of paintings and inventions for prints featuring female nudes in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, images of the nude female figure would have become familiar to the art-buying public in the towns of Holland and Utrecht. It was during this period that mythological subjects were popularized in paintings and prints – with portrayals of *Venus*, the *Judgment of Paris*, *Venus and Adonis*, *Diana and Her Nymphs*, and *Assemblies of the Gods* as front-runners (for example

figs. 00). But just as popular were biblical women who were usually depicted as nudes: Susanna, Bathsheba, and Lot's daughters; these belonged to the favorites in history painting of this period (e.g. figs. 00). Especially in prints by and after Goltzius (most of them engraved by Jan Saenredam and Jacob Matham), but also in prints by Christijn de Passe I and many other engravers, a large repertoire of examples of subjects with female nudes had been composed (e.g. figs. 00). They were complemented by prints by and after sixteenth-century Italian masters, including those produced by engravers like Marcantonio Raimondi, Jacopo Caraglio, Antonio Tempesta, and the Carracci brothers (figs 00), by prints after Antwerp masters (Frans Floris and Maarten de Vos, in particular; figs. 00), and, not to be forgotten, by older German and Netherlandish engravers such as Albrecht Dürer and Lucas van Leyden, as well as lesser known ones like Hans Sebald Beham, Georg Pencz, and Heinrich Aldegrever (figs. 00). Even in book illustrations one could find images of female nudes if one opened illustrated editions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or, less obviously, the *Old Testament*, in which Susanna and Bathsheba were often portrayed as naked (figs. 00).²⁰

Of the generation of the late Mannerist artists, Cornelis Cornelisz. went on producing a sizeable number of scenes with female nudes until the end of the third decade of the seventeenth century (figs. 00), while Abraham Bloemaert, although in less numbers, continued even longer, having moved smoothly towards a more classicizing style (fig. 00). For the next generation of Dutch artists the 'from life' ideology took prominence, which went together with a steep decrease in the portrayal of female nudes. This new ideology, in which artists aimed to bring the subject depicted as close as possible to the world of the viewers' experience, and to which, in different ways, the so-called pre-Rembrandtists and Caravaggists adhered, meshed badly with the idealization that was always connected with the depiction of female nudes. It is no coincidence that the legendary story from

antiquity that underpinned the ideology of selecting the most beautiful from nature – the tale of Zeuxis, who chose different parts of five maidens to make the ideal image of female beauty – was concerned with the depiction of the female nude. However, there were some interesting efforts to adapt them to changing styles, notably in the late paintings by Goltzius (fig. 00), in some works of the much younger Werner van den Valckert (figs. 00) and in the etchings of Willem Buytewech (figs. 00). Other artists of this generation who sometimes painted nude female figures, like Adriaen van Nieulandt, held on to Cornelis Cornelisz.’s type of nudes (fig. 00). However, apart from a few works by Rembrandt’s master Pieter Lastman (figs. 00), such figures were extremely rare in the oeuvres of most artists of this generation, including Jan Tegnagel and the brothers Pynas, or Utrecht Caravaggists like Hendrick ter Brugghen, Dirck van Baburen, and Gerard van Honthorst, unless these artists changed their manner to a more stylized direction in later works, as did Gerard van Honthorst, Jan van Bylert, and Paulus Moreelse (e.g., fig. *). With regard to this generation, only specialists in landscapes with small figures, like Moyses van Uytenbroeck and, especially, the highly successful Cornelis van Poelenburch (whose figures were considered to be in an ‘Italian’ style), produced a sizeable number of *naakte vrouwtjes* (small nude women) during the 1620s (figs. 00). In the same period prints appeared after inventions by Rubens (figs. 00), who, as no other artist, had imbued his work with knowledge of the Italian masters of the Renaissance and the art of antiquity. His works would supply models which were intensely studied by a younger generation of Dutch artists – not the least by Rembrandt. Most paintings of subjects with nudes in household inventories of the first half of the seventeenth century are – as far as can be gleaned from the intermittent naming of artists – from the generation of the late Mannerists. They had produced a substantial supply of such paintings, which, apart from the small nude figures in landscapes, were hardly supplemented

with new works by artists of the generation between the late Mannerists and Rembrandt’s contemporaries.

When Rembrandt began to depict his first nudes in (small) paintings and etchings in the early 1630s, newly produced paintings with female nudes were far from current in the towns of Holland. Images of nudes in paintings and prints by the generation of the late Mannerists would have represented the most familiar type to those who collected paintings; these images would have determined the general expectations of what a portrayal of a female nude should look like, especially when depictions of nudes were the focus of a picture. In the 1630s few other artists took up the theme, apart from the specialists in small figures in Italianate landscapes. However, when Rembrandt reintroduced the life-size female nude with his *Danaë* – he might have been the first to try his hand at this since the quite numerous large-scale works of the late Mannerists – other Amsterdam artists, notably Jacob Backer (b. 1608) and Jacob van Loo (b. 1614) also began to engage themselves with female nudes as of c. 1640, and the younger Van Loo would become a true specialist in this field (figs. 00). About the same time female nudes in all sizes began to appear in the works of other painters of this generation, like Pieter de Grebber (b. 1600; fig. *), Salomon de Braij (b. 1597; fig. *), Jan Lievens (b. 1607; fig. *), and Jan Gerritsz. van Bronchorst (b. 1603; fig. *), who were followed by many younger artists, such as Govert Flinck (b. 1615; fig. *), Ferdinand Bol (b. 1616; fig. *), Caesar van Everdingen (c. 1617), and Johannes Jansz. van Bronchorst (b. 1627; fig. *). Particularly in Amsterdam, a considerable group of collectors must have developed a lively interest in rather large paintings with female nudes. After having demonstrated with his *Bathsheba* of 1654 that he was still the unsurpassed master in this field, Rembrandt left it to the younger artists to satisfy this demand.

The sequence in which Rembrandt’s paintings with female nudes are discussed is in principle chronological,

although this chronology is now and then suspended because the individual chapters on these works are structured by subject matter: the paintings of *Susanna* of 1636 and 1647 (the latter a later reworking of an earlier composition) are studied in one and the same chapter, as are those of *Bathsheba* of c. 1631/32 (only known through a copy), 1643 and 1654. The chapter on *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon and the Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy* (chapter vi), dated 1634, is placed after the chapter on the two *Susannas* of 1636 and 1647 (chapter iv), since the intermezzo on the representation of the passions and the activation of the viewer's involvement (chapter iii) makes a logical transition from the earliest painting, the *Andromeda* of c. 1630/1 (chapter ii), to the *Susanna* of 1636 (chapter iv). The large painting of *Diana and Her Nymphs*, with small figures in a landscape, has a somewhat separate place within Rembrandt's oeuvre and fits well between the *intermezzo* examining the erotic and moral implications of paintings with female nudes (chapter v), and the one exploring Rembrandt's position within contemporary discussions on coloring and line and connected views about 'from life' and idealization (chapter vii). The latter is most perfectly reflected in the *Danaë* (chapter viii), his first life-size nude, and a painting that seems to be an open declaration of his position in this respect. After the chapter on *Danaë* follows an inquiry into the seventeenth-century Dutch understanding of the relation between imitation, emulation and competition (chapter ix), concepts which are of crucial importance for my discussion of Rembrandt's paintings. The etchings and drawings, with an emphasis on the more public medium of etching, are examined together in the next chapter (chapter x), in which the question of the extent to which Rembrandt worked from the model takes central stage. This leads to complicated issues concerning the reality 'behind' the image, the relations between the artist, the portrayal of the nude and the actual nude model herself, a subject that has more facets than could be discussed here (chapter xi).

The book ends with a chapter on Rembrandt's depictions of Bathsheba. In his magnificent 1654 *Bathsheba* many threads come together, so that this painting forms an appropriate conclusion to my discussion of Rembrandt's not very numerous but intense treatments of subjects with female nudes.

As noted before, the exploration of Rembrandt's dialogue with the works of other artists, predecessors as well as contemporary colleagues, constitutes a unifying thread throughout my discussion of Rembrandt's work. His searching competition with renowned predecessors would have been fascinating for the connoisseur of the time. All the works examined in this book show Rembrandt's profound knowledge of pictorial traditions and iconographic conventions, which, as I demonstrate, were always his point of departure. In many ways he kept close to those traditions; simultaneously, however, he gave the portrayal of the subjects concerned an unexpected turn, so that all of them deviate thoroughly from the works of his colleagues. More forcefully than ever before and after, Rembrandt strove to incite the viewer's empathy, which often has a far-reaching effect on the way the moral and erotic implications of the subject are conveyed. In many ways his handling of such matters changed considerably in the course of three decades, yet it remained consistent in its powerful suggestion of lifelikeness that creates an inescapable relationship with the beholder. For that reason, these works not only evoked deep-felt admiration but also intense resistance.

During the last three decades there has been the tendency to 'normalize' Rembrandt, a healthy reaction to the cult of the solitary genius in which his art and his person had been trapped for such a long time. However, it is my aim to demonstrate – and it is also for this reason that I draw Rembrandt out of his isolation by studying his work in close relation to the production of his predecessors and contemporaries – that he was an artist who produced works of art that were exceptional in conception

and execution at the moment of their making. Rembrandt's art was fashionable during most of the period in which he produced the works discussed in this book and it was imitated by many lesser talents, while the goals he pursued fitted securely in the concerns of his own time and place. But to attain these goals he cut a path for himself with a determination and consistency that were singular, and it took him to places where no other painters were to go. When following this path, his profound interest in the images produced by other artists was a compelling force.

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources that give us some insight into Rembrandt's persona, sources which are mostly based on direct acquaintance or on the information of pupils, Rembrandt is consistently de-

scribed as a man with little social grace, but who was thoroughly convinced of his own qualities as an artist. In his dealings with patrons he apparently had no patience with the judgment of amateurs and could demonstrate a 'stubbornness that borders on social defiance', as Paul Crenshaw wrote.²¹ I would concur with this image. My Rembrandt is an artist who was obsessed with his art – early in his career Huygens remarked on his intense concentration, dedication, assiduousness and single-mindedness – and with his position among 'painters who at that time occupied an important place in the republic of painting' (to quote the words of De Piles when he enumerated renowned artists, including Rembrandt, who could match themselves with each other) – his position, in short, within an international canon of great artists.

Plates

II

Andromeda Chained to the Rock

With the little painting of *Andromeda Chained to the Rock* of 1630/31 (fig. 29), Rembrandt made his first appearance as a painter of the female nude. Significantly, it was also his first painting of a mythological subject. When he chose it for his earliest exercise in portraying a nude female body, no doubt he was well aware of the many illustrious predecessors who had depicted this theme. In particular, at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries the renowned Hendrick Goltzius and artists of his circle had represented *Andromeda* in prints more frequently than any other image of a nude.¹ Apart from a number of book illustrations of the subject in several editions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, there were four inventions by Goltzius (of which only one was engraved by Goltzius himself; figs. 4-7) and others by Karel van Mander (fig. 8), Jacob de Gheyn, and Jan Saenredam (fig. 15), respectively.² Rembrandt would have been familiar with these prints, but not only Rem-

brandt; this must have been true as well for the connoisseurs that were interested in such themes. From reading Karel van Mander's biography of the revered Titian, Rembrandt would also have learned that this master of the nude had painted a famous *Andromeda* for Philip II (fig. 14), and he undoubtedly knew a print based on Titian's composition (figs. 13, 14). Moreover, he might have heard that the great Rubens had even painted the subject on the garden façade of his house (figs. 22-24).³ Finally, he may have known that a nude *Andromeda* by the celebrated Greek painter Nicias was praised as a famous work in antiquity. All of these factors would have been stimulus enough for Rembrandt to attempt his own version of this theme. Goltzius, Titian, Rubens, and a famous painter from antiquity: these are artists we will often encounter in this book. The stage is set from the start.

In the traditional pictorial scheme of this subject, the chained *Andromeda* is rendered frontally as a nude fig-



1
Bernard Salomon, *Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, woodcut. In: *Excellente figueren ... Ovidius ... veranderinghen* (G. Borluit) 1557



2
Pieter van der Borcht, *Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, engraving 8.4 x 6.9 cm. In: *P. Ovidii Nasonis Methamorphoses*, 1591



3
Chrispijn van de Passe, *Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, 1602, engraving 8.4 x 13.1 cm

ure that forms the focal point of the composition. This made it the perfect vehicle for an artist who wanted to show off his ability to depict naked female beauty. Contemporary connoisseurs who saw Rembrandt's *Andromeda* would certainly have compared the painting, consciously or unconsciously, with a mental image of Andromeda that had been shaped by the many prints of the subject, especially those by or after Goltzius. With such images in mind, they would have found Rembrandt's painting of a frightened and defenseless girl to be new and startling. They would have experienced the same kind of surprise and excitement as Constantijn Huygens when he described how the expression of lifelike emotion in Rembrandt's figure of Judas (fig. 39, 39A) was something entirely different when placed 'next to all the beautiful art that has been created through the ages.'⁴ The fact that Rembrandt tried to do something similar with the depiction of a female nude might have made the painting more difficult to admire for a segment of his audience, as is certainly the case in our own time. With this first nude, in which an uncompromising naturalness and lifelikeness seems to be his primary goal, Rembrandt seems to explore the boundaries of what was possible within the conventional norms and standards that prevailed among a certain group of admirers who valued his work. Most of the issues that will be addressed in this book are present in this little painting. -

However, let us first consider those illustrations and prints that must have been the foil against which Rembrandt's *Andromeda* was measured.

Andromeda by Hendrick Goltzius and his circle

The subject was well known from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which was the source of almost all the mythological subjects that became popular in Netherlandish painting in the late sixteenth and throughout the entire seventeenth centuries.⁵ The basic scheme, which can be traced

back as far as medieval illuminated manuscripts, was very conventional. The many book images printed in the profusely illustrated vernacular editions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which were published as of the middle of the sixteenth century,⁶ had codified both the moment that was selected from the story of Andromeda and Perseus and the general pictorial scheme. Bernard Salomon's lively woodcut, first published in 1557 (fig. 1), was followed by the free copy made by Virgil Solis in 1563, which was reprinted in many Dutch editions of the *Metamorphoses* between 1566 and 1650.⁷ Variations on this composition were made by Pieter van der Borcht (1591; fig. 2) and Chrispijn de Passe I (1602; fig. 3). This basic image must have impressed itself in the minds of visually literate Dutch burghers and artists as the prototype of the scene. When thinking of the story of *Andromeda*, this standard pictorial scheme would have immediately suggested itself to such people. However, it was especially the inventions of the famous Hendrick Goltzius, which were all brilliant variations on this same composition, that must have been the ones to which any knowledgeable connoisseur consciously or unconsciously would have compared a subsequent depiction of *Andromeda*.

Goltzius kept closely to the basic scheme established in the book illustrations. The frontally exposed nude body of Andromeda is chained at the wrists to a rock that vertically divides the picture plane in two halves (figs. 4, 5, 7). Only in the third of his four inventions (fig. 6), engraved by Jacob Matham in 1597, did Goltzius expand the scene: faithfully keeping to Ovid's text, he included a group of lamenting spectators (among whom are the parents of Andromeda) and placed the rock with Andromeda in the center middle-ground.⁸ Thus he followed a compositional type that Van Mander advised as a means to lead the eye of the viewer into the imagined space. Van Mander recommended placing bystanders in the foreground and middle-ground so as to encircle the main scene, which they turn to or look at.⁹ We find something similar in Van Mander's own invention (fig. 8): he pushed



4
Hendrick Goltzius, *Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, 1583,
engraving 18.3 x 14.1 cm

Andromeda even further into the background and placed Nereids in the foreground, in reference to the source of Andromeda's predicament (her fate was punishment for the transgression of her mother Cassiope, who had boasted that she was more beautiful than the Nereids). This arrangement also gave the artist the opportunity to show the naked female body from many different angles.

In all his inventions, Goltzius depicted Perseus as seated on Pegasus in his fight with the threatening monster. Thus he maintained a pictorial convention codified in the many series of *Metamorphoses* illustrations, although this deviated completely from Ovid's text and all



5

Anonymous after Hendrick Goltzius, *Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, c. 1590, engraving 20,5 x 15,5 cm

other classical accounts of the story. In Ovid's tale, it is only Mercury's winged sandals that enable Perseus to take to the air. The inclusion of the winged horse Pegasus derives from an old tradition encountered early in medieval miniatures; it reflects confusion with the story of Bellerophon who did, indeed, ride Pegasus.¹⁰ Such confusion is understandable since Pegasus does figure in the story of Perseus: the steed was born from the blood of the decapitated Medusa, as Perseus himself recounts.¹¹ Goltzius certainly would have been aware that this motif did not correspond to the classical text. Several of Goltzius's peers did follow Ovid faithfully, as exhibited by a

drawing by Anthonie Blocklandt that he might have known, the print by Fontana based on a composition by the well-known Titian (fig. 13, 14), and the book illustrations of Van der Borcht and of De Passe I after Maarten de Vos (figs. 2, 3). In those scenes, in accordance with Ovid's text, Perseus dives down on his own while attacking the monster with drawn sword and shield. Although he follows Goltzius's example in the rest of his invention, Jan Saenredam must have read Ovid carefully to represent Perseus fighting the monster at the edge of a cliff, as this corresponds exactly with the final stage of the story. Ovid recounts how Perseus, no longer trusting his drenched wings, ends the fight from 'a rock whose top projects above the surface ... holding an edge of the rock with his left hand, thrice and again he plunges his sword into the vitals of the monster.'¹²

However, the image of Perseus seated on a horse who speeds through the air in full wing-borne gallop with waving mane and flowing tail was undoubtedly a far more interesting pictorial motif than Perseus swooping down on his own. For Goltzius this visually exciting motif was probably reason enough to maintain the traditional imagery. The fact that he depicts the flying horse in various ways, seen from different angles and often in strong foreshortening, shows that he relished this motif and that he wished to present a virtuoso performance. But there were reasons to keep the visual convention of Pegasus that had nothing to do with such theatrics and concerned, instead, the allegorical content of the image.

Before we consider those, it should be understood that Goltzius seems to have used this scene at different stages of his career to showcase his virtuosity in depicting the female body and to record both his changing ideas and ideals about the portrayal of female anatomy and proportion. The traditional pictorial scheme of the subject – a frontally exposed nude woman as the focal point of the composition – made it an eminently suitable subject for an artist who wanted to display his ability in depicting

naked female beauty during a period in which this had become the paradigm of the highest artistic goals. As indicated in the introduction to this book, every ambitious artist wanted to be considered an Apelles of his time – there is almost no poem or text praising a painter which does not invoke Apelles, the greatest painter of antiquity. As Apelles was especially famous for the beauty and grace with which he depicted nude women,¹³ the image of female beauty could even stand for the beauty of painting in general.¹⁵ Moreover, Andromeda’s great beauty, the sight of which immediately fired the love of Perseus, as was poignantly described by Ovid, offered a great challenge to the artist: ‘As soon as Perseus saw her there bound by the arms to a rough cliff – save that her hair gently stirred in the breeze and the warm tears were trickling down her cheeks, he would have thought her a marble statue – he took fire unwitting, and stood dumb. Smitten by the sight of the beauty he sees, he almost forgot to move his wings in the air.’¹⁵

Goltzius’s first *Andromeda*, engraved by the artist himself early in his career (fig. 4), shows his adaptation of the idiosyncratic and highly stylized type of nude that was developed by Anthonie Blocklandt. Indeed, Karel van Mander mentions Blocklandt when he enumerates the many shapes in which Goltzius, this ‘rare Proteus or Vertumnus in the art’, could transform himself by taking on different *handelingen* (manners/methods of rendering).¹⁶ The long but heavy tubular thighs make a smooth, taut curve from hip to knee and flow almost without any interruption into the peculiarly short calves, which themselves abruptly merge into the almost ankleless feet; the pronounced pelvis; the more or less classical proportions of the torso, with broad ribcage, firm, round breasts placed rather wide apart under muscular shoulders; and, finally, the small head atop a long columnar neck, can all be found, for instance, in Blocklandt’s beautiful *Venus and Cupid* painted a few years earlier (fig. 9).

The second invention (fig. 5), engraved by an anonymous artist around 1590, shows the impact of Bartholo-



6

Jacob Matham after Hendrick Goltzius, *Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, 1597, engraving 26.9 x 37.5 cm

meus Spranger’s *handeling* (fig. 10), upon which Goltzius extensively elaborated during the second half of the 1580s. As stylized and artificial as the former type, the body has now become more slender, the structure of the anatomy less pronounced, the hip and calves more elongated, the breasts smaller, the shoulders narrower, and the tiny head has become almost the same size as the broad neck. The elegant *contrapposto*, which is even more exaggerated than before, with its clear contours is sharply accentuated against the rough pile of rocks. In these first two engravings Andromeda indeed looks like a chiselled marble statue, ‘save that her hair gently stirred in the breeze’, as Ovid says.¹⁷

In the two later engravings after inventions by Goltzius, both originating from the time after his journey to Rome, there is a definite change in Andromeda’s appearance (figs. 6, 7). One immediately gets the impression that the proportions of the bodies have become less artificial, which is mainly due to the more natural proportions of the heads and necks. However, the bodies themselves certainly do not conform to the classical pro-



7

Jan Saenredam after Hendrick Goltzius, *Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, 1601, engraving 25.4 x 18.1 cm

portions of the *Venus Felix* or the *Venus ex Balneo* (figs. 11, 12), which he had drawn so carefully in Rome.¹⁸ In many respects, these later figures are close to Goltzius's former types, but a new suggestion of the tenderness of human skin makes their appearance markedly different from his earlier portrayals of Andromeda. By softening the contours and slackening their extreme tautness a bit and modulating transitions from the highest light to the deepest shadow far more carefully by way of a subtle shadowing, the artist suggested in a convincing manner the softness of flesh. Goltzius also skipped the traditional pose – one arm above the head and one at the side of the body – and aimed at a more natural attitude in his 1597 invention. It shows Andromeda with her arms

bound behind her body, her right shoulder hunched in suggestion that she is writhing in her chains while she chastely directs her gaze downwards, instead of theatrically looking up at heaven.

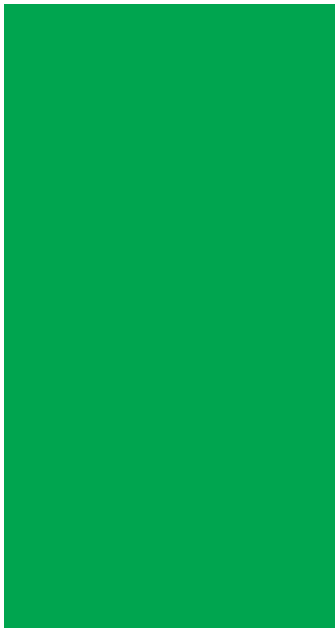
In the 1601 invention the exaggerated swing of the hip returns, but now a visual justification is given: she is chained with both arms to a rock sloping down to the left, from which she turns in the direction of Perseus and Pegasus (fig. 7). With great energy the winged horse and its rider swoop down on the monster that rises from the water, while the cliffs that circle the bay recede with great atmospheric effect into the distance. More than before, Andromeda seems emotionally involved with the outcome of Perseus's struggle. The undulating rocks that appear to push her in the direction of the monster, the positioning of the monster adjacent to her soft thighs and the highly conspicuous skull and bone in the foreground underline her terrifying situation. This arrangement of motifs strongly heightens the erotic appeal of this archetypal male fantasy, which is emphasized by the wind-swept hair that seems to caress her pudendum rather than cover it.

Goltzius must have been well aware of Fontana's etching (fig. 13), which was freely based on a composition by the renowned Titian (fig. 14). The pose of the arms in his print of 1583, the legs in the engraving of around 1590, and the general pose and placement of Andromeda in the engraving of 1601 all reflect Goltzius's knowledge of this print. Especially in the last one, Goltzius and his engraver Jan Saenredam seem to have engaged in direct competition with Fontana's etching. Technically, Fontana was no match for Goltzius, or, for that matter, for the Goltzius-trained engravers Saenredam or Matham. Fontana's technique is far removed from the virtuoso style of the Dutch master, and the expression of the tenderness of flesh, for which Titian was so highly praised and which seems of such great concern for Goltzius and Saenredam in their 1601 print, was completely beyond his reach. As a matter of fact, Fontana's much cruder style was not only unfit to suggest the softness of flesh,



8

Jacques de Gheyn II after Karel van Mander, *Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, 1588, engraving 17.9 cm. (diam.)



9

Antonie Blocklandt, *Venus and Cupid*, c. 1580, canvas 167.5 x 89.5 cm. Prague, Narodni galerie v Praze



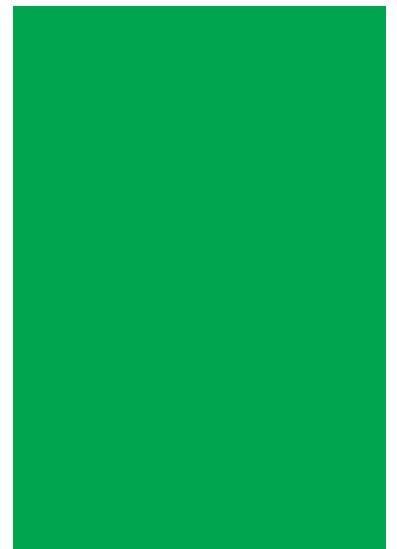
10

Hendrick Goltzius after Bartholomeus Spranger, *The Wedding of Cupid and Psyche* (detail), 1587, engraving (three plates) 43.5 x 85.5 cm.



11

Hendrick Goltzius, *'Venus Felix'*, 1591, red chalk 27 x 18.6 cm. Haarlem, Teyler's Stichting



12

Hendrick Goltzius, *'Venus ex Balneo'*, 1591, red chalk 27 x 18.6 cm. Haarlem, Teyler's Stichting



13
Giovanni Battista Fontana after
Titian, *Andromeda Chained to the
Rock*, 1562, etching 21.2 x 16.1 cm



14
Titian, *Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, 1554-56, canvas 183 x 199 cm.
London, Wallace Collection

he even seems to have consciously ‘hardened’ Andromeda’s body by changing the proportions quite drastically and by imbuing it with many characteristics of the male body (note the torso, waist, hips, and short abdomen). Thus the sensual effect of a fully exposed nude, so overwhelmingly present in Titian’s painting, is effectively diminished – something Fontana might have felt necessary for a print that was widely circulated. Undoubtedly Goltzius and Saenredam wanted to compete with the real Titian behind this print. They tried to evoke by way of the graphic medium the ‘glowing fleshtones’ and ‘fleshi-ness’ (*gloeyende carnation* and *vleesachticheyt*, to use Van Mander’s – and probably also Goltzius’s – terms) that had impressed Goltzius during his stay in Italy. Van Mander tells us this explicitly when he relates how Goltzius continually talked about what marvels he had seen there.¹⁹ Indeed, there is a strong endeavor to achieve in engraving an effect of flesh that has the ‘mellowness and softness of nature’, as Ludovico Dolce wrote about the work of his hero Titian.²⁰

The subtlety of Goltzius’s last depiction of the *Andromeda* theme, beautifully engraved by Jan Saenredam, becomes all the more evident when compared to Jan Saenredam’s own invention, which was engraved by Willem van Swanenburg (fig. 15). Although correcting Goltzius by being more faithful to the text, Saenredam has retained little of the protagonist’s energy, the soft modulation of the shadows that describe the surface of the body of Andromeda, or the atmospheric subtlety of the landscape. Although Saenredam varied the movement of Andromeda’s body, illogically he turned her away from the fighting Perseus. Somewhat clumsily Saenredam and Van Swanenburgh did try to accentuate soft skin, especially in the stomach and midriff. Interestingly, Andromeda’s proportions are quite different from those of Goltzius’s nudes and herald something new in her protruding belly and high, narrow waist. These aspects recall a much earlier fashion of female anatomy in northern art.

In the Latin inscriptions underneath the image, com-

posed by Petrus Scriverius, there is a remarkable reference to the darkness of Andromeda's skin. Although Andromeda is an Ethiopian princess, Ovid makes no mention of her dark skin in the *Metamorphoses*; on the contrary, he emphasizes her whiteness by comparing her body with a white marble statue, as evident in the passage quoted above. Scriverius, however, undoubtedly aware of the fact that Ovid described her as dark-skinned in the *Ars amandi* and the *Heroides*, wrote: 'Just as in the case of Andromeda, whose skin is the color of her country, black girls may hope for a handsome man as well' ('Et speret pulchram nigra puella virum').²¹ One may wonder if the darkish shading of Andromeda's body is indeed a reference to Andromeda's native color. Her obviously blond hair flowing around her body would seem to contradict this.²²

The image of Andromeda's plight as metaphor

Apart from the fact that the subject was eminently appropriate for showcasing ideals of anatomy and proportions of the female nude, there were many more reasons why this subject was attractive for Goltzius and his circle. It should not be forgotten that the image of a nude young woman in distress, chained and helpless, threatened by a vicious monster and about to be rescued by a male hero, belongs to an obvious archetypal eroticism. Such sexually charged situations occur with many variations in our own times – from movies like Tarzan and Batman to s&m magazines or the unpleasant art photography of the contemporary Japanese photographer Araki, whose naked or partly naked women are often bound with ropes or chains.²³ Even the ancient *Andromeda* story itself can still function as a setting meant to arouse the viewer, as in a hilarious scene in a novel by David Lodge in which an intellectual stripper stages the story of Andromeda in a Soho nightclub as a high-class striptease act.²⁴



15

Willem van Swanenburgh after Jan Saenredam, *Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, c. 1605-10, engraving 26.7 x 19.5 cm

In the seventeenth century, in a context in which it functions as an image with a distinctively erotic impact, we find the story of *Andromeda* in a rare and rather odd representation of *Hydaspes and Persinna* by Karel van Mander III for a ten-part series on the *Aethiopica*, painted for Christian IV of Denmark (fig. 16).²⁵ In one of these works Andromeda is the subject of a painting within a painting: the picture of *Andromeda*, which strongly recalls one of Goltzius's inventions (fig. 5), hangs on the wall of a bedchamber and is meant to arouse sexual feelings and to stimulate the conception of healthy and beautiful children. Heliodor's *Aethiopica*, a text from late antiquity that had become one of the most popular novels



16

Karel van Mander III, *Persinna and Hydaspes Embracing before a Painting of the Chained Andromeda*, canvas 110 x 220 cm. Kassel, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister



17

Anonymous (Michel le Blon?), *Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, etching 4.4 x 6.2 cm. In: *Thronus Cupidinis*, 1618

18

Anthony van Leest, *Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, in: *Declaratie van de incompst van de Prince van Orangien binnen Brussel*, 1579 (4°)



of the seventeenth century, tells the story of Chariclea, whose black mother, an Ethiopian queen, was suspected of adultery because she gave birth to a white-skinned daughter, the beautiful Chariclea. This change in color was due, according to the queen, to the fact that during conception of the child, she had been gazing at a painting of *Andromeda*: 'I knew that it was caused by having right before my eyes – while your father was embracing me – the image of Andromeda, totally naked', she tells her daughter.²⁶ Such references to erotically charged paintings with beautiful figures meant for bedrooms will be addressed in chapter v; the notion that they had the power to stimulate the conception of handsome offspring, ultimately proving the power of painting as well as of the imagination, stems from antiquity and is repeated endlessly from St. Augustine to Jacob Cats.

We also find the depiction of *Andromeda* in the entirely different, light-hearted and playfully amorous context of the *Thronus Cupidinis*, a beautifully produced little book of love emblems – a genre that had a sudden popularity in the first two decades of the seventeenth century (fig. 17).²⁷ Here the image stands for the concept that the power of love conquers all difficulties, instills courage and is impervious to danger. In Theodoor Rodenburgh's words: 'He who loves sincerely does not fear death.'²⁸ This wonderful little emblem book, which includes quite a few fables from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is arranged in such a way that the Petrarchan ideal of love is consistently present.²⁹ The Petrarchan mode, in which love is perceived as an omnipotent and compelling power that makes great demands on the tormented and suffering lover who is destined to fight with unwavering tenacity to conquer his beloved, is the central motif in Dutch love emblems and amorous lyric poetry of the time.³⁰ With its embedded eroticism, the *Andromeda* theme fits well into this popular, amorous, and playfully erotic context. For the contemporary beholder who was familiar with the story, this must have been the most obvious association that the image would evoke.

However, there might have been several more reasons for the popularity of the *Andromeda* theme in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In Dutch literature, the subject of *Andromeda* figured quite regularly in political allegories. In such instances, Andromeda stands for the threatened country – the Netherlands – and Perseus for the noble hero who liberates it from tyranny. Used in the ‘joyous entry’ of the Prince of Orange in Brussels (1579), it was staged in a canal by Jan Baptist Houwaert. The naked Andromeda was chained to a rock to be rescued by a winged Perseus who, handling a shield with the coat of arms of William of Orange, had to dive down into the water to kill the artificial monster while hanging from a rope above the canal.³¹ In the text describing this joyous entry, however, the staged happening was not illustrated; instead, the traditional image of *Andromeda* was used without adjustment to accompany the account (fig. 18). We see the same phenomenon half a century later, when in 1642 a tableau vivant (in the waters of the Rokin) was planned for the joyous entry of Maria Henrietta in Amsterdam, with Perseus symbolizing Frederick Henry. Again in this case the traditional image functioned as illustration when the description was published, albeit with the silhouette of Amsterdam in the background (fig. 19).³² The only emphatically allegorical representation of the subject in visual art is a print after Chrispijn van den Broeck that shows a group of women seated around the main scene holding the arms of the seventeen Netherlandish provinces, while the sea monster carries the arms of Spain and the Duke of Alva, and Perseus those of William of Orange (fig. 20).³³

As we can see in these examples, Pegasus was included in some cases and in others he was left out. The winged steed, who naturally makes a very fitting mount for a heroic prince, is present in the description of the joyous entry of Albert and Isabella in Louvain in 1599. In this case Andromeda represents *Belgica*, while Albert flies to the Netherlands on the winged Isabella and liberates the country by order of God.³⁴ On the other side of



19

Pieter Nolpe, *Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, engraving in: S. Coster, *Beschrijvinge van de blyde inkoopste ...*, 1642.



20

Anonymous after Chrispijn van den Broeck, *The chained Andromeda (The Netherlands) Threatened by the Monster (Alva) and Liberated by Perseus (William of Orange)*, engraving



21

Peter Paul Rubens, *Andromeda Rescued by Perseus*, c. 1615-20, canvas 100 x 138 cm. St. Petersburg, Hermitage

the border, Jacob Duym also had employment for Pegasus. This author included Pegasus in his play *Nassausche Perseus, verlosser van Andromeda ofte de Nederlantsche Maeght (The Nassau Perseus, Liberator of Andromeda, or the Dutch Maiden)*, published in 1606.³⁵ In the introduction, Duym describes the staging of the scene: a (dressed) Andromeda is chained to rocks, while Pegasus and Perseus emerge from a retractable cloud that hangs from a lever over the stage. Perseus sits in the saddle ('he should be fastened well, so that he cannot fall') and with every movement of the lever he stabs the dragon. This threatening monster is to be constructed of light wood or thick paper and is made to spit fire and water by an actor inside the apparatus. In this case we again find the coats of arms of the Netherlands, William of Orange and the Duke of Alba. A commentator who explains the theatrical performance after each scene even interprets Pegasus as God's grace in which William put all his trust. It is clear that elements of this tradition could be used at will, as best fitted one's needs and purposes.

All this means that the many prints produced in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries could be viewed in both the North and the South as political allegories. Although nothing in the images themselves – except, of course, in one explicitly allegorical print (fig. 20) – specifically points to such an allegorical meaning, the theme lent itself well to the traditional personification of a country as a maiden. If one wished to do so, the political allegory could easily be projected onto the image of the beautiful Andromeda as the threatened Northern or Southern Netherlands with the sea lapping fittingly at her feet. Except for the peculiar one by Scriverius mentioned above, the Latin verses at the bottom of the various prints never give a specifically allegorical reading, but instead only summarize the story of Ovid in several versions. All of the variants, however, report that the ill-fated Andromeda, who had fallen prey to the monster because of her mother's pride, was saved by the virtuous Perseus who fell in love and took her as his bride. As with the images, however, one may easily read these lines as metaphors if he or she wishes to do so.

There were additional aspects that must have made this story attractive to someone like Goltzius. For artists in particular, appeal may have lain in the fact that there were several texts from antiquity in which a painting of the theme of *Andromeda* is described. There is Philostratus's ekphrasis in the *Imagines* of a painting in which Perseus, who has already killed the monster, rests while a winged Eros frees Andromeda from her bonds.³⁶ Best known were Pliny the Elder's descriptions of the works of painters from antiquity, extensively cited by Karel van Mander in his *Leven der oude antijcke schilders*. This author mentions a painting by the famous Greek painter Nicias that showed the nude Andromeda liberated by Perseus. Although his source, a French translation of Pliny, makes no mention of nudity, with his knowledge of the pictorial tradition it must have been self-evident to Van Mander that she had been represented naked.³⁷ The opportunity to recreate the achievements of ancient

painting and to emulate famous works of art described in sources from antiquity was for many ambitious artists an important motive behind their choice of subject matter. It comes as no surprise that Rubens, who knew such sources as no other artist of the period, chose twice to depict the moment that Perseus, with the help of Cupid, liberates Andromeda from her chains (fig. 21).³⁸ Significantly, his scenes come close to Pliny's concise description, but also have elements of Philostratus's text in them.³⁹ In these scenes we are reminded of Ovid, too. Andromeda's attitude wonderfully shows her chasteness as described in the *Metamorphoses*, when Perseus (at an earlier moment in the story) asks her who she is: 'She was silent at first, for, being a maiden, she did not dare address a man: she would have hidden her face modestly with her hands but that her hands were bound.'⁴⁰

The composition of the St. Petersburg version (fig. 21), painted between 1615 and 1620, is close to the painting on the garden façade of Rubens's house in the engraving by Jacobus Harrewijn (figs. 22, 23). That Rubens used this theme in such an important and conspicuous place as a kind of emblem for the workshop that was situated precisely in that part of the building points to the fact that the theme of *Andromeda* must have had a special meaning for the artist. Elizabeth McGrath showed in an article in 1978 that the other scenes between the windows consisted of grisaille paintings, which recreated paintings by or depicted events from the lives of ancient Greek artists.⁴¹ A few years later Jeffrey Muller argued convincingly that the open loggia above the ground floor is actually an architectural illusion painted in perspective on the wall, and that the painting with Perseus and Andromeda that appears to hang before it is also painted on this wall. These images were meant to fool the eye of the viewer, representing a canvas *as if* it were hanging to dry in the sun (a common practice of the time).⁴² In a letter to Junius, Rubens described the paintings of the ancients as images 'which present themselves to us only in the imagination, like dreams, or so obscured by words that we try



22

Jacobus Harrewijn after J. van Croes, *View of the Rubens House*, 1692, engraving 28.7 x 35.7 cm



23

Idem, *Detail of the Garden Façade of 'the Rubens House (with the trompe l'oeil canvas of Andromeda Rescued by Perseus)*, engraving, 28.7 x 35.7 cm



24

Jacobus Harrewijn, after J. van Croes, *View of the Rubens House: Courtyard (seen from the street entrance)*, 1684, engraving 28.7 x 35.7 cm



25
Jacob Matham after Hendrick
Goltzius, *Hermathena*, 1588,
engraving 27.9 x 21 cm

in vain to grasp them.⁴³ This seems to be reflected in the ghostlike grisaille paintings, before which the canvas of *Andromeda Freed by Perseus* was placed as a ‘real’ painting, thereby truly reviving the ancients but emphatically remaining an illusion of an illusion at the same time.

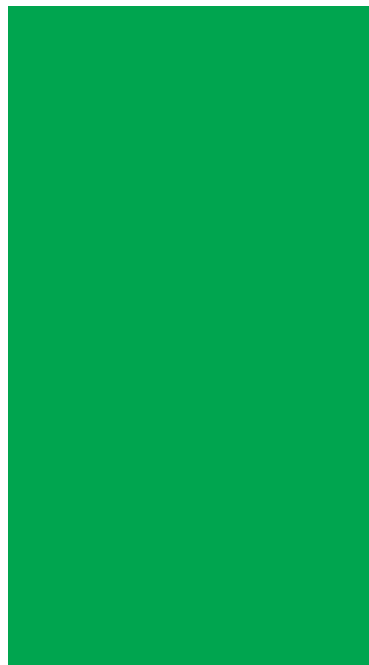
Jeffrey Muller also pointed out that opposite this scene, above the arch that gives entrance to the courtyard from the garden, stand Mercury and Minerva, as if presiding over Rubens’s house (fig. 24). These patrons of the arts – Mercury bearing a maulstick instead of his caduceus – had together armed Perseus; this act is depicted in an engraving by Jan Muller after Spranger.⁴⁴ Equipped by these gods, Perseus was able to slay Medusa, from whose severed head was born Pegasus, who struck Mount Helicon with his hoof to create the Hippocrene spring in which the Muses bathe. Around this time many artists were quite preoccupied with the image of these two patrons of the liberal arts, Mercury and Minerva, who were appropriated by the visual arts as *Hermathena*, and were shown as two gods united.⁴⁵ One of those

artists was Hendrick Goltzius, from whom we know several depictions of *Hermathena*. These include a print of 1588 (fig. 25),⁴⁶ but the best known use of this motif is seen in his painted series of 1611, in which Mercury holds a palette and brushes and Minerva wears a beautiful helmet crowned by a gilded Pegasus (figs. 26, 27). In the background of these paintings we encounter the familiar motifs of the enemies of real art: behind Mercury, the god who stands for artistic imagination and eloquence, we discern a figure representing jealousy and slander, and behind Minerva, the goddess of wisdom and learning, King Midas figures as a representation of the ignorant who are unable to value true art.

With this in mind, it is interesting to note that after the death of Goltzius in 1617, Balthasar Gerbier, artist, political agent, and acquaintance of Rubens, wrote a lengthy elegy titled *Eer ende Clachtdicht* (1620), in which a long procession of artists lament Goltzius’s death.⁴⁷ Heading this procession, and the first to mourn the death of Goltzius, is the greatest artist of all: Rubens. The poem tells us that Rubens is painting an ‘emblem full of meaning’ on a large canvas that includes the musical contest between Apollo and Pan surrounded by the Muses, a subject referring to the victory of true art over ignorant judgment,⁴⁸ as well as ‘the evil rock where Andromeda is lamenting.’ Thus, in this context the *Andromeda* theme has a direct bearing on the status of Goltzius’s art, just as the painting on the façade of Rubens’s house is evidence that it does for Rubens. It represents the image of true beauty rescued by the virtuous artist, who, armed and guided by *Hermathena* and riding the winged Pegasus who had created the spring from which all creative inspiration flows, is in love with art and beauty. He is the devoted and inspired artist who defeats the monster, symbolizing the ignorant and the jealous who threaten true art. This is an allegorical interpretation that was certainly intended in the decoration on Rubens’s house, and which – like the political allegory – could be projected onto the image if the viewer wished to do so, depending

on the context in which it was contemplated. This subject could effortlessly be interpreted in this way by an ambitious artist like Goltzius, who, as appears from other images, was quite preoccupied with the notion of ignorance and poor judgment as enemies of the arts,⁴⁹ and with people who do not understand the prestige of the depiction of the nude and only level criticism at its sensual effect (see chapter v).⁵⁰

These numerous examples reveal that various rationales account for the popularity of the *Andromeda* theme in the prints of Goltzius and his circle and in the oeuvre of Rubens. That the subject rarely occurred in paintings by masters such as Cornelis Cornelisz., Abraham Bloemaert, or Goltzius himself may be due to the fact that the traditional composition of a frontally exposed nude, serving as the sole cynosure of the image, was considered less than appropriate adornment for the walls of a home and certainly unfitting as a political allegory in a public building. It is telling that in a painting by Bloemaert, known only from a description by Karel van Mander, *Andromeda* was depicted as a small figure in the background; the description actually recalls Van Mander's own representation of the subject that was engraved by Jacques de Gheyn II (fig. 8).⁵¹ A painting by Cornelis Cornelisz. mentioned in an eighteenth-century sale must have had a similar composition,⁵² as do an anonymous mannerist painting,⁵³ a later work by Bloemaert⁵⁴ and various works from the school of Cornelis van Poelenburch (fig. 35).⁵⁵ The only known paintings with *Andromeda* in the foreground prior to Rembrandt's are two virtually identical paintings by Joachim Wtewael from around 1611 (fig. 28).⁵⁶ They show how closely Wtewael kept to the example of Goltzius's inventions, while retaining the stylized Sprangerian type of nude that had been abandoned by most other artists at that time. One, or possibly both paintings appear in an inventory of Wtewael's descendants; they seem to have remained in the possession of his own family.



26
Hendrick Goltzius, *Mercury*, 1611, canvas 214 x 120 cm. The Hague, Mauritshuis, on loan to the Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem



27
Hendrick Goltzius, *Minerva*, 1611, canvas 214 x 120 cm. The Hague, Mauritshuis, on loan to the Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem

Rembrandt and Andromeda

Such was the situation when Rembrandt set out to depict his first nude and chose the subject of *Andromeda* through which to do so (fig. 29). The facts that, more than any other theme, the conventional pictorial representation of this subject offered the opportunity to represent a fully and frontally exposed female body as the dominant focus of the picture, and that it had been thoroughly explored and exploited by Goltzius, would have stimulated his choice. That Goltzius, about whose high artistic ability as an engraver Constantijn Huygens was still raving in 1629,⁵⁷ had shown how eminently suited the subject was for showcasing one's mastery and ideals in portraying the nude made it all the more challenging to Rembrandt. In the beginning of this chapter it was suggested that



28 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
 Joachim Wtewael, *Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, 1611,
 canvas 181 x 151cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre

Rembrandt may have heard that the great Rubens had painted this subject on the garden façade of his house. For artists and connoisseurs who had visited Antwerp, a description of the paintings on Rubens's house would have been a very exciting piece of news to bring home. Furthermore, Rembrandt undoubtedly knew the print based on a composition by Titian and was aware that Titian had made a famous painting of this subject, as Van Mander had mentioned in his biography of this master. Thus, the two painters who, throughout his career, must have been most paramount in his mind as the ones to measure himself against, had both preceded him with this subject.

Finally, Pliny's text on Greek painters and Van Man-

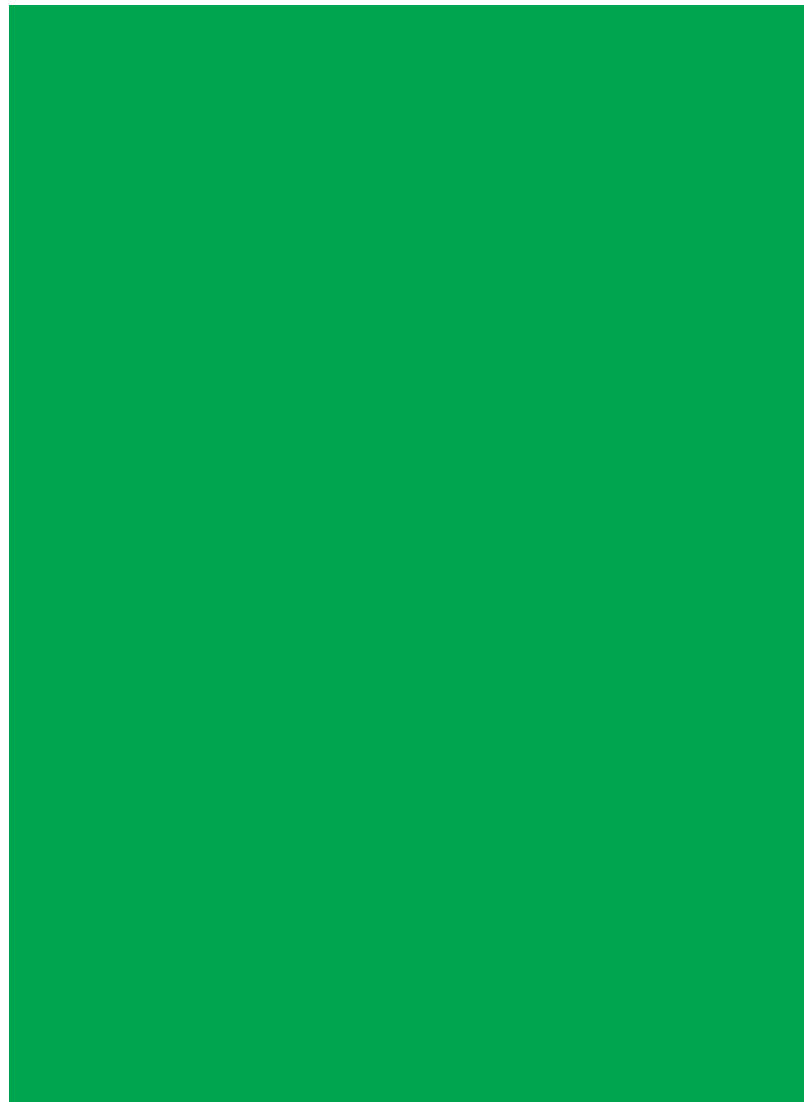
der's translation of it, which mentions Nicias's famous painting of *Andromeda*, would have been avidly read by painters and connoisseurs alike. Interestingly, the work of Nicias was described by Pliny in terms that fit the *colorito* ideology: Nicias was especially good in painting female figures and 'always saw to it with all the diligence and knowledge he could muster that the highlights and receding shadows of his things were well painted, so that it was as if his paintings came forward and stood out in relief.' One is immediately reminded of the words with which the works of Titian were always praised and which often return in comments on the art of Caravaggio and Rembrandt himself, as will be discussed in chapter VII.⁵⁸ The art of receding and coming forward through light, shadow and color was certainly one of Rembrandt's main endeavors. The patron for whom the painting of *Andromeda* was made remains unknown, but it is not unlikely that Constantijn Huygens was somewhere nearby to applaud the choice of such a subject.

Rembrandt followed the conventional scheme, which makes his drastic deviations all the more striking for a viewer who had Goltzius's prints in the back of his mind – and all artists and connoisseurs would have thought of such prints when looking at his *Andromeda* (figs. 4-7). In Rembrandt's version, nothing remains of the elegant *contrapposto*, so emphatically elaborated upon in all the prints of Goltzius's circle and already present in the *Metamorphoses* illustrations by Bernard Salomon and Virgil Solis (fig. 1).⁵⁹ The traditional pathetic expression of Andromeda – unfocused eyes raised to heaven – has disappeared, as well. To be sure, Goltzius had, in his last invention, turned Andromeda towards the struggling hero (fig. 7), but the emotionally charged countermovement of Rembrandt's Andromeda, who awkwardly pulls away from the terrifying monster and simultaneously turns to face it, is completely different. This movement might have been inspired by Fontana's print after Titian (fig. 13), which would have provoked him to emphasize even more the emotional reaction of the figure. The idea

to omit the other protagonists may have been suggested by the prints of Agostino Carracci (fig. 30), who left out the figure of Perseus so that the viewer could take the position of the rescuing Perseus falling in love with this young beauty.⁶⁰ But nothing would have prepared the connoisseur for the emotional impact of Rembrandt's little painting.

By omitting Perseus and the monster,⁶¹ Rembrandt eliminated all possibilities for any allegorical reading, be it political or art theoretical, for all of which the inclusion of both Perseus and the monster is essential. Rembrandt focused on the action and reaction of the narrative, as reflected by the single figure of Andromeda only. Andromeda reacts more forcefully to what is happening than any Andromeda in earlier depictions of this subject. By emphasizing her frightened reaction to an occurrence which the viewer cannot see, Rembrandt heightens the feeling of suspense in an entirely new and original way. Panofsky described this beautifully in a footnote to his famous article about Rembrandt's *Danaë* (1933) as: 'Das Erwartungsmoment, die gespannte Konzentration der psychischen Energien auf einen ausserhalb des Bildes befindlichen Erlöser'.⁶² Already a few years earlier, in his *Samson and Delilah*, Rembrandt had brilliantly condensed a strong sense of impending danger and pre-climactic suspense in the expression of one figure of the scene: the frightened Philistine soldier who, stopping in his tracks and wavering, looks at Samson sleeping in Delilah's lap (fig. 234). In his *Andromeda* Rembrandt had the opportunity to do the same while focusing on a single figure only, evoking the whole episode in the image of this one frightened girl.

Andromeda's fettered arms, painfully twisted because of her strain, show emphatically that Rembrandt, more than any artist before, imagined what her grievous situation would look like in reality. Most striking of all is the total lack of stylization of the nude body. Any reference to classical ideals of proportions and posture, ideals which were present – albeit in varying ways and degrees –



29 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Rembrandt, *Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, c. 1630-31,
panel 34.1 x 24.5 cm. The Hague, Mauritshuis



30
 Agostino Carracci, *Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, c. 1590-95, engraving 15.2 x 10.8 cm



31
 Abraham Bloemaert, *Apollo and Pan* (detail), c. 1635-40, canvas 194.5 x 264.5 cm. Berlin, Schloss Grunewald

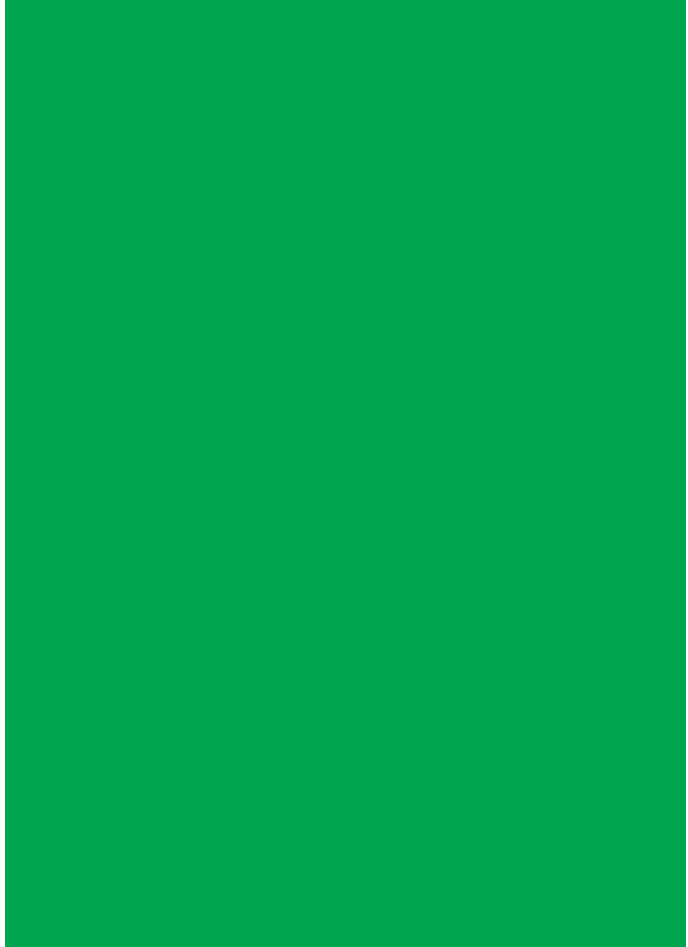
in all the earlier depictions of the subject, is totally absent. As has been said, Rembrandt must have chosen this subject because it offered the opportunity to display his conception of the female nude and to emulate well-known masters. The fact that all the examples he would have known – in the first place the inventions of Goltzius – are so utterly different from the type of nude he portrayed makes evident how deliberate his deviation from the then-existing conventions must have been. Although Rembrandt's type of nude was totally alien to those of Cornelis Cornelisz. and Abraham Bloemaert – the only specialists in depicting the nude body who, apart from Goltzius, were producing female nudes during the first three decades of the century and who had both developed specific types of their own (fig. 98, 118, 144, 147, 159, 328, 329; 31, 204, 205) – there are elements in a few earlier depictions of *Andromeda* that might have inspired him in developing this kind of nude. The earlier *Andromeda* depictions I have in mind would include Saenredam's invention (fig. 15) and an illustration by Pieter van der Borcht (fig. 2); these prints display some characteristics that may have encouraged Rembrandt's desire to develop a type of nude that breaks the then-current conventions.

When discussing the print after Saenredam, I pointed out that it seemed to hark back to conventions of depicting the naked female body by early Netherlandish painters (fig. 33). Remarkably similar in both Rembrandt's painting and Saenredam's print – and in accordance with earlier ideals – are the small breasts, the high waist, the utterly unclassical lengthening of the distance from breasts to navel, and the narrow ribcage sloping down into a protruding belly the roundness of which is emphasized by a shadow at the underside. Rembrandt does away with the elegant tilt of the hip, still present in Saenredam's *Andromeda*, but emphasizes the belly even to a greater degree. New are the relatively large head and short neck. He also emphasizes that in this pose one breast hangs down while the other is being lifted, which is visible in Saenredam's invention as well. The drapery

of Rembrandt's *Andromeda* underlines the curve of the belly and accentuates the dark recess, indicated by a strong shadow, that it hides. The idea to cover part of *Andromeda*'s body with drapery might have been inspired by the print by Pieter van der Borcht, which features the only other *Andromeda* that lacks any elegance of posture (fig. 2).⁶³

However, Rembrandt's insistence on the folds in the skin at her left shoulder and between her breasts, the twisted shape of the skinny arms and the pale face contorted by fear, are entirely new and pointedly demonstrate a striving for lifelikeness as had never been attempted before. The slightly open mouth refers to the specific moment that '... advancing over the broad expanse, a monstrous creature loomed up, breasting the wide waves. The maiden shrieked.'⁶⁴ The eyes turned sharply to the left, suggested by tiny specks of black in the translucent brown of her irises, accentuate *Andromeda*'s expression of anxiety. The effect of lifelikeness is enhanced by the handling of paint and strong lighting. The controlled modelling of *Andromeda*'s body makes her torso stand out against the freely handled, thinly painted dark background. The skin of the body between the shoulders and the drapery is depicted with a rather thick paint layer that shows careful, but clearly visible brushstrokes, which follow the shapes of her belly, ribcage and breasts and convincingly suggest a soft, almost ivory-white, skin.⁶⁵ Only her nipples are scrupulously highlighted with a pale pink. The flesh of her skin seems all the more palpable because of its juxtaposition with the texture of the white cloth covering her legs and the rugged stone of the rock behind her.

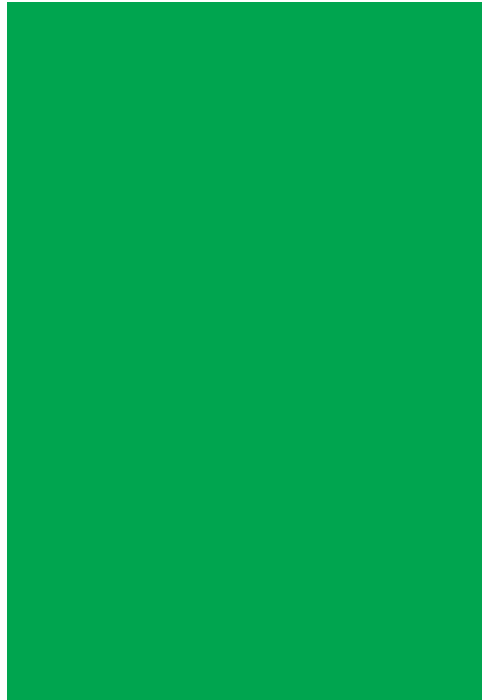
By turning *Andromeda* into a frightened naked girl and eliminating any stylization which might diminish the emotional appeal of this helpless young woman, Rembrandt enhances the image of her vulnerability. This helplessness is all the more emphasized by the total isolation of her strongly lit body wedged between the threatening, dark cliff behind her and the rough boulder in the



32

Rembrandt, x-ray of *Andromeda*

foreground, which Rembrandt painted in the final stage over *Andromeda*'s lower legs and feet (fig. 32).⁶⁶ The sense of fear is heightened by the color of her face and lips, which seem to be drained of blood. *Andromeda*'s naked body is no longer an unapproachable ideal. This brings her closer to the viewer's world of experience and enlists his empathy. By suggesting the presence of the male hero, but not including him in the image, Rembrandt even facilitates the imaginative process of identifying with the rescuing hero who was fired by love when seeing this pitiful young woman chained to a rock. *Andromeda*'s having a 'huddled and defenceless body', the



34

Albrecht Dürer, *Four Naked Women*
(*The Four Witches*), 1497, engraving
19.4 x 13.6 cm

33

Hans Memling, *Eve*,
exterior wing from
triptych of the *Altar*
of *St. John* (*Johannes-*
altärchen), c. 1485,
panel 69.3 x 17.3 cm.
Vienna, Kunsthisto-
risches Museum



words Kenneth Clark used when describing what we do *not* imagine when we think of the word ‘nude’ in the opening pages of his famous book *The Nude*, is precisely the effect that Rembrandt wanted to convey.⁶⁷

As suggested above, by turning away from the kind of stylization that was usual among the former generation of artists, Rembrandt seems to return to conventions of depicting the naked body that had a long tradition in the Netherlands: his type of nude has much in common with the nudes depicted by early Netherlandish painters, from Van Eyck, Van der Goes and Memling (fig. 33) to Dürer’s famous nudes in his *Four Witches* (fig. 34). This type more emphatically brings forward traits that were at that time considered specific to a woman’s body, and therefore would have looked sexually more desirable than Goltzius’s stylized nudes (see chapter x). The latter were, notwithstanding their changing proportions, ultimately grafted onto types that conformed to more masculine classical ideals, with broader shoulders, lower waist, a shorter distance between breasts and navel, less contrast between the width of ribcage and hips, and less emphasis on the belly.

How Rembrandt’s *Andromeda* conformed to and was stylized into another type of nude, how it is related to certain notions of a ‘from-life’ ideology, and what Rembrandt’s specific approach to this subject meant for the involvement of the beholder when looking at a female nude in an erotically charged situation will be discussed in the next chapters.

We do not know who bought Rembrandt’s painting.⁶⁸ One gets the impression that the *Andromeda* immediately entered a collection where it was never seen by other artists. In contrast with Rembrandt’s depictions of *Susanna* and *Danaë*, his *Andromeda* seems to have had no impact whatsoever. Even in the work of his own pupils there is no echo to be found. As a matter of fact, despite its popularity in other areas of cultural production (such as printmaking and triumphal-entry design) the subject

of *Andromeda Chained to the Rock* would never become a favorite in Dutch painting. The subject occurs in a few paintings of Abraham van Cuylenburgh, a follower of Cornelis van Poelenburch, and in a work by Van Poelenburch himself made in collaboration with Adam Willaerts (fig. 35).⁶⁹ In these cases the figures function more as staffage in a rocky coastal landscape, showing a small Andromeda at a distance with a tiny Perseus seated on Pegasus, tearing down with drawn sword towards the monster. Andromeda, rather quietly watching this scene, is of a 'sitting type' that recalls the prints by Agostino Carracci (fig. 30).⁷⁰ We know very few paintings of an Andromeda figure on a larger scale and those are all rather uninteresting and, mostly, anonymous works.⁷¹ In fact, there are two later paintings in which Perseus and the monster are also missing, a rather ugly De Grebber-like painting (fig. 36) and a work by the little-known artist Arnold Verbuys, but none of those seem to reflect any knowledge of Rembrandt's little masterpiece.

Rembrandt's real rival would have been Rubens, whose brilliant, lifelike *Andromeda* (painted around 1638) was probably one of the last works of his long career, as it remained in his studio at his death (fig. 37).⁷² This life-size *Andromeda*, placed close to the picture plane and completely dominating the narrow canvas, is one of the coloristic highpoints of the depiction of flesh. During the process of painting, Rubens diminished the size of Perseus and Pegasus swooping down on the monster, so that they became tiny compared to the large nude and almost dissolve in the richly colored evening sky.⁷³ But he still incorporated this traditional motif, thereby allowing the political or art theoretical references to be projected into the painting. Rubens added a genius with a burning torch who points to Perseus's fight with the monster, thus announcing the imminent rescue. In Andromeda's upturned eyes we recognize the conventional motif found in most of Goltzius's inventions; however, Rubens depicted this motif in conscious emulation of Titian's tearful *Mary Magdalene* (fig. 58), of which he



35 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Adam Willaerts and Cornelis van Poelenburch, *Coastal Landscape with Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, 1624, panel 36 x 60 cm. Lübeck, St. Annen Museum



36
Anonymous (formerly attributed to Pieter de Grebber), *Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, panel 49.5 x 21 cm. Present location unknown



37 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
 Peter Paul Rubens, *Andromeda Chained to the Rock*,
 c. 1638, panel 189 x 94 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen,
 Gemäldegalerie.

owned a version.⁷⁴ Thus, with this martyr-like image Rubens seems to give the viewer the opportunity to consider yet another allegorical explanation of the fable which, from medieval times up to Natale Conti and Karel van Mander, was often interpreted as demonstrating how the innocent who keeps faith in God will be rescued in the end.⁷⁵

Next to Rembrandt's *Andromeda*, one realizes how much the fleshy body of Rubens's *Andromeda* conforms to classical proportions and to the traditional *contrapposto*. For one thing, the body is quite close to a drawing Rubens made after a statue of a *Venus Pudica*.⁷⁶ Rubens might even have been inspired by the pose of a bacchante holding a tambourine above her head on a Roman relief (fig. 38).⁷⁷ He used the same figure a few years earlier for the goddess at the left in a late painting of the *Judgment of Paris*, where it became quite a provocative posture of a woman undressing for the viewer (fig. 239).⁷⁸ However, in the late *Andromeda* Rubens transformed this pose into the epitome of the innocent suffering of a maiden who is not only chained and threatened, but – worse for a chaste virgin – whose naked body is exposed against her will to the eyes of everyone who sees her. This Andromeda indeed resembles Ovid's description mentioned before: 'save that her hair gently stirred in the breeze and the warm tears were trickling down her cheek, he [Perseus] would have thought her a marble statue' – but a marble statue that has really come to life. It is a perfect demonstration of Rubens's approach to the antique, about which he himself wrote in *De Imitatione Statuarum*: 'one must have a profound knowledge of ancient sculpture, but it is necessary to make judicious use of statues and above all, to avoid the taint of the appearance of stone.' His warning that a painting should not look like colored marble, but like flesh and blood, because the subtleties of shadow, luminosity and movement are central to the painter's art is loud and clear.⁷⁹ The suggestion of soft, breathing skin of which one seems to feel the warmth has rarely been matched in the history of art. In the back-

ground Rubens consciously adopted Titian's late technique of painting 'di grosso e con macchie' ('rough and with smudges') as Vasari describes it, but he modelled the body itself with careful, flowing brushstrokes that seem to caress her body.⁸⁰

Had Rembrandt seen this breathtaking virtuoso performance in the art of coloring, he would surely have admitted defeat, although he might have reacted critically to the conventionalism of Andromeda's 'classical' proportions, her elegant *contrapposto* and her pathetic upturned eyes, all of which he would have considered unnatural. For Rubens, who adhered to classical proportions and classical conventions of poses and gestures, the formal example of antiquity remained the standard to emulate. It exemplifies his ideology of the selective imitation of classical sculpture as well as nature.⁸¹ Rembrandt's main concern, on the other hand, was to depict as convincingly as possible a plausible and lifelike expression of the emotions.



38

Giovanni Battista Franco, *Bacchanal* (detail), etching 29.5 x 42.6 cm. (after a Roman relief, now in the British Museum).

III

Intermezzo

Rembrandt and the Depiction of the Passions in the 1620s and 1630s

To surpass the masters he was competing with through the convincing depiction of the ‘passions of the soul’ or the *affecten* must have been paramount on Rembrandt’s mind when painting such subjects as *Andromeda* or *Susanna*. By concentrating on a persuasive expression of emotion, Rembrandt seriously took up the challenges that he found expounded in Karel van Mander’s writings. In his *Schilder-Boeck*, Van Mander had devoted a whole chapter to the representation of the passions; in this, he followed Alberti, who had already given this aspect of the art of painting an important place in his theory.¹ Based on familiar concepts from the theory of rhetoric, such ideas would have been general knowledge in the studios of history painters like Rembrandt’s master, Pieter Lastman.

Van Mander called the portrayal of the emotions the kernel and soul of painting.² They could be depicted because ‘the affects and passions which move the heart and

the senses from within, make the external limbs react, and show demonstrable signs through an observable movement in bearing, as in their appearance as in their actions’, he writes in the opening verse of this chapter.³ He emphasized how one could learn to do this only through observation from life. First of all, one has to study all the parts of the face and ‘... watch closely and observe very carefully the natural appearance in order to learn how to place the different parts in such a relation to each other that they express what moves the heart’, adding in the margin, ‘nature teaches the affects.’⁴ Hence, close study of nature leads to perfection in the depiction of the emotions: ‘for the benefit of our art, we have to pay attention to the movement (*motus*) of the exterior of the body and the changes and stirring of the limbs, so that everyone can easily see what our figures experience and what they do.’⁵ At the end of this chapter, which gives many oft-repeated examples of how mar-



39 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
 Rembrandt, *The Repentant Judas Returning the Thirty Pieces of Silver*, 1629, panel 79 x 102.3 cm. Great Britain, Private Collection

velous and inventive the emotions depicted by painters from antiquity were, and adds a few from his own experience (by Lucas van Leyden and Pieter Brueghel), he states that, better than learning from his lessons, one can learn from the words of the painter Eupompus as told by Pliny. When asked by the young Lysippus ‘which model or example of the ancients he valued highly and followed most in his works’, Eupompus answered by bringing him to a market full of men, women and children, saying, ‘See there my model, this is the example I follow most in all my work.’⁶

Rembrandt, Huygens, rhetoric, and antiquity

To Rembrandt, the explicit linking of the expression of emotion with a ‘from life’ ideology (to the latter we will return in chapter VII) must have been crucial. In a letter

written in 1639 to Constantijn Huygens, he described his endeavors as observing ‘die meeste ende die natuereelste beweeghelickeijt’, or ‘the most natural (e)motion’, by which he meant the lifelike expression of emotion through natural movement of the human body.⁷ With these famous words he expressed clearly one of his major artistic goals, and it was precisely this that Huygens immediately noticed around 1629, probably shortly before Rembrandt made his *Andromeda*.⁸ Praising Rembrandt excessively in the autobiography of his youth, Huygens acutely emphasized that Rembrandt’s excellence, when compared to that of his friend Lievens, was to be found in particular in the *affectuum vivacitas* and *vivida inventio*, or lifelike expression of emotions and his true-to-life inventions. To this Huygens added, ‘he [Rembrandt], being totally absorbed in what he is doing, prefers to concentrate [his work] in a smaller picture and to bring about, through compactness, an effect that one may seek in vain in the largest paintings by the other [Lievens].’⁹ Huygens expressed with remarkable precision that which struck him most in Rembrandt’s work.

That Rembrandt’s portrayal of the passions meant – and indeed managed – to evoke strong empathy in the viewer, was demonstrated by Huygens in his beautiful ekphrasis of Rembrandt’s figure of the repenting Judas (fig. 39a) in *The Repentant Judas Returning the Thirty Pieces of Silver* (fig. 39). He writes, ‘The gesture of this one desperate Judas (to say nothing about all the other amazing figures in this one painting), this one Judas, who raves, wails, begs forgiveness, but without any hope, and in whose face all traces of hope have disappeared; his countenance wild, the hair pulled out, the clothes torn, the arms twisted, the hands pressed together until they bleed; in a blind impulse, he has fallen on his knees, his whole body contorted in pitiful hideousness.’¹⁰ This passage is certainly not a mere display of literary contrivances as Huygens’s response to the Judas figure shows an engaged, participatory reading of the picture.¹¹ Imagining that one really sees what is happening in the

narrated event as if it were happening before one's eyes was certainly part of the established tradition of ekphrasis, but the context, as well as the sheer enthusiasm with which Huygens presents it give us an insight into the way a true connoisseur reacted.¹² Huygens explicitly focused on one figure only and emulated its emotional impact in words through an empathizing scrutiny of the depicted apostle, inferring the whole drama of the narrative from this one figure. In the process, he made clear that this miserable figure is something entirely different from anything he has ever seen.¹³ This was the feat by which Rembrandt had surpassed all the Italians and the artists from antiquity. 'Let all of Italy and all the miracles of beauty that have survived from antiquity be placed next to this. ... This I compare with all beauty that has been produced through the ages. This should be a lesson for all those nitwits who say that nothing is being created or expressed nowadays (and I lectured them before about this) that has not already been done better in antiquity.'¹⁴

Huygens – the highly placed connoisseur, secretary of the Stadtholder, famous poet and talent scout for the court – was undoubtedly an awe-inspiring figure for Rembrandt. He must have made an immense impression on the young artist; his opinions about art, especially those on artistic rivalry, would have reinforced and intensified Rembrandt's own endeavors. From Huygens's autobiography of his youth, it clearly appears that he was of the opinion that one should emulate and surpass the works of antiquity and the old masters through one's own means, not by following rules formulated in the past but by one's innate talents. This approach is obvious throughout his eulogy of Rembrandt, but we find the same attitude in Huygens's strong opinions about the art of rhetoric, especially when he fiercely criticizes the rhetorical performances of contemporary ministers. In matters of rhetoric, Huygens considers learnedness and the rules of antiquity redundant. He states that all one should learn can be summarized in a few pages, as his father had indeed done; more theory is unnecessary. The



39A
Rembrandt, *The Repentant Judas Returning the Thirty Pieces of Silver* (detail)

rest one has to learn in practice, especially by critically listening to others. He recounts that every Sunday after church his father discussed with him and his brother the positive and negative points of the sermon they had just heard.¹⁵ Huygens's heroes in the art of rhetoric are not the great rhetoricians of antiquity, not Quintillian and Cicero, but Johannes Wtenbogaert and John Donne: 'Let all of antiquity listen to this as well as all those people, who, following in their footsteps, find rhetoric devices as they are in fashion nowadays, so irresistible.'¹⁶ In this exclamation we hear almost the same words that Huygens had used when praising Rembrandt; it makes his convic-

tion all the more clear that men of his own time had by far surpassed antiquity.

For Huygens, the matter of greatest consequence in the art of rhetoric was moving and convincing the audience. On the several occasions from as early as 1628 to as late as 1666 that Huygens discusses the bad performances of most modern preachers, he emphasizes that artful grace and beauty can be pernicious.¹⁷ A sermon or oration is beautiful if one communicates one's meaning as effectively as possible. Good rhetoric is a gift of nature, which one can often see in the natural talent of simple and illiterate people like the women in the market. He asserts that this proves that inborn nobility is more important than learnedness and artificiality. Huygens continually insists on the need for simplicity, naturalness and innate talent: theory is superfluous, a talented person needs only training and should forget about any artificial stylization based on rhetorical rules like those of Quintilian. If one concentrates only on the message, the result will be good: he who speaks from the heart will speak to the heart, to summarize Huygens's beliefs.¹⁸

It is this same attitude that he applies to the painter Rembrandt. To emphasize Rembrandt's innate talent he exaggerated the artist's supposedly low birth, adding that he does not know a more forceful argument against nobility of the blood. He also underplays the status of Rembrandt's (and Lievens's) teachers in the art of painting, saying that they were 'masters that only had a name among the lower classes' since their parents could not afford better ones. 'These two young artists have nothing to thank their teachers for', he states, 'because they would have attained the same height without their lessons.'¹⁹ No doubt Huygens knew perfectly well that this claim of the inferiority of their masters was not true. They certainly would have told him that they both learned with Pieter Lastman, one of the most accomplished history painters of the time; a few pages earlier Huygens himself had listed Lastman among the great history painters of his country. By twisting the truth a bit,

however, he was able to assert with great rhetorical effect that one needed only innate talent to surpass the greatest artists – even the Italians and the ancients. Huygens also stresses that Rembrandt and Lievens worked incredibly hard, which shows that they trained themselves with diligence. To focus on the message while jettisoning artificial grace and beauty was Huygens's main point when praising Rembrandt's *Judas*. Even Huygens's account that the best way to learn excellence in the art of rhetoric is to critically review the performances of others seems in accordance with the practice of Rembrandt and Lievens, who constantly comment in their early works on artists like Goltzius, Lastman, Rubens, and many others.

Emulating and surpassing others is central to Huygens's assessment of painters from his time; the pages he writes about them are composed in terms of one outstripping the other. Having reached Rembrandt, he could assert that now a young Dutchman had surpassed the Italians and the painters of antiquity: 'I maintain that no Protogenes or Apelles or Parrhasius ever would have been able to invent, or, if they would return to earth, could invent, all that – and I am amazed, when I say this – a young man, a Dutchman, a miller's son, a beardless boy, condensed in this one figure [the Judas] and has expressed in its totality. Bravo, Rembrandt! To have carried Troy, yes, the whole of Asia to Italy is not as great an achievement as transmitting the highest fame of Greece and Italy to Holland, which has been achieved by a young Dutchman who hardly ventured beyond the walls of his hometown.'²⁰ And the means through which Rembrandt outstripped the Italians and the artists from antiquity was an unqualified depiction of lifelikeness and human emotion to evoke empathy in the viewer, as Huygens showed emphatically with his description of the figure of Judas.

Having already met Huygens, Rembrandt's choice of a mythological subject showing a female nude (the naked Andromeda) to repeat such a feat might have been due to the fact that he wanted to prove to Huygens that he was

perfectly able to compete with the Italians, even in the prestigious tradition that was pre-eminently associated with Italy, that of depicting the nude. After all, Huygens did criticize the two young painters for not making the journey to Italy 'to get acquainted with the works of Raphael and Michelangelo and take the trouble to devour with their own eyes the creations of so many great minds.'²¹ Huygens also recounts their reaction to this criticism. They argue that they cannot spare the time, being in the prime of their life, and they maintain that since Italian works are collected avidly, great examples of Italian works can be seen outside Italy. Huygens grumbles that he leaves aside the validity of this excuse. His doubt is certainly not unwarranted: numerous Italian paintings would come to Amsterdam beginning in the following decade, but in the time Huygens was writing, there certainly were not that many Italian paintings in Holland. However, as is clear from Rembrandt's works, he carefully studied the many prints by and after Italian masters that were easily available and which he collected with great eagerness.

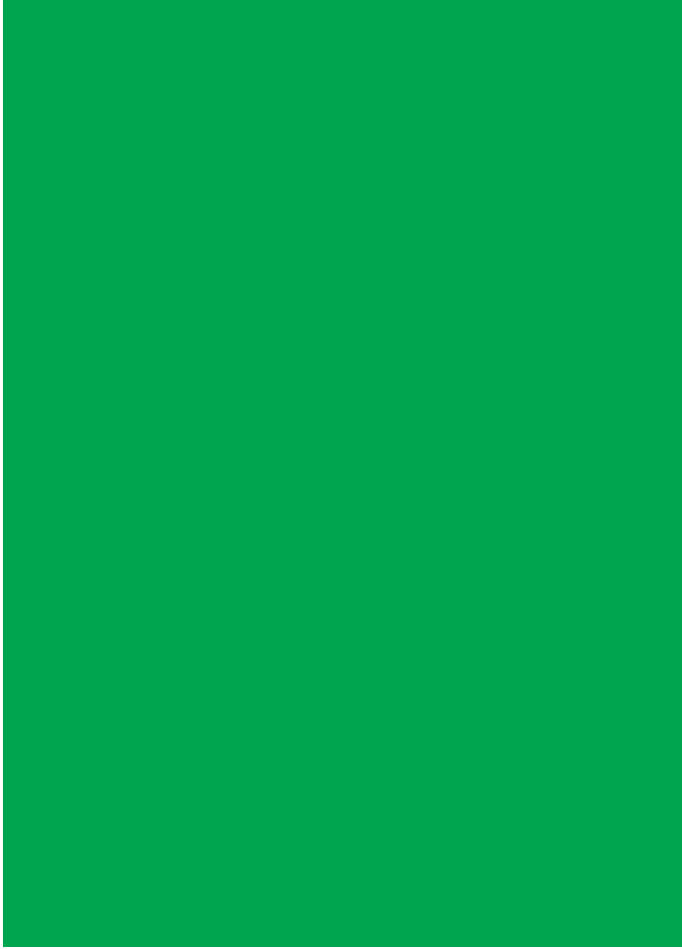
Although the depiction of the nude had as long and as interesting a tradition in the art of the North as in Italy, it is clear that the nude figure was indeed especially associated with Italian art by this time. As indicated in the Introduction, since the publication in 1567 of Ludovico Guicciardini's *Descrittione di tutti paesi bassi* (*Description of the Low Countries*, soon translated in many French, German, and Dutch editions), Italy had been securely named as the cradle and source of mythological subjects and the depiction of the nude. Guicciardini, followed by Vasari and Van Mander, had written in the biography of Jan Gossaert that he was the first to bring to the North 'historie & poesie con figure nude' ('histories and poetical subjects with nude figures', with *poesie* referring to mythological subjects taken from the poetic fables of antiquity).²² Hence, Rembrandt chose a subject which, as connoisseurs were very aware, had a tradition that reached from antiquity to Titian and Rubens and which

was especially suitable for showing off one's views on the nude, as well as on the expression of emotions. And Rembrandt did so by representing one figure only, as if to underline the point Huygens made when describing Judas as the figure in which the emotional impact of the whole drama was concentrated.

Samuel van Hoogstraten and Rembrandt's lijdingen des gemoeds

Huygens was not the only contemporary to point out Rembrandt's exceptional mastery in depicting the passions. As Thijs Weststeijn has shown, Rembrandt's pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten characterized him as the pre-eminent master of the passions when discussing the different parts of the art or the *kunstdelen* (a notion based on the *partes orationis* from rhetorical theory).²³ Van Hoogstraten mentions a number of famous painters as exemplary models for the different components of art. He begins with several Italians, like Michelangelo (well-constructed nudes), Raphael (graceful women), Correggio (soft fleshiness), Titian (the appearance of coming forward and receding in space), and Caravaggio (naturalness). Then follow northern masters, among them Rubens (rich compositions), Van Dyck (gracefulness), Goltzius (convincing imitation of the manners of great masters), and Rembrandt, who represents for Van Hoogstraten the passions of the soul (*lijdingen des gemoeds*).²⁴ Since Van Hoogstraten elsewhere calls the depiction of the passions 'the most noble part of painting' ('het alleredelste deel der kunst'), he implicitly seems to place his own master at the top.²⁵

Van Hoogstraten writes extensively about the concept of *beweeglijkheid*, the same word Rembrandt had penned in a letter to Huygens when describing what he was striving for. Van Hoogstraten's discussion of this concept might have reflected lessons learned from his master. 'It does not suffice that an image is beautiful; there has to be a certain *beweeglijkheyt* [movement that expresses emo-



40

Rembrandt, *The Rape of Ganymede*, 1635, canvas 177 x 129 cm. Dresden, Gemäldegalerie

tion] that exerts power over the viewer', Van Hoogstraten asserts. As he often does, he embeds such a notion in a classical quotation, applying Horace's well-known dictum that a poem has to enlist the reader's empathy: 'As Horace sings about poetry: 'A beautiful poem will not lightly move me, but friendliness can transport heart and soul. One laughs, one cries, and the spectator will follow: so if you want me to cry, show me crying'', after which Van Hoogstraten adds: 'This is also true for painters: they do not move the soul, if they take no heed of this *beweglijkheit*.'²⁶

Franciscus Junius, whose treatise *The Painting of the Ancients* was an important source for Van Hoogstraten, uses the term *beweghelick* as well. Interestingly, he applies the word in relation to an exemplary image of *The Sacrifice of Abraham*, and he relates that St. Gregory of Nissa, after having heard a very moving (*beweghelick*) account of the story of Isaac's sacrifice, had added the words, 'often have I viewed the portrayal of this story in a picture with tears in my eyes, so powerfully was the whole history brought before my eyes by art.'²⁷ We will never know if someone told Rembrandt this story, but one is immediately reminded of Rembrandt's spectacular depiction of this gruesome theme, which he depicted as gripping as possible (fig. 45). Many other paintings of the 1630s, such as *The Blinding of Samson* (fig. 233), the series of *The Passion of Christ*, *The Feast of Belshazzar*, and *The Rape of Ganymede* (fig. 40), as well as *Andromeda Chained to the Rock* (fig. 29) and *Susanna Surprised by the Elders* (fig. 73), exemplify Rembrandt's intense concentration on the depiction of a single, immediate (e)motion.

What we see in these paintings is what his pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten describes appositely as the *oogenblikkiqe beweging*.²⁸ Van Hoogstraten gave the advice (and one seems to hear Rembrandt in it): 'Whether one has a single figure or many together in mind, one should see to it that one shows only a single immediate (e)motion [*oogenblikkiqe beweging*] which expresses in essence what occurs in the story. ... So that the work unequivocally [*eenstemmich*] involves the viewer as if he were one of the bystanders, and will make him frightened when showing a brutal deed, or pleased when seeing something cheerful, or moved with compassion when seeing that someone suffers harm, or gratified by some fair deed. Above all it is required that gesture and movement of the body correspond with the passion of the soul, even if it is an almost still scene.'²⁹ The depiction of a sudden occurrence, implying a specific moment epitomized by a single, crucial emotion (that is simultaneously the highpoint of a story), represented as lifelike as possi-

ble and with the purpose of involving the beholder and having him empathize with the figure(s) represented, is precisely what Rembrandt was striving for in most of his paintings of the thirties.

This, as a matter of fact, is something different than *staetveranderinge* or *peripeteia*, an Aristotelian concept that was part of his theory of classical drama and which was adapted by Joost van den Vondel when he, later in his career, turned away from the Senecan-Scaligerian type of tragedy that was current in the first decades of the seventeenth century (and remained so in the tragedies of Jan Vos). Albert Blankert, in particular, maintained that Rembrandt applied this notion in his history paintings from this period.³⁰ However, the concept of the Aristotelian *staatveranderinge* was described and applied by Vondel only in the later 1640s and 1650s.³¹ And more importantly, Aristotelian *peripeteia* is much more complex. The concept comprises not just a sudden reversal of the mood of the protagonist from one extreme to the other as was usual in the Senecan-Scaligerian drama, which was dominated by an alternation of strong, quickly changing emotions. The reversal of mood in the Aristotelian sense had to be connected with *agnitio* (the protagonist's recognition of and insight into a tragic situation) and should be the climax of a continuous development of the individual protagonist's inner passions throughout the plot and lead to the final catharsis.³² In my opinion, only when Rembrandt developed in his later works entirely different methods of expressing the passions and involving the viewer do there seem, indeed, to be analogies with the concept of *staatveranderinge* – a prime example being his *Bathsheba* of 1654 (see chapter XII).

Especially when writing about methods of learning how to depict the passions, Van Hoogstraten seems to echo advice he learned in Rembrandt's studio. For instance, he recommends that 'If one wants to win honor in this the most noble part of art [the representation of the passions], one must completely transform oneself into an actor' and practice before a mirror 'so that one is at

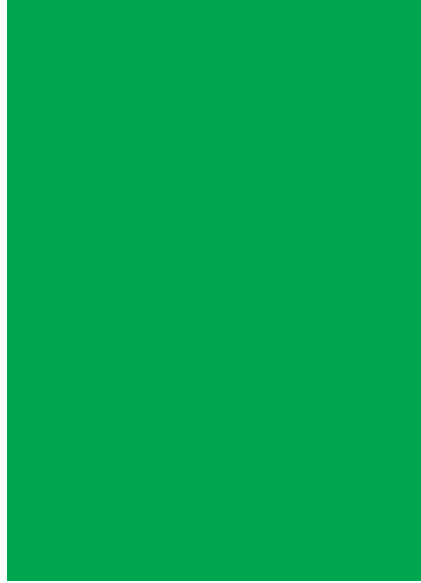


41
Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait, Wide-Eyed*,
1630, etching 5.1 x 4.6 cm



42
Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait, Open-Mouthed*,
1630, etching 8.1 x 7.2 cm

the same time performer and spectator.³³ When saying this, he warns, however, that one needs to possess poetic wit ('een Poëtische geest') to be able to imagine every situation; otherwise one should not even try this.³⁴ Again, one seems to hear Rembrandt, who, in his youth, published etchings showing his own face acting out different emotions (figs. 41, 42).³⁵ Van Hoogstraten even urges the



43
Rembrandt, *Balaam and the Ass*,
1626, panel 63.2 x 46.5 cm. Paris,
Musée Cognacq-Jay



44
Pieter Lastman, *Balaam and the Ass*, 1622,
panel 51.3 x 60.3 cm. Jerusalem, Yad Vashem
Historical and Art Museum

painter to learn from his own emotions when he experiences grief or something pleasant, to be able better to express them: ‘... notice what inner feelings and what outward movements these passions bring about.’³⁶ This seems to be a visual adaptation of the familiar rhetorical advice that one should be able to feel the emotions oneself in order to be able to convey them, which is condensed in Horace’s famous maxim: ‘Si vis me flere, dolendum est / primi ipsi tibi’ (‘If you wish me to cry, cry yourself first’) and which is nicely played upon by Hendrick Spiegel: ‘In general, if you want to really move someone / Your own words, face, and mood, should tally / Do you want me to cry, you have to shed tears yourself / Then your sorrowful appearance will also make me cry with you.’³⁷

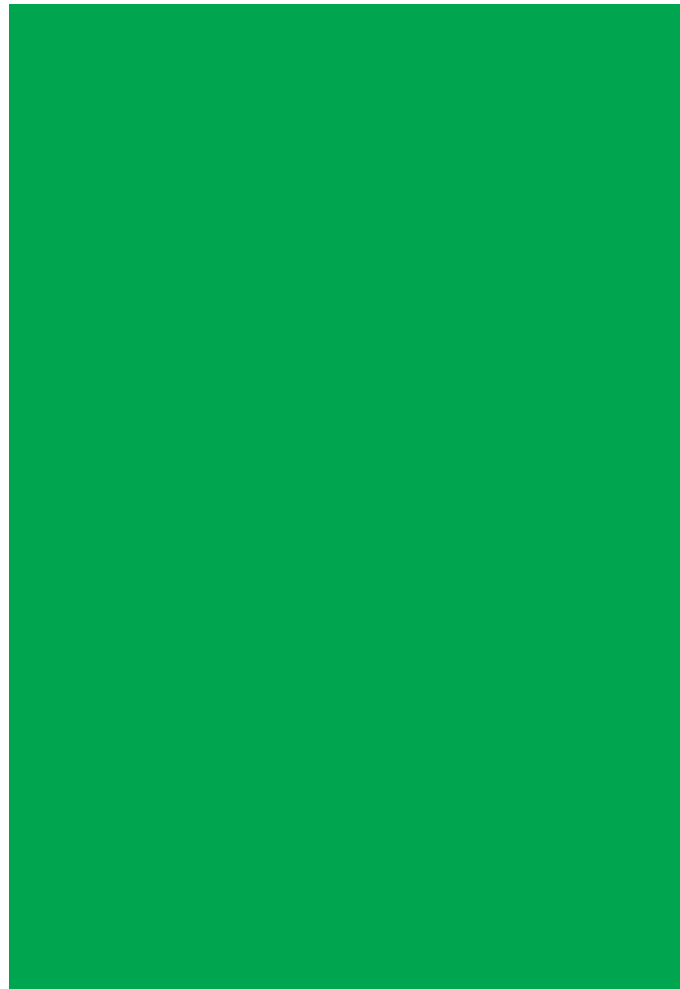
A theatrical analogy

More than any other artist in this period, it was Rembrandt who focused so emphatically on the expression of emotions. This must have been strongly encouraged by Pieter Lastman. In many works produced in the first decade of his career, from *Balaam and the Ass* (figs. 43, 44) up to *The Sacrifice of Abraham* (figs. 45, 46) or *Susanna and the Elders* (fig. 73), Rembrandt competed with paintings by his master in depicting an immediate, crucial (e)motion, an *oogenblikkige beweeging* that is unequivocal, *eenstemmich*. Rembrandt’s interest in precisely this most ‘rhetorical’ part of the art might have been stimulated by his earlier education at the Latin school, where lessons in rhetoric formed one of the most important components of the program. In most rhetorical handbooks of that time, based as they were on the Roman rhetoric of Quintilian and Cicero, to persuade the audience by appealing to the emotions was a central issue.³⁸ For this reason rhetorical handbooks discuss extensively the different passions, giving guidelines for eliciting compassion in the audience. The listener should be able to imagine himself in the position of the victim and

feel a strong involvement, which can be attained by representing misery as recognizably as possible. Cicero maintained that distress of an innocent and defenseless victim, in particular, will move the audience more deeply than any other human suffering.³⁹ One immediately thinks of *Andromeda* and *Susanna*.

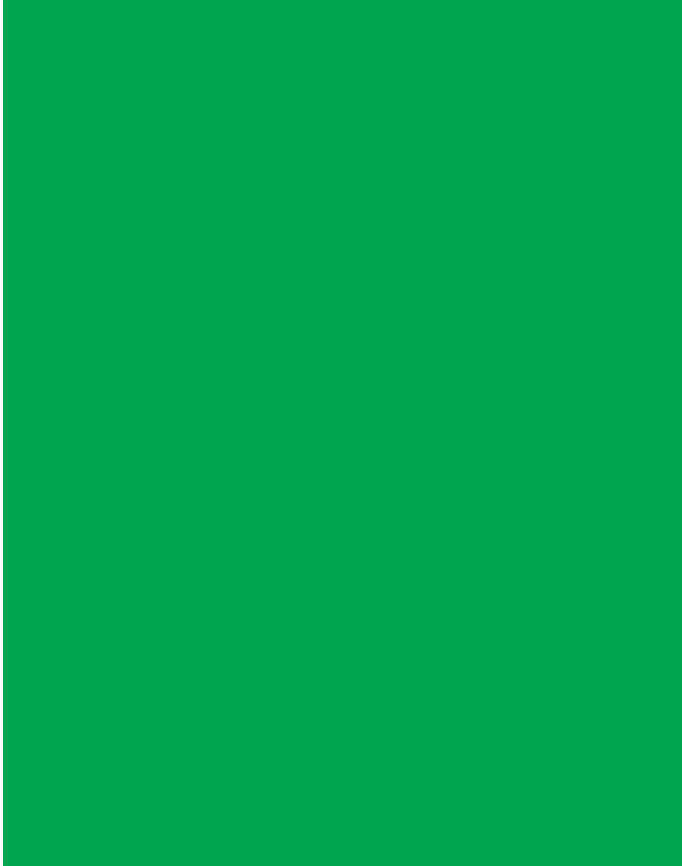
The emphasis on a lifelike, and preferably violent, representation of the passions, which is so striking in Lastman's work and is elaborated upon by the young Rembrandt in a much more thoughtful and inventive way, seems to run remarkably parallel to the intellectual interest in the passions that we find in theatrical drama in the first decades of the seventeenth century. In the leading tragedies of the period, often described as Senecan-Scaligerian drama, the depiction of a great variety of violent passions, such as love, jealousy, fear, remorse, gruesome pain, innocent suffering, and the like, were of paramount importance. Plausibility in the representation of such passions was a crucial requirement in the Senecan-Scaligerian theory of drama, meaning that everything presented on the stage should be believable to the viewer.⁴⁰ In the end their function is to hold a mirror up to the audience; showing unbridled passions should confirm current moral values, in particular the virtue of self-restraint. The awkwardly phrased advertisement by the publisher of Pieter Cornelisz. Hooft's *Achilles and Polyxena*, a typical Senecan-Scaligerian drama that depicts strong and constantly changing passions, expresses quite clearly in words that for which Lastman, first, and then his pupil were striving. Printing this drama had the purpose, the publisher says, of demonstrating for everyone 'how nakedly he [Hooft] depicts the passions of men and their constant changes, as he has depicted that nakedly for us in a stage play.'⁴¹ Remarkable is the emphasis on the words 'nakedly' and 'depict'; by using these words twice he accentuates the importance of bringing emotions before the viewer's eyes as recognizably as possible.⁴²

Although the choice of subject matter for tragedies in this period is for the greater part strikingly different



45 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Rembrandt, *The Sacrifice of Abraham*, 1635, canvas
193.5 x 132.8 cm. St. Petersburg, Hermitage

from the subjects depicted in painting, as both had their own strong traditions that defined their conventional themes and motifs, there certainly are remarkable similarities in the general notions applied to both. Scaliger's poetics, based mainly on Horace's *Poetica*, had an immense influence on the theater in this period. Although the many gruesome deeds that were especially popular on stage are rarely found in paintings, Rembrandt depicted several, and was unique in representing 'the stabbing out of eyes', one of the horrors that Scaliger mentions as



46

Pieter Lastman, *The Sacrifice of Abraham*, c. 1612, panel 40 x 32 cm. (grisaille). Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (on loan to the Rembrandthuis)

a suitable subject for tragedies, as Weststeijn has pointed out.⁴³ The exceptional subject of the *Blinding of Samson* (fig. 233), depicted with unusual violence, shows Rembrandt's awareness of such ideas, which probably held common currency among the cultural elite of that time. Of Scaliger's enumeration of suitable (mostly violent) topics that would move the beholder, there are many others that easily recall subjects of Rembrandt's paintings of the late '20s and '30s: terror (*Belshazzar's Feast*); rage (*Balaam* [fig. 44], *Christ Driving the Moneylenders from the Temple*); intimidation (*Samson Threatens the Father of Delilah*); murder (*Stoning of St. Stephen*); despair

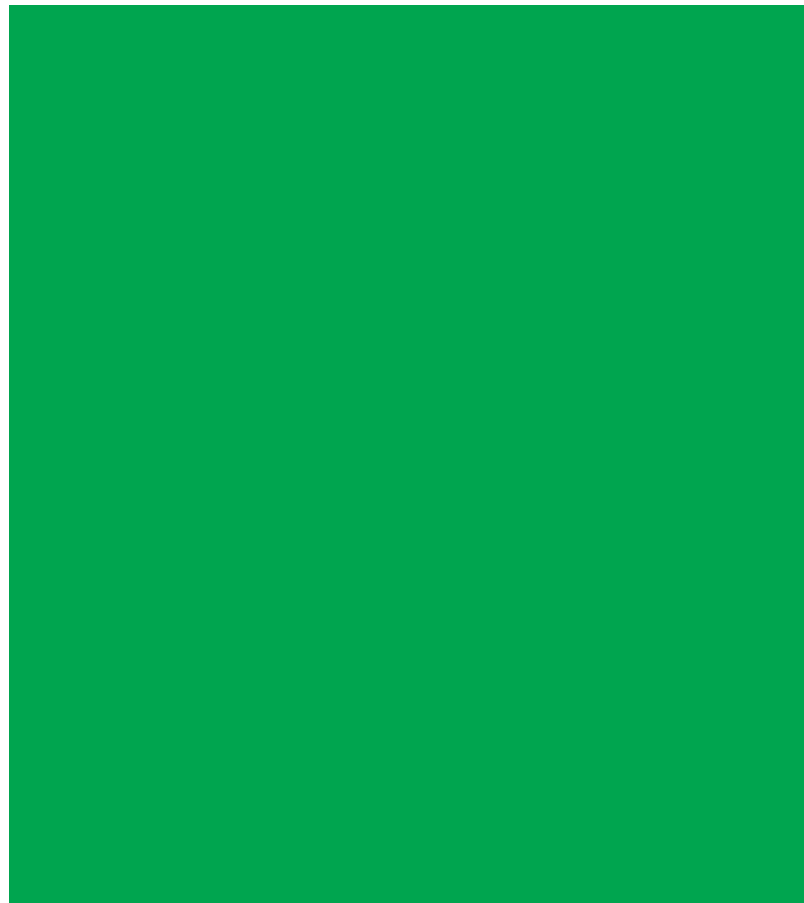
(*The Repentant Judas* [fig. 39], *Andromeda* [fig. 29]; *Susanna* [fig. 73]); exile (*The Flight into Egypt*); rape (*Rape of Proserpina* [fig. 47], *Rape of Europe*, *Rape of Ganymede* [fig. 40]); betrayal (*Samson and Delilah* [fig. 234]); and the killing of family members (*The Sacrifice of Abraham* [fig. 45]).⁴⁴

When the normative approach of the Aristotelian theory of drama took clear shape in the works and theoretical ideas of Joost van den Vondel in the 1640s and 1650s, it elicited the reaction of Jan Vos, author of the most successful play of the seventeenth century (*Aran and Titus* of 1641), who set down his ideas most extensively in the introduction of *Medea* (1667), his last tragedy. The opinions of Vos, who was much admired by learned men like Barlaeus, seem strikingly close to what must have been Rembrandt's outlook, especially when one thinks of Rembrandt's works of the late 1620s and 1630s. In many ways still adhering to the Senecan-Scaligerian views, Vos gave his own interpretation of them without the didactic framework of the earlier period.⁴⁵ The playwright passionately defends the need for an unconditional following of nature and human experience, even in all their disorderliness and ugliness. Since the latter of these qualities forms part of nature and human experience, it should therefore be represented unretouched. And since life is disorderly, one must not try to produce order – the result would be disorder, because such a goal is against fidelity to nature, he maintains. As a corollary, if one represents disorder well, then one creates order.⁴⁶ Vos, repeating Horace's famous dictum that 'what is heard touches the soul less than what one has seen with one's eyes, and which the beholder takes in himself', is also a strong adherent of the notion that the sense of sight has a much greater effect in moving the beholder than hearing.⁴⁷

Though it was becoming a rearguard action at this time, Vos also maintains that it is erroneous to assign absolute authority to theorists of antiquity. Rules of classical antiquity should not be employed as norms and, if

one does use them, their rules should always be adapted to the needs of one's own time. Antiquity has no special privileges: after all, did not Descartes outshine the wisdom of Aristoteles? And what about the compass, the gun, the telescope, the art of printing, the clock?⁴⁸ Innate talent is the first requirement, followed by experience and training. By those means Michiel de Ruyter learned his art of marine warfare, not by following Atilius or Pompeius, Vos argues. Although Vos was an ambitious and highly successful playwright, he parades the fact that he, contrary to Vondel, did not read Latin; he poses as an artist who does not heed – and does not need – the rules of classical antiquity. He emphatically expounds a 'from life' ideology, with the expression of strong emotions as his main concern. It is certainly not the succession of atrocities in Vos's tragedies that recall Rembrandt, but Vos's emphasis on strong 'ad-hoc emotions', as Jan Konst calls them.⁴⁹ These emotions are characteristic for the Senecan-Scaligerian tragedies from the 1610s up to Vos's very popular plays of around mid-century and are certainly related to Rembrandt's preoccupations in the late 1620s and 1630s. However, it is particularly the terminology that Vos used in the defense of his type of tragedies that brings Rembrandt to mind.

Vos appears to have been a supporter of Rembrandt, as he mentions him as the first artist in the parade of Amsterdam painters enumerated in his long eulogy of the art of painting, *The Struggle Between Death and Nature, or the Victory of the Art of Painting* (1654).⁵⁰ One may even wonder if it was the ideology and terminology of Rembrandt and his environment that Vos brought to his own defense as a playwright, rather than the reverse. Keeping all this in mind, around the middle of the century many attitudes towards antiquity would change, which also implies different approaches to the representation of drama and expression of emotions, most noticeably in Vondel's influential ideas and work from the forties onwards. As touched upon above, these changes may parallel Rembrandt's altered attitude in his later paintings, as will be



47 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Rembrandt, *The Rape of Proserpina*, c. 1631,
panel 84.8 x 79.7 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen,
Gemäldegalerie

seen when discussing his second version of *Susanna and the Elders* (1647) and, especially, *Bathsheba with King David's Letter* of 1654.⁵¹

Rembrandt, Rubens, antiquity, and the passions: a case study

Rembrandt's interpretation of *The Rape of Proserpina* of c. 1631 (fig. 47), admirably analyzed by Amy Golahny in particular,⁵² may function as another good example of the 'natural' and 'immediate' depiction of emotion in relation to his attitude towards imitation and emulation (the latter concepts will be discussed more extensively in



48

Pieter Soutman after Peter Paul Rubens, *The Rape of Proserpina*, engraving 21.6 x 32.7 cm

chapter IX) and towards the standards of antiquity. In his almost compulsive urge to compete with great works of art, Rembrandt resembled the much older Rubens, who was widely considered at the time to be the greatest Netherlandish master. However, this painting is one of many examples that demonstrate how Rembrandt differed fundamentally from Rubens in one crucial respect: for Rembrandt, it was not the visual forms of antiquity that were the ingredients for emulation, but the works of modern masters who, in his view, had already surpassed antiquity. Foremost among these modern masters would have been Rubens. When Rembrandt depicted *The Rape of Proserpina*, his primary goal was to emulate Rubens's invention, which was known to him from an engraving after Rubens by Pieter Soutman (fig. 48).⁵³ Several details, such as the falling basket with flowers and the woman hanging on to the train of Proserpina's drapery, clearly reveal that this print was Rembrandt's direct point of departure.⁵⁴ For Rubens it was a Roman bas-relief of a sarcophagus that fired his imagination (fig. 49).⁵⁵ He obviously adhered to the conventional classical poses

and gestures of fear, despair, and fury, such as the frantically extended arms and long, tumbling locks of Proserpina. The formal example of antiquity remained his standard to emulate; this composition is again an example of Rubens's ideology of selective imitation of classical sculpture, as well as nature. He depicts a heroic race, a 're-creation, through the mediation of ancient sculpture and Renaissance painting, of the physically and, by implication, morally and intellectually superior past', as Muller described it.⁵⁶

What Rubens, in fact, does not emphasize is the frenzied violence of the scene as described in Claudian's *De Raptu Proserpina*, the obvious source for both Rubens and Rembrandt, as well as for the Roman relief that was Rubens's source.⁵⁷ The scene as Rubens depicts it is clearly arranged by Venus, who follows the train contentedly, while two cheerful cupids briskly lead the horses. In its good-humored atmosphere Rubens seems to adhere to the Ovidian version of the story, which emphasizes Pluto's 'precipitate love' – visually expressed by Pluto's forceful but loving embrace of the terrified girl. As Elizabeth McGrath has argued in her discussion of Rubens's *Rape of the Sabines* and the *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippos*, Rubens's approach in most of his representations of men abducting women by force – a theme he depicted with such great intensity throughout his career – is in line with Ovid's prescription in the *Ars Amatoria*: carrying off a protesting maiden will succeed best if passion is overtaken by love. Men are allowed to seduce a beloved woman, forcefully if necessary, because women are naturally reluctant to submit to the passions of men. In contrast to our present day view of this as offensive, Rubens and his contemporaries believed that women actually enjoyed this experience in the end and that it was a perfectly appropriate view of the relationship between women and men.⁵⁸

Rembrandt's main concern was to surpass Rubens by depicting the most plausible and lifelike actions in this violent occurrence and to depict as convincingly as possi-

ble the *oogenblikkige beweeging* and the *natuereelste beweeshgelickheit*. Hence, we see a terrified young girl clawing in panic at Pluto's fearsome face, which underlines the unequivocality (*eenstemmigheid*) of the emotion, while the other women cling to the train of Proserpina's cloak and are dragged along on their stomachs. The last motif was introduced by Rubens but exploited to its fullest by Rembrandt to heighten the empathy of the viewer. The basket with flowers, which Rubens depicted as having fallen onto the ground, hangs in mid-air in Rembrandt's painting. This recalls Abraham's knife as the angel grips his wrist (fig. 45), emphasizing the *oogenblikkigheid* of this moment. Rembrandt also changed the orientation of the scene considerably so that the horses and chariot come rushing towards the viewer.⁵⁹

As was first pointed out in the 1970s by Wallace Weston, not only Rubens, but Rembrandt as well took Claudian's *De Raptu Proserpina* as his point of departure. This can be gleaned from various details, such as the presence of Minerva, striding forwards with shield and spear in Rubens's composition and almost invisibly present in Rembrandt's painting (in the background at the left), and the presence of the chaste Diana, who vigorously opposes the rape in Claudian's poem. She is given an eye-catching role in Rembrandt's scene as the most conspicuous woman, with a crescent moon on her head, clutching Proserpina's train.⁶⁰ Rembrandt certainly emphasizes the frenzy of Claudian's poem, which describes Pluto as the 'fierce ravisher, who is like a lion when he has seized a heifer ... and has torn with his claws the defenseless flesh and has sated his fury on all its limbs ... and scorns the shepherd's feeble rage.'⁶¹ Since Claudian's poem was not translated into Dutch,⁶² I assume that Rembrandt must have been assisted by Huygens or another learned connoisseur.⁶³ The fact that the *Proserpina* probably entered into the collection of the Stadtholder immediately makes the involvement of a highly placed connoisseur all the more likely.⁶⁴ Huygens might even have suggested this competition with Rubens's invention to Rembrandt. We



49
Roman sarcophagus relief, *The Rape of Proserpina*, Rome, Palazzo Rospigliosi

may imagine the two men discussing and poring over Soutman's engraving after Rubens and Huygens pointing out to Rembrandt that the lines of verse beneath the print, as well as several details within the image, refer to Claudian's poem. Much more than Rubens, Rembrandt followed the details of Claudian's text – the richly embroidered cloak with a brooch, for instance, is described in Claudian's poem.⁶⁵ Hence, Rembrandt's seemingly unclassical garb is not a deviation from the classical text – quite the contrary. It is, however, a deviation from the classical nudity of the pictorial example set by Rubens's composition and, through it, the antique source.

Rembrandt desired most to give the viewer the opportunity to empathize with his figures by bringing them and the emotion they expressed close to the viewer's world of experience. This, as well as following more closely the details and frenzied mood of Claudian's text, were the 'arguments' with which he wanted to surpass Rubens. It was probably this painting that hung in the Stadtholder's main gallery,⁶⁶ precisely the kind of place where connoisseurs who knew about Rubens – the most favored artist at the court in The Hague – would have been able to appreciate the young Rembrandt's competition with the great master from Antwerp.

IV

Susanna and the Elders

The expression of powerful emotions together with a convincing suggestion of lifelikeness and naturalness is at the core of Rembrandt's next narrative painting with a single nude figure, the little panel of *Susanna* painted in 1636 and now in the Mauritshuis (fig. 73).¹ To combine lifelikeness and strong emotional expressiveness had been Pieter Lastman's goal as well when he depicted this subject more than twenty years earlier in the painting that served as Rembrandt's point of departure (fig. 66). Works of his late master (Lastman had died three years before Rembrandt started this *Susanna*) could still offer an inspiring challenge to Rembrandt, even at this point in his career, when he was the most successful portrait and history painter in Amsterdam. Rembrandt's solution demonstrates how he surpassed his former teacher, not only by imagining how such an event might have taken place in reality, but also by way of establishing a search-

ing dialogue with a range of other compositions by famous masters, foremost among whom was Rubens.

The story of *Susanna and the Elders* was at that time undoubtedly the most popular vehicle for the depiction of the female nude in painting, and one that explicitly visualized the forbidden act of spying upon, or even pawing, a nude young woman, a chaste beauty who had undressed to take a bath and by doing so unwittingly aroused the basest desires of those watching her. The viewer knows that the voyeurs *in* the picture, the lecherous Elders, were eventually punished with death. Although he finds himself in the same position as those spying old men (but always with a much more revealing view of Susanna's body), the viewer need fear no punishment for enjoying this beautiful woman, a woman who was traditionally considered the prime example of threatened chastity.² After his *Andromeda*, this subject



50
Lucas van Leyden, *Susanna and the Elders*, c. 1508, engraving
19.7 x 14.4 cm



51
Jan Swart, *Susanna and the Elders*,
woodcut 5 x 7.6 cm. In: *De Bibel. Tgeheel Oude ende Nieuwe Testament* (W. Vorsterman) 1528



52
Georg Pencz, *Susanna and the Elders*, engraving 4.4 x 7.4 cm.

gave Rembrandt once again the opportunity to concentrate on the image of a helpless, naked, and completely isolated female victim whose state of mind is defined by a frightened anticipatory glance.

Countless illustrious painters had portrayed this subject before, and Rembrandt would have been familiar with prints after various compositions by Maarten van Heemskerck (figs. 55, 56), Hendrick Goltzius (fig. 57), Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem (figs. 58, 61), and Peter Paul Rubens (figs. 67-69), as well as with an obviously well-known etching by Annibale Carracci (fig. 62). Although the painting by his teacher Pieter Lastman was his immediate starting point, it must have been the inventions by Rubens, in particular – especially the one engraved by Lucas Vorsterman (fig. 67) – that constituted the real challenge.

Susanna in prints of the sixteenth century

Susanna was the devout and beautiful wife of the rich Joachim, whose large garden functioned as a meeting place where justice was administered in sessions presided over by the two Elders. The apocryphal biblical story tells how she went to take a bath in the garden: after everyone had left she sent away her servants and the gates were closed. Two Elders who had hidden themselves in the garden, ‘their lust ... inflamed toward her’, emerged from their hiding place and said, ‘We are in love with thee; therefore consent unto us, and lie with us. If thou wilt not, we will bear witness against thee, that a young man was with thee ...’ However, Susanna remained steadfast and answered: ‘I am straitened on every side: for if I do this thing, it is death to me: and if I do it not, I shall not escape your hands. But it is better for me to fall into your hands without doing it, than to sin in the sight of the Lord.’ The Elders carried out their threat and Susanna was condemned to death, but Daniel, inspired by God, unmasked the Elders, proving that they gave false testimony. Susanna thus became the unequivocal

example of chastity. She preferred to be accused of adultery and be put to death rather than be sexually violated, because God would recognize her innocence. This gave her an important advantage over the classical example of chastity, the Roman Lucretia, a chaste married woman who was violated by Tarquin and subsequently committed suicide. Not only did suicide clash with Christian morals, but Lucretia killed herself *after* the act. St. Augustine, who devoted an entire chapter of *De civitate dei* to this problem, argued that if one is chaste in spirit, there is no need to feel guilt and thus no need for such severe punishment. In the case of Lucretia, however, one may never be sure that she had no reason to feel guilty, since she might have derived some enjoyment from Tarquin's assault, he argued.³

From the medieval cycles illustrating the whole *Susanna* story, one scene would become a favorite in the pictorial arts. In the course of the sixteenth century, the moment of Susanna bathing would often be depicted separately in German and Netherlandish Bible illustrations as well as in independent prints.⁴ Two pictorial types developed, that of the Elders spying upon Susanna and that of the Elders confronting her.⁵ A Susanna spied upon from a great distance is found in a well-known print of c. 1508 by Lucas van Leyden (fig. 50). Lucas placed the spying Elders in the foreground, so that the viewer looks, together with them, at the object of their lust in the background: Susanna bathing her feet in a pond, still unaware of being observed. However, this brilliant solution, which 'bespeaks a sly wit playfully toying with the visual image as a means for engaging and locating its audience', as Peter Parshall remarked, would not recur in later prints or paintings.⁶ In the celebrated Vorsterman Bible of 1528, illustrated with woodcuts by Jan Swart (fig. 51), we find another early example of a Susanna who does not know that she is being watched. Quietly washing herself, she would be interchangeable with a bathing Bathsheba if it were not for the Elders at the left standing behind



53
Heinrich Aldegrever,
Susanna and the Elders, 1555,
engraving 11.4 x 8.1 cm



54
Tobias Stimmer, *Susanna and the Elders*,
woodcut 6.0 x 8.5 cm. In: *Neue künstliche
Figuren biblischer Historien*, 1576



55
Anonymous after Maarten van Heemskerck, *Susanna and the
Elders*, 1563, engraving 20.6 x 25.1 cm



56
Philips Galle after Maarten van Heemskerck, *Susanna* (with Susanna and the Elders in the background), engraving 20.5 x 24.8 cm



57
Jan Saenredam after Hendrick Goltzius, *Susanna and the Elders*, c. 1598, engraving 24.8 x 16.6 cm

shrubbery. In the German illustrations of Georg Pencz and Hans Sebald Beham, we meet another type in which elements of the popular tradition of images of unequal lovers – showing old men lusting for young women – merge with that of Susanna. The difference with the unequal-lovers theme is that Susanna strongly resists the physical pawing of the Elders (fig. 52). Around the same time, we also meet with some German examples of Susanna, as in an illustration by Heinrich Aldegrever (1555) (fig. 53), in which a quietly bathing Bathsheba-like woman is watched from a distance by the Elders. However, an assaulted Susanna, often being grabbed by her breasts, remains the favorite way of representing this episode in Germany, as we see in the woodcuts of Jost Amman (for the famous Feyerabend Bible of 1565) or Tobias Stimmer (Basel 1576; figs. 54).

Susanna's nakedness, as well as the physical attack of the Elders, are elements obviously untold in the biblical story but added by the artists. They make the arousal of the Elders more convincing and Susanna's courage and firm resistance more admirable, while creating simultaneously a more exciting image for a male audience. The quietly bathing, Bathsheba-like Susanna who is unaware of the Elders, as in Lucas van Leyden's, Jan Swart's, and Heinrich Aldegrever's prints (and also as represented in a few sixteenth-century paintings, such as the famous work by Tintoretto), would find almost no continuation in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A frightened Susanna, being confronted by physically grabbing, or – more often as of the mid-sixteenth century – verbally persuading Elders, would become the standard image. Maarten van Heemskerck made two prints of *Susanna and the Elders*, both with texts underlining Susanna's chastity: one for a series of six *Susanna* scenes (dated 1563), the other in the background of a print that forms part of a series of eight *Famous Women* (figs. 55, 56), in which a large-scale, full-length Susanna is the subject. In these inventions Van Heemskerck introduced the type in which the Elders forcefully argue their case with expres-

sive rhetorical gestures, while Susanna wards off their approach.

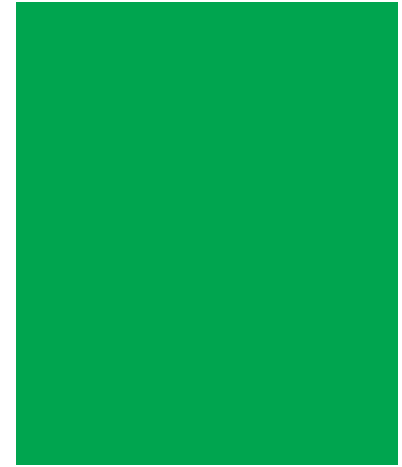
In prints with inventions by Goltzius (fig. 57) and Cornelis van Haarlem (figs. 58, 61), we find the appearance of another motif. Susanna turns away from the Elders, her eyes piously directed towards heaven, while making the familiar *Venus pudica* gesture. In the case of Goltzius, such a gesture clearly does not derive from an antique source but is a response to Titian's use of the motif in a *Mary Magdalen* engraved by Cornelis Cort (fig. 59, in which the Elders gesture closely behind her. They visualize simultaneously two successive passages of the story: the Elders persuading Susanna to do their will, threatening that otherwise they will testify that she committed adultery with a young man; and Susanna's response that she would rather be sentenced to death than to sin against the Lord. The Latin verse under the prints, by the Haarlem humanists Schonaeus and Schrevelius, tell us in varying ways about the constancy of Susanna, who kept her purity before God. In a painting of c. 1589, which precedes these prints, Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem had depicted the subject in a startling way (fig. 60). The frontally exposed body of Susanna is placed so close to the picture plane and is seen from such a low viewpoint that the spectator seems to be in a rather uncomfortable position. He looks up at a writhing Susanna – her figure is clearly meant as a tour de force in torsion and foreshortening – who turns her face towards heaven, but begins to scream for help at the same time.

Much quieter is an engraving by Jan Saenredam after Cornelis, dated 1602 (fig. 61), in which Susanna's attitude clearly reflects Cornelis's knowledge of the *Susanna* print by Annibale Carracci, dated 1590 (fig. 62). In the engraved invention of Cornelis, a Cupid riding a swan and dolphins, all attributes of Venus, feature as fountain figures, making it clear that the Elders are fired by love. Related to this print is an engraving by Chrispijn de Passe I after Maarten de Vos in which a peacock, the bird of Juno, is added, referring to Susanna's faithfulness in



58

Jacob Matham after Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1599, engraving 23.2 x 16.8 cm



59

Cornelis Cort after Titian, *Mary Magdalen*, 1566, engraving 35 x 28 cm

marriage (fig. 63). In this period the type of the physical attack on a screaming Susanna with flailing arms was picked up in some Flemish prints, as we can see in a print by Antonie Wierix after Maarten de Vos (fig. 64) and another by Antonie Wierix II after Antonie Wierix.⁷ The motif of one Elder groping Susanna's body and the other reaching out to remove her drapery is also seen in a small, experimental etching by Werner van den Valckert of c. 1612 (fig. 65). But here we seem to have arrived in another world. The figure of Susanna suddenly has an unstylized, more natural appearance; Van den Valckert tried to suggest the softness of her body, while at the same time making her recoiling movement much more convincing. Susanna's *pudica* gesture is clearly not that of the copies and variations of the *Aphrodite of Knidos* (fig. 78), but derived from the so-called *Venus of Doidalsas*, or *Crouching Venus*, an antique example that had also inspired Van den Valckert when he painted his *Venus and Cupid* (fig. 103).⁸



60 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
 Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem, *Susanna and the Elders*,
 c. 1589, canvas 126 x 102 cm. Nürnberg, Germanisches
 Nationalmuseum (on loan from the Bayerische Staats-
 gemäldesammlungen)



61
 Jan Saenredam after Cornelis Corne-
 lisz. van Haarlem, *Susanna and the
 Elders*, 1602, engraving 22.8 x 25.9 cm

Susanna in the early seventeenth century

When Pieter Lastman took up the subject in 1614 (fig. 66), the invention of Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem engraved by Jan Saenredam (fig. 61), the print by Christpijn de Passe I after Maarten de Vos (fig. 63), and the etching by Annibale Carracci (fig. 62) were the ones that inspired him. In an approach typical for him, Lastman picked out the elements with which he could visually narrate the story as clearly as possible, emphasizing the verbal interaction between the Elders and the startled Susanna by easily readable gestures. The scale of the figures, the general positioning of Susanna and the Elders, the upper part of Susanna's torso and the left arm in her lap, as well as motifs like the steps towards the water, the palace in the background and the tree trunk behind the Elders, all betray Lastman's interest in Cornelis Cornelisz.'s invention (fig. 61). Other elements, like Susanna's more violent reaction as she turns to face the Elders, show his knowledge of the print by Annibale Carracci (fig. 62), while the attitude of one of the Elders (one hand on his heart, the other outstretched) and the conspicuous peacock derive from the engraving after Maarten de Vos (fig. 63); elements from the latter also inspired Lastman when devising the closely related painting of *Bathsheba* around the same time (fig. 336). In Lastman's *Susanna*, the Elders move energetically towards the startled Susanna, whose expression of distress is more convincing than any earlier representations of her. In particular, the slightly cringing upper torso, the movement away from, but at the same time turning towards her assailants, and the tense pose of her legs – suggesting that she is on the point of leaping to her feet – are persuasively portrayed and must have met with Rembrandt's approval.

Peter Paul Rubens, who made at least six different paintings of *Susanna*, three of which were engraved (by Lucas Vorsterman, Paulus Pontius, and Christoffel Jegher, respectively; figs. 67, 68, 69), opted in most of them for the physical attack. However, unlike sixteenth-

century prints with this motif, Rubens's inventions do not display the Elders crudely grabbing or pawing Susanna's body, but show them cheerfully admiring her irresistible beauty, often trying to uncover her body as much as possible by removing all her garments. His inventions make clear that he emulated primarily Annibale Carracci (fig. 62), without directly taking motifs from Annibale's print. Rubens himself inscribed the 1624 engraving by Pontius with the text (fig. 68): 'Turpe Senilis Amor', a phrase with which Ovid had summed up the ridiculous spectacle of amorous old age. Thus Rubens wittily referred to the long tradition of the portrayal of unequal lovers, as Elizabeth McGrath demonstrated.⁹ Much later Jan Steen would elaborate on this relationship; in his depiction of a bordello scene with a prostitute being courted by an old man, he inserted a painting of *Susanna and the Elders* (one of Rubens's compositions) on the wall (fig. 70).¹⁰ Goltzius seems jokingly to refer to the same idea (as did Sir Dudley Carleton in a letter to Rubens mentioned further below), when he incorporated the portrait of his friend, Jan Govertsz. van der Aar, in his painting of *Susanna* dated 1607 (fig. 71).¹¹ In the seventeenth century there were even terms to describe old men who went courting: 'Susanna rascals' or 'Susannists' (*Susanna-boeven* or *Suzannisten*).¹²

As we will see, the invention that must have most fired Rembrandt's imagination was the engraving by Lucas Vorsterman after Rubens, probably published in 1620 (fig. 67). By her posture as well as by the text under the print, this Susanna is characterized as a model of chastity, a *pudicitiae exemplar*, as is stated in the inscription. However, at the same time Rubens knew how to enhance Susanna's erotic appeal. 'The heroine's obvious annoyance that we, the spectators, are spying on her naked charms makes us only too conscious that the artist has invited us to follow the example of the Elders and do just this', was Elizabeth McGrath's acute comment.¹³ This beautifully engraved print was dedicated to the Dutch poetess Anna Roemers Visscher. Again, Elizabeth Mc-



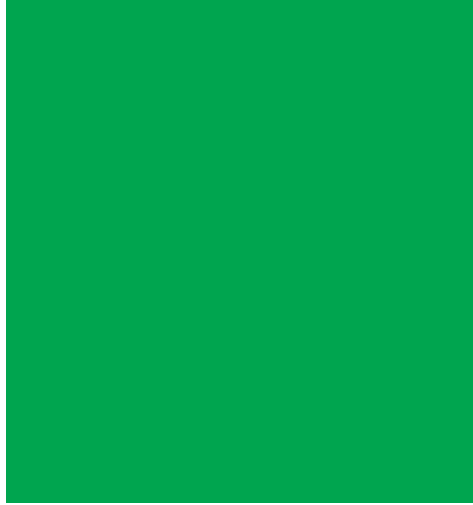
64
Antonie II Wierix after
Maarten de Vos, *Susanna
and the Elders*, c. 1610,
engraving 27.7 x 20.2 cm



63
Chrispijn de Passe after Maarten
de Vos, *Susanna and the Elders*,
engraving 9.8 x 12.7 cm



62
Annibale Carracci, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1590, engraving
and etching 35.1 x 31 cm



65
Werner van den Valckert, *Susanna and the Elders*, c. 1612, etching 7/8 x 6/6.4 cm

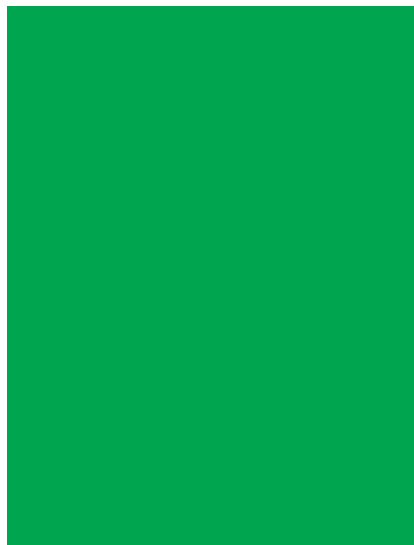


66 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Pieter Lastman, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1614, panel 42 x 58 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie

Grath provides a compelling analysis: ‘when pictures of naked women were used to make public compliments to illustrious and respectable female contemporaries, it was clearly essential to supply a moral that specifically relates to chastity But if he aptly characterized this Susanna as a model of chastity for publication and for the benefit of Anna Roemers, Rubens by no means thought that the scene was exclusively, or even primarily, a biblical exemplum of virtue, and it was certainly not painted by him, any more than it was by other artist, in order to give a moral lesson.’¹⁴ I wonder if we may even assume that, by choosing this subject for a dedication to Anna Roemers Visscher, Rubens commented wittily on the fact that the attractive Anna Roemers was surrounded by a circle of poets (some of them elderly) who praised her beauty and virtue in rather amorous poems, among them Jacob Cats, who dedicated his *Maechden-plicht* (*Duties of the Maiden*) to her. Anna certainly would not have been squeamish about such suggestive puns, as is testified by her humorous reply to a poem of Simon van Beaumont in which he had joked about her virginity.¹⁵

In 1618, when working on the painting with this composition (to be reproduced in the engraving by Vorsterman about two years later), Rubens described it in a letter to the English ambassador in The Hague, Sir Dudley Carlton, as *una gallanteria*.¹⁶ In his reply, Carlton expressed the hope that the *Susanna* Rubens was offering would ‘prove beautiful enough to enamour even old men’, a jest that, like Rubens’s inscriptions under the prints engraved by Vorsterman and Pontius mentioned above, was feeding into the age-old and familiar theme of the unequal lovers.¹⁷ To make her so beautiful that even the elderly would fall in love with her was certainly what Rubens had set out to do. He emphasized Susanna’s chasteness by her strained crouching position, forcefully crossed legs and determined attempt to hide her body with both arms. The water spouting from a fountain in an overflowing basin enhances the image of sexual arousal.

Apparently in an attempt to make a *Susanna* that was



68
Paulus Pontius, after Peter Paul
Rubens, *Susanna and the Elders*,
1624, engraving 36.9 x 28.6 cm



69
Christoffel Jegher after Peter Paul Rubens,
Susanna and the Elders, c. 1630, woodcut
44 x 58 cm

as violent and shocking as possible, Jan Lievens drew upon the cruder tradition dating back to two prints by the Wierix brothers (figs. 64), in which a panicking Susanna is seized at the wrist. Lievens's invention, etched by Jan Jorisz. van Vliet, probably existed also as a painting (fig. 72).¹⁸ Although the sphinxlike, water-spouting fountain figure shows that he knew Lastman's quiet interpretation, Lievens threw all caution to the wind by depicting a Susanna who, falling backwards with flailing arms and screaming with a widely opened mouth, is being grabbed by utterly repulsive Elders. These elderly men, with rolling eyes and obscene gestures, make their intent all too clear.

Rembrandt's Susanna of 1636

Such was the situation at the popular *Susanna*-front when Rembrandt entered the scene to try his hand at this subject (fig. 73). As noted before, the composition of his master Pieter Lastman of 1614 (fig. 66) was Rembrandt's starting point for rethinking the theme in the little Mauritshuis painting. He had made a rather quickly executed red chalk drawing after Lastman's painting, but while doing so he made a few significant changes (fig. 74). We see Rembrandt thinking about the subject and 'correcting' certain motifs. Susanna, sitting on a bunch of clothes, turns to confront the offenders, who are urgently talking to her. While drawing, Rembrandt did away with the raised hand of Lastman's Susanna, a theatrical gesture of fear which the young artist would have considered too conventional and blatant. He brought more tension to Susanna's body by changing the position of the head and slightly increasing the angle of the legs. In a pen sketch generally dated c. 1635 (fig. 75), Rembrandt experimented with a frontally viewed *Susanna* that showed a stronger forward movement in her frightened reaction to the threatening Elders.¹⁹ This much more violent motion seems to have been inspired by the woodcut made by Christoffel Jegher after a composition by Rubens

(fig. 69), while the Elders in Rembrandt's sketch, one pointing to the left and the other sporting a long beard and gesturing with his left hand, were clearly variations on the same figures in Annibale Carracci's print (fig. 62). However, when he began the painting, he returned to his drawing after Lastman's *Susanna* (figs. 66, 74).

In the Mauritshuis painting Rembrandt focused on the figure of Susanna, retaining the figure's sitting position on a heap of clothes and also keeping the general disposition of elements: Susanna's nude, brightly lit body is placed before dark shrubbery, from which a tree trunk emerges that defines the middle ground. We also encounter the steps leading to a pool, the ornamental end of a parapet to her left (the sphinxlike figure in Lastman's painting being transformed here into mere goat's legs, emphasizing that something lewd is in the air), and a low stone wall at the left that functions as a repoussoir and that also casts a strip of shadow in the foreground. We also see architectural motifs: a palace-like structure with a terrace in the left background. Lastman had used the same compositional scheme for a *Bathsheba* (fig. 336), another invention which Rembrandt must have remembered well, since we observe in his *Susanna* a few motifs deriving from this work including: the white chemise – the sleeve hanging down – that lies on a wine-red velvet cloak; the balustrade of the terrace in the background; and the richly decorated metal bowl on the low stone wall, a transformation of Lastman's flowerpot. From Lastman's *Susanna* he also retained the motif of Susanna pressing a white cloth to her crotch to cover her shame, but now it is her right hand with which she does this. He had already played with this idea in the drawing after Lastman's painting, where he moved Susanna's raised right hand to the position where it would end up in the final composition. Rembrandt might have done this with the little etching by Van den Valckert in the back of his mind (fig. 65). However, the hand itself is remarkably similar to that with which Lievens's Susanna tries to shield her crotch (fig. 72).



70

Jan Steen, *Bordello Scene with an Old Man Courting a Young Prostitute* (with a painting of *Susanna and the Elders* on the wall), c. 1660-62, panel 49 x 37 cm, Moscow, Pushkin Museum

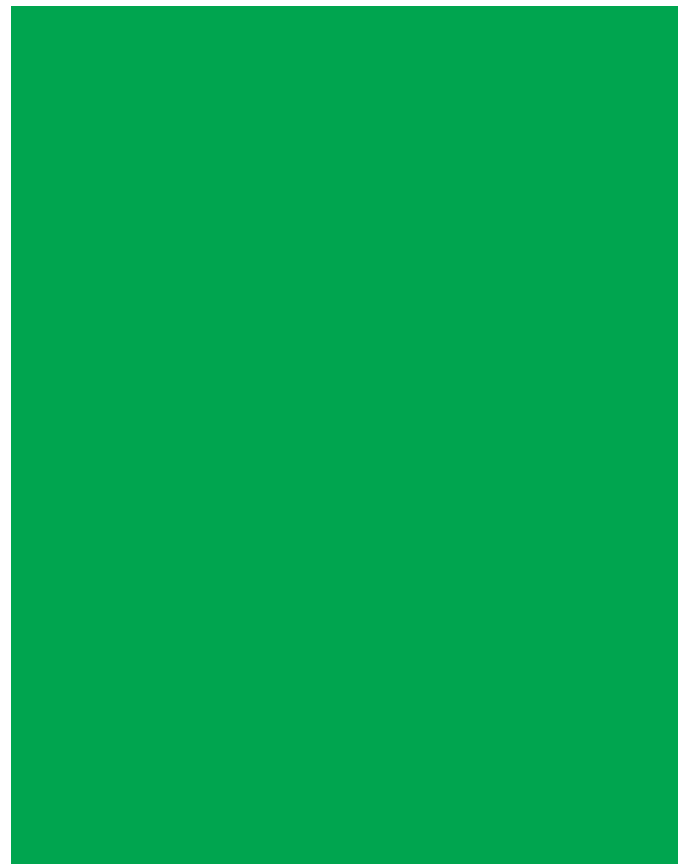


71 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx

Hendrick Goltzius, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1607, panel 67 x 94 cm. Douai, Musée de la Chartreuse

Equally as important a stimulus was the *Susanna* engraved by Lucas Vorsterman after Rubens (fig. 67). It was certainly this composition by Rubens that he wished to emulate. Inspired by this engraving and assisted by tools which had been provided to him by Lastman, he developed a brilliant solution that was inimitably his own. In Rubens's invention the Elders are conveniently removing Susanna's robes for the viewer. The old men, the one with a lecherous grin tearing off her garments and the other leaning over to persuade Susanna to abandon her resistance, function as a threatening foil against which her completely naked body stands out. As implied above, it is from the viewer that Rubens's *Susanna* recoils, hiding her body with great determination from the viewer's eager eyes and confronting his gaze with an angry frown. Rubens's endeavor to actively involve the viewer by way of Susanna's direct, confronting gaze would have been an important incentive for Rembrandt to do the same and to do it better. In addition, one may also wonder if irritation with Jan Lievens's crude expression of violent emotions in his *Susanna* (fig. 72) would have offered an extra impulse to conceive of a representation of the theme that evokes a stronger emotional response through much subtler means. As we shall see later, Rembrandt might have been experimenting with the *Susanna* story before the Mauritshuis painting, if we assume that the first stage of his *Susanna and the Elders*, now in Berlin (fig. 81), which in its general layout is closer to Lastman's composition and even shows aspects of Lievens' invention, precedes the Mauritshuis version.

Rembrandt must have realized that Rubens had the so-called *Venus of Doidalsas*, or *Crouching Venus*, in mind when conceiving of the *Susanna* engraved by Vorsterman. For Rubens, this *Crouching Venus* was one of the favorite antique sculptures of a female nude upon which to base various creative interpretations. Rubens likely made drawings of this sculpture, with which he would have been familiar from a Roman version at the Vatican.²⁰ Rembrandt would have known it from a print by



72

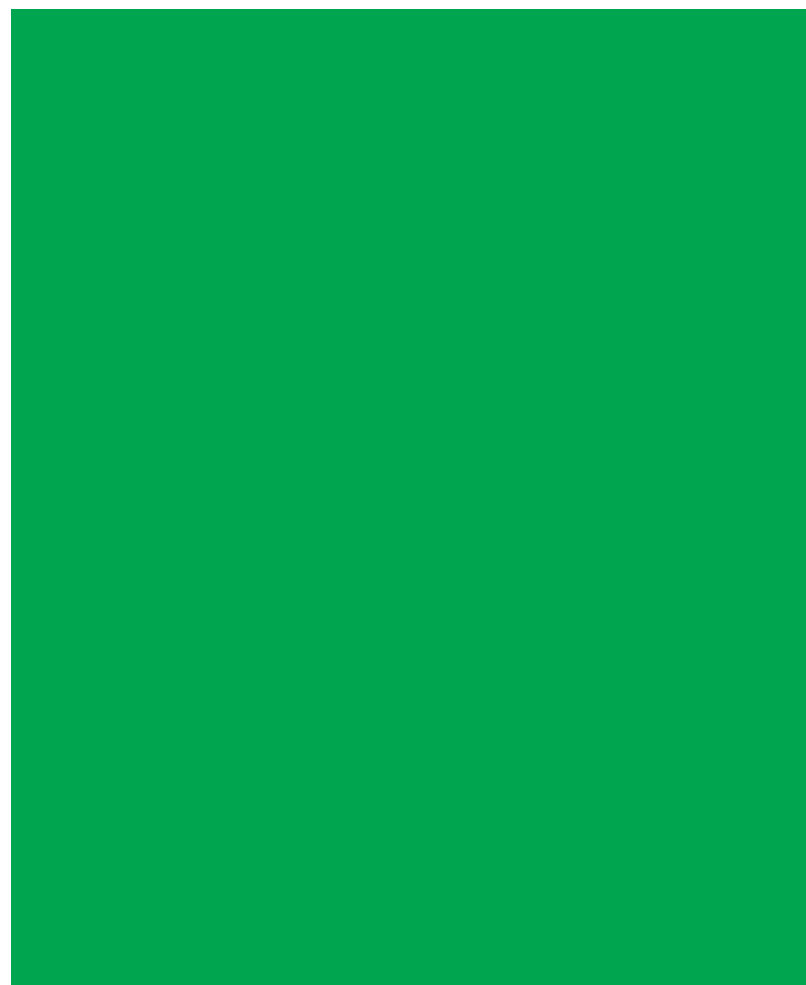
Jan Jorisz. van Vliet after Jan Lievens, *Susanna and the Elders*, c. 1628-29, etching 55.1 x 43.5 cm

Marcantonio Raimondi (fig. 67) and from a free copy after it by Albrecht Altdorfer (fig. 77), both of which evidently inspired him as he was formulating the composition.²¹ In fact, Rembrandt kept closer than Rubens to the attitude of the classical figure as he found it displayed in those prints; at the same time he transformed this specific variation on the better-known – and already often used – *Venus pudica* pose (fig. 78) into an entirely natural reaction.²² The torsion in Susanna's body – her lower part is slightly turned towards the viewer, while her upper torso turns away from him – is stronger than in Lastman's and Rubens's paintings and seems to be inspired by the *Crouching Venus*, as is the movement of the forearm. As

in Rubens's composition, Rembrandt's Susanna presses her left upper arm protectively against her body, but in Rembrandt's invention the forearm and hand are also visible. The hand reaches up as in the prints of the *Crouching Venus*; it does not grasp a lock of her hair as in Altdorfer's engraving, but becomes entangled in the long strands she brushes away.²³ Different from both Rubens and the *Crouching Venus* prints is that the viewer is rewarded with the tempting vision of one of the breasts being pressed against the body.

The white cloth she presses to her crotch is used as a beautiful contrast to the texture of the skin of her thighs, painted in creamy flesh tints, as well as to the more ruddy color of the hand. The cloth is painted with the distinct relief of thickly applied paint, the ridges of which mark the fine folds of the material and the lace of the trim. Susanna's back, the beautiful outline of which is accentuated in the lower part by light reflecting from the white chemise, curves more strongly than it does in Lastman's painting (fig. 66), but less so than in Rubens's invention (fig. 67). However, her hunched shoulders suggest a more strained and sudden movement than the long arched back of Rubens's Susanna. It is striking to see that Willem de Poorter, in a copy he drew after Rembrandt's painting (fig. 79), was not able to capture the subtlety of this tense outline of Susanna's back that so perfectly expresses her sudden, writhing movement. De Poorter, in contrast, ends up with a seemingly hunchbacked Susanna.

The fact that Rembrandt incorporated a pose stemming from antique sculpture affirms all the more his conscious rejection of classical conventions when depicting the anatomy and proportions of this nude. The body of Rubens's Susanna clearly adheres to the classical type. The muscularity of the shoulder, upper arm and thigh, the rather virile structure of muscles between the waist and the joint of the thigh, the general proportions of the body and such details as the high instep of the foot all point to a classical ideal, as we see, for instance, in the *Crouching Venus*. As was discussed in chapter 11, it was



73 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Rembrandt, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1636,
panel 47.4 x 38.6 cm. The Hague, Mauritshuis

crucial for Rubens to breathe life into the smooth surfaces of antique sculpture by suggesting the 'accidents of flesh, which the art of painting was pre-eminently able to do.' This lifelikeness of soft, human skin is visible even in the brilliant reproductive engraving of Lucas Vorsterman. Again, this demonstrates how the formal example of antiquity remained normative for Rubens. It was this assumed superiority of antiquity that gave Rubens his rationale for the imitation of ancient sculpture, as Jeffrey Muller has argued.²⁴ Rembrandt, on the contrary, like his earliest admirer Constantijn Huygens, must have been convinced that the ancients had been surpassed com-



74

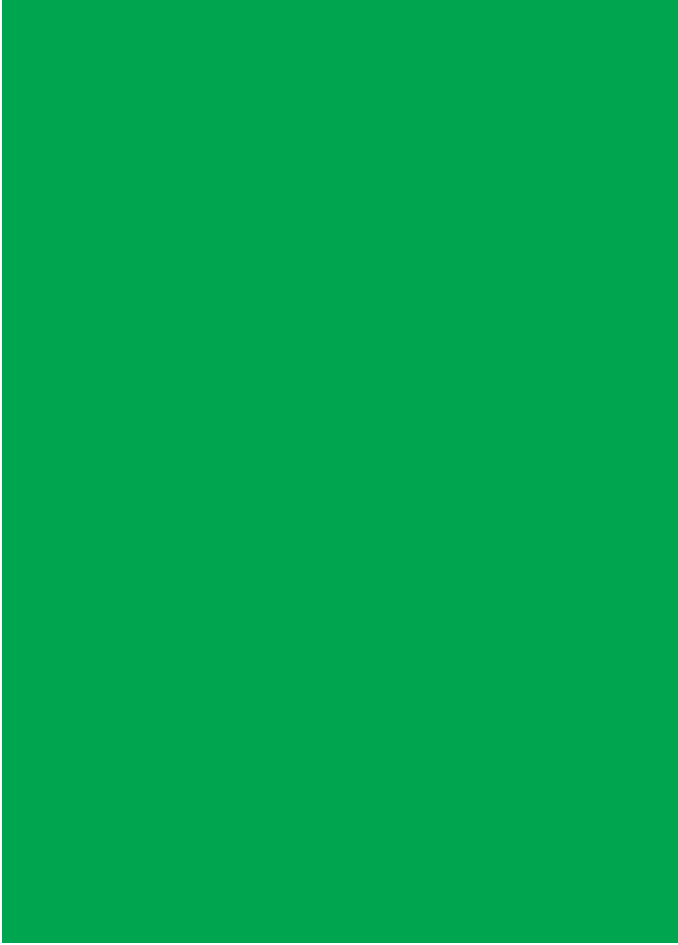
Rembrandt after Pieter Lastman, *Susanna and the Elders*, c. 1635, red chalk 23.5 x 26.4 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett

pletely by modern artists like Titian and Rubens (see chapters III and VII). For Rembrandt the visual vocabulary of antiquity did not constitute the standard: rather, the ancients and moderns alike were both worthy of competition, presenting standards that had to be surpassed by suggesting true lifelikeness in appearance and expression of emotions.

Compared with his direct models – Lastman, Rubens, and the prints after the antique – the proportions of the body of Rembrandt’s Susanna have changed entirely. They have much in common with the figure of the earlier Andromeda, but are now even more pronounced. Characteristic are again her rather large head with a relatively non-existent neck placed on narrow shoulders, a high waist, a long and expanding abdomen and comparably spindly legs. Rembrandt was certainly not the only one at

this time to use the unclassical proportions that recall the nudes of early Netherlandish paintings, as well as the silhouettes of fashionably dressed ladies of the 1620s and 1630s (see chapter XI),²⁵ but no one else had developed it so thoroughly as Rembrandt did. A type of nude from earlier in the seventeenth century that comes closest to that of Rembrandt is to be found in experimental etchings of the 1610s, specifically the *Susanna* in the small etching by Van den Valckert of c. 1612 (fig. 65) and Willem Buytewech’s *Bathsheba* etching of 1615 (fig. 242). Rembrandt certainly studied both etchings carefully. When rotated ninety degrees, the postures of the Susannas by Rembrandt and Van den Valckert are remarkably close; both repeat elements of the *Crouching Venus*, as does the Buytewech etching. Although a natural softness pervades the body of Van den Valckert’s Susanna, she still has the wide shoulders and smaller head of the more classical type. The large head and the shape of the legs of Buytewech’s *Bathsheba* do remind us of Rembrandt’s Susanna. However, the torso of Buytewech’s figure, seated in a pose directly based on an etching after a *Bathsheba* invention by Raphael (fig. 243), has a muscular, almost virile quality that Rembrandt’s Susanna lacks entirely. Also, Lastman’s Susanna looks idealized, hard, and statuesque in comparison (fig. 66).

Rembrandt seems to have done everything possible to emphasize the softness of Susanna’s flesh. The undulating shadow on the back of Rembrandt’s Susanna, which recalls Rubens’s treatment of such motifs, emphasizes the slightly flabby curves formed by a layer of fat under the skin. Fine creases of the skin suggested by the relief of the brushstrokes, most prominent around the waist and stomach and more subtly along her side, give the impression of a somewhat flaccid, almost palpably lifelike – and entirely feminine – fleshiness. This is enhanced by the extremely subtle modulation of the light caressing her body, created by differentiating the thickness of the paint layer and permitting the underpainting to shine through. The lifelikeness and lack of conventional stylization



75

Rembrandt, *Susanna and the Elders*, c. 1635, pen and bistre
249 x 177 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett

bring Susanna disquietingly close to the viewer, which made the painting problematic for later critics like Sir Joshua Reynolds, even when they recognized one of Rembrandt's main goals. 'It appears very extraordinary that Rembrandt should have taken so much pains, and have made at last so very ugly and ill-favoured a figure; but his attention was principally directed to the colouring and effect, in which it must be acknowledged he has attained the highest degree of excellence', Reynolds wrote.²⁶ Despite such views, not all eighteenth- and nineteenth-century viewers thought of her as unattractive.

De Burtin (1808), writing a handbook for collectors, described the painting very perceptively as: '... ce piquant tableau qui, quoique très empâté et peint à la brosse, n'en est pas moins d'une touché assez soignée et caressée. Le corps de la baigneuse avec ses habits forment une opposition heureuse avec le reste de cette composition.'²⁷

Most striking – and completely new in the depiction of *Susanna and the Elders* – is that Rembrandt's painting focuses attention completely on Susanna. This would have been even more apparent in its original state. During a recent restoration, it was proved beyond doubt that the painting was conceived with an arched top and that at some later date, probably in the first half of the eighteenth century, a strip was added at the right and the upper corners were filled in.²⁸ The arched top would have focused the viewer's gaze even more on Susanna's strained, arched body, while the right edge, running originally just along the white chemise, left less space behind her, which must have given a stronger suggestion of Susanna being enclosed (fig. 80).²⁹

Probably the most important factor contributing to the strong emotional effect Rembrandt wanted to achieve is his divergence from the moment typically represented: he depicts the moment Susanna starts in fear but before she knows its source. This exact, pre-climactic moment had never been depicted before. It epitomizes the essence of suspense. In this work – even more forcefully than in his *Andromeda* – Rembrandt concentrated on the crystallized moment of anxiety and impending danger as expressed in a single figure. The Elders still hide in the bushes and, in fact, the viewer has difficulty finding them. One's first impression is that Susanna is completely alone. Only by close scrutiny does one detect the profile of the face of one of the Elders in the darkness at the extreme right (before a strip was added at the right it was probably even less conspicuous), while the second Elder's plumed, turban-like headdress is hardly visible in the foliage behind her back.³⁰ The positions of their near-



76

Marcantonio Raimondi, *Crouching Venus* (after Hellenistic sculpture, the so-called *Venus Doidalsas*), engraving 22.3 x 14.5 cm

ly invisible heads matches, in fact, that of the Elders' heads in Lastman's painting, but their bodies are now completely hidden.

What the viewer witnesses is a Susanna who suddenly understands that she is being watched. She seems to be startled by something she hears, a rustling sound, for instance, or a twig snapping. She does not see the men hiding in the shrubbery behind her. With her large dark eyes,

Susanna addresses the viewer with a startled, yet intense look. It is the viewer she confronts as the intruder who frightened her into hiding her naked body.³¹ She starts in fear and begins to rise from a sitting position. Her weight is already on her feet, which emphasizes the sudden agitation of her reaction and gives a suggestion of wavering imbalance that recalls the Philistine soldier in Rembrandt's earlier *Samson and Delilah* (fig. 234). In the process she steps on her slipper. Thus Rembrandt stressed the abrupt clumsiness of her spontaneous movement, but at the same time brilliantly used this movement, with which she flattens her slipper's instep (which is often exposed in the foreground of genre paintings illustrating depraved women) to refer metaphorically to her chastity.³² The clever combination of an entirely natural reaction used as a metaphorical motif recalls the urinating Ganymede as an image of the zodiacal sign of Aquarius (*Waterman* in Dutch) which Rembrandt had devised two years before (fig. 40).³³

To an even greater extent than in the painting of *Andromeda*, the brightly lit body of Susanna is completely isolated against the dark, menacing background. However, we should realize that as a result of the discoloration of blue smalt in the sky and fading of yellow lake in the leaves of the shrubbery, the colors in those areas were originally more vibrant.³⁴ They were, however, quite dark, so that the general atmosphere of darkness would not have been much different.³⁵ The sense of Susanna's isolation is enhanced by the stark contrast between the thick and very careful application of paint in her body, modeled with great vitality, and the highly sketchy treatment of the background. Although the general layout of the background is quite similar to Lastman's, Rembrandt compressed the space. The solid vertical of the architecture in the background serves as a foil for the strained and twisting movement of Susanna's torso. Rembrandt aligned Susanna's face with the crossing point of two sloping lines (the contours of the foliage and the hill in the background) and a strong vertical line (the architec-

ture of the palace). Our attention is thus focused on Susanna's facial expression and her intense, striking dark eyes that look out at us. She seems to react forcefully to the gaze of the viewer. Unlike Rubens's Susanna, her reaction is not ambiguous; the viewer is recognized as the intruder and primary offender. Susanna is trapped by the beholder's gaze, which becomes explicitly the 'illicit' gaze of the voyeur. This makes the image more intensely erotic. In this charged moment, the engaged viewer experiences, as it were, the rush of being caught in an illicit act by the source of his sensual enjoyment. Thus, the moral implications are heightened, but at the same time the tension created by this erotically charged moment comes more powerfully than ever to the fore.

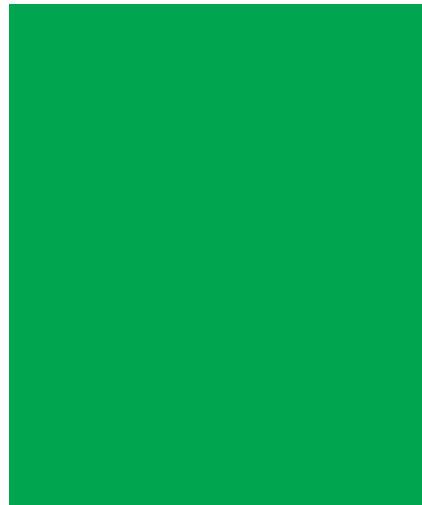
The vulnerability and complete helplessness of the undressed young woman is emphasized in every possible way. Rembrandt, the painter of *affectuum vivacitas* and *vivida inventio*, to repeat the words of Huygens, or of the *natuereelste beweegelijkheid* to use his own words (see chapter III), managed in *optima forma* to fulfill the 'rhetorical' requirements to involve the viewer by a convincing expression of the passions. More than ever he suggested a truly *oogenblikkige beweeging* (instantaneous [e]motion) that is *eenstemmich* (unequivocal) and he did so more subtly than in his *Andromeda*. We are again reminded of Cicero's rhetorical advice that distress of an innocent and defenseless victim, in particular, will move the audience more deeply than any other human suffering. Susanna's captivating eyes recall the description of a Susanna in a poem by Karel van Mander: 'Brown eyes clear like stars which set two hearts ablaze with the fire of unchastity.'³⁶ In these lines we find the then-current thought – with which Rembrandt would also have been familiar – that the eyes of a woman could send out powerful rays, inflaming the heart of the recipient (see chapter v).³⁷ That beauty simultaneously incites love and lust by entering the body through the sense of sight, the highest but also the most dangerous of the senses, was considered self-evident (chapter v). The no-



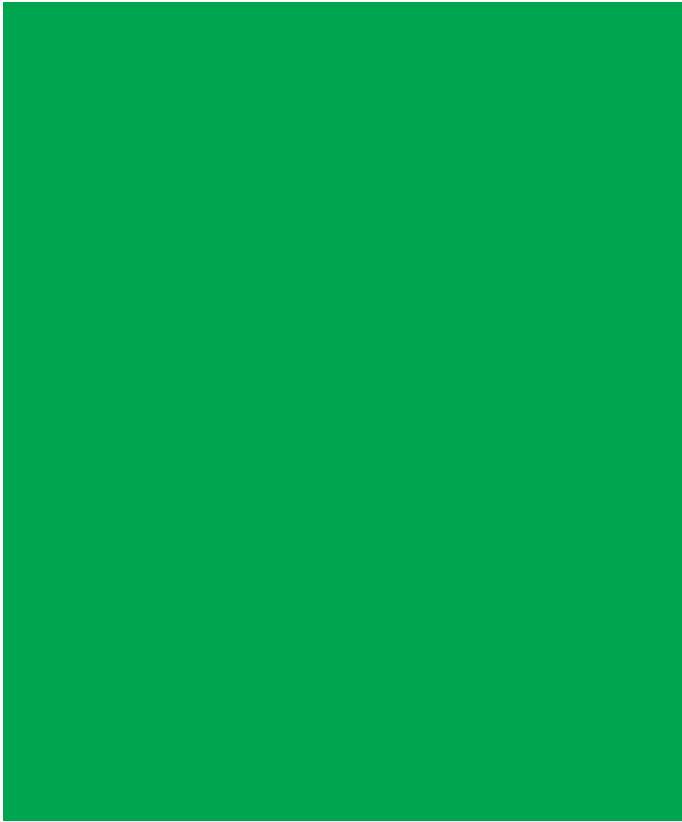
77
Albrecht Altdorfer,
Crouching Venus, engraving
6.1 x 4.1 cm



78
Hendrick Goltzius, *Venus*
("Venus pudica" type), 1591,
red chalk 36 x 15 cm.
Haarlem, Teylers Museum



79
Willem de Poorter after Rembrandt,
Susanna, 1636, pen and wash over
black chalk 22.7 x 19.2 cm. Berlin,
Staatliche Museen, Kupferstich-
kabinett



80 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Rembrandt, *Susanna*, Mauritshuis, computer reconstruction
showing the painting in its proposed original format

tion that a painting of a beautiful woman had these powers, as well, was not only pictorially expressed by Werner van den Valckert in his spirited painting of *Venus and Cupid* (fig. 103), we also find it in numerous texts since antiquity, among them Joost van den Vondel's poem on a painting of *Susanna*.³⁸

The rhetoric in Vondel's poem corresponds in a remarkable way to the 'rhetoric' in Rembrandt's painting. We do not know to which painting Vondel referred – he calls the poem simply 'On an Italian Painting of Susanna' – but it must have been a painting in which Susanna makes a *pudica* gesture, turns her back towards the viewer to hide her breasts, has striking eyes and has not yet discovered the Elders who hide in the bushes behind her.

Remarkably, the elements he mentions seem to match Rembrandt's *Susanna* better than any other painting of Susanna I know, be it Netherlandish, Flemish, or Italian.³⁹ It is, however, of greater importance that, while using in an agile way many topoi from the tradition of laudatory ekphrastic poems, Vondel's verses give us insight into certain values and critical categories with which such paintings were viewed and appraised by informed viewers, showing us what such educated viewers expected and wanted to see.⁴⁰ It seems to me that in a pre-eminent way Rembrandt was trying to elicit precisely the kind of engaged response we find verbalized by Vondel in a contrived, but brilliant manner.⁴¹

When praising the stimulating effect that the highly lifelike depiction of Susanna has on the viewer, Vondel assumes the position of the Elders who experience the erotic effect of observing Susanna. Like Rembrandt, Vondel concentrates solely on the image of Susanna in his description. When in the first part of the poem he describes the scene, he makes no mention of the Elders, who were undoubtedly portrayed in the painting he took as the starting point for his poem. Vondel draws attention to the fact that Susanna attempts to hide her nakedness with drapery; this shows her chasteness, because no person, except her husband, should be allowed to see her nude body.⁴² Then he gives an enraptured description of her body, drawing attention to her mouth ('happy is the mouth which is allowed to kiss this mouth'),⁴³ to the blush on her cheeks and, especially, to her alert eyes, which, like glowing coals, set afire whoever sees her.⁴⁴ He also describes her expression of anxiety and shame and mentions her back, shoulders, neck, and arms, painted as if living alabaster, all of which make the figure of Susanna irresistible. In a combination of traditional praise of the painting and playful identification with the Elders, he underlines that no viewer will be able to withstand the arousing power of this image of Susanna. Even the chaste St. Paul and Joseph would not have been able to resist this beauty, he asserts. This remark, as Porteman argued,

might be interpreted as a witty reference to Jacob Cats's convulsively moralizing *Self-Stryt*, a long didactic poem about Joseph, the male counterpart of the chaste Susanna, resisting the seduction by Potifar's wife.⁴⁵

Vondel then asks rhetorically whether lifeless paint is capable of kindling such love and desire in us. He answers, naturally, in the affirmative.⁴⁶ The sight of such a virtuous and chaste woman would even entice us to trespass the laws by which the Elders were severely punished.⁴⁷ The viewer is the victim of Susanna's beauty, he maintains, and it is the painter who is to blame for the damage caused to the soul, because his brush was fired by the sunny rays flowing from the eyes which, in real life, aroused his love.⁴⁸ This 'accusation' is clearly meant as a playful compliment on the painter's ability to render such lifelikeness. In the same lines we encounter the popular topos that the painter's extraordinary achievement in having painted a beautiful woman was also fueled by the fact that he was incited by love for his (nude) model, as Apelles was when he portrayed Campaspe (see chapter XI).⁴⁹

Jan Vos also wrote a poem on a painting of Susanna, although not the same painting as Vondel, it seems, since Vos's tearful Susanna is clearly panicking, being trapped by the Elders.⁵⁰ Vos used many of the same motifs as Vondel, but, as was to be expected from this adherent of the expression of violent passions, he emphasized both the danger which threatens Susanna and the hot lust of her assailants, thereby underlining her expression of fear, innocent suffering, and chaste despair that excites one to want to rescue her.⁵¹ The motifs and aspects to which Vondel and Vos responded and upon which they elaborated may be seen in a great number of *Susanna* depictions, and both poets innovate cleverly on topoi one expected the poet to use in such a case, such as the lifelikeness and beauty of the woman, the expression of certain passions and the arousing effect on the viewer. These, however, were also the aspects to which the painter catered and which the informed viewer expected

to see in such a painting. The 'virtual reality' to which the poets responded was not just a cliché stemming from the ekphrasis tradition, but a fundamental way of looking at paintings. Numerous texts make clear that one was supposed to imagine that one were looking at the real thing, which makes the involvement of the viewer all the stronger (see chapter v). Rembrandt drastically heightened the emotional impact and the tension between morality and eroticism inherent in precisely the conventional motifs to which Vondel, in particular, and, to a lesser extent, also Vos, drew attention. Thus, Rembrandt engaged the spectator in an unprecedented way.

Rembrandt's Susanna of 1647

In order not to complicate the discussion of the Mauritshuis *Susanna*, which was undoubtedly painted in 1636,⁵² I have thus far left out of the discussion the beautiful *Susanna* in Berlin (fig. 81), although its first stage might have originated in close proximity to the Mauritshuis painting. This may sound strange, since the painting is dated 1647. However, it appears from x-rays (fig. 82), as well as from drawings by pupils and by Rembrandt himself, that the genesis of the painting has a long history.⁵³ Rembrandt seems to have started on the painting somewhere between 1635 and 1638, to have changed the composition a few years later, and to have transformed it, again, in 1647 into the present painting. Nonetheless, the composition still looks more like a Rembrandt of the thirties than one of the late forties. It is mainly the handling of the paint surface and of color, light and shade that turned the painting into something entirely different.

The first stage of the painting has lately been dated around 1638 on the basis of the specific technique – gall-nut ink on paper prepared with a yellowish coating, which Rembrandt appears to have used only around 1638 – of a drawing by Rembrandt that records the left Elder as he must originally have appeared (fig. 83).⁵⁴ This would mean that the Berlin *Susanna* came into being af-



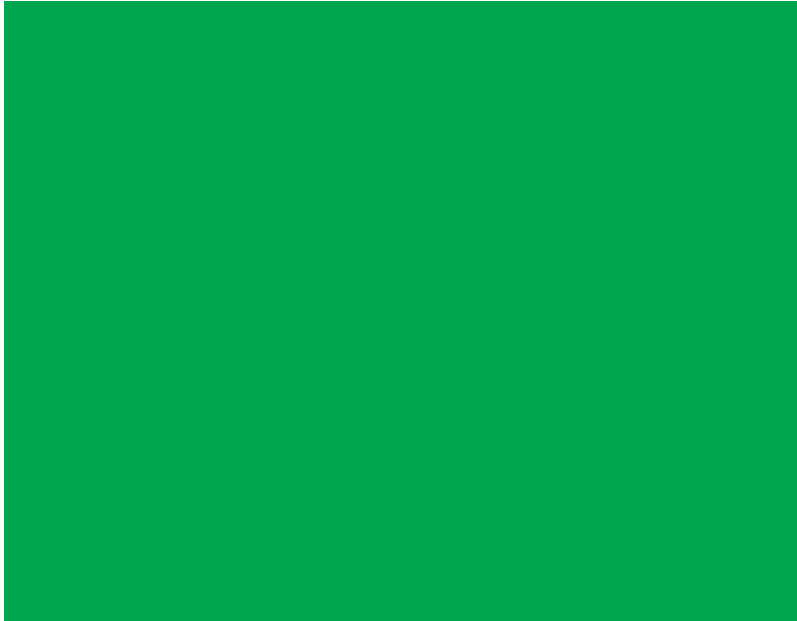
81 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Rembrandt, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1647,
panel 76.6 x 92.8 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen,
Gemäldegalerie

ter the Mauritshuis painting. However, to me it seems much more likely that this was Rembrandt's first painting of *Susanna and the Elders*. Unsatisfied, he left it as it was but retained it in his studio. He then produced a brilliantly new and much more innovative response to the painted *Susannas* by Lastman and Rubens on a much smaller panel: the little painting in the Mauritshuis. Around 1638 he started thinking again about the other painting, making the drawing in Melbourne (it often appears that the few drawings by Rembrandt that are directly connected to a painting originated during a process of altering that painting), changing a few things in the first version of the painting and leaving it again for many years, only to return to it in a final reworking of 1647. A *Susanna* was acquired in 1647 by the merchant Adriaen Banck for the substantial price of 500 guilders.⁵⁵ One wonders if this man, having seen the painting in Rembrandt's studio, wanted to have it, after which Rembrandt decided to update the work, or if Rembrandt for

some reason quickly needed a saleable painting of a rather large size during a period in which his production of paintings was at a low point.

It seems possible even that the first stage was started by a pupil as an exercise to elaborate upon Lastman's composition with the help of Rembrandt's drawing after his master's painting (fig. 74). The drawing by a pupil in Budapest (fig. 84), attributed to Barent Fabritius,⁵⁶ seems to be a fairly precise copy of the second stage of the painting.⁵⁷ This stage differed from the first, as can be gathered from the x-rays, primarily in that the large tower in the left background was added. Originally there was a light blue sky, which was subsequently toned down by the insertion of this grey architectural structure. At this point the rest of the sky might also have been overpainted with a greyish color to concentrate the eyes of the viewer more effectively on the light body of Susanna. In accordance with this change are the alterations at the far right: the pile of light-colored textiles,⁵⁸ which must have resembled those in Lastman's *Bathsheba* (fig. 66), was turned into a red cloak which would, in this second stage, have looked like the detailed execution of the same glimmering passage in Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* of 1643 (fig. 346). The present glowing red surface of this garment was painted in the last stage.

From the x-rays it also appears that, as in the drawing in Melbourne, the obscene gesture of one of the Elders was placed in a higher position relative to the face in the first stage (above the nose), while this man's headgear was also decidedly different. This is about all that can be said with some certainty about the changes that occurred in the second stage. We may conclude that the general layout of the composition and the scale of the figures in comparison to their surroundings – the figure of the Berlin *Susanna* is only a little larger than her sister in the Mauritshuis – is much closer to Lastman's painting than Rembrandt's *Susanna* of 1636. Also, the frontal posture of the Elder wearing a turban, leaning to the right, a cloak thrown over his shoulder, directly recalls Last-



82
Rembrandt, *Susanna and the Elders*, x-ray of the painting in
Berlin



83
Rembrandt, *Study for one of the
Elders*, c. 1638, pen and gall nut
ink 17.3 x 13.5 cm. Melbourne,
National Gallery of Victoria

man's *Susanna and the Elders*. However, in comparison to Lastman's composition and Rembrandt's drawn copy after this work (figs. 66, 74), Rembrandt heightened the agitated movement of Susanna by having her step forward, away from her assailants, which makes her frightened reaction to the Elder who is now grabbing her body more convincing. It even seems possible that, in the first version, Susanna was still sitting and that originally the position of her legs was more similar to that in the painting by Lastman.⁵⁹ If this was indeed the case, the Susanna figure of the first stage would have been very close to Rembrandt's drawn copy after Lastman (it might also have shown the right hand pressing the cloth to her crotch), but with the difference that the upper torso bends forward in a stronger reaction of fear, while the left arm and hand move up – motifs through which a stronger reference to the *Crouching Venus* type was created (figs. 76, 77). This hand, with its splayed fingers, repeats the startled gesture of Susanna's right hand in Lastman's painting.

As far as can be discerned from the Budapest drawing – which, as has been noted, appears to be a quite exact copy in pen and brown ink of the second stage (fig. 84)⁶⁰ – it seems that in this stage Susanna's eyes were not focused on the viewer but turned towards her assailants. Thus, the composition represented exactly the same moment we see in the Rubens invention engraved by Paulus Pontius (fig. 68). Susanna's movement in Rembrandt's composition is, however, less violent, and the (probably altered) position of the legs, suggesting a stepping down from the terrace, is quite similar to that of the figure of Adam in the etching of *Adam and Eve* of c. 1638 (fig. 263).⁵⁷ This comparison, however, makes all the more clear how awkward the proportions of Susanna are: her legs are curiously short (most notably her thighs, especially the thigh of her right leg), possibly as a consequence of leaving certain parts unchanged while altering others. The construction of the anatomy as a whole has become peculiar too. How the right leg could ever join

with the torso is totally unclear, while the left leg is strangely twisted; the thigh is parallel to the picture plane, while the lower leg is turned inward (and her foot outward) in an impossible stance. All these inconsistencies have been solved in the related pose of Adam, but Rembrandt did not take the trouble to do the same in his painting of Susanna. Only a few years after finishing the Berlin *Susanna*, he would, in a different way, correct the posture in a drawing of *Susanna and the Elders* (fig. 85) which, according to Schatborn, should be dated as late as the early 1650s.⁵⁸ In this drawing we may also notice that the hand pressing some drapery against her crotch, which is oddly missing in the Berlin painting (but which was present in the earlier stage, as the Budapest-drawing shows), has returned.

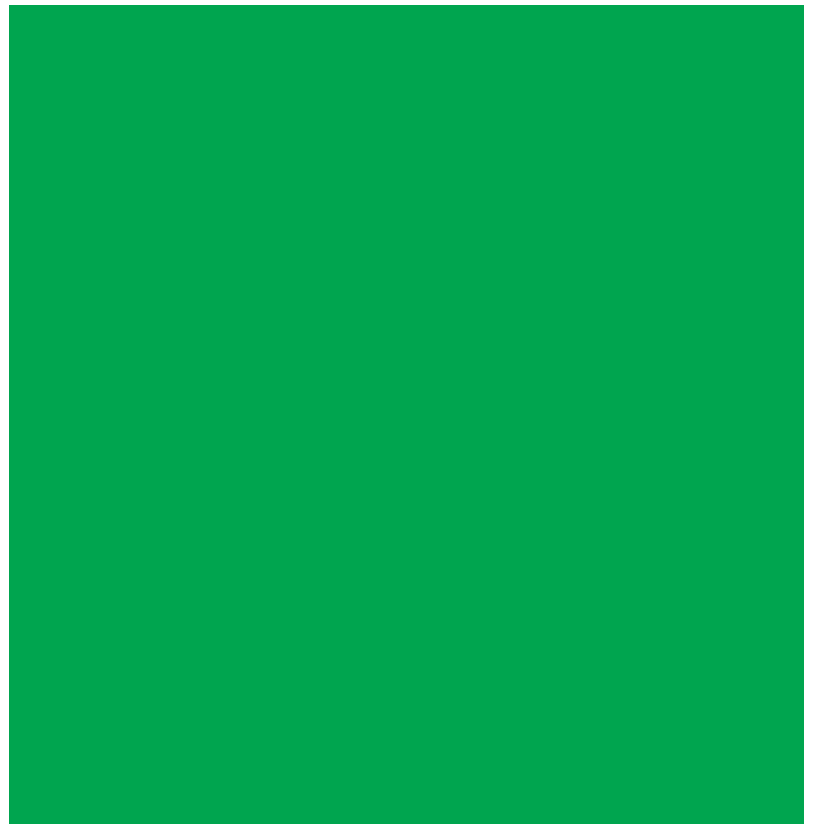
Why Rembrandt made, sometime in the late thirties, the changes which resulted in the second stage we will never know. It seems likely to me that there was originally a pupil at work, practicing creative imitation (see chapter IX) and combining the basic composition of Lastman with elements of both the Carracci print (for instance, the motif of the fence and the descending line formed by the three heads, from the right Elder to Susanna, which gives a strong feeling of threatening assault; fig. 62) and Rubens's composition engraved by Pontius (fig. 68). We also recognize in the lewd gestures of the nearest Elder, who makes an obscene gesture with one hand and paws at Susanna's body with the other, Lievens's rather coarse depiction of this theme (fig. 72). Several drawings from Rembrandt's studio attest that *Susanna and the Elders* was a popular subject for practice. Most of them vary on motifs we encounter in the Berlin *Susanna*, in particular.⁵⁹ One wonders if Rembrandt assigned exercises in devising such variations to his pupils.

Rembrandt made only minor changes in the composition when, much later, he resumed work on the painting, which must have been standing for about nine years in his studio.⁶⁰ He did, however, completely overpaint the surface. In the process he removed details (such as the



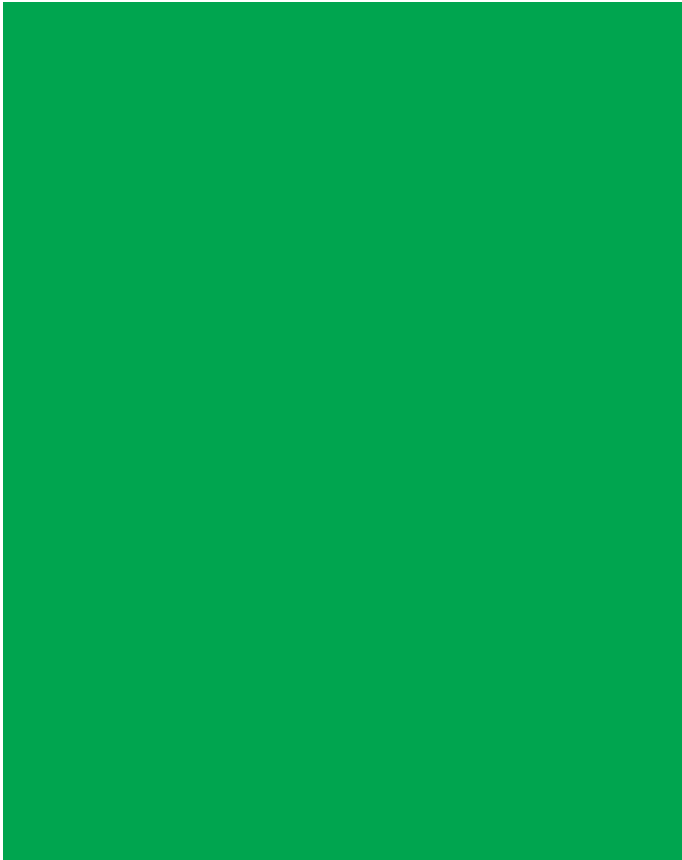
84

Pupil of Rembrandt (Barent Fabritius?), *Susanna and the Elders*, c. 1640-45, pen and brown ink, brown and grey washes, red chalk 17.8 x 23.8 cm. Budapest, Szépművészeti Museum



85

Rembrandt, *Susanna and the Elders*, c. 1650-53, pen and bistre, 19.8 x 18.8 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet



86

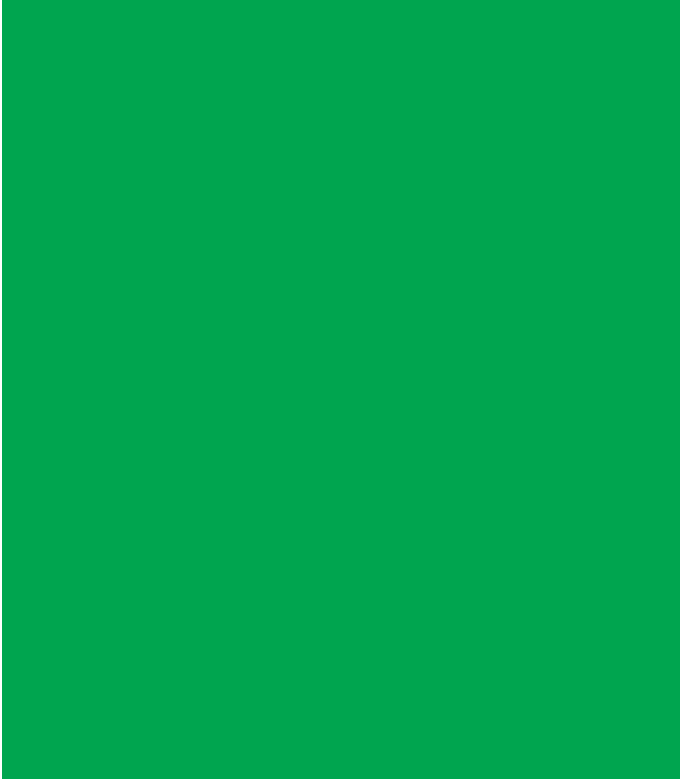
Rembrandt, *Seated Female Nude*, c. 1647, black chalk
20.3 x 16.4 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett

swan with its young in the lake which flee with an alarmed beating of wings; see figs. 82, 84) and generally toned down the chromatic effects, which were originally brighter and some of which, such as the sky and the pile of textiles, had already been reduced in brightness during the previous modifications. According to the findings of the Rembrandt Research Project, as recorded by Jan Kelch, the water was worked over in brown and black, not only to erase the swan and its young, but also to darken the setting as a whole.⁶¹ Red shimmers through the cloak of the leftmost Elder as the predominant color, while on his chest some blue can be seen, as well as a spot of light turquoise. His costume was probably of a

brighter material and painted with much more detail (compare, for instance, the costume of the old woman in the *Bathsheba* dated 1643, which seems in many ways to be related to the first and second stage of this *Susanna*).

When, in the forties, Rembrandt repainted his *Danaë* (see chapter VIII), he retained from the first stage of 1637 the rich and detailed surroundings of the figure, a process that he may have repeated with the little *Bathsheba* just mentioned (see chapter XI). In the Berlin *Susanna*, however, he seems to have decided to cover the whole paint layer of the earlier stage, perhaps because it was mostly a pupil's work and did not meet his standards. Not only the background, but also the figures of the Elders were overpainted with rather broad, loose strokes, their costumes generally colored a dark reddish-brown. Susanna's body, softly modulated in creamy tones, now became the radiant centre of the painting, dazzling against the ominously dark background. The same occurred with the cloak and the touching slippers at the right, which were now overpainted with an intensely glowing red that beautifully offsets the color of Susanna's skin. In the earlier Mauritshuis painting, Susanna's body was made to stand out strongly against the background by way of a stark contrast between the thick, but carefully modeled surface of the torso, and the thin, highly sketchy treatment of the dark shrubbery behind her. In the final version of the Berlin *Susanna*, however, the body is set off from the background by very different means. Here, the paint layer of the body is not applied more thickly and with more relief than the background, and the brushstrokes in the torso and the legs do not follow emphatically the shapes of the different parts of the body, as they did in the Mauritshuis painting. It is not so much the application of paint and the movement of the brush, but the infinitely subtle modulations of the light falling on Susanna's skin that make her body stand out.

Two significant changes were made in the figures. Not content with Susanna's torso, Rembrandt likely posed a model in this posture, leaning forward with an arched



87

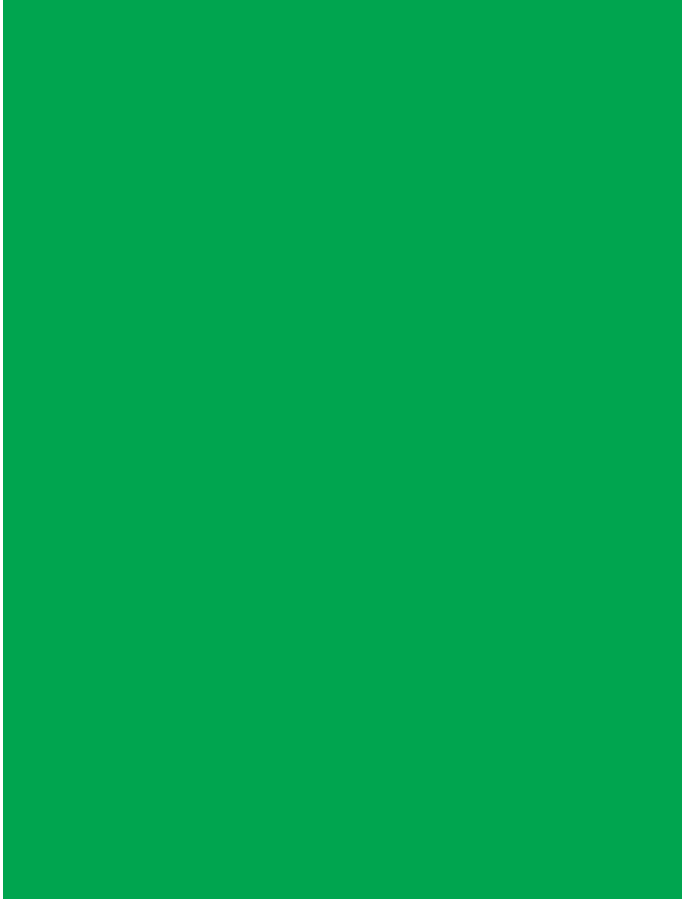
Salomon de Bray, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1648,
panel 59 x 53 cm. Moscow, Pushkin Museum

back (fig. 86). The beautiful shape of the spine and the lowered shoulder, the contour of one breast just showing, and the elbow pressed against the body were the result. Considering the length of the (covered) upper legs of the figure in the drawing, Rembrandt would have realized that in the painting the thighs of Susanna were too short. However, as we noticed already, he left them as they were. Had he lengthened Susanna's legs, he would have run into serious problems with her position in space and the placement of the Elder behind her would have required modification too. As we will see later with his so-called *Pygmalion* etching, it was not the only time that Rembrandt had difficulties with the length of the legs of a nude figure.

Rembrandt did also alter the too-crude gesture of the

Elder grabbing Susanna's body and transformed it into the more subdued gesture of grasping the drapery which still surrounds her body. Rather than terror, Susanna's face expresses helplessness and vulnerability, the focus of her dark large eyes being quite ambivalent. One may interpret her somewhat squinting eyes as turned toward the Elders, but one can also see them as turned towards the viewer. It is as if she does not really see anything; tears seem to be welling up and clouding her sight. This time Rembrandt did not emphasize an *oogenblikkige beweging* and he certainly did not render a movement and emotion that is *eenstemmig* (unequivocal). The development of several emotions are visualized. The movement shows her desperate reaction of attempted flight from the assailants, while the facial expression seems to show helpless resignation. The viewer sees that she is trapped in a hopeless situation and assumes that Susanna realizes this. Her unfocused gaze forces him to contemplate what is going on in her mind. While one of the Elders is making his lecherous proposal, she is coming to a gruesome decision: she chooses condemnation by her community and a death sentence rather than the loss of her chastity.

In contrast with Rembrandt's earlier paintings, in this portrayal of Susanna the process of *staetveranderinge* (or peripeteia, in which a reversal of emotions is connected with the protagonist's recognition and understanding of the tragic situation that he or she is in), does seem to be implied.⁶² As was pointed out in chapter III, several authors, notably Albert Blankert, have argued that, in his history paintings of the 1630s, Rembrandt applied the notion of *staetveranderinge* as discussed by Vondel in his (later) theory of tragedy. However, in my opinion this is certainly not the case; it is only in later works, like this *Susanna*, that we notice a change that seems to have affinity with this concept as Vondel began to employ it in the course of the 1640s. Applying the Aristotelian theory of drama, Vondel no longer aimed in this period at involving the viewer through an alternation of strong, quickly changing emotions. Unlike Vos, who continued



88

Govert Flinck, *Susanna and the Elders*, c. 1640, panel 47 x 35 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie



89

Georg Peckham, *Susanna and the Elders*, etching 13.2 x 19.5 cm

to adhere to a Senecan-Scaligerian approach, Vondel now strove for a continuous development of the individual protagonist's inner passions throughout the plot, to culminate in a change of state (peripeteia) that leads to the character's full awareness of the situation (*agnitio*). This elicits an empathetic response from the reader or theater-goer, who shares the protagonist's dawning realization of the implications of his or her position, preferably inciting commiseration in the viewer that leads to the final catharsis.⁶³

This is not to say that the ideas Vondel was developing precisely around this time in his tragedies were the source of Rembrandt's own thinking about the same problems. I would, however, suggest that in this same period, more or less parallel to the changes Vondel was going through as a playwright, Rembrandt felt the need to change his ideas about the expression of (e)motion from a representation of the passions in which the suddenly changing and thrilling *eenstemmige* and *oogenblikkige beweeging* had been crucial to a more subtle representation of the affects. More and more he began trying to represent what is most difficult to visualize: the development of conflicting, inner emotions in a person. This can only be done by compelling the informed viewer to think about the emotions with which the depicted protagonist is coping. This approach would culminate in Rembrandt's *Bathsheba Contemplating King David's Letter* of 1654 (fig. 356).

Some other Amsterdam Susannas of c. 1640-1660

As of the 1640s, many Dutch artists, especially artists working in Amsterdam, would portray *Susanna and the Elders*. In almost all of them one sees reflections of one or more of the prints after Rubens, and sometimes also of the composition by Lastman. A nice example of the latter is a painting by the Haarlem-based artist Salomon de Bray, dated 1648, who also must have had the ambition to

emulate Lastman's composition (fig. 87). Several details betray his knowledge of this painting. It demonstrates how a contemporary painter for whom clear outlines, a smooth surface, and more classical proportions of the body must have been fundamental could come to an entirely different solution than Rembrandt.

None of the many painters who depicted this subject chose the moment Rembrandt portrayed in the little Mauritshuis panel – the moment just before Susanna realizes what is happening. Only one quite disarming work attributed to the young Govaert Flinck shows an even earlier point in time – that is, a Susanna who is still quietly bathing (fig. 88).⁶⁴ In its composition the painting has little affinity with Rembrandt's work in the Mauritshuis, except that the faces of the Elders are almost invisibly placed at the right edge of the picture. However, though it does not show the highly controlled brushstrokes with which Rembrandt painted Susanna's torso, the rather thickly applied brushstrokes that model the starkly lit body against a thinly painted, dark background immediately remind the viewer of Rembrandt's painting. Flinck must have aspired to attain a completely different (and less difficult) effect by choosing a moment in which he did not have to show movement and emotions in the figure of Susanna. He turned her into a voyeuristic object that may be quietly observed, a type we find quite often in sixteenth-century prints. A late sixteenth-century etching by the German Georg Pecham even shows some strikingly similar features, especially in the long hair hanging down at both sides of her face and the pose of leaning forward and holding her leg (fig. 89). It might have given the young Flinck the idea to try his hand at an entirely different approach to the subject.

Strangely enough, with only one exception, no other artist repeated the gaze that is directed towards the viewer, which is the focal point of Rembrandt's two paintings and which was inspired by Rubens. In fact, I do not know of any other seventeenth-century Flemish or Italian paintings with this motif.⁶⁵ Most Susannas turn around



90

Jan van Neck(?), *Susanna and the Elders*, canvas 123 x 167 cm
Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst.

to identify their offenders, while now and then there is one who lifts her eyes towards heaven, as in the prints of the Haarlem Mannerists. Remarkably, there is only one, somewhat later, *Susanna and the Elders* that directly reflects a work by Rembrandt, but not one of his depictions of *Susanna* (fig. 90). The artist of this painting took as his model Rembrandt's early etching, or rather his drawing, of *Diana* (fig. 241). He copied the figure of Diana literally, although he made the contours taut and the surface smooth, and turned her into a Susanna who is not yet aware of the faces of the Elders popping up at the left. This Susanna does look directly at the viewer, but her expression shows the same noncommittal stare with which Rembrandt's Diana looks out. She acknowledges the spectator passively, as if feeling no discomfort about being watched. The artist of this rather large painting – Bredius attributed it to Jan van Neck, which was followed by Sumowski⁶⁶ – was certainly a competent painter, and it seems strange that he copied Rembrandt's figure so faithfully, something a qualified artist would rarely do.



91 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Salomon Koninck, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1649,
panel 35 x 38.5 cm. Maastricht, Robert Noortman Master
Paintings

92
Agostino Carracci,
Susanna and the Elders,
c. 1590-95, engraving
15.4 x 11 cm

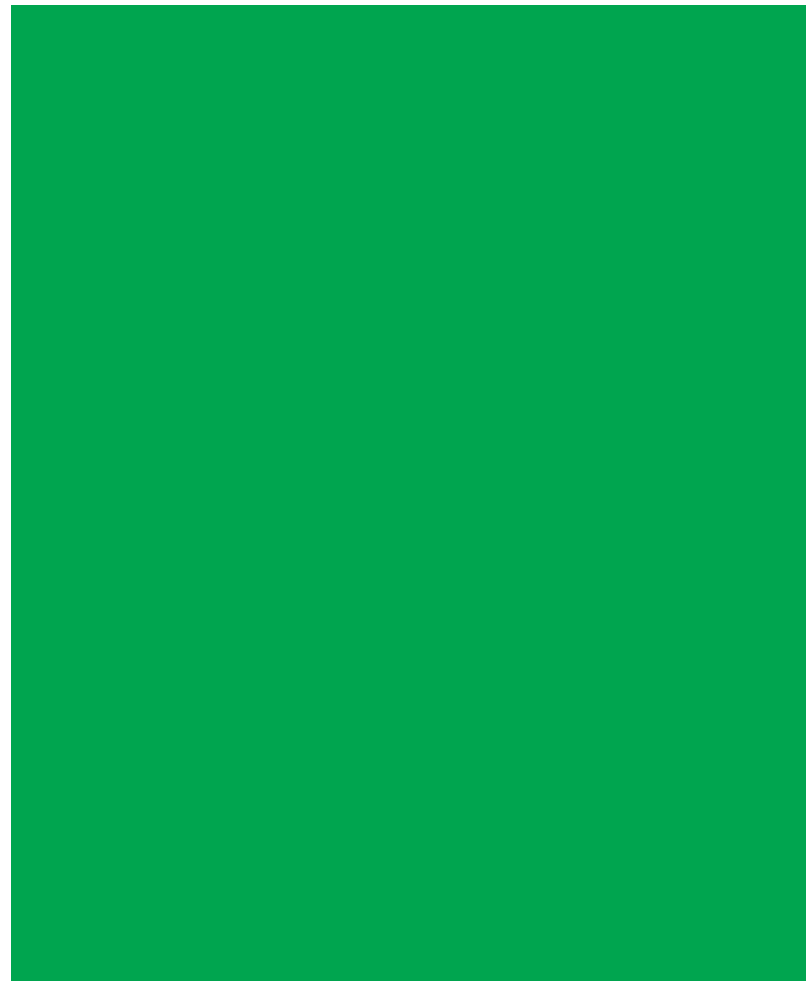


The most likely solution seems to me to be that the painting was a commission by someone who admired this figure of Rembrandt's, perhaps the owner of the drawing, and wanted a sizeable painting of this female nude.⁶⁷

A quite successful painting by an Amsterdam artist who certainly saw Rembrandt's painting of 1647 was a *Susanna and the Elders* by Salomon Koninck, dated 1649 (fig. 91). This is the best of several paintings Koninck produced of this subject. In all of them Susanna reacts rather forcefully while one of the Elders puts his forefinger to his mouth, admonishing her not to scream, which indeed she seems at the point of doing. Not only do the gesture of one of the Elders grabbing Susanna's white drapery and the peculiar headgear of the left Elder betray Koninck's knowledge of Rembrandt's painting of 1647, but also the way he presents her brightly lit body against the dark background with only the two old faces lit up shows his indebtedness to his Amsterdam colleague. However, Koninck seems to attempt a genuine emulation, inserting the strong movement of a frontally viewed Susanna warding off the Elders with her outstretched left arm, which seems to be inspired by a print after Agostino Carracci from the famous *Lascivie* series (fig. 92). This borrowing brought him a bit into trouble. In Agostino's print both the hip and the left leg swing out because Susanna is running away, but in Koninck's painting this connection between hip and leg has become quite awkward now that Susanna is bracing herself against the force with which the Elder is pulling at her garment.

The one artist who seems to have responded to Rembrandt's *Susanna* of 1636 was his Amsterdam colleague, and, especially in the field of the nude, also his competitor, Jacob van Loo (fig. 93). Like Rembrandt, Van Loo shows thorough knowledge of many sources, in particular the etching of Annibale Carracci (fig. 62), which is clear from the fountain at the right, the profile of Susanna and the motif of the Elders leaning over a parapet, one of them pointing towards the palace. One also recognizes elements of the composition of Goltzius, engraved

by Jan Saenredam, in the placement of the heads of the Elders (fig. 57). Nonetheless, Van Loo seems to be in dialogue with Rembrandt in particular (fig. 73). The suggestion of strained movement and imbalance – of suddenly cringing and simultaneously being at the point of rising from a seated position – recalls especially Rembrandt’s painting of 1636, as does the gesture with which she presses the cloth in her lap. However, Van Loo is careful to give her body precise and taut outlines, and he sees to it that the smoothly painted skin and the glossy paint surface create an entirely different effect than Rembrandt’s *Susanna*. Like Rembrandt, Van Loo was aware of the *Crouching Venus*, but, in great contrast to Rembrandt, his figure of Susanna, with her smaller head, broader shoulders, lower waist, less pronounced hips, and heavier legs, conforms much more to the classical type of the ancient example. The pronounced rolls of her torso – the only ‘accidents of the flesh’ Van Loo tolerated, are allowed because they were clearly present in the antique model, as well. As far as we can judge from the Susannas that are still extant, Van Loo was the only contemporary Amsterdam artist who was able to offer worthy competition that simultaneously demonstrated a true alternative to Rembrandt’s manner.



93 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Jacob van Loo, *Susanna and the Elders*, c. 1640-50,
canvas 76.2 x 63.5 cm. Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum



Intermezzo

Images of the Nude: Moral Disapproval and Erotic Impact

Vondel's poem on a painting of *Susanna* introduced the theme of the viewer's erotic arousal as caused by the image of a female nude. Vondel took the position of the spying Elders and asked rhetorically if lifeless paint is capable of kindling love and desire in the viewer. His answer was definitely in the affirmative. Even the male paragons of chastity, St. Paul and Joseph, would have been aroused when seeing this beautiful nude woman, he maintained jokingly, and it is the painter who is the one to 'blame' for this. Thus, this 'accusation' was a clever way to praise the painter by using two often-recurring topoi: the things depicted are so lifelike that they seem real, and lust is aroused by the act of seeing a (seemingly living) nude woman. Vondel's poem was certainly meant humorously, but how should we value Vondel's emphasis on 'like real' and on the arousal of lust? For some people in the seventeenth century a painting of the nude *Susanna* was ab-

solutely unacceptable for precisely these reasons. This is most forcefully expressed in a poem by the religiously strict Dirck Raphaelsz. Camphuyzen, who took this 'virtual reality' very seriously and considered such paintings as truly dangerous: 'One has a nude woman bathing amidst lovers / As cancer of good morals and venom for the eyes, / And that is supposed to be *Susanna*, a chaste woman', he exclaims disgustedly.¹ In this chapter I will consider how artists and their audience may have thought about the erotic impact of such paintings and how we should interpret such notions in connection with Dutch paintings of the nude, in general, and Rembrandt's works in particular. The fact that the most popular mythological, as well as biblical subjects with nudes – *Susanna and the Elders*, *Bathsheba Seen by King David*, *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon* and *The Judgment of Paris*, three of which were painted by Rem-

brandt – were precisely about men *looking at* beautiful naked women (with fateful consequences), makes such an examination all the more urgent.

Religious outrage

Statements about the arousing power of images that were considered erotic are quite numerous in this period. These stand in a long tradition, which seems to have reached a climax in the last decades of the sixteenth and first decades of the seventeenth centuries. Familiar ideas about seduction through sight were transposed onto the art of painting and, more specifically, onto representations of female – especially nude – beauty.² Such ideas could be given greater authority by referring to anecdotes from classical antiquity about an image of a nude woman arousing lust in the viewer. Quite a few such stories existed and those were often quoted in sixteenth-century discussions about the power that images could have over the mind. The most famous was Pliny's story about Praxiteles's *Cnidian Aphrodite*, upon which statue a young man left the traces of his uncontrolled lust, a story which was repeated in the sixteenth century by, among others, Desiderius Erasmus.³ Another well-known story from classical antiquity about young men being sexually aroused by an image was that of Terence concerning a painting of *Danaë*, which will be discussed extensively in chapter VIII.⁴ Such stories were used to prove the far-reaching impact of images, often combined with references to or variations on Horace's well-known dictum: 'What the mind takes in through the ears stimulates it less actively than what is presented to it by the eyes, and what the spectator can see and believe for himself.'⁵ Following the footsteps of the writers from antiquity, Erasmus expressed his serious concerns about the intentions of painters with respect to the depiction of women in biblical scenes such as David and Bathsheba and the dancing Salome, emphasizing that, because of its more powerful effect, the danger of the image was

greater than that of the written word.⁶ Almost two centuries later, Gerard Lairesse would formulate the same connection most clearly when warning against pictures of 'improper' subjects. He states: 'Although writing can stimulate our heart and lust, the eye does so much stronger, because sight moves and affects our senses more forcefully, in particular when one has the things themselves – especially if it concerns carnal love – clearly before one's eyes. And if it is true that authors straying from the right path with shameless tales deserve defamation rather than praise, how much more would this be the case with an artful painter portraying such things?'⁷

Erasmus's criticism was repeated extensively by, among others, the counter-reformist theologian Johannes Molanus later in the sixteenth century,⁸ and it appears that reformists and counter-reformists fully agreed on this point. In 1594, the Calvinist theologian and professor in Leiden, Jeronimus Bastingius in his *Verclar- inghe op den Catchismus der Christelijcker Religie (Explanation of the Catechism of the Christian Religion)*, railed against '... the dishonest paintings of unseemly, damaging acts, in which women and men are represented naked: while nature, common decency, and God's holy word teach and affirm that this is improper and very damaging. It is true that they utter no words, but in their own way they do speak loudly, through the eyes (the windows of the heart), which thus let in all sinfulness.'⁹ In the sixteenth century we find Anna Bijns lashing out against 'The display ... of Cupid with his arrows, / Lucretia, Venus or one of her nieces stark naked, / Will easily lead to indecencies',¹⁰ as well as Dirck Volckertsz. Coornhert, who wrote: 'The mill of thoughts turns incessantly. Throw in the chaff of paintings with the nude Venus, what else will it grind but fiery unchasteness, burning desire and feverish love.' Elsewhere the same author wrote: 'Imagine a beautiful nude Venus / What will it make churn in one's mind but an unchaste fire? / Douse this spark before you go up in flames! / Swiftly extinguish this fiery image, / Abide firmly by your reason, / Such that it

turns your eyes away from lust, / Because the sight of lust breeds evil desire.’¹¹ In both of these quotations, Coornhert skillfully uses the verb *malen*, which can mean to grind, to rave (like a lunatic), and to paint.

The most extreme case in the seventeenth century is undoubtedly the aforementioned Dirck Raphaelsz. Camphuyzen, in whose poem ‘Tegen ‘t Geestig-dom der Schilderkonst’ (‘Against the Wit of the Art of Painting’), a translation of a poem in Latin by his friend Johannes Evertsz. Geesteranus, fear of the power of the eyes as well as the power of the image reached a feverish pitch.¹² Both poets abhorred images in general, but their fury is especially palpable when they come to painters who depict nudity. They refer to many popular subjects, even the *Last Judgment*, in which ‘To please the eyes with salacious diversion / You present men and women stark naked’, and the *Fall of Man*, where the adulterous eyes, seeing the nude Eve in Paradise, will send the ‘heat of lust into the deepest recesses of the heart.’ As is to be expected, the daughters of Lot, Delilah, Bathsheba, and, of course, Susanna (see the lines quoted above) are reviewed. In fact, just as wine will derange the mind, ‘Any beautiful figure, desirable to see / Makes the mind drunk and causes men to lose their senses’, these writers maintain.¹³ The depiction is for them as baneful as reality. Because the eye is deceived by the beautiful sham of painting, one wants to do and to have what one sees in a painting, they state. Such paintings openly display the depravity of the people who create and possess them.¹⁴

The vehemence of Camphuyzen and Geesteranus is unusual and springs from a specific religious milieu; nevertheless, few books were more often reprinted than Camphuyzen’s *Stichtelycke Rijmen (Pious Verses)* in which this poem was published. After Jacob Cats, Camphuyzen was the most widely read Dutch poet of the seventeenth century. Although Camphuyzen was originally trained as a painter, we find in his work the most fierce, and therefore the clearest, denunciation of the art of painting, an art he considers ‘seductress of sight, spell-

bound by all that is transient’, ‘the foolish mother of all vanities’ and ‘food of evil lust and villainous foolishness’, to cite but a few words of abuse he reserves for this art.¹⁵ The thoughts he expresses, though extreme, are manifestations of common concepts and would certainly have been familiar among the educated.

A remarkable instance of such censure, which I quoted already in the introduction, is a passage by the Haarlem pastor and city historian Samuel Ampzing in his 1628 tribute to the city of Haarlem. At the end of his extensive encomium on the artists of Haarlem, he severely condemns the representation of nudity, launching a vehement attack on those artists who consider the depiction of nude figures the highest aim of art, while in fact they are merely shaming art: ‘... why do you paint those parts of the body / Which reason and nature command us to conceal, / And feed an unchaste fire in the hearts of youths? / For you, the highest art lies in [the depiction of] nudes. / But why is your heart not more inclined toward God?’¹⁶ Many of his readers will have understood that he was cursing a large part of the oeuvre of Haarlem history painters like Hendrick Goltzius and Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, on whom he had just bestowed the highest praise in previous pages, carefully avoiding mention of any subject that included nudity.

Moralizing disapproval

Karel van Mander would certainly have been aware of such attitudes, but he never criticizes paintings with nude figures. In his chapter on color, he contends that it is because of colors that the art of painting has such a powerful impact on the senses (a concept to which we will return in chapter VII), without emphasizing negative implications. He states that scenes of young women cause countless hearts to swim ‘in a sea of lust’ and precisely this ‘makes the power of colors evident.’¹⁷ In the same breath he mentions the destructive potency of beautiful women for whom many a war has been fought



94
Hendrick Goltzius, *Lot and his Daughters*, 1616, canvas
140 x 204 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

and for whom heroes have perished (alluding primarily to Paris, Helen, and the Trojan War), thus implicitly referring to the powerful effects of depictions of just these women.

In a moralizing context, Jacob Cats added to this thought in *Houwelyck (Marriage)*, undoubtedly the most widely read book of the seventeenth century (first published in 1625), the notion that the better a painter is, the more ‘dangerous’ his paintings are. First, Cats warns against all indecorous pictures, referring to *Bathsheba Seen by David* and *Lot Seduced by His Daughters* (fig. 94), popular subjects in contemporary painting which would immediately have evoked in the minds of his readers paintings with an abundance of female nudes: ‘Thou should, nevertheless, avoid lecherous images, / Painted for the people in service of pleasure: / All that the bold brush extracts from empty heads / Has taunted many an eye and tarnished many a heart: / To paint in detail the downfall of Lot or David, / Causes – I do not know how – the lascivious senses to stray.’¹⁸ After this warning, he goes on to say, ‘Do not allow art in any way here to move you, / For evil lurks even in art: / The higher the painter strives in this case / The deeper he can

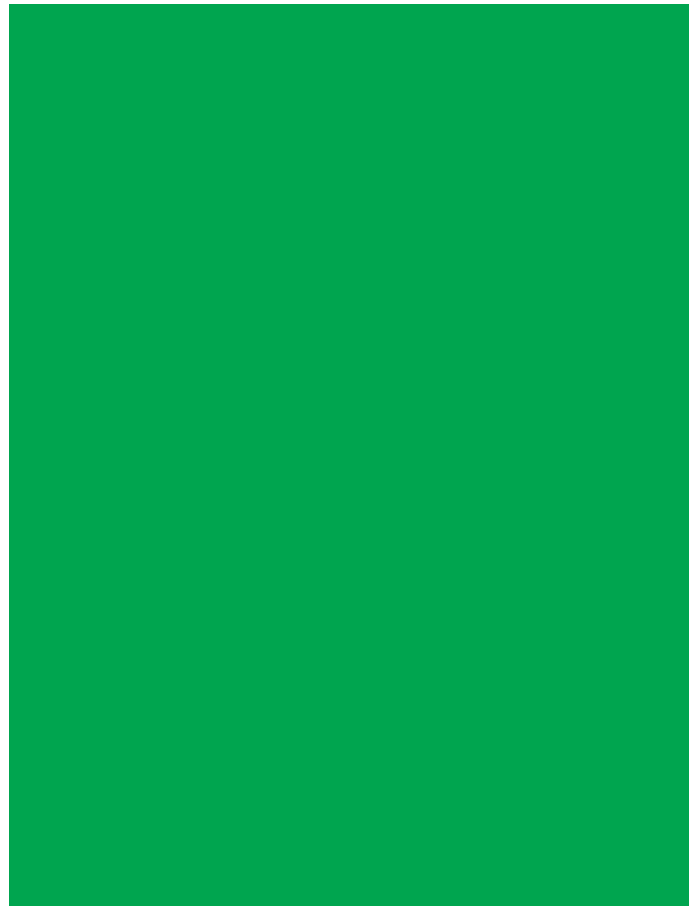
wound, and the stronger he hurts; / The closer he is able to come in his suggestion of life / The more he can arouse all passions / Until heaven knows what; precisely the best of minds / Can breed the worst evil and cause the greatest harm.’¹⁹ Thus, the notion that lifelikeness, ‘the closer the painter is able to come to life’, enhances the involvement of the viewer is clearly stated in the context of erotic pictures.

Jacob Cats was quite preoccupied with the dangers of looking at naked women and depictions of the nude. Indeed he was even ridiculed by several contemporary poets – Jaap Priaap (Jake Priapus), he was called – because some of his compulsively moralizing poems were full of an unmistakably erotic content.²⁰ When Cats warns his female readers to keep their limbs decently covered under any circumstance (he does this when he discusses breast-feeding, which should never happen in public), he impresses on them the shocking consequences: ‘... how many frivolous youngsters / Because of seeing this, were seized by an untamed fire? / It is not possible to fully express by language / To what extent lascivious sight manages to drag down the soul; / How far the fire of lust will shoot through all limbs, / When a loose youth only sees a naked bosom.’²¹ After this follow several examples of the power of sight in the arousal of lust, among which are mentioned, again, the stories that supplied some of the most popular subjects with female nudes in painting, such as *David and Bathsheba* and *Diana and Actaeon* (see chapters VI and XII). The seductiveness of female nudity, the dangers of seeing it and the risks of viewing paintings with nude women are all implicitly connected here, merely a few pages after he had railed extensively against such paintings.

It is clear that these moralists made little distinction between the effect of beholding naked women in a painting and seeing them in reality. Both were considered dangerous because of the generally accepted notion that seeing female beauty incites love and lust by entering the body through the sense of sight – the highest, but also

most hazardous of the senses. We find this expressed ad nauseam in numerous variations since antiquity.²² As Van Mander said: ‘One found the eyes to be the seat of desire’,²³ or, in the more poetic words of Hoof: ‘You [the eye] are the mouth through which we taste beauty. / Love, as well as that sweet lust, which rescues / This mortal race from extinction, gets through you, her greatest power.’²⁴ That love enters the body through the eyes and in the end incites sexual desire in the liver was even considered a physical reality,²⁵ as Johan van Beverwijk described, for instance, in 1636 in the most popular Dutch medical handbook (another bestseller of the seventeenth century), which then quotes a passage from Cats: ‘The eye, only the eye is able to derange men completely / It is an open door, the entrance of lust; / He, who without being on his guard, opens this window, / Receives more easily than he would think, a thief in his mind.’ After that, as if the connection is self-evident, he warns of the effect of ‘... amorous and frivolous painting which also easily arouse lechery’ and which one has to avoid for that reason.²⁶ However, the fact that Johan van Beverwijk, medical scholar, local historian, poet, and politician, himself possessed a *Susanna* after Rubens, makes clear that such warnings were not meant for men of education, who knew how to judge art.²⁷

Moralizing censure in texts under prints with nudes in amorous situations is exceedingly rare. Most of the time these lines, written by local humanists, simply paraphrase the classical source or hark back to the literary tradition of moralizing explanations of mythological (or biblical) stories. An exception is a handwritten poem in Dutch under an engraving representing a *Feast of the Gods* by Jacob Matham, written by someone who shows (religiously inspired) outrage from what he sees in this print (fig. 95): ‘Tell me, what use can this randy print of the gods have? / Is it to stimulate us to follow their lecherous lust? / This should be far from us. God only loves virtue. Knock this print down; / Do not follow those gods, but God, the All-highest.’²⁸ A much more light-



95

Jacob Matham, *Feast of the Gods*, engraving 22.9 x 17.5 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet

hearted admonishment we find in the two lines under a print by Jan Gerritsz. van Bronchorst after Cornelis van Poelenburch, showing a sleeping nymph or Venus, with a spying satyr in the background (fig. 96): ‘Why are you looking lecherously, Silenus, at this sleeping Venus? / This woman is not a prey for what you want’, lines which are obviously directed at the other voyeur, the viewer, as well.²⁹

A pictorial pendant to the moralizing criticism discussed above is Pieter Serwouter’s title print for Bredero’s *Aendachtigh liedt-boeck* of 1622 (fig. 97). Here the poet renounces the ‘seductress of sight.’ He has



96
Jan Gerritsz van Bronchhorst after Cornelis van Poelenburch, *The Sleeping Venus Approached by a Satyr*, etching 15.3 x 20.9 cm



97
Pieter Serwouters, *The Poet Turning Away from Painting towards Faith, Love and Hope*, engraving 12.7 x 16.8 cm.
Frontispiece of G.A. Bredero, *Aendachtig Liedt-boeck*, 1622

turned away from an easel with painter's implements and a picture of a nude woman with a skull, thus characterized as a paragon of Vanity, while at the left his startled 'models', the nude Venus and Cupid, take flight. He now kneels before a table behind which are the three Christian Virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love. The inscription reads: 'Contemplating one's vanity with grief, / And humbly lending an ear to the holy teachings of Virtue / One dismisses Venus, and treads under foot the world's splendour / And gratefully offers God the incense of conversion.'³⁰ Thus, Bredero uses familiar thoughts about paintings of the nude as representative of amorous and seductive amusements and of vanity in general in this specific context. This print has a specific function, marking the transition from his *Amouereus liedt-boeck*, to the *Aendachtigh liedt-boeck* (from the light-hearted amorous songs to the serious religious songs); it should certainly not be interpreted as Bredero's personal denunciation of the art of painting.³¹

Erotic amusement

As we have seen, expressions of this kind came from very diverse cultural milieus and make clear that paintings with nude women in erotically charged situations, biblical or mythological, were experienced as highly titillating and thereby effective. In texts this fascination with the sensual stimulation elicited by such images is especially evidenced by the many negative comments. The same concepts are also to be found, however, in several types of literary amusement: in comedy and pornography, as well as a highly sophisticated type of poetry. An example of the first is a passage in Gerbrandt Adriaensz. Bredero's comedy, *Moortje* (based on Terence's *Eunuch*), in which a rapist's lust is aroused by several paintings. He enumerates paintings such as one of 'many nude figures' representing 'a merry garden of lasciviousness' (by which he undoubtedly refers to scenes like the many paintings of *Mankind before the Flood*, *The Marriage of*

Peleus and Thetis or *The Golden Age* by Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem [fig. 98], which are in general appearance virtually interchangeable),³² *Mars and Venus* (fig. 118) and the *Rape of Lucretia* (fig. 99).³³ When devising this scene, Bredero exchanges Terence's painting of *Danaë* as the object of the rapist's attention for pictures which would have been more familiar to his audience. 'These I looked at ardently, because to behold is to remember',³⁴ the young man says, wittily applying an old maxim used in connection with representations of illustrious people or uplifting histories in public buildings.³⁵ The same motif occurs in a lengthy erotic poem in *Nova Poemata*, a decidedly pornographic booklet with emblems and poems published in 1624 and meant for the amusement of Leiden students. Here the poet visits a courtesan and sleeps with her after having become 'impassioned by fiery love', which was inflamed by admiring beautiful pictures she showed him of *Mars and Venus*, *Jupiter and Leda*, *Mercury and Herse*, and the nude *Helen*.³⁶

But much more important are the many playful, non-moralizing variations on the theme of the arousing power of pictures in later seventeenth-century poems by Joost van den Vondel and Jan Vos. The poems were triggered by paintings with subjects like *Venus*, *Danaë*, *Susanna*, or *Ephigenia* which really existed in Rembrandt's time. The poems on paintings of *Susanna* have already been discussed in chapter IV, and the one on a *Danaë* will be presented in chapter VIII.³⁷ A good example to mention at this point is a poem by Vondel lauding a painting of *Venus* by Dirck Bleker that was owned by Prince William II. The painted image of Venus 'speaks' to the prince's wife with the words: 'If my nudity with its life-like rays / Pierces His Majesty's heart, this should not pain you. / Finding no hold on paint and life's semblance / He will, inflamed by glowing heat, take vengeance upon you. / And if this agrees with you, do not despise me / But rather praise the excellence of the brush.'³⁸ As in the *Susanna* poem, Vondel turns the motif of the erotic effect of



98 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, "The Golden Age" or *The Garden of Love (with the Prodigal Son?)* 1614, canvas 157 x 193.5 cm. Budapest, Szépművészeti Museum



99
Hendrick Goltzius, *The Rape of Lucretia*, c. 1578, engraving 19.3 x 24.8 cm



100 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
 Jacob Backer, *Ephigenia Spied upon by Cimon*,
 c. 1640, canvas 150 x 230 cm.
 Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum

the painting, caused by its lifelikeness, into praise for the capacities of the painter who is able to occasion this. With remarkable familiarity (which, by later critics, would be considered preposterous), Vondel implies that the prince would be inflamed by lust. By applying simultaneously the other conventional motif – the painting is but life's semblance, only paint on canvas – he reassures the princess that she will be the one to profit. She will be the happy victim on whom the prince takes his revenge.

In a poem on a painting by Jacob Backer of the *Sleeping Ephigenia Spied upon by the Shepherd Cimon* (fig. 100), which was owned by the collector Abraham van Bassen, Jan Vos uses in an amusing way the conventional thought that rays flowing out of the eyes of a woman kindle a fire of love in the heart of the recipient – the viewer/owner.³⁹ The poet warns the owner not to wake her. She already arouses a burning desire; were she to open her eyes the outcome would be disastrous. 'Van Bassen don't give in; the Nymph you see sleeping / Is not created by the brush, but by nature herself / ... / One may often satisfy one's lust just through the eyes / So, make

no sound; no creaking noise of shoes. / Approaching too hastily, will awaken this nymph. / She burns us while she sleeps; if she wakes up, / She will turn us into ashes; because the eyes fire the heart.'⁴⁰

In such poems, the poet is, of course, in the first place wittily playing with current topoi, celebrating the painter by exaggerating the supposed effect of his work on the viewer. However, such texts, the negative ones from moralists as well as these playful erotic poems, all repeat time and again the same concepts, concepts which must have constituted an important frame of reference in the consciousness of both the artist and the informed viewer. For the viewer they determined to a large degree his expectations and response, while the artist anticipated these when producing a nude. As I pointed out when discussing Rembrandt's *Susanna* of 1636, the artist would capitalize – in conventional or innovative ways – on the commonplace assumptions prevailing in the minds of the art lovers. The often-formulated awareness that images are capable of arousing desire and the endlessly voiced notion that the eyes are the most powerful 'seducers' of the mind make clear that the contemporary beholder would have been highly conscious of the erotic implications of such paintings. He could value this negatively or positively, depending on his religious, social and intellectual background. This ambiguity is nicely summarized in one line accompanying the engraving by Jan Saenredam after Goltzius, representing *Visus*, the sense of sight, and showing as its main motif Venus looking into a mirror held up by Cupid, while an artist is painting her seductive image (fig. 101). The inscription reads, 'I know from experience that this affords the beholder both harm and pleasure' ('Haec memini nocuisse atque oblectasse videntes'). Images of nude beauty afford pleasure to those who know about art and know how to enjoy this art in the right way; others may suffer damage or be disturbed by its 'harmful' effects.⁴¹ This was an art for the delectation of art lovers, but also one that was

viewed with animosity by those who considered it dangerous. Such people were literally satirized by Werner van den Valckert in a drawing with a satyr raping a nude woman holding a palette and brushes in her hand and the inscription: ‘Art has its haters’ (‘Kunst heeft haters’; fig. 102). Van den Valckert certainly referred to people who are ignorant of the traditions of art and level their hate at its sensual effect, people whose crass lust (embodied by the satyr) is transformed by their equally crass ignorance into aversion, which they take out on the source of their discomfort, namely art representing beauty, here in the form of a nude *Pictura*.⁴²

A ‘virtual reality’

The poems of Vondel and Vos also imply that the erotic arousal generated by these images means that sight brings to life in the mind that which is represented.⁴³ The motif of ‘error’, of inadvertently mistaking the image as real or living, recurs in virtually all of the poems on paintings of nudes that were said to arouse lust. Naturally, the expressions of astonishment, admiration, and praise for the artistic image as being real or living can be considered a convention with a long humanistic tradition in poems and other texts on imagery.⁴⁴ However, far from being empty and meaningless statements, they embody fundamental responses.⁴⁵ Their constant repetition and the way in which they were used in such poems – in a time that striving for lifelikeness and the preoccupation with painting as ‘deceit’ reached a highpoint – indicate an essential aspect of looking at such pictures: bringing them to life through sight while simultaneously knowing that they are but paint. ‘Good pictures are just a delusion of our eyes’,⁴⁶ wrote Franciscus Junius, or, as Johan de Brune said, elaborating on Junius: ‘to gape at the things that are not there as if they were there, and to be stimulated by this to make ourselves believe, without any harm, that they are really present – how can this not entertain our minds? Certainly it gives someone exceptional pleas-



101
Jan Saenredam after
Goltzius, *Allegory
of Visus and the Art
of Painting*, c. 1600,
engraving
24.4 x 18.4 cm.



102
Werner van den Valckert, “*Cunst heeft haters*”, 1618,
pen and ink, wash 18.2 x 15.5 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen,
Kupferstichkabinett



103 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Werner van den Valckert, *Venus and Cupid*, c. 1612-14,
panel 103 x 76.5 cm. USA, Private Collection

ure, when he is deceived by the false similitude of things.⁴⁷

Many texts, from the art theoretical to the poetical, make clear that viewers wanted to see the things represented in paintings as a 'virtual reality' (or, to use a seventeenth-century term, an *eygen-schijnende gedaente*),⁴⁸ as substitutes for the real thing, and that these substitutes, the paintings, were considered to be capable of having the same impact on the mind as seeing the same things in reality. We touched on this in chapter III when discussing the engaged, participatory way of looking at the passions represented in a painting. In many writings we find the advice that the viewer should immerse himself completely in what he sees, and imagine that it is reality that he is looking at.⁴⁹ Pierre le Brun, when advising art lovers how to talk about paintings when visiting an artist's studio in 1625 recommends: 'Pour parler des riches peintures, il en faut parler comme si les choses estoient vrayes, non pas peintes.'⁵⁰ This attitude is in line with the ancient tradition of ekphrasis, which was revived by Renaissance humanists; not to take this approach seriously and to consider it 'just a topos', as has often been done, would be a great mistake. The learned Junius probably records common studio knowledge when he writes that we should not just hurriedly scan a painting, but 'that we have to consider it with the full attention of our art-loving mind, as if we were confronted with the living presence of the things themselves and not with their painted portrayal.'⁵¹ He emphasizes several times that the art lover has to train his imagination to this purpose, so that, as a result, he will be deeply moved by what he sees.⁵²

Willem Goeree formulates it thus when parrying the argument that painting cannot represent what is invisible: 'Since it is in the nature of paintings that they lack life and movement, this should stimulate us all the more to find the means to create images in such a way that the spectator forgets all thoughts about canvas and panel, paint and oil, wood and stone and copper, be it cast or modelled, and to give him the idea that he sees before his

eyes nothing painted or cast, but images of living people, so that he thinks they walk, move, speak, shout, fight, hear, see, think, and do all other living actions of living people.⁵³ It is evident that this way of looking at art has serious consequences when it concerns beautiful images of the female nude. To prove authoritatively the physical and psychological impact such beauty can have, Van Hoogstraten quotes, as he often does, a source from antiquity: 'I was in a cold sweat, said Damascius, when I saw the Venus that Herodes Atticus had consecrated, because of my gravely disordered, battling senses which I felt in my heart. My inner thoughts were so tickled by lively feelings of an inexpressible pleasure that it was almost impossible to go home. Although I hurried home, my eyes were now and then drawn back, because I kept thinking about this rare sight.'⁵⁴

Playful erotic wit in images and texts

In a painting of c. 1612, Werner van den Valckert visualized the power of 'the nude Venus' to arouse the senses in an inventive and playfully direct way by depicting a Cupid who aims his arrow straight at the beholder (fig. 103). This Venus directly addresses the viewer with an inviting look; at the same time she removes for us the clothing that covers her body. However, by depicting her ogling the viewer with one large shiny eye while her mischievous accomplice shoots his arrow at us, Van de Valckert not only played with the thoughts about the effect of observing a depiction of a naked woman, he also wittily illustrated the current notion, already referred to above, that love flows in rays that come out of and into the eye.⁵⁵ As was indicated briefly when discussing the striking dark eyes confronting the viewer of Rembrandt's *Susanna* of 1636 (chapter IV), these rays were considered to be a physiological reality. The gaze of a woman could send out a powerful force that entered through the eyes of the beloved, inflaming his heart: 'How a fire shoots out of the eye to the heart, proves Marsilio Ficino', we read in



104
Otto van Veen, *A Woman Shooting Arrows from Her Eyes*, engraving 14.8 x 11 cm.
In: *Amorum Emblemata*, 1608

the Dutch translation of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, after which follows a long account of how one should imagine this phenomenon, concluding with the words: 'no wonder that an open eye, which is intensely aimed at someone, shoots arrows of rays from the eyes into the eyes of the one who looks at those eyes: which rays, shooting through the eyes of the other, penetrate the heart and makes him suffer; ... they are wounded in the heart by the arrows issued from the other heart.'⁵⁶ An emblem in Otto van Veen's famous *Amorum Emblemata* of 1608 shows arrows literally coming out of the eyes of a woman and striking the heart of an agonized young man (fig. 104). The French motto expresses the conceit most wittily: 'Les regards dards.'⁵⁷ In Pieter Cornelisz. Hooft's wonderful booklet of love emblems, the *Emblemata Amatoria* of 1611, we find the same concept, differently expressed: 'A member that I care for, catches me in its snares / Which is the eye: through this wound the arrow hits my heart.'⁵⁸ To involve the viewer as much as possible in an amusing and innovative way, Van den Valckert transformed the highly traditional subject of *Venus and Cupid* by inserting this witty motif.⁵⁹

A related device is to be found in several versions of a lively invention by Paulus Moreelse, in which a Venus



105
Paulus Moreelse, *Venus with Doves*, 1628,
canvas 82 x 67 cm. Present location unknown



106 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Jan Gerritsz van Bronchorst, *A Sleeping Nymph*,
c. 1645-50, canvas 85 x 116 cm. Braunschweig, Herzog Anton
Ulrich- Museum

looks with a roguish smile at the viewer while she squeezes one of her breasts and spouts her ‘Venus milk’, not only at the little doves she holds, but also out of the picture to be received by the viewer, as it were (fig. 105).⁶⁰ Another, somewhat crude way to make clear the purpose of the painting is seen in the portrayal of a beautiful, but provocatively displayed, sleeping nymph by Jan Gerritsz van Bronchorst of 1646-1650 (fig. 106). In this striking painting, there are no elements to be found that place the nude woman in a familiar narrative context, but the lewd gesture of the shepherd looking at her enticing body makes the already obvious intention of the painting even more explicit.⁶¹

The erotic impact of many paintings with nudes, for a long time evaded or even denied by art historians, must have been an essential aspect of the content of such paintings. By contemporaries it would often have been experienced as being the most fundamental part – openly decried by opponents and probably considered as self-evident by the buyer of these paintings. Naturally, such views were rarely written down by the admirers and owners. Only Sir Dudley Carleton’s playful statement in the letter to Rubens mentioned above, in which he wrote that he hoped that the *Susanna* on which Rubens was working would be beautiful enough to enamor even old men (fig. 67), and the witty poems by Vos and Vondel give us some idea of the reception of such works. I do not know of any Dutch statements in the same key as Pietro Aretino’s in a letter to Frederico Gonzaga, when he warmly recommends a *Venus* by Sansovino which he, Federico, would find very pleasing: ‘... a Venus so real and so lifelike that she fills the thoughts of all who admire her with lust.’⁶² Similar is Giovanni della Casa’s enthusiastic appraisal of Titian’s *Danaë* (fig. 171) in a letter to Alessandro Farnese. He writes that even Cardinal San Silyvestro (official theologian of the Curia and the church’s chief censor) would be possessed by the devil if he would see the nude Titian was presently painting,

adding that in comparison with this nude, the one owned by the Duke of Urbino was like a chaste nun (figs. 184).⁶³ Nor are there in Dutch literature explicitly erotic ekphrases like the one by Aretino of Michelangelo's Leda: '... tender of flesh, elegant of limb and slender of figure, and so sweet, soft and gentle of attitude, and with so much naked grace in all parts of the nude that one cannot gaze upon her without envying the swan who takes pleasure in it with a tenderness so lifelike ...',⁶⁴ or Ludovico Dolce's description of Venus in Titian's *Venus and Adonis* (fig. 107): 'I swear ... that there is not to be found a man so acute in vision and judgment, who seeing this would not believe it to be alive; nobody so chilled by the years, or so hard of constitution, would not feel warmed, touched and feel his blood move in his veins. Nor is it a marvel, for if a marble statue [the *Cnidian Venus*] could so stimulate with its beauty, penetrating the marrow of a young man that he left a stain, now what would he do before this which is of flesh, which is beauty itself, which seems to breathe?'⁶⁵ Only Vondel and Vos sometimes come close in their celebration of Dutch paintings of nudes.

In written texts we encounter more negative reactions to paintings of nudes than positive ones. However, given the substantial production of nudes in paintings and prints, there must have been a considerable public that appreciated them highly and had no qualms about the supposedly dangerous erotic power of such images. The prestigious tradition of the representation of 'Venus or one of her nieces stark naked' could justify the possession and enjoyment of such paintings. In this milieu, erotically charged paintings could also be part of a light-hearted and sophisticated play that had its place in the context of courting and marriage.

For a considerable part of the burgher elite a certain amount of erotic playfulness and sexual innuendo was permitted in special circumstances, even in public. This was the same audience that could also enjoy the beautifully produced songbooks and amorous emblem books



107
Titian, *Venus and Adonis*, 1551, canvas 186 x 207 cm.
Madrid, Museo del Prado

that were highly fashionable among the urban elite in the first decades of the seventeenth century.⁶⁶ Some of these show delightful title prints with the nude Venus and Cupid worshipped by young men and women, such as the titleprints of Hooff's *Emblemata Amatoria* (1611) and the *Nieuwen Jeucht Spieghel* (1617), and Bredero's *The Great Fountain of Love* (*De Groote Bron der Minnen*), part of his *Great Songbook* (*Groot Liedboek*), published in 1622 (figs. 108, 109).⁶⁷ These songbooks not only contain many light-hearted love songs, but also quite flippant marriage poems in which Venus and Cupid are the main actors. We find this wonderfully exemplified in poems by the Amsterdam poet and playwright Bredero. In many of his marriage poems Bredero felt free to use sexual metaphors and allusions which would have been unthinkable under other circumstances.



108

Pieter Serwouters (?) after Michel le Blon, *Venus Worshipped by Young Men and Women*, engraving 11.5 x 16.3 cm. Frontispiece of G.A. Bredero, *De Grootte Bron der Minnen* (*The Great Fountain of Love*), in: idem, *Groot Liedboek* (*Great Songbook*), 1622



109

Attributed to Hessel Gerritsz, *Venus and Cupid Worshipped by Amorous Couples*, etching 12.6 x 16.3 cm. Frontispiece of P.C.Hooft, *Emblemata Amatoria*, 1611

Among Bredero's poems made for weddings we also find very serious, edifying and pious verses. For a different segment of the Amsterdam elite, however, he produced merry and erotic marriage poems full of jokes alluding to the wedding night. In the latter Venus and Cupid are the leading characters.⁶⁸ In many cases the bridegroom has been suffering up to that point because he was unremittingly hit by Cupid's arrows: 'This [Cupid], Mr. Bridegroom, is the same loose child / That has its domicile in the lovely eyes / Of your beloved bride. / There he hid, since I saw him last. / This, Mr. Bridegroom, is what caused the fire in your breast, / About which you are sighing, but dare not to speak of.'⁶⁹ After which the bride is urged by the poet to cure the pain of the gruesome wounds which have been struck in the heart of the groom. She has been pretending long enough, the poet says, now she will die this ultimate sweet death, and after having experienced this, for nothing in the world would she want to have back her virginity. So, they should go to bed; let us all kiss her, the rest will be dealt with by the bridegroom, the poet tells his audience.

It is within this artistic and literary context that paintings like the *Venus and Cupid* of Werner van den Valckert (fig. 102) and Moreelse's *Venus* (fig. 105), who with a smile spurts her 'Venus milk' out of the picture, should be considered – or, for that matter, the many Venuses with Cupid by painters like Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, Jacques de Gheyn (fig. 110), Jacob van Loo (fig. 111), Bartholomeus van der Helst (fig. 112),⁷⁰ and many others, including, probably, a large and expensive painting by Rembrandt that is lost.⁷¹ The image of Venus, the goddess who secures procreation, would have been a fitting present for a marriage. 'Would I turn my back on the human race / No men would be fired by lust anymore, no woman would give birth. / And the world would be empty of people before one realizes', Venus proclaims in a little play that Pieter Cornelisz. Hooft wrote on the occasion of a wedding around 1606/7.⁷² A rare case in

which such concepts are displayed visually is a family portrait by Jan Miense Molenaer (fig. 113), which shows a painting of a reclining Venus – the nude figure is based on a print after Goltzius⁷³ – as a chimney piece with an extremely elaborate gilded frame where we discern Cupid with his bow and arrow underneath and Ceres (fertility) and another nude goddess, both standing on dolphins (attributes of Venus).⁷⁴ In the middle, right under this chimney stands a young married couple, holding each other's right hands. Three children, the result of their fruitful marriage over which Venus reigns, sit at the right, surrounded by references to the senses: the mirror of sight in the middle, wine and a piece of lemon above their heads referring to taste, a lute (hearing and harmony at the same time), while the gesture of the couple represents touch, all senses which have their proper role within the bonds of marital love.⁷⁵ A few decades later Eglon van der Neer made a remarkable portrait of a respectable young couple sitting in a sumptuous interior with a large painting of *Venus and Cupid* in the style of Jacob van Loo hanging above their heads (fig. 114).⁷⁶ This portrait must have been commissioned for their marriage or given as a present at that occasion.⁷⁷ It seems likely that in addition to paintings, the large number of prints featuring Venus and Cupid, not only published by Goltzius and his circle but produced throughout the century, were suitable and less expensive gifts for a marriage (fig. 115).

The opposite attitude towards such images is also visualized, for instance, in an amusing painting from the late 1650s by Pieter Codde (who produced a few rather lascivious paintings himself; fig. 158).⁷⁸ It shows an extremely luxurious interior representing the saying 'in weelde siet toe' ('when wealthy, be on your guard'; fig. 116). A man and a woman are sleeping – drunk, no doubt – while children and dogs are doing all kinds of things they are not supposed to do and the maid is stealing from the cabinet. In the background a man and woman are playing backgammon. In these wealthy but



110
Jacques de Gheyn II, *Venus and Cupid*, c. 1604, panel 132 x 112 cm.
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



111
Jacob van Loo, *Venus and Cupid*,
c. 1650-55, canvas 133.3 x 199 cm.
Copenhagen, Statens Museum for
Kunst



112 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Bartholomeus van der Helst, *Venus*, 1664,
canvas 105 x 86 cm. Lille, Musée des Beaux-Arts



113
Jan Miense Molenaer, *Family Portrait* (with a painting of
Venus on the wall), c. 1645, canvas 135 x 166.5 cm. Milan, Art
dealer Robert Smeets (1991-92)

quite unsavoury surroundings hangs a painting of a reclining nude above the head of the wanton pair.⁷⁹ From the painting on the chimney at the upper left we only get to see a naked cupid (probably supporting Venus), while on the cabinet stands a statuette of a swooning *Leda* with Jupiter in the guise of a swan kissing her, which reminds us immediately of the poem by Vondel: ‘Ay, draw – out of shame – the curtain / Before the shamelessness of Jupiter, / The swan fastened to the soft alabaster / Of the stark-naked Leda. / This marble seems to be feathers and skin. / The art provokes adultery.’⁸⁰

Paintings with nudes in private homes

One may even wonder if paintings with beautiful nudes could have a more specific function, one in which concepts about the power of images, the sense of sight and the imagination all play a role. In connection with sixteenth-century Italian paintings of *Venus and Cupid* it has been argued convincingly that these were often intended as marriage presents. A well-known example is the startling painting of *Venus and Cupid* by Lorenzo Lotto in the Metropolitan Museum which is bursting with sexual symbols (fig. 117).⁸¹ But also amorous mythological couples like *Venus and Adonis*, *Mars and Venus*, and other paintings with beautiful nudes, such as the *Judgment of Paris*, *Cimon and Ephigenia*, and *Andromeda*, could probably function in this context. Recurrently we meet with the notion that to conceive a child when contemplating images with beautiful figures would increase the chances of generating beautiful and healthy offspring. This idea has already been cited in regard to the story of Chariclea (chapter 11), who was born white because her black mother had been gazing at a painting of the beautiful *Andromeda* during conception. In the early Renaissance Alberti had recommended that in the bedroom of the master of the family and his wife there be hung only images of ‘dignity and handsome appearance; for they say that this may have a great influence on the



117
Lorenzo Lotto, *Venus and Cupid*, c. 1540-42,
canvas 92.4 x 111.4 cm. New York, Metropolitan
Museum of Art



114
Eglon van der Neer, *Married Couple* (with a painting
of *Venus and Cupid* on the wall), c. 1663-66,
panel 73.9 x 67.6 cm. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts



115
Jacob Matham after
Hendrick Goltzius,
Venus and Cupid, 1612,
engraving
26.3 x 18.5 cm



116
Pieter Codde, "*In weelde siet toe*" ("*When Wealthy, Take Care*"),
c. 1656-60, panel 50 x 72 cm. Present location unknown

fertility of the mother and the appearance of future offspring.⁸² That gazing upon beauty – or ugliness – during conception and pregnancy had an impact on the appearance of a child is repeated endlessly, from St. Augustine up to Jacob Cats and Van Beverwijck, as well as in the art theoretical treatises of Van Hoogstraten and Goeree, because ‘paintings powerfully affect the imaginations of people, [paintings] which, by looking at them, can impress their workings on us very deeply ... in particular in order to help nature in the procreation of mankind through beautiful statues or well-made paintings.’⁸³

In the early seventeenth century, Giulio Mancini, Roman art lover and doctor to the pope, eloquently summarized this function of ‘lascivious’ pictures with beautiful figures, giving the reason why they have the desired effect. He writes: ‘Lascivious things are to be placed in private rooms, and the father of the family is to keep them covered, and only uncover them when he goes there with his wife, or an intimate who is not too fastidious. And similar lascivious pictures are appropriate for the rooms where one has to do with one’s spouse; because once seen they serve to arouse one and to make beautiful, healthy, and charming children ... not because the imagination imprints itself on the fetus, which is of different material to the mother and father, but because each parent, through seeing the picture, imprints in their seed a similar constitution which has been seen in the object or figure And so the sight of similar objects and figures, well-made and of the right temper, represented in colour, is of much help on these occasions; but they must nevertheless not be seen by children and old maids, nor by strangers and fastidious people.’⁸⁴

Although Vondel seems to have implied this notion in his poem about the *Venus* of the Prince and Princess of Orange, it is hard to say if erotically charged paintings with beautiful figures were indeed often placed in bedrooms for erotic stimulation and not in the more-public spaces of houses. In inventories in which such paintings are mentioned, one can rarely conclude anything specific

from their placement in the house. Since most rooms in seventeenth-century Dutch houses contained beds, and since it is seldom specified where the master of the house and his wife slept, little can be said about this, apart from the fact that the material is scanty. A few cases seem to support this hypothesis, but others demonstrate the contrary.⁸⁵ To give some examples from collections assembled by their owners during the first half of the seventeenth century: a very rich inventory of 1656 describes the content of the Roman Catholic financier of Lombard descent Johan Franchoys Tortarolis. He was manager of the Leiden Lending Bank (like his predecessor, Bartholomeus Ferreris, who owned Goltzius’s *Danaë*, – see chapter VIII) and lived in a large house on the Leiden Rapenburg in which he kept the respectable number of 173 paintings. He is one of the few people I know about who had quite a number of paintings of precisely the subjects that were so often denounced by moralists: *Susanna and the Elders*, *Bathsheba*, *Lot and His Daughters*, *Venus and Mars*, *Venus and Adonis*, and *Diana*. None of these were placed in the *voorhuis*, the most public of spaces, where we only find landscapes and other innocuous subjects; only a *Bathsheba* by Lievens (the only *Bathsheba* by Lievens that I know is fully dressed), hung in ‘t *groot sijsalet*, a room without a bed in which guests were received. The paintings which undoubtedly showed nudes were in more private rooms. In the ‘green’ room on the first floor at the back side of the house, which was the most elegant bedroom of the house, we find the *Mars and Venus*, the *Lot and his Daughters*, and the *Diana*, as well as two bordello scenes; additionally, it contained a painting with Mary, Elisabeth, the young Jesus, and St. John (looking at beautiful children was also considered to help). The *Susanna* was in a somewhat plainer bedroom on the same floor, while a *Venus and Adonis* by Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem hung downstairs in the little room above the cellar, which had a boxbed.⁸⁶ The rich Gillis van Heussen, on the contrary (inventory of 1661), almost Tartarolis’s neighbour and a fellow Roman

Catholic, had his paintings of *Venus* and *Diana* and two paintings with ‘nude figures’ in rooms without beds, among them the *voorsalet* (a large room in the front side of the house). However, a *Venus and Adonis*, *Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife*, and ‘the love’ (probably a painting of *Venus*) were kept in bedrooms, albeit not the bedroom of the deceased, which only had portraits, a seascape, a fish still life, and a painting of *Our Lady*.⁸⁷

We find something similar in two Haarlem inventories of this period with a number of paintings with naked figures. The 1650 inventory of the wealthy Reformed textile merchant Willem van Heijthuisen (whose portraits by Frans Hals would become among the most famous ever painted), living on the Oude Gracht in Haarlem, also contained quite a few paintings with nudes, which, as Pieter Biesboer stated, was rather exceptional in Haarlem. Biesboer only found them now and then in the houses of the more sophisticated cosmopolitan merchants. Here we come across a *Susanna* in the ‘bedroom of the deceased’ (a bachelor, as a matter of fact), and a *Diana and Acteon* in a kind of perspective box and ‘a large scene with nude figures’ in other rooms with beds on the first floor. However, he also had ‘a large scene with several nude figures’ and ‘three nudes on the floor’ [*sic*] hanging in the *groot salet*, undoubtedly a place to entertain guests.⁸⁸ The Roman Catholic Aeltie Pieters Bega, the sister of the painter Cornelis Bega and granddaughter of Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, had several paintings with nudes by the latter artist, all of which were placed in the most public rooms. A *Mars and Venus* and a painting with ‘naked figures’ were placed in the *voorhuis*, a *Susanna* (figs. 118, 60) in the *zijkamer* (often used to receive people) and a *Venus and Cupid* hung in the dining room. She and her husband could have decided to place them in rooms upstairs, where they also had many paintings, but they chose to display them proudly in their main rooms.⁸⁹ Surely, not all people who owned many paintings had pictures showing subjects with nudes. An interesting case is Franciscus de le Boe Sylvius, a famous Lei-



118

Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, *Mars and Venus*, 1623, panel 32 x 41 cm. Hannover, Niedersächsische Landesgalerie

den professor of medicine and devout member of the Calvinist Walloon church, who had a costly collection of 172 paintings. He owned only one painting with a nude, a *Bathsheba* by Pieter Lastman (fig. 66). This painting hung indeed in the most private room of his house, which was clearly used as the main bedroom.

As far as can be gathered from Dutch household inventories that include a number of paintings of mythological or biblical subjects with nudes (and those inventories were certainly a minority), the people who did own such paintings were not afraid of ‘children, old maids, strangers or fastidious people seeing them.’ Mancini’s warning would have been lost on them. As Loughman and Montias remarked, there is no evidence in those inventories of the prudishness of the Englishman William Sanderson, one of the few who gives advice about the places where one should hang paintings. In his treatise of 1650 on the art of drawing, he counselled that ‘Obscene



119

Pieter Codde, *Portrait of a Family* (with two paintings of nudes), c. 1630, panel 60.5 x 78.5 cm. Present location unknown

Pictures', including 'Centaurs, Satyrs, Ravishings, Jupiter-scapes', should be excluded from all areas of the house, even if they were painted by important artists, 'unless you mean to publish the sign, because you delight in this sinn.'⁹⁰ Remarkably, a Roman Catholic priest from France, one Charles Lemaître, who visited Amsterdam in 1681 was shocked to see paintings in a Roman Catholic home with 'impure subjects' opposite others with 'quite pure subjects.' For what we know from inventories which specify subjects of paintings that this priest would undoubtedly have called 'impure' this was, in fact, the common practice of display.⁹¹ One can even see this in an interesting family portrait of c. 1640 attributed to Pieter Codde (fig. 119), in which the whole family, probably Roman Catholic – mother, father, grandparents, two 'old maids (?)' and three young children – are gathered in a room full of paintings. It is a rare Dutch example in which we can see how all types of paintings hung closely together. A painting of *Christ on the Cross with Mary and St. John* functions as a chimneypiece, but to the left of the

chimney, above a large landscape, one may clearly discern (and I assume that the painting was less cropped originally) a painting of a reclining nude and in the right corner, above a seascape, even a painting of *Danaë* or *Semele*.

This family presented themselves proudly in surroundings that would have appalled others (as was evident from the other painting by Codde discussed above, a comical scene featuring a loose pair displaying such nudes in their room (fig. 116). Even artists themselves were careful, at least in writing. Gerard Lairesse, who produced a sizeable number of works which would have been considered lascivious (fig. 120), did not advise against making or possessing such paintings, but cautioned artists not to hang them openly in their studios, because '... it is not appropriate to hang there a painting of *Mars and Venus Surprised by Vulcan* and represented in a wanton manner, nor a *Bath of Diana*, even if it were painted by Van Dyck, nor *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*; because, even if they hang in a corner, those who have cast their eyes on it think that they have them before their eyes constantly, because against one's will the senses would be full of it. As a consequence, the memory of the depiction of those historical or mythological stories would make young and chaste maidens blush for shame.'⁹²

Everyone – those owning paintings with nudes in amorous or voyeuristic subjects and those repudiating them – would have been aware that these paintings were considered effective in stimulating sexual arousal.⁹³ As we have seen in the discussion of Rembrandt's *Andromeda* and *Susanna*, and as we will see with *Diana and Her Nymphs*, *Danaë*, and *Bathsheba*, the erotic appeal of the nude played a crucial role in Rembrandt's thinking about these inventions, which is not to say that the paintings were in the first place meant for erotic amusement. For his paintings of nudes, however, Rembrandt chose some of the most current subjects with nudes, subjects that were based on stories which were all about female beauty

in a state of undress which caused the arousal of love and desire. All of them had strong voyeuristic implications. This means that Rembrandt's paramount concern – to involve the viewer by depicting as lifelike and convincingly as possible the most natural (e)motions – had in these cases specific consequences. Undoubtedly he was highly conscious of this fact. When discussing the *Susanna* of 1636, we saw how Rembrandt heightened the tension between moral and erotic impact inherent in the conventional motifs of this subject. He would get another chance to do this, and to do so through very diverse means, in the *Danaë* and *Bathsheba*. As we shall see, the various ways in which nakedness and sexual arousal are framed in these stories, and thus the differences in the kinds of impact the depicted scenes would have had on the viewer, were Rembrandt's main concerns when portraying these nudes. Simultaneously he must have been much preoccupied with matters of artistic rivalry when devising these compositions. But first let us consider the specific problems he encountered when thinking about combining two popular 'voyeuristic' subjects, which both revolved around the bathing virgin goddess Diana and her chaste nymphs: *Diana and Her Nymphs Seen by Actaeon* and *The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy*.



120
Gerard Lairesse, *Sleeping Bacchante*, c. 1680-85,
canvas 145 x 192 cm. Bremen, Kunsthalle

schetsscan



Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon and the Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy

Rembrandt's choice of subject matter was based on a keen sense of competition with his famous predecessors, as we have seen in his first two single-figure nudes, *Andromeda* and *Susanna*. The same holds true for his *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon and the Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy* (fig. 151), which was painted in 1634, a few years later than *Andromeda* and two years before the *Susanna* in The Hague. This was his first – and only – essay in the depiction of a multi-figured scene with small figures of naked women in a landscape, a type of painting that had gained popularity since the 1620s through the work of the highly successful Cornelis van Poelenburch, in particular (figs. 135-138, 149, 150). It must have been Rembrandt's goal to try his hand at a genre that was greatly appreciated in elite circles and to compete with an artist like Van Poelenburch by making out of

this type of painting something distinctly different, while at the same time marshalling all his pictorial knowledge of these two subjects and responding to virtually every known artist who had depicted them.

If one wanted to depict a multi-figured scene with naked women, the selection of *Diana and Her Nymphs Bathing* was certainly not an original way of doing it. On the contrary, as of the beginning of the seventeenth century both *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon* and *Diana and Her Nymphs Discovering Callisto's Pregnancy* had become the most popular subjects in this genre. The source for both was Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; we find the myth of Actaeon in book III and the story of the beautiful Callisto in book II.¹ However, to combine the two into one painting was an original idea. No other painting is known that shows the two scenes simultane-



121

Attributed to Hendrick de Clerck and Jan Brueghel, *Diana Surprised by Actaeon*, panel 70 x 105 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado



122

Johann Rottenhammer, *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, 1602, copper 35 x 48 cm. Munich, Alte Pinakothek

ously.² It was also highly unusual for Rembrandt to combine two stories in one painting. As far as we know he did not do this in any other work, which means that he must have had good reason to do so in this instance.

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries we find both subjects in quite a number of Italian, German, and, especially, Netherlandish prints, *Diana Surprised by Actaeon* in particular, which appears in the first decade of the century in several paintings by Joachim Wtewael (figs. 132-134). *The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy* was undoubtedly also portrayed by Wtewael, but we only know works in the manner of Wtewael of this subject – probably copies after works by this master (fig. 145) – of which Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem made several paintings, only one of which showed small figures in a landscape (fig. 146). In the same period the two subjects, especially that of *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, had already become favorites with northern artists in Venice like Paolo Fiammingo and Johann Rottenhammer, and with the Antwerp artists Hendrick van Balen and Hendrick de Clerck, sometimes in collaboration with Jan Brueghel the Elder (fig. 121). It might have been Rottenhammer in particular who started the vogue (fig. 122). Remarkably, Van Mander mentions already in 1604 a painting by Rottenhammer's hand of *Diana and Actaeon* in an Utrecht collection, the city which would remain the center of production for this type of painting.³ Between c. 1625 and 1670 the Utrecht artist Cornelis van Poelenburch and his followers, Dirck van der Lisse, Abraham van Cuylenburgh, Daniël Verlangen, and Johan van Haensbergen, produced numerous scenes of Diana and her nymphs bathing, with or without the stories of Actaeon and Callisto.⁴

The most famous predecessor who depicted both subjects, however, was Titian. He painted a *Diana Surprised by Actaeon* and a *Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy* as companion pieces for Philip II (figs. 123, 124). The former, Titian's *Diana and Actaeon*, could only have been

known through hearsay – it was mentioned by Karel van Mander in his biography of Titian⁵ – because it was shipped immediately to Madrid and no additional versions or replicas were made. The composition of this painting left no trace in the many later depictions of the theme.⁶ In contrast, Titian's *Diana and Callisto* became a prototype for all later portrayals of the subject because of the well-known engraving made in 1566 by Cornelis Cort after one of Titian's versions of this composition (fig. 140).⁷ Rembrandt may have known that Titian painted the subjects in two companion pieces, which may have been an incentive to take them up and to consider them as closely related, an idea that was possibly strengthened by his knowledge of two prints by Antonio Tempesta that can be considered as pendants (figs. 130, 131). The similarity in ambiance and composition in the two prints by Tempesta may have planted the idea to combine the two subjects in one painting. And in fact, Tempesta was not the only one to make two prints of these subjects. Paulus Moreelse also designed two inventions, engraved in large, impressive prints, the one by Jacob Matham, the other by Jan Saenredam, which one could perceive as pendants (figs. 129, 145).⁸ The famous silver dish and ewer by Paulus van Vianen (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum), showing scenes of Actaeon on the dish and Callisto on the ewer, also demonstrate that these subjects were often understood as being connected.⁹

There is, however, one artist who indeed seems to have combined the two scenes in one painting. Werner Busch quoted Joachim von Sandrart's appreciative description of a painting by Giovanni Lanfranco that was shown during a special exhibition in Rome in 1631, along with paintings by other famous Roman masters and Von Sandrart himself: 'In the ninth painting Gioanni La Franc showed in a very praiseworthy way how Diana bathes with her companions in a little brook welling up out of a rock, also Callisto, who is found pregnant while she is forcefully stripped from her clothes, and Actaeon who is changed into a stag as a punishment for beholding



123

Titian, *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, 1556-59, canvas 188 x 206 cm. Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland (on loan from the Duke of Sutherland)



124

Titian, *The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy*, 1556-59, canvas 188 x 106 cm. Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland (on loan from the Duke of Sutherland)

125
Virgil Solis,
*Diana and
Her Nymphs
Surprised by
Actaeon*, 1563,
woodcut
6.1 x 8.1 cm



126
Jacob de Gheyn II after Dirck Barendsz.,
Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon, c. 1588,
engraving 34.8 x 45.5 cm

127
Antonio
Tempesta, *Diana
and Her Nymphs
Surprised by
Actaeon*, etching
9.7 x 11.5 cm



the nude Diana. It was all very naturally represented, as if it were alive before one's eyes.¹⁰ Von Sandrart had not yet arrived in Amsterdam when Rembrandt conceived of his painting, but the coincidence is remarkable. Would someone who had just returned from Rome have told Rembrandt enthusiastically about this exhibition, which seemed like a contest between celebrated Roman artists, kindling in his imagination the desire to compete with this successful work of a famous Roman artist?¹¹

As stories, the two myths have several elements in common. In both cases, Ovid describes evocatively an idyllic setting of a pool within a shaded grove where Diana and her nymphs go to bathe after the hunt. Being undressed while bathing is essential for the narratives of the two tales, while in both the idyll is disrupted rudely by an offence against the chastity of these virgins, the offenders being relentlessly punished by Diana. In the one story it is a young man, Actaeon: while wandering around in the woods he happened upon the naked Diana and her nymphs bathing in their secret and well-shaded grotto in a heavily wooded valley, where a babbling stream 'widened in a pool with grassy banks.'¹² This infuriated Diana, who, splashing water in the young man's face, cried out: 'Now you are free to tell that you have seen me all unrobed – if you can!'¹³ Actaeon was transformed into a stag and was subsequently torn to pieces by his own hunting dogs. In the other story a woman, one of Diana's own nymphs, is the offender and victim; the pregnant Callisto, after having been raped by Jupiter, did not dare to undress when Diana and her nymphs went to bathe after the hunt in 'a cool grove through which a gently murmuring stream flowed over its smooth sands.'¹⁴ While the other nymphs were undressing, Callisto 'sought excuses for delay. As she hesitated the other nymphs took off her garments and then her offence was openly revealed by her nude body. As she stood dismayed, vainly striving to hide her belly, Diana cried 'Begone, you will not pollute our pool with your impure body, see to it that as of this day I never again find you in my company.'¹⁵

Later, poor Callisto and her little son Arcas were changed into bears by Juno and finally transformed into constellations by Jupiter.

Diana Surprised by Actaeon in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries

When Rembrandt took up these subjects, fixed pictorial schemes had been developed for both. That of *Actaeon* had gradually evolved from the 1557 book illustration of Bernard Salomon, which was followed by illustrations of Virgil Solis (fig. 125), Pieter van der Borcht, and Christpjin de Passe I.¹⁶ These illustrations established the main elements that would forever be depicted: Actaeon chancing upon, and seeing, the bathing Diana and her nymphs; Diana splashing water at him and speaking her fateful words; while, at the same time, Actaeon is already changing into a stag. This type of illustration, which shows an artificial basin and Actaeon with a stag's head – elements we also see in most other sixteenth-century paintings¹⁷ and prints (for instance, in the brilliant elaboration of the Solomon composition in Jacob de Gheyn's engraving after Dirck Barendsz.; fig. 126) – would be made more 'natural' in prints from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, such as the one by Antonio Tempesta (fig. 127) and those after Joseph Heintz and Paulus Moreelse (figs. 128, 129). In these later prints, artificial elements like the basin were discarded and the umbrageous surroundings emphasized, sometimes even with an arched grotto: '... nature by her own cunning had imitated art: for she had shaped a native arch of the living rock and soft tufa', as Ovid writes (figs. 126, 128, 129).¹⁸ Actaeon has come to be represented only with sprouting antlers, so that the act of his looking at Diana could be depicted convincingly.¹⁹ Diana's splashing of water has mostly been replaced by an aggressively admonishing gesture (originating in Titian's famous *Callisto*: fig. 140), which expresses more clearly the act of punishment and eliminates the temporal incongruity of Diana splashing



128

Egidius Sadeler after Joseph Heintz, *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, c. 1600, engraving 37.8 x 50.5 cm



129

Jacob Matham after Paulus Moreelse, *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, c. 1606, engraving 37.7 x 53.6 cm



130
Antonio Tempesta, *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, etching 22.7 x 32.4 cm (B.823)



131.
Antonio Tempesta, *The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy*, etching 22.7 x 32.4 cm (B. 822)



132
Antonio Tempesta, *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, etching 13.7 x 19.1 cm (B. 815)

water while Actaeon's metamorphosis is already in progress. More often than not, one of the dogs looks up at Actaeon, as if he already smells the stag (figs. 127, 129, 132).²⁰

In this way, several successive moments of the story were combined into one scene: the idyll of the bathing nymphs; Actaeon wandering in the woods (indicated by suggesting that he has just turned a corner); the sudden confrontation and the reactions of surprise (Actaeon); fear (the nymphs) and wrath (Diana); Actaeon's fateful transgression (looking at Diana and her nymphs); Diana's scolding (the gesture she makes); Actaeon's punishment (the sprouting antlers); and a reference to the gruesome end (the dog looking up at his master's antlers). The viewer in the first place enjoys an attractive group of naked nymphs in idyllic surroundings; in the beautiful prints after Heintz and Moreelse the naked nymphs receive the main role (figs. 128, 129), while in Tempesta's illustration the action and reaction – disruption and punishment – are emphasized (fig. 127). In his two other *Diana and Actaeon* prints, Tempesta was the first to place the subject as a scene with small figures in a large landscape (figs. 130, 132). One of the two showed a fleeing Actaeon, which became an alternative type (fig. 130). The most complete depiction is the invention by Paulus Moreelse that was engraved by Matham in a large print (fig. 129). Applying motifs he found in several of Tempesta's prints and in the print by Egidius Sadeler after Heintz, as well as in scenes of *Callisto* by Goltzius (figs. 142, 143), Moreelse presented a well-balanced group of attractive nymphs against an arched rock. This composition would resonate in many later depictions of the theme.

All the above-mentioned elements are present in paintings by Joachim Wtewael (figs. 133, 134), who played with the voyeuristic position of the viewer enjoying the nudes exhibited before him in complicated poses. In his earliest version, dated 1607 (fig. 133), the viewer, whose attention

is not at all compelled to focus on the narrative, is invited to scrutinize quietly the extremely stylized figures of the naked nymphs that show him every possible aspect of the female body. Although their twisting bodies adopt conventional poses of fright and despair, each nymph seems completely self-contained. In the middle ground Diana, who is placed in a patch of shadow, turns quite inconspicuously towards the small figure of Actaeon, who comes rushing in from the background. We discern him through the opening of the arched rock, in which 'nature by her own cunning had imitated art.'²¹ The viewer, when taking in all parts of the painting, is thus confronted with the voyeur *in* the painting, who enters the scene from the other side, his antlers already sprouting as one dog suspiciously raises his head. When looking very closely, one may discern Actaeon's cruel death in a tiny scene in the landscape at the right.

In a later version, dated 1612 (fig. 134), Wtewael rotated the position of the main protagonists. The nymphs have been pushed to the background, except for two nymphs at the left, who exemplify the emotions concerned. The viewer's gaze moves first from Actaeon, who is entering the scene from the right foreground, to Diana, who directs her wrath towards Actaeon while two nymphs, seemingly trying to cover Diana's breasts but, in fact, presenting them, look reproachfully out at the other intruder – the viewer. Wtewael created the first composition by shifting around components offered to him by several Tempesta prints and the prints after Moreelse and Heintz. The later version – a type we only find with Wtewael – came into being through subtle use of elements from Tempesta's book illustration (fig. 127).²² Interestingly, the print after Joseph Heintz (fig. 128), which certainly played a role in the genesis of Wtewael's first version, makes the voyeuristic position of the viewer even more explicit. A nymph lying on the ground, the second from the right, does not show any awareness of what is happening, but looks through her spread fingers out of the picture. This nymph displays the traditional



133 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Joachim Wtewael, *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, 1607, panel 58 x 79 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum



134
Joachim Wtewael, *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, 1612, panel 57 x 76 cm. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts



135
Joachim Wtewael (or figures copied after Wtewael), *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, panel 28.5 x 29.5 cm. Warwickshire, Upton House, Coll. Bearsted



136 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Cornelis van Poelenburch, *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, c. 1624, copper 44 x 56 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado

gesture of the jester turning to the audience, making fun of the other voyeur of whom she is obviously aware.²³

Wtewael also used the earlier arrangement of figures in a painting of an extensive, Coninxloo-like landscape, which stands at the beginning of the long succession of landscapes with this subject (fig. 135).²⁴ Tempesta's prints, which Wtewael certainly knew, might have given him the idea to use this subject for the staffage of a landscape (figs. 130-132).²⁵ None of the nymphs seem to notice Actaeon and it takes some time to find Diana, who is stooping to splash water while a nymph is trying to cover her. Wtewael causes confusion by including motifs that initially recall more the story of Callisto: in the right foreground he placed a group in which one nymph grabs another nymph sitting in the traditional pose of despair, while the pair of Diana and the nymph frantically covering Diana's body looks at first sight more like a wrestling match between two nymphs.

Although Wtewael did not represent the story as a clearly legible narrative, all its elements are present. The careful viewer can easily put them together. In this case the story of Actaeon is represented with all the necessary details, while the story of Callisto seems to be wittily implied by compositional means. When Cornelis van Poelenburch and his followers took up the subject they would not bother themselves with the correctness and exhaustiveness of the narrative elements. Often, only some compositional motifs remain that seem to refer to one of the two stories, although the necessary details are missing.

In the first known depiction of the story of *Diana and Actaeon* by Cornelis van Poelenburch (fig. 136), probably painted around 1624, his innovative type of Italianate landscape with figures was already fully developed. Although the scale of the figures is small, they are very carefully modelled and placed in the foreground so that they immediately attract the attention of the viewer. In this case Diana and her nymphs are still clearly involved in

what is happening: Diana makes the familiar gesture towards Actaeon, who has suddenly appeared behind a rock, already sporting his antlers. The dogs, however, reminding the viewer of the gruesome conclusion of the story, are missing, and the landscape, though typical for Van Poelenburch, has little to do with Ovid's description. This is even more striking in a slightly later work that shows an entirely open landscape in which the nymphs are visible at great distances (fig. 137). The figures are somewhat larger in scale and more prominent, but Diana and the nymphs do not show any emotion. Only two of them seem to make a somewhat agitated gesture. None of them pays any attention to Actaeon, who can be seen as a tiny figure (with antlers) running away in the far distance and who is hardly visible even for the careful viewer. He seems only to be there as a kind of attribute to remind the viewer of Ovid's story.

In many later paintings we see only a group of naked nymphs frolicking in an open Poelenburch landscape. With some difficulty the tiny figure of Actaeon watching from a great distance in the background may be found, but often he is not present at all.²⁶ Some nymphs may make frightened gestures, but frequently there seems to be no cause for this. The water would often disappear, even in scenes in which Actaeon can be discovered (fig. 138). In the art of Van Poelenburch the nakedness of those nymphs has obviously become their natural state; it does not need to be explained by references to bathing. In a few cases we find Van Poelenburch's figures of Diana and her nymphs in densely wooded surroundings, but then it is due to a collaboration between two successful artists: the landscapes are painted by Alexander Keirincx and the figures by Cornelis van Poelenburch (fig. 139). Such a painting was owned by Frederick Henry and Amalia van Solms and was already mentioned in the inventory of 1632, in which we also find paintings by the young Rembrandt.²⁷ The latter may have seen this painting and several other works by Van Poelenburch in the gallery of the Stadtholder (who owned twelve paintings



137 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Cornelis van Poelenburch, *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, c. 1625, panel 52 x 84 cm. Nancy, Musée des Beaux-Arts



138
Cornelis van Poelenburch, *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, 1659, panel 59 x 83 cm. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst

by his hand) and it might have been such a painting that inspired him to try his hand at this type as well.

*The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy
in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth
centuries*

In contrast to the theme of Actaeon, the discovery of Callisto's pregnancy did not have a sixteenth-century tradition of book illustration that formed the fountainhead for later developments. The episode was not illustrated by Bernard Salomon, since the scene of Jupiter seducing Callisto in the guise of Diana was always chosen to illustrate this particular story, which meant that the discovery of her pregnancy did not appear in the subsequent series of book illustrations. It was Titian's original invention, in 1566 engraved by Cornelis Cort (fig. 140), that stimulated a long tradition of vying with, and varying upon, this one composition, beginning with a veritable outpouring of beautiful prints with inventions by Goltzius, Cornelis Cornelisz., Moreelse, and Christpijn de Passe I (respectively, figs. 142-145).²⁸ We do not know if Titian's invention reflected in some way a work by Giorgione painted on the Casa Soranzo and described by Ridolfi.²⁹ The only place where we meet with an earlier depiction of this scene is a woodcut in the Venetian *Ovidio Metamorphoseos Vulgare* (later varied in an emblem in Anulus's famous emblem book of 1552).³⁰ There we notice between two other episodes of the Callisto story the same moment, in which two nymphs, holding the shameful Callisto, lead her before Diana, who makes a speaking gesture (fig. 141).³¹

Titian changed this into a scene in which three nymphs uncover with force the belly of a struggling Callisto, while Diana makes a commanding gesture, pointing with outstretched arm at the poor Callisto. A reference to such violence is not to be found in Ovid, who relates laconically: 'while Callisto hesitates, her dress is taken from her.'³² However, we do find this rather agitat-

139 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Alexander Keirincx and Cornelis van Poelenburch, *Diana and Her Nymphs*, c. 1630, panel 40 x 61 cm. Copenhagen, Statens Museum



140
Cornelis Cort after Titian, *The Discovery of Callisto's
Pregnancy*, 1566, engraving 44 x 36.9 cm

ed scene in the translation of the *Metamorphoses* by Titian's friend, Ludovico Dolce (1553): 'But the nymphs surrounded her immediately / And stripped her with force from the clothes that adorned her.'³³ Especially the *subito intorno* and *tosto le spogliar* give the scene a more expressive and passionate character. Titian emphasized the involuntary unveiling of her shameful situation, and therewith her punishment as well, while making the image undoubtedly more exciting and more tantalizing. In contrast with the traditional scene of the Actaeon episode, in which different moments of the story had to be combined, in the case of the Callisto fable it was possible to depict in a clearly readable way the kernel of the narrative and the most important elements of the story by representing only this one moment, based on five lines in Ovid.³⁴ Throughout the seventeenth century we come across variations on the gesture of Titian's Diana, which would also be inserted into depictions of the Actaeon story and which can be read as pointing, commanding, accusing, reprimanding and dismissing. This gesture was a brilliant solution to express both her indignant rage as well as the fateful words she speaks; at the same time, it visually connects Diana with her victim.³⁵

Hendrick Goltzius, a compulsive emulator, eagerly seized the opportunity to compete with both an invention of this celebrated master and the print by a famous engraver, and he designed three different compositions, all of them clearly in dialogue with Titian's invention.³⁶ One of those formed part of his ambitious *Metamorphoses* project (fig. 142), which he started in 1588 and which would have comprised 300 prints had he finished it. In the highly mannered idiom based on the style of Bartholomeus Spranger that governed his art in this period, Goltzius shifted the main scene to the background and added a separate group of nymphs in different states of undress at the left foreground. The artificial fountain was eliminated (and would rarely return in any other rep-



141

Anonymous, *Episodes from the Story of Callisto*, woodcut in: *Metamorfoseo Ouidio Vulgare*, 1498. liggend



142

Anonymous after Hendrick Goltzius, *The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy*, 1590, engraving 16.8 x 25 cm



143
Jan Saenredam after Hendrick Goltzius, *The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy*, 1599, engraving 21.5 x 30 cm



144
Jacob Matham after Cornelisz. van Haarlem, *The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy*, c. 1590, engraving 25.4 x 19.4 cm

resentation of Callisto – after all, Ovid only speaks about a shaded wood with a babbling brook),³⁷ while the arched cave that had its source in Ovid's description of the myth of Actaeon was added behind Diana. In a later invention, engraved by Jan Saenredam and dated 1599 (fig. 143), the story is told in more straightforward rendering, while figure types, bodies and postures received a more natural appearance. The group around Diana relies heavily on Titian, but Goltzius replaced the assaulted and struggling Callisto with a group in which the disgraced Callisto is presented to Diana, the former shamefacedly trying to hide her protruding stomach. This scene, which reminds one of the earliest illustration of this subject in the *Ovidio Metamorphoseos Vulgare* (fig. 141), is a much more accurate visualisation of Ovid's text: 'she stood dismayed, and with her hands vainly tried to cover her belly.'

Cornelis Cornelisz., on the other hand, elaborated upon Titian's harsh disrobing of Callisto in an invention that was also engraved by Jacob Matham in 1599 (fig. 144). This somewhat scabrous group, in which one of the nymphs pushes apart the legs of Callisto, is turned frontally, facing the viewer, but at the same time shifted to the background and more or less concealed behind large-figured nymphs in various stages of undress. Paulus Moreelse, to conclude this short discussion of a few impressive prints with which Rembrandt certainly would have been acquainted, took Goltzius's two emulations of Titian's invention as his point of departure, but also turned directly to the composition by Titian.³⁸ Moreelse's invention, engraved and published in 1606 by Jan Saenredam (fig. 145), merged both the titillating act of the disrobement and the image of the remorseful, meek Callisto. A remarkable motif is the nymph in the background; this figure, walking towards the scene with two hunting dogs, immediately recalls Actaeon chancing upon the bathing nymphs. Similar to what we encounter in one of Wtewael's scenes of Actaeon, the other story seems to be implied by a compositional motif.



148
Adriaen van Nieulandt, *The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy*, 1626, panel 86 x 140.2 cm. Present location unknown



149
Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, *The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy*, 1623, panel 58.5 x 83.5 cm. Formerly Potsdam, Sanssouci



147
Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem, *The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy*, 1605, panel 55 x 96 cm. Present location unknown



145
Jan Saenredam after Paulus Moreelse, *The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy*, 1606, engraving 30.5 x 40 cm



146
After (?) Joachim Wtewael, *The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy*, panel 50.8 x 69.8 cm. Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Art



150 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
 Cornelis van Poelenburch, *The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy*, c. 1640-45, panel 53.5 x 81.5 cm. St. Petersburg, Hermitage

The few paintings we know of this subject are less interesting than the prints, but some of them pave the way for the later popularity of the subject as staffage in a landscape setting. Examples include an invention by Wtewael in which we have to search for the well-known Callisto group placed rather inconspicuously in the shadow (fig. 146),³⁹ a painting by Cornelis Cornelisz. of c. 1600-1605 (fig. 147) – from which it is clear that Titian's, as well as Goltzius's inventions served him well when designing the figure groups – and a work by Adriaen van Nieulandt of 1626 in which Titian, Goltzius, and Moreelse, as well as Tempesta, all left traces (fig. 148).⁴⁰ The scene was sometimes used for compositions with large-scale figures, especially in later works by Cornelis Cornelisz., who, applying his repertoire of poses and attitudes developed earlier, varied in rather dull paintings on the above-mentioned prints. His painting of 1623 is one of the few that follows Goltzius in representing Callisto as standing shamefacedly before Diana (fig. 149).

When Van Poelenburch and his followers pick up the subject we notice the same phenomenon as with the scenes of Actaeon. Cornelis van Poelenburch himself painted only one comprehensive composition with the

Callisto scene, a beautiful painting probably dating from the 1640s (fig. 150). Instead of a babbling brook in a shaded wood, it presents Van Poelenburch's familiar open landscape with rocks, Roman ruins and rolling hills in the distance. The Callisto group clearly derives from Titian's invention, but it also shows familiarity with Tempesta's print (fig. 131). The Diana group, however, has little relation to any of the earlier depictions and is purely Van Poelenburch's invention. At first sight it is even hard to identify Diana, and, when located through the little crescent moon on her head, it is difficult to make out what she is doing. In the works of Van Poelenburch's followers we see the same loose handling of the traditional conventions of the subject. In many paintings of this group, we are only reminded of the story by a gesturing Diana, a shamefaced nymph, or one nymph pointing accusingly at another nymph, without having all the elements together that constitute the full depiction of this specific tale (for instance, fig. 151).

Rembrandt's painting of Diana and Her Nymphs

When surveying the pictorial tradition of the Actaeon and Callisto themes, stories that were both about an intrusion on the chasteness of virgins bathing nakedly in shady wooded surroundings, we came across many similar motifs appearing in the representations of both subjects. We even noticed that in a few cases, motifs belonging to the one were shifted to the other, or that the other story was seemingly implied by compositional motifs. Rembrandt, however, was the only one to combine the two scenes (fig. 152), which, as we have seen, had been depicted as pendants in paintings by Titian and in etchings by Tempesta. The only one, that is to say, apart from Lanfranco, whose work Rembrandt did not know (nor do we know it, as it has disappeared), but about which he might have heard. Especially the Tempesta prints (figs. 130-132), with which he would have been familiar and in which the

idea of placing the scenes with small figures in a landscape was first introduced, must have been on his mind when he began to create his own invention.⁴¹

However, it is entirely likely that the landscapes with small, nude figures by Van Poelenburch first stimulated Rembrandt to try his hand at such a painting, which had many small nymphs in a landscape. In particular, it might have been a painting with a landscape by Alexander Keirincx and figures by Van Poelenburch, a work owned by the Stadtholder, as noted above.⁴² A painting in Copenhagen by both artists shows – in reverse – a remarkable similarity to Rembrandt’s work in the general layout of the picture (fig. 139). The landscape with dense woods and old gnarled trees closing off the greater part of the picture like a dark screen, in the middle a path cutting into the woods, and the scale of the nude women in the foreground standing in the water of the forest pool could have been the incentives to make something more arresting and more convincing.⁴³ Knowing the late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century prints and having seen Van Poelenburch’s paintings which had been drained of almost all narrative and emotional content, it must have been a challenge to infuse this type of landscape with small figures with *vivida inventio*, *affectuum vivacitas*, the *natuereelste beweeghelicckheyt*, and an *oogenblikkige beweeging* which is *eenstemmich* in order to involve and engage the viewer as much as possible in the representation of these erotically and morally charged subjects.

The motifs Rembrandt selected for elaboration from the pictorial tradition are definitely different from those that had been selected by other artists. Rembrandt was, for instance, the only one who used the vigorous figure of Diana, who scoops water with both hands while turning towards Actaeon, from Tempesta’s B.823 (fig. 130) and no other artist elaborated so clearly on the motif of nymphs fleeing in panic on the bank of the pool where heaps of clothes and huge spears are lying (B. 823, also 822; figs. 130, 131). Although, as was noted above, a paint-



schetsscan

152 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx

Rembrandt, *Diana Surprised by Actaeon and the Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy*, 1634, canvas 73.5 x 93.5 cm. Anholt, Museum Wasserburg Anholt, coll. Fürst zu Salm-Salm



151

Cornelis van Poelenburch, *The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy* (?), panel 17 x 23 cm. Frankfurt a/M., Städelsches Kunstinstitut



153
 School of Marcantonio Raimondi,
*Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by
 Actaeon*, engraving 27.7 x 41 cm

ing by Van Poelenburch and Keirincx probably was a source of inspiration for the general layout and scale of the figures, the motifs Rembrandt had seen in the *Tempesta* prints were his most direct starting point when inventing and devising his own solution. The dark coulisse that reaches the upper edge of the picture, which Actaeon abuts as if coming around the corner, refers to the same motif in one of *Tempesta*'s prints of the Actaeon scene in a landscape (fig. 132).⁴⁴ The idea of nymphs bathing deep in the water must also have been elicited by *Tempesta*'s prints. The general scale of the figures in relation to the landscape and their positioning on the foreground is most similar to that of B. 815 and B. 822, in particular (figs. 131, 132).

However, Rembrandt also knew other prints of *Actaeon*. The movement of the figure of Actaeon has a striking similarity to a print from the school of Raimondi (fig. 153). There we also find the dog that goes deep down on his forepaws. The wrestling Callisto group was certainly inspired by Titian's invention, but also in this case he seems to have had more prints stored in his memory through which this motif was further elaborated. The position of Callisto in relation to the other nymphs around her recalls Moreelse's invention (fig. 145), but the

fierce way in which she is undressed, with one nymph pulling apart her legs, is reminiscent of the engraving after Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem (fig. 144). Cornelis Cort's print after Titian has also visibly left its mark (fig. 140), as is shown by the nymph who clutches the wrist of Callisto's raised arm; this is again an energetic motif that no other artist ever used. To make this struggling group even wilder, Rembrandt added another nymph who has Callisto's arm in a tight hold.⁴⁵

These were the motifs Rembrandt must have had in mind when he started working on the invention with the purpose of surpassing all earlier works in expressive power. Compared to his predecessors, his scene is already dramatized effectively by turning the Keirincx-like dark forest with gnarled trees into a completely impenetrable, quite sinister foil that contrasts sharply with the subtly nuanced pale blue, white, and light brown hues of the brightly lit pond, the fresh tints of the grassy bank and the gay blue, golden, and deep-red colors of the garments thrown aside and reflecting in the water.⁴⁶ Above all, Rembrandt sets up a contrast with the vivid creamy and pinkish colors of the female bodies, which seem to be struck by a beam of sunlight. This bright light makes the groups of nymphs in the middle, threatened by the appearance of Actaeon, appear extremely naked and vulnerable.

From the *Actaeon* and *Callisto* inventions mentioned above Rembrandt consistently selected the most violent motifs, some of which had not been used by other painters, and he eliminated the elegance in movement and poses present in the prints he had studied. No other painter capitalized so emphatically on Titian's vigorous Callisto group, transforming it into a wild wrestling match.⁴⁷ These nymphs do not look like virtuous and chaste companions of Diana. The malicious delight, even hilarity, of the nymphs around Callisto, most exuberantly represented by the roaring nymph at the right, adds an entirely new element that cannot be justified by Ovid's

text. The violence of the nymphs around Callisto and the fury of Diana reverberate in the dogs: those of Diana fiercely attack the dogs of Actaeon. The two fighting dogs at the left echo the Callisto group: one dog, baring frightening teeth, has thrown itself on another one that lies howling on its back. At the same time this points forward to Actaeon's gruesome fate, as he will be torn to pieces by those teeth, recalling the book illustrations in which we see such dogs bloodthirstily fall upon the stag into which poor Actaeon has been changed (fig. 154). The fearsome teeth, blood-red gums, and flashing eye of the attacking dog nearest to Actaeon makes one fear for the worst.

Rembrandt tightly fused both episodes together, using the striking nymph in the foreground – unmoved, seemingly a bit older and with some drapery around her waist – as the pivot of the composition. The gaze of the viewer is attracted first by the furious Diana and the bewildered Actaeon. The isolated figure of Actaeon and the strongly lit, robust Diana who confronts him – the only figure observed in full, frontal nakedness and the only one whose movement is directed towards the left – are the most eye-catching figures. Our eyes move between the two figures, from Diana's vigorous movement to Actaeon's gesture of surprise and warding off, which makes our gaze bounce back to the foreground to the half-dressed nymph turning to the right. She directs our eyes along the chain of fleeing nymphs toward the frenzied Callisto group and, finally, to the two conspicuous nymphs at the far right. The one laughing wildly – representing a kind of parody of the conventional *pudica* attitude (fig. 78) – transforms the violence of the scene into comedy. The other nymph, seen from the back and leaning on one arm, is a figure that comes straight out of a celebrated composition by Raphael as engraved by Marcantonio Raimondi (fig. 155). Titian had varied upon this figure in his depiction of Diana and Callisto (fig. 140) and, since then, Titian's variant was used by almost every artist depicting Diana and her nymphs. Rembrandt,



154

Antonio Tempesta, *Actaeon Devoured by His Dogs*, (from series illustrations of *The Metamorphoses*), engraving 9.7 x 11.5 cm



155

Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael, *The Three Graces* (after a fresco in the Sala di Psiche, Villa Farnesina), engraving 30.6 x 20.6 cm

however, recognized the origin of this motif and returned to Raphael, but he adapted the figure in an inventive and humorous way. Shielding her eyes against the light, she turns to the left and is the only one who notices Actaeon, thus connecting the two events.

From these two amusing nymphs at the right, our gaze glides back, resting for a moment on the beautifully painted garments and hunting attributes (among the spears lie quivers, a dead boar and a hare), then down to the left along the string of naked figures which hurry towards the bank of the pool. Our eyes then pass Diana, stopping for a moment with the delightful splashing nymph beneath the figure of Actaeon, to end at the far left with the touching figure of the young, innocent girl who, unaware of all the violence behind her, wades into the cold water of the forest pool in a way everyone knows from experience. One nymph does not fit in this general movement, which is emphasized by the fact that she does not participate in the action. She is the only one who, with an enigmatic expression, looks straight at the viewer, while she holds her hand on the suggestively shaped buttocks of a nymph plunging headlong into the water.⁴⁸ She seems to make the vigorous erotic charge of this painting explicit.

One may wonder if Rembrandt consulted Ovid's text. It is possible that the representations of the two scenes grew entirely out of his knowledge of many pictorial sources and a general familiarity with the essence of the two well-known stories. The things he added, such as the hilarity of the nymphs, have no grounding in any text. Likewise, the fierce assault on Callisto, which he pushed to its extreme, is not to be inferred from the text but only from the pictorial tradition. In contrast to other painters, the illogical sequence that Diana is still scooping up water while the transformation of Actaeon is already in progress obviously did not bother him. To depict simultaneously Actaeon looking at Diana, her infuriated reaction and the beginning of the metamorphosis was more important to Rembrandt. Another element that does not

fit either story is the shadowy, nowadays virtually invisible pair that appears from the darkest recesses of the forest. The left figure appears to be an old man and the right one an old woman, but even of that we cannot be sure.⁴⁹ One wonders if they ever were clearly visible. When an etching was made after a portion of the picture in the De Passe studio, the etcher saw something different: an old woman with a small, childlike person of indeterminate sex, both looking in the direction of Actaeon (fig. 155). If these figures, as has been suggested, are meant to mirror the beholder's gaze, confronting from within the pictorial space the beholder who scrutinizes the scene, then they must once have been clearly visible.⁵⁰

Since Cornelis van Poelenburch was a truly successful artist whose atelier had a high production of landscapes with small nude figures that catered to an elite of art lovers (especially around the court in The Hague),⁵¹ connoisseurs like Huygens would have undoubtedly compared the nude nymphs of Rembrandt's work with Van Poelenburch's Italianate figures, which were perceived in the seventeenth century as being in the style of Raphael.⁵² Rembrandt himself would certainly have done so too and made his own figures consciously different. When we compare Rembrandt's nymph looking out of the picture in the right foreground with a figure in a remarkably similar pose in Van Poelenburch's early work in Madrid (fig. 136), it is immediately clear how Rembrandt changed this more 'classic' ideal in the same way as he had done with his earlier nude, the *Andromeda*, and as he would do with his *Susanna* of two years later. The head is enlarged, the neck has disappeared, the shoulders are sloping and much narrower, the figure has a more distinct and higher waist and the section of the hip and belly has been lengthened and enlarged. Any sign of muscularity in arms, shoulders, midriff or back has been eliminated. The only thing their bodies have in common are the small, high breasts. We find the same characteristics in Rembrandt's other nymphs, most conspicuously in the

schetsscan





156

Studio of Christijjn de Passe II, *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, etching 16.5 x 22.7 cm. In P. du Ryer, *Les Métamorphoses d'Ovide*, 1677

stocky figures of Diana and the nymph standing in the foreground, whose neckless bodies, with large heads, narrow, sloping shoulders and muscleless torsos that consist of high breasts and large bellies only (a midriff section has disappeared), are stripped of everything reminiscent of classical proportions. Simultaneously, in contrast with the porcelainlike smoothness of Van Poelenburch's nudes, Rembrandt did everything to suggest the softness and tenderness of these female bodies by subtly nuancing the light and shade in the flesh tones with gentle and highly controlled, but still visible brushstrokes. For the first time it is unmistakable that Callisto has a heavily pregnant belly. Still more conspicuous is the emphasis on Diana's crotch, which is strikingly noticeable even from a distance.

Although the painting did not have a discernable impact on other artists, it must have been in an accessible collection, because two copies as well as an engraving after part it are known.⁵³ The engraving belonged to a se-

ries of Ovidian illustrations begun by Magdalena de Passe and her father and continued by Christijjn de Passe the Younger and his studio (fig. 155). The print after Rembrandt's painting was probably part of a number of engravings made after Magdalena's death (in 1638) in Christijjn de Passe the Younger's Amsterdam studio in an attempt to complete this ambitious project.⁵⁴ The print only appeared much later in an edition of the *Metamorphoses* published in Brussels in 1677 in French and Dutch. Since the print was meant as an illustration of the fable of Actaeon, the Callisto scene was omitted. Realizing that the figure at the far right belonged to the Actaeon scene, the engraver shifted her to the left, while the touching girl at the far left was moved closer to the other nymphs. In the process she lost her innocent expression and entirely natural gesture. Obviously, the engraver did not know what to do with the suggestive shape before the stomach of the nymph looking boldly out at us in Rembrandt's painting and so changed it into a rather incongruous drapery. He also altered the direction of the gaze of this nymph, who now looks away. The shady figures in the cave are more visible now; as was mentioned before, here the left one seems to be an elderly woman looking towards Actaeon and the other figure appears to be a child. However, their presence remains mysterious.⁵⁵

The engraver made the figures of the nymphs heavier than Rembrandt's. He emphasized even more the bellies and buttocks of the women, but simultaneously broadened their shoulders so that they are less strikingly pear-shaped than the nymphs in Rembrandt's painting and conform to a more Rubenesque type. However, one wonders what the buyers of the *Metamorphoses* edition published in Brussels in 1677, in which, as mentioned above, this illustration first appeared, would have thought of these bulky nymphs. In a copy for an edition of 1732, they have been adapted to an entirely different taste (fig. 157).⁵⁶ The women, and also Actaeon, were thoroughly restyled, as is evident in their smaller heads, longer necks, broader shoulders, and more muscular

arms, their slimmer and smoother bodies drawn with taut outlines, and their more elegant postures (and this engraver, understandably, eliminated the figures in the cave). If we did not know Rembrandt's painting, no one would ever think of Rembrandt when seeing this print. The lifelike and lively character of his nymphs has been thoroughly erased.

Two works have, in a few respects, similarities to Rembrandt's painting, in particular a painting by his Amsterdam colleague Pieter Codde with *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon* placed in a landscape setting (fig. 158). Although Codde is mainly known for his paintings of merry companies and soldiers, we know a few paintings of nude figures in a landscape by his hand, one of them, remarkably, also in the old collection of the Fürst zu Salm-Salm.⁵⁷ Codde's painting with the scene of *Actaeon*, probably dating from the 1640s, might have been inspired by Rembrandt's painting. The scale of the figures, their positions in the landscape and the sizes of the paintings are quite similar. The atmosphere, however, is entirely different. The poses of the nymphs seem to be composed in such a manner as to be as titillating as possible. Neither Diana nor any of her companions notice Actaeon, who looks with surprise upon a nymph surrounded by a few others, lying indecently on her back with her legs wide apart while the head and shoulder of another nymph pop up between her legs. This group reminds the viewer immediately of the Callisto story. However, the nymph on her back seems to display her body with complete abandon. In the left foreground Diana reclines like a Venus gazing seductively at the viewer. Also the other two nymphs closest to the viewer look out at him, the one exhibiting her buttocks, the other her large breasts. In this picture, with its rather blatant eroticism, the painter did his best to suggest a certain degree of naturalism in the female bodies, especially apparent in the back of the nymph in the foreground and the nymph lying on her back. Because of their proportions, the types



157

Anonymous, *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, engraving 15.7 x 21.3 cm. In: *De Gedaantwissingen (Metamorphoses)*; ed. I. Verburg and A. Banier), 1732



158

Pieter Codde, *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, c. 1635-45, panel 65 x 95 cm. France, private collection



159
Jacob Lois, *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, 1643, etching. liggend



160
David Colijns, *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, 1641, canvas 99 x 131 cm. Present location unknown

of these nudes have, however, more in common with Rubens and Jordaens than with Rembrandt.

Related to Codde's painting is a print by Jacob Lois dated 1647 (fig. 159).⁵⁸ Here the scene has become almost pornographic. One is also reminded of the Callisto story in this instance because of the group at the left, where, in a similar attitude to that in Codde's painting, a nymph is lying on her back, her legs seized by another nymph who looks with a grin at the viewer. This supine nymph, however, does not seem to be unhappy. She is enjoying the spurt of water that spouts from the fountain and splashes on her belly, while the five surrounding nymphs appear to enhance her pleasure. Also in this case, neither the nymphs nor Diana notice Actaeon, who spies on them from behind a tree trunk at the upper left. As in the painting by Codde – and this is exceptional for depictions of the subject – no antlers sprout from his head. In both cases Actaeon is the voyeur receiving pleasure from this sight without any indication of the fateful consequences. Obviously referring to the nature of what Actaeon and the viewer are doing, we discern in the upper right corner a crapping dog, while another one is sniffing at its rear end.

When searching for other Amsterdam artists who painted these scenes in the 1640s and 1650s we come across such diverse works as those by David Colijns, Adriaen van Nieulandt, and Jacob van Loo, all utterly different from Rembrandt. The endearingly clumsy, rather large painting with a fleeing Actaeon by Colijns, dated 1641 (fig. 160), makes clear that even in Amsterdam there must have been people who wanted to own such a mythological subject and who were satisfied with quite unsophisticated workmanship and a rather old-fashioned style. Colijns took as his point of departure early seventeenth-century book illustrations; not only the composition, but also the figure types and the awkwardness of their poses recall such prints (fig. 165).⁵⁹ Remarkably, Colijns depicted the fleeing Actaeon in the traditional pose of the chaste Joseph breaking away from the advances of the

wife of Potiphar. More accomplished, but also rather old fashioned, are the paintings of Diana and her nymphs by Adriaen van Nieulandt, some of them illustrating the story of Callisto (fig. 161). It makes little difference if they were painted in 1626 or 1654 (figs. 148, 161); in many ways these quite sizeable paintings still recall the late Mannerist works on whose engraved compositions they are mainly based (figs. 143, 145).⁶⁰

Of a different calibre are the paintings by Jacob van Loo, the main specialist in depicting nude figures in Amsterdam, who made several versions of *The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy* (fig. 162). Van Loo kept close to Titian's invention (fig. 140), even including the artificial fountain. For him the subject offered foremost the opportunity to depict a large group of more or less academic nudes in all manner of poses, varying intelligently – as would have been recognizable to all connoisseurs – on Titian's famous composition. Van Loo's Diana and her nymphs are quietly, even a little amusedly looking at the predicament of Callisto. As we shall see more often, Van Loo's style must have been an important alternative to the Rembrandt school for art lovers in Amsterdam; his accomplished nudes contrast greatly with Rembrandt's.⁶¹ In the later seventeenth century, the Callisto scene in particular would be a favorite among painters like Willem van Mieris and Adriaen van der Werff, painters specializing in porcelainlike, smooth female bodies (fig. 163).⁶²

Towards the end of his life, Rembrandt returned to the story of the unfortunate Actaeon in a beautiful drawing which he must have made somewhere between 1660 and 1665 (fig. 164).⁶³ It shows how Rembrandt remained in intense dialogue with prints by and after predecessors when thinking about such a scene. We immediately recognize the composition of Antonio Tempesta's B. 823 (fig. 130), which was also very much in his mind when he conceived the composition of almost thirty years earlier. The figures of Diana and Actaeon, as well as the nymph



161

Adriaen van Nieulandt, *The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy*, 1654, canvas 115 x 82 cm. Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum

at the left, demonstrate how the depiction of action and reaction in Tempesta's invention still could stimulate Rembrandt to rethink the subject and to make a breathtaking virtuoso variation. In great contrast to his 1634 painting, the fierceness of the action is completely toned down. Rembrandt now concentrated entirely on the relation between the two protagonists: Diana turning around and, seemingly with some hesitation, on the point of scooping water, while Actaeon spreads his arms in a gesture that expresses apology rather than fright.



162 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
 Jacob van Loo, *The Discovery of Callisto's Pregnancy*,
 c. 1640-50, canvas 99 x 81.5 cm. Present location unknown

Remarkably, Rembrandt returned to an old motif that had become obsolete: Actaeon's head has already become that of a stag, a motif we never see in seventeenth-century paintings and prints, but which was current in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century book illustrations and which we also find in the beautiful print by Jacques de Gheyn II after a drawing by Dirck Barendsz. of c. 1580 (figs. 125, 125, 165). By this time the greater part of Rembrandt's huge collection of prints must have been sold, but it seems that, when contemplating such a subject with the drawing pen in hand, Rembrandt automati-

cally started playing with motifs which derive directly from several Actaeon prints that were indelibly etched on his memory as belonging to this subject. It was not only the composition of Tempesta's B. 823 he remembered, he also had the engraving after Dirck Barendsz and the elegant composition of Moreelse in his mind (fig. 126, 129). Apart from the stag's head, we recognize Diana's gesture and the nymphs close behind her from Dirck Barendsz.'s invention, as well as the shape of the grotto, which was also used by Moreelse. However, the pose of Diana's torso and the turn of her head, the nymph at the right of Diana (the one of whom we see her left side from the back while she turns to Actaeon), and the position of Actaeon in relation to the group of women all recall Moreelse's invention. Remarkably, both the engraving after Barendsz. and the one after Moreelse had played no role at all in the conception of Rembrandt's painting of 1634. As we shall see, the radically changed atmosphere of this drawing goes hand in hand with a different approach to the moral and erotic implications of the story.⁶⁴

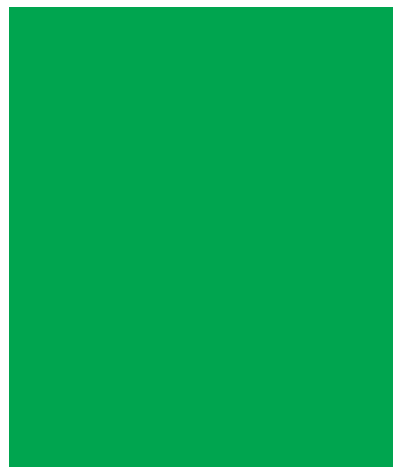
Seventeenth-century interpretations of the two fables and Rembrandt's invention

The two stories, both evolving around the intrusion upon the chasteness of naked virgins bathing in deep, shaded woods (Actaeon even penetrating a shady cave from which water flows), are heavily charged with sexual implications. No wonder that they were food for moralists. Since both intruders were severely punished, the moral of the story is evident if one ignores the fact that Actaeon and Callisto were both innocent victims in Ovid's account. Although this was in both cases actually emphasized by Ovid, it has been consistently disregarded in all the explanations of or references to the stories until late in the seventeenth-century.⁶⁵ Few stories from the *Metamorphoses* received so many explanations in the long tradition of commentaries on Ovid as that of Actaeon. We will not bother here with the older interpretations but

merely survey a few examples of how the fable was approached in seventeenth-century literature.⁶⁶

From the four explanations that Van Mander provided in his *Wtlegghing op den Metamorphosis*, there was one that recurs often in a simplified form in literary texts and in the few cases where text and image are combined. It is the moral explanation in which Actaeon stands for the rash youth devoured by his own vile lust because his unrestrained and immoderate mind yielded to his unchaste eyes, which lead him to doom.⁶⁷ Van Mander used it in the introductory chapter of *Den Grondt der edel vry schilder-const*, when warning pupils that they should work diligently and not follow wanton Cupid who leads youth astray, keeping them from work, since the ‘senses get scattered like dogs at a chase, devouring the flesh of their master’, as happened to Actaeon after he had seen Diana naked.⁶⁸ We find the same moral simplified in quite a number of songs,⁶⁹ while Bredero used it for a love emblem in which the picture shows the familiar image of Actaeon chancing upon Diana (fig. 165). It has the motto ‘To see too much is damaging’, while the little poem reads: ‘If high-spirited youths would let themselves be counselled by reason and intellect / They would not run into danger / But carnal lust makes them look at things that will cause harm / And that bitch often bites her own master to death.’⁷⁰

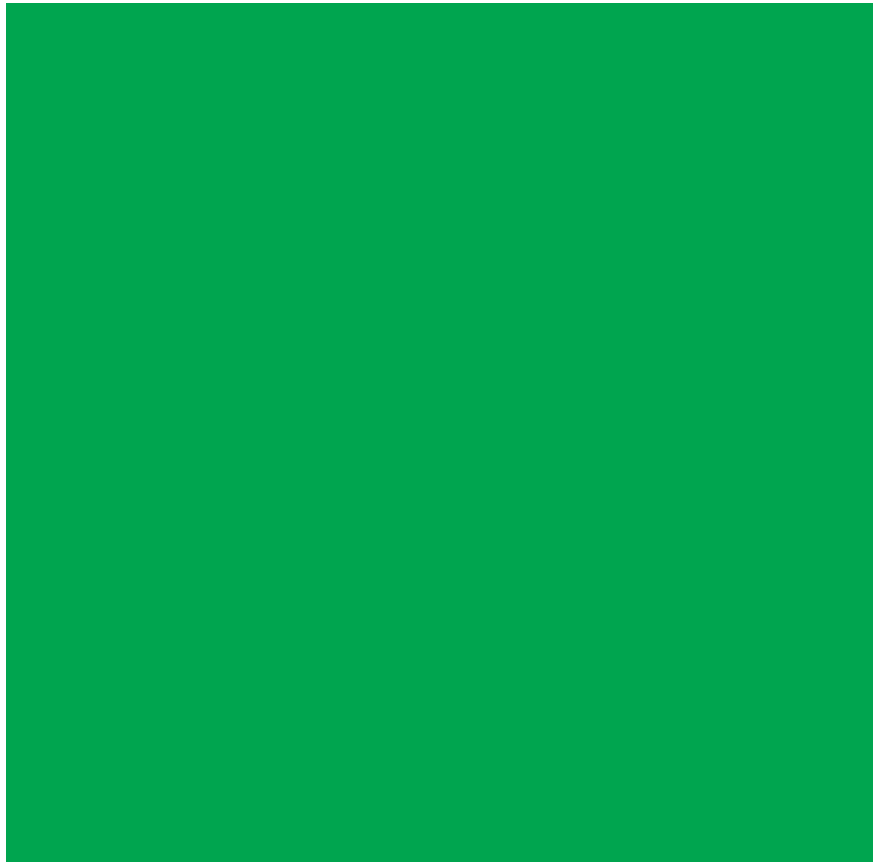
In addition to the examples discussed in chapter v, we notice how the act of seeing is perceived as the source of all trouble. The lines under one of Goltzius’s allegorical representations of *Visus*, the sense of sight (fig. 166), even allude to Actaeon perishing as result of the power of sight: ‘Actaeon, not in his right mind, had observed Diana ... the power of vision harbors the sin of seduction (how many has it not cast into moral decay!) so long as caution does not keep a tight rein on it.’⁷¹ This notion is elaborated upon by Jacob Cats in *Houwelyck* (1625), when he discusses the dangers of seeing female nakedness. Because lust is most easily aroused through the eyes, he admonishes women to keep their delicate limbs



163

Adriaen van der Werff, *The Discovery of Callisto’s Pregnancy*, 1704, panel 46 x 39 cm. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen

covered under all circumstances; the story of Actaeon demonstrates how even men of high standing become like beasts when they see female nakedness. ‘Actaeon becomes a stag, and do you want to know why? / He saw the naked limbs of the goddess of the hunt / A hero, a courageous man, a high-minded Prince / Has only to see a naked woman and changes into a beast; / A horny beast full of lust / A hot-blooded beast driven to carnal desire.’⁷² Interestingly, in *Trou-ringh* (1632), Cats refers to the myth of Actaeon once again in a story in which a man observes a depiction of scenes from this fable.⁷³ In the complicated tale of Rhodope, Cats recounts how the King of Memphis admired a shoe embroidered (painted with the needle) with the fable of Actaeon; a charming ekphrasis follows. The king first sees a landscape with trees, streams and rocks, but when he looks more closely he realizes that the scene contains a deeper meaning. He discerns all kinds of hunting gear, wild boars, dogs, and Diana and her nymphs. This leads him to imagine that he is in the woods and fields himself. His excitement grows when, on the other side of the shoe, he sees Diana and her nymphs bathing: ‘He sees at this side, how Diana is



164

Rembrandt, *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*,
c. 1610-65, Pen and brush in brown 24.6 x 24.7 cm. Dresden, Staatliche
Kunstsammlungen, Kupferstich-Kabinett

washing herself / And how her nymphs are serving her / He even sees the naked bodies of the nymphs, / And he sees how the goddess is being rubbed with clean cloth.⁷⁴ As he enjoys the scene, he is suddenly taken aback: 'He sees her, and is startled, fearing danger / And feels as if he were Actaeon.'⁷⁵ Then he sees on the back of the shoe how Actaeon meets his end: 'He was struck down and could not see anymore / he who saw her naked limbs.'⁷⁶ On a ribbon of the shoe the moral is spelled out: 'Let your eyes not go too far / Because it may lead to disaster / You should not see anything / That no one is allowed to enjoy.'⁷⁷

Jacob Cats certainly had a specific depiction of the scene in mind when composing this passage. We notice

how Cats's viewer moves from savoring all the attractive aspects and all the sensual delights the eyes take in – he is described as an engaged viewer who experiences the scene as if he sees Diana and her nymphs in reality, while Cats explicitly imputes to him the feeling that he is trespassing like the voyeur Actaeon – to the punishment, which is followed by the moral. This moral is, significantly, written. It is as if Cats describes the process of a viewer carefully deciphering a painting like the one by Wte-wael of 1607 (fig. 133). He first scrutinizes the idyll with the naked nymphs, only then realizing that this depicts the story of Actaeon, who enters from the background and is elsewhere in the background being torn to pieces by his dogs.

In a poem by Jan Vos on a painting representing *Diana Surprised by Actaeon* we also find how a moral follows in a simple way from looking at that which is represented.⁷⁸ Here the idyllic scene is also described first: the bathing of the naked women in a shady and secluded pool and then the alarm of the nymphs and the anger of Diana.⁷⁹ The description of the poet now takes on an excited tone that recalls the way Rembrandt depicted the Actaeon scene. The poet emphasizes Diana's rage, Actaeon's recklessness, the dangers of seeing the epitome of 'undressed chasteness' with lustful eyes, and he warns Actaeon frantically of the atrocious vengeance of the virgin goddess.⁸⁰ It seems as if Jan Vos was inspired by the violent nature of the action in Rembrandt's painting. It is, indeed, possible that he had the print of the De Passe studio in mind, which depicts only the Actaeon episode of the picture.

In contrast with the story of Actaeon, the popularity of the discovery of Callisto's pregnancy was entirely pictorial. We rarely come across the fable of Callisto in literature and, if we do, it is clear that it was considered an exemplum of rightly punished sexual offence.⁸¹ It demonstrates the fate of those young women who do not sufficiently protect the precious treasure of a virgin. That Callisto was an innocent victim in Ovid's tale is completely disregarded; she receives the full blame of what has happened to her.⁸² In fact, this moral is on the surface of the story as Ovid recounts it, if one isolates the five lines that constitute the textual basis of the images.⁸³ By generalizing these lines, one understands that a sexual offence is always discovered and will be punished without mercy. Under the many prints of Callisto we always find variations on Ovid's lines, for instance: 'Because the Tegean (i.e., Callisto), who resisted, was disrobed, her hidden disgrace was caught.' (fig. 143)⁸⁴ In this case, by adding the words 'resisted' and 'hidden' and saying that her disgrace 'was caught' instead of 'revealed' (as in Ovid's original text), the writer of the caption further emphasized Callisto's guilt.



165

Anonymous (Michel le Blon?), *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Actaeon*, etching 4.4 x 6.4 cm. In: *Thronus Cupidinis*, 1618

As in representations of the Actaeon fable, in depictions of the Callisto myth the viewer is also confronted with the erotically charged disruption of an idyll and, while enjoying this, he is playfully reminded that he is looking at things one is not allowed to see. In the scene of the young hunter, revolving around the dangers of seeing, the viewer is situated in the same position as the punished offender, which makes it more forceful and immediate than the Callisto scene. On the other hand, what happens in depictions of Callisto is even less meant for the eyes of an outsider. Not only do we see what no mortal is allowed to see, but we are also confronted with the outcome of a sexual act – rendered explicit by Rembrandt – that utterly shocked Diana. This time it is not the man who is punished for the arousal of lust, but rather the woman who is condemned because of the consequences of her seductiveness.

Joachim Wtewael played with the inherent ambiguity of simultaneously showing an erotic idyll and the harsh moral judgment implied by the scene (figs. 133, 134). He did not force the narrative on the viewer, but gave him the chance to quietly gaze at all the variety of different figures. Only after reading the painting thoroughly do all the elements constituting the story, and thus the moral, become apparent. It recalls the way in which Cats's king of Memphis scrutinized with great delight the enticing beauty of all the figures, but at a certain point felt for a



166
 Nicolaes Clock after Hendrick Goltzius,
Visus, 1596, engraving 26.2 x 17.8 cm

moment taken aback when he realized what he was doing and what this would have meant ‘in reality’. The works of Van Poelenburch and followers went a step further because they dispose of almost everything that referred directly to the fables of Actaeon and Callisto. If there were still elements that recalled the stories, then they functioned more like attributes. Moral references were not needed in such small figure paintings produced for an elite. In paintings with larger-scale figures, on the contrary, like those by Jacob van Loo (fig. 162), the stories were clearly and straightforwardly represented and the act of punishment underlined so that the moral was clearly implied.

The moral ambivalence in Rembrandt’s portrayal of the subjects is as strong as in Wtewael’s, but the artists reach their goals through entirely different means. In Rembrandt’s painting nothing is casual, in contrast to

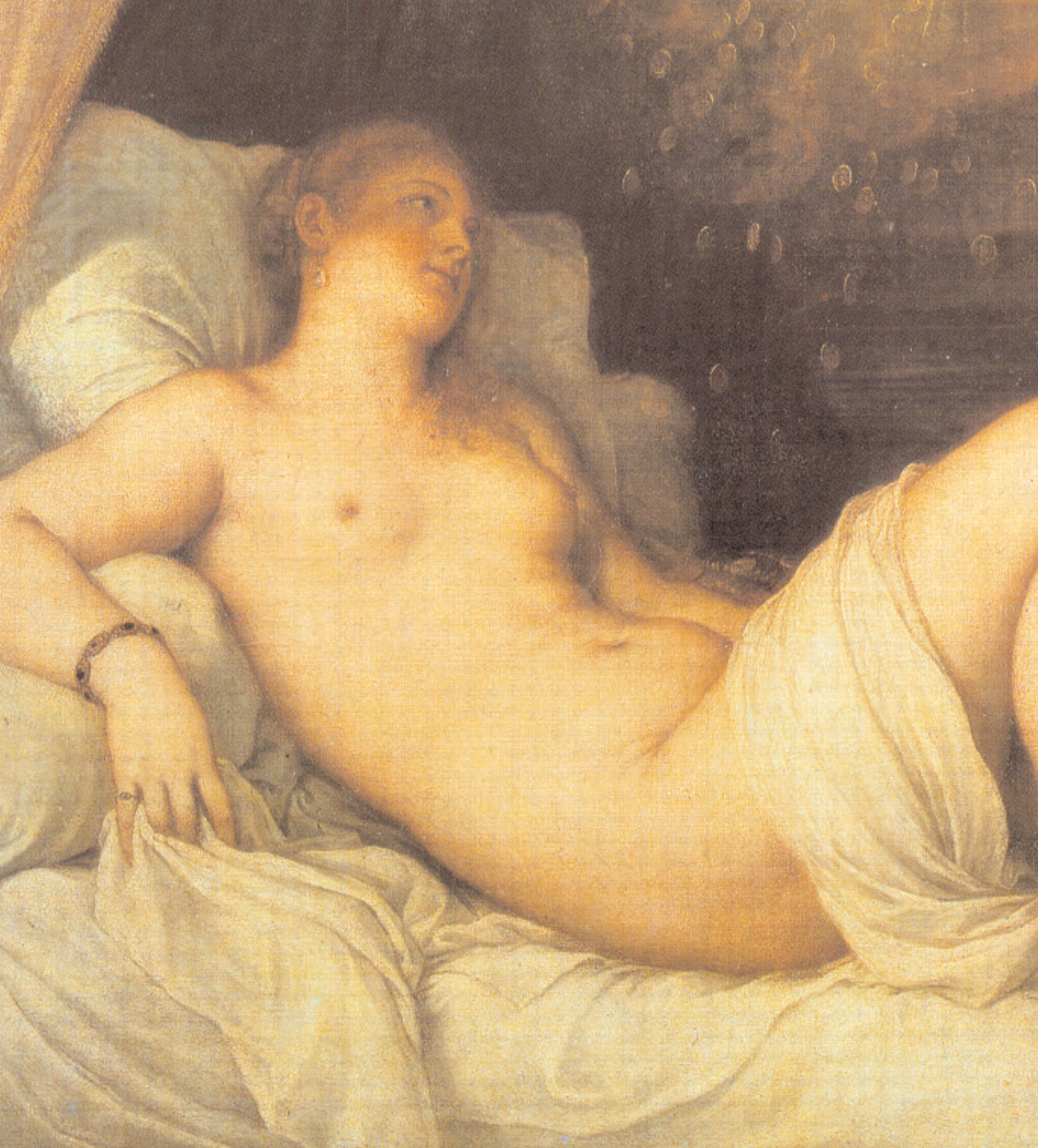
what one finds in Wtewael’s or, even more so, Van Poelenburch’s works. Rembrandt pushed the possibilities of each motif to its limits; he represented both stories with the greatest possible force. There can be no mistaking what befalls those – men as well as women – who transgress the laws of chastity. By combining the two scenes, the notion that sexual desire was in the first place aroused through the sense of sight is vigorously displayed. The man whose lust is aroused by observing the forbidden beauty of nude virgins finds his doom, as does the woman whose beauty inflamed the lust of a man who saw her (and subsequently raped her).⁸⁵

The erotic appeal of a scene which no mortal is allowed to see is enhanced not only by the way in which the softness of the naked bodies of the nymphs is brilliantly suggested. The titillation is also heightened by the nymphs frolicking in the water and the group wrestling around Callisto. The forceful uncovering of Callisto’s swollen belly makes us share the sight that offended Diana, but in Rembrandt’s conception it is also the source of the other nymphs’ malicious merriment. By emphasizing this, Rembrandt turns the scene concurrently into a comedy, which is made explicit by the laughing nymph to the right. When we notice her hilarity, suddenly all the figures – the struggling nymphs around Callisto, those fleeing upon the bank or splashing in the water, the nymph shading her eyes to see Actaeon, the young woman gazing at us with her hand on the buttocks of another diving in the water, even the infuriated figure of Diana herself – take on an irresistibly comical air. The laughter of this nymph functions as a laughing prompt that unsettles the grimness that pervades the scene. The one nymph that looks at the viewer and accentuates the erotic charge of the painting by her gesture does not need to make the out-of-place fool’s gesture of looking through her fingers, as did a nymph in the print after Joseph Heinz (fig. 128), to underline the amusing situation of the viewer who safely takes in and enjoys these ‘forbidden’ scenes. He can laugh about the fury of Diana,

the dumbstruck Actaeon, the panicking virgins, the fierce fight with the desperate Callisto, the gloating of some nymphs and all the havoc and agitation that remains unnoticed by a few others. At the same time, Rembrandt's violent depiction of the occurrences also emphasizes the gruesomeness of the main protagonists' situation, an atmosphere we find expressed in the words of Jan Vos's poem on a painting of Actaeon to which I referred already. These words would certainly be applicable to (the left half of) Rembrandt's painting: 'Diana burns even in the water, she burns with rage and spite / Actaeon, go back, your recklessness goes too far, / she who is naked chasteness herself does not allow herself to be approached by a man / She who is colored purple by shame will not tolerate lustful eyes. / She will avenge herself through the crystals of water / It is impossible to escape the vengeance of a goddess. / Don't you feel the horns growing out of your brain / Flee, flee, Actaeon, flee, before the dogs see you / They will tear you to pieces in the forest, thinking you are a shy stag. / He who reviles chastity will deplore his very existence.'⁸⁶ Rembrandt's highly pitched erotic amusement, however, simultaneously undermines such moral anxiety.

Almost thirty years later the atmosphere had radically changed in the drawing Rembrandt made of the Actaeon scene (fig. 164). As we have seen, he did away completely with the vehemence of the actions and reactions. By depicting Actaeon with a stag's head Rembrandt mitigated the voyeuristic motif of a man looking at nude women. Simultaneously, the accidentality of Actaeon chancing upon the nymphs seems to be accentuated by suggesting that he just came around the corner of the grotto. As indicated above, the gestures and poses of Diana and Actaeon, both with an inclined head and one raised shoulder, express, respectively, hesitation and apology rather than rage and terror. It seems that for the first time an artist is contemplating Actaeon's innocence, which was so emphatically underlined by Ovid: 'But if you seek the truth, you will find the cause of this [Actaeon's death] in

fortune's fault and not in any crime of his. For what crime had mere mischance?'⁸⁷ However, in all seventeenth-century explanations of the myth Actaeon remained guilty, while even in the Dutch translations that were available at the time Ovid's emphasis on fate was consistently ignored.⁸⁸ It was not before Vondel's verse translation, which appeared as late as 1671, that this passage was rendered correctly; Vondel even elaborated a little on Actaeon's innocence: 'One does not find any fault in the one who perished, / But only in fortune; for never will an unwitting boy / justifiably be charged with crime.'⁸⁹ Only late in the seventeenth century does one come across an author who draws upon this thought in a little poem that seems much more in accordance with Rembrandt's late drawing than does Jan Vos's poem quoted above. 'The hunter sees Diane, and is punished with antlers / Was not this punishment too cruel? / What use is beauty, if no one can see it? / The eye of a lover should please and not incense her'.⁹⁰ However, we know that Diana had no choice – the goddess of chastity has to punish a mortal who sees her nude body; but unlike the Diana of thirty years earlier, Rembrandt's Diana in the late drawing does not do this with conviction; the self-evident straightforwardness of her reaction is now entirely lacking. Again we notice how the *oogenblikkiq* (immediate) and *eenstemmich* (unequivocal) action of the 1630s gave way to gestures and movements that are much more ambiguous, that elicit questions in the viewer and compel him to contemplate the tragic and fateful situation the protagonists find themselves in. The titillating tension between the moral and erotic implications, let alone the humoristic possibilities of the theme – which Rembrandt had fully exploited in the 1634 painting – are now completely banned.



Intermezzo

Rembrandt and Notions about Art: ‘Coloring’ and the ‘From Life’ Ideology

In his biography of Rembrandt, published fifty years after the master’s death, Arnold Houbraken – a pupil of a pupil of Rembrandt – voices devastating criticism of Rembrandt’s portrayals of the female nude: he finds them too pathetic for words, ‘because in general these are usually depictions which fill one with disgust and make one wonder how a man of so much genius and intellect could be so obstinate in his preferences.’¹ This statement launches an extensive didactic digression, lasting several pages, in which Houbraken discusses the need to select the most beautiful from nature, in order to draw and paint from a firmly fixed mental image (*vast denkbeeld*), warning sternly against too much – undisciplined – working from life.

Arnold Houbraken and Andries Pels

Houbraken opens this passage by announcing that he will discuss ‘the basics of the various notions held by the great masters ... which they conceived of as fundamental principles’, for the benefit of ‘those inclined to familiarize themselves with artistic practices based on reason and the firmest of foundations, whether to use them or to discuss them.’² To examine properly what he clearly sees as opposing ideologies, he proceeds to compare two luminaries of the art of painting.

First, Houbraken quotes Van Mander’s life of Caravaggio,³ who ‘used to say that all painting, no matter what or by whom, is mere child’s play or a trifle if it is not painted from life, and that one can do no better than to imitate nature; thus he [Caravaggio] did not paint a single stroke without having nature before him.’ Having quoted this,

Houbraken adds: ‘This opinion was shared by our great master Rembrandt, whose fundamental principle was ‘only to imitate nature’, and everything done otherwise he found suspect.’⁴ Houbraken agrees with Karel van Mander who, he tells us, added to Caravaggio’s statement that to imitate nature is not a bad way to achieve good results, ‘for painting after a drawing (even one made closely from life) is not so sound as having life before one’s eyes and imitating nature in all its diverse colors; but one must first be so far advanced in understanding that one can distinguish the most beautiful from the beautiful and is able to select. Herein lies the knot: being able to select the most beautiful from the beautiful.’⁵

A lengthy exhortation follows, in which Houbraken first argues that it is often impossible to work from life, even when depicting emotions (recommending, in passing, Colbert’s *Discours Academiques*). He agrees on this point with people who say that Rembrandt was a great master in portraying emotions as they manifest themselves in human nature, but adds that Rembrandt possessed a rare gift that enabled him to do this – it was not a skill that one could learn. Houbraken is convinced that one should learn to draw from life at the academy, but warns that in Holland artists often lack the judgment to benefit from this exercise, because they do not learn to draw from Italian examples, other prints and drawings, plaster casts of antique statues, or the sculpture of famous masters. Neither do they have any knowledge of anatomy.

According to Houbraken, Rembrandt refused to be bound by others’ rules, nor was he inclined to follow the good examples of those who had achieved lasting fame by knowing how to select the most beautiful. On the contrary, Rembrandt dispensed altogether with the selection procedure, being satisfied to imitate nature exactly as it manifested itself to him. Houbraken ends this passage with the famous quotation from Andries Pels, who in 1681 wrote in his *Gebruik én Misbruik des Tooneels (Use and Abuse of the Theater)*:

When he painted a nude woman, as sometimes
 occurred,
 No Greek Venus did he choose, oh no, upon my word
 His model was a laundress from a hut or a turf
 treader;
 His error he explained away as following Dame
 Nature,
 And all else as idle decoration. Drooping breasts,
 Misshapen hands, marks left on flesh all pinched and
 pressed
 By tightly laced up corsets, garter bands that legs
 constrain,
 It all must be depicted or risk nature’s high disdain;
 His, at least, which brooked no rules, nor did he yet
 believe
 In molding human limbs into proportions bound to
 please.
 Correct perspective, rules of art, he did not utilize,
 Preferring simply to depict whatever filled his eyes.⁶

This spirited attack is assuaged somewhat by Houbraken’s reassurance that his frank opinion is not based on hatred; indeed, he only wants to compare the different approaches to art and to stimulate inquisitive minds to follow the best method, agreeing with Pels that it was to art’s detriment that such an excellent master as Rembrandt had not made better use of his innate talent. Had he done so, he would have been unparalleled. Nevertheless, ‘his art was so much admired and sought after in his own time, that (as the saying goes) one had to beg and throw in money to boot.’⁷

Since the publication of Emmens’s influential book *Rembrandt en de regels van de kunst (Rembrandt and the Rules of Art)* these arguments – which appear in many texts from the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries – have been considered typical of the classicist criticism of Rembrandt that did not arise until after his death. Emmens maintains that this tells us little or nothing about

the perception of Rembrandt's art during his lifetime. Regarding the criticism voiced by Joachim von Sandrart – who lived and worked in Amsterdam from 1637 to 1645, when Rembrandt's fame was at its height – Emmens wrote: 'Sandrart missed his golden opportunity [to give reliable information] and chose instead to repeat the popular clichés of the new classicism in his treatise of 1675.' Emmens adds that the remarks Von Sandrart put into Rembrandt's mouth are plainly anti-classical, 'which was impossible in the Netherlands in 1637-45, since classicism did not yet exist.'⁸

Emmens's argument was so convincing that one no longer asked oneself whether these discussions might possibly reflect long-standing controversies.⁹ This is all the more remarkable because an alternative style in history painting that existed during the whole of Rembrandt's career has in recent decades been given close attention and labeled, confusingly, 'Dutch classicism.'¹⁰ The differences in style between these 'classicists' and Rembrandt and his followers were, however, discussed only in twentieth-century 'Wölfflinian' terms of style, without taking into account how Rembrandt and his contemporaries would have made stylistic distinctions. I am convinced that the criticism voiced at that time by Houbraken, Pels, De Bisschop, Von Sandrart, and others stemmed not so much from theoretical ideas which did not become current until after Rembrandt's death as from ongoing debates that had already been raging during, and even before, Rembrandt's lifetime, debates rooted in discussions that had arisen in sixteenth-century Italy. I assume that Rembrandt was an advocate of *colorito* (*wel schilderen* in Van Mander's terminology, *koloreeren* in Van Hoogstraten's), and therefore a strong proponent of the 'from life' ideology; indeed, he even took a rather provocative stand on this issue. In my view, the ideas which Emmens sees as the 'plainly anti-classical remarks that Von Sandrart put into Rembrandt's mouth' were already burning issues in the 1630s and '40s in Amsterdam.

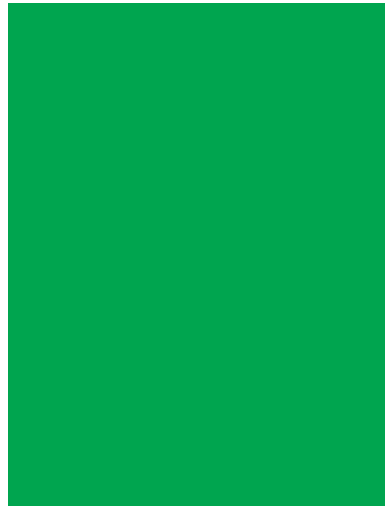
Jan de Bisschop and Joost van den Vondel

Houbraken's statement that Rembrandt, like Caravaggio, was an advocate of painting 'from life' – thereby referring to Van Mander's wording of Caravaggio's ideology – should certainly be taken seriously. The same passage on Caravaggio is quoted twice by Rembrandt's pupil (and Houbraken's master) Samuel van Hoogstraten (most extensively in his discussion of *koloreeren*),¹¹ which means that he may well have remembered it from discussions in Rembrandt's studio. Van Hoogstraten, however, leaves out Van Mander's cautious admonishment, so exhaustively elaborated upon by Houbraken. Instead, after saying that painting (and not drawing) most closely approximates nature, Van Hoogstraten uses Caravaggio's 'dictum' by way of introduction, going on to say that all things in nature have their own shape and appearance, made manifest through their colors, which are an innate part of them, and that it is the task of painting 'to imitate everything', painting's subject therefore being 'the whole of visible nature', perceived primarily through colors and their endless nuances¹² – a sentiment that Rembrandt would have seconded wholeheartedly.

There is also no reason to doubt that the fierce criticism of Rembrandt's nudes first published shortly after his death by Jan de Bisschop and Andries Pels – who cited Rembrandt's 'unshakeable belief' that 'life' provided painters with the best and most perfect examples – does indeed reflect a central tenet of Rembrandt's ideology as a painter. In his dedication to Jan Six of *Paradigmata* (1671), it is apparent that De Bisschop sees Rembrandt's style as a fashion prevailing in a given period, saying that 'every age ... has its fashions, which are introduced by one or more masters held in high esteem at the time and therefore capable of making an impact.'¹³ De Bisschop goes on to say that the conviction of some great artists that life was the best and most perfect example to follow was misunderstood and abused by many, resulting in the notion that 'one must imitate life indiscriminately as it



167
Govert Flinck, *Venus and Cupid*,
1648, canvas 87 x 71.2 cm.
Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv Museum of Art



168
Rembrandt, *The Descent from
the Cross*, c. 1632-33, panel
89.6 x 65 cm. Munich, Alte
Pinakothek

usually and ubiquitously manifests itself.¹⁴ When De Bisschop enumerates the horrors of ‘this mistaken notion, which until recently was deeply rooted in many particularly fine minds of our country and had well-nigh found general acceptance, so that almost everything that was reprehensible to the eye was selected – indeed, sought out – to be painted and drawn, as if it were sacred and special’, he adds that ‘even if a Leda or a Danaë was represented (which shows how entrenched this tradition was), one depicted a naked woman with a fat, swollen stomach, pendulous breasts, garter marks on her legs, and many more such deformities.’¹⁵ The portrayal of the specific and individual characteristics of all things in nature, as they appear to the eye, instead of selecting from the beautiful, is thus presented by De Bisschop as an ideology deeply rooted in many painters of an older generation.

Although De Bisschop does not mention Rembrandt by name, he is clearly referring to that most famous of Amsterdam artists of the past half century, the artist whose style – Houbraken repeatedly insists – was thought highly fashionable and extremely innovative in the 1630s and ’40s. This is expressed most strongly in the biography of Flinck – who arrived in Amsterdam at a time when ‘the manner of Rembrandt was generally praised, so that everything had to be based on his example if it was to please the world’¹⁶ – as well as in the life of De Gelder: ‘the art of Rembrandt met with general approval as something new in its day, so that the practitioners of art were forced (if they wanted their work to be accepted) to adopt that manner of painting, even if they had a much more commendable style themselves.’¹⁷ Houbraken informs us that Flinck later changed to the ‘Italian manner of painting’ (*Italiaansche penceelkonst*), which was admired by true connoisseurs, so that a ‘clear, bright manner of painting’ (*helder schilderen*) again became fashionable (fig. 167).¹⁸ In both biographies, Houbraken mentions the existence of two different manners of painting, of which Rembrandt’s was the more fashionable for some time in Amsterdam.

In the mid-seventeenth century, art lovers were very much aware of these two divergent positions, as borne out by a poem composed in 1656 by Joost van den Vondel to commemorate Flinck's marriage. Herein Vondel characterizes Flinck as a painter who knows how to render every figure with a precise 'outline' (*omtreck*), according to the rules and laws of art ('de regels en de wetten van de kunst'), one who shows others the way with his 'clarity' (*klaerheit*).¹⁹ Another poem Vondel wrote (probably in 1656), which praises a *Sleeping Venus* by Philips Koninck, is discussed in this light by Houbraken, who quotes Vondel's reference to 'sons of darkness', who prefer the shadows, contrasting them with the art of Koninck, who paints without shade and shadow, being a child of clarity and light.²⁰ Houbraken quotes the last-mentioned poem and concludes that it is a sly dig at Koninck's master, Rembrandt, 'showing how he [Koninck] introduced powerful illusion into his work through clarity instead of dismal blackness.'²¹ A characteristic reaction from the opposite side regarding another aspect of the differences in style prevailing in this period came from the poet and playwright Jan Vos, seemingly a champion of Rembrandt's style. A poem in which he condemns a portrayal of the Crucifixion as too idealized opens with the lines: 'This body is completely misshapen / Because it is not completely misshapen' and ends with 'He who portrays the wholly misshapen Christ / Has come the closest to portraying life.'²² Such a poem conjures up visions – then and now – of a *Descent from the Cross* by Von Sandrart (c. 1646/47) juxtaposed with a *Descent from the Cross* by Rembrandt, paintings in which both artists emulate in their own way Rubens's famous composition, which was well known through Lucas Vorsterman's engraving (figs. 168, 169 and 170).²³

No doubt there were heated debates during Rembrandt's lifetime about the divergent artistic styles favored at various times in certain circles. We will now take a look at the roots of different ideologies concerning the correct way to make a painting, and explore the issues



169

Joachim von Sandrart, *The Descent from the Cross*, c. 1646/47, canvas 350 x 185 cm. Formerly Würzburg, Dom, destroyed in World War II



170

Lucas Vorsterman after Rubens, *The Descent from the Cross*, 1620, engraving 85.5 x 43.5 cm

that would have engaged Rembrandt, his pupils, and his rivals when discussing the various manners of painting.

Giorgio Vasari and Karel van Mander

Even anecdotes from classical antiquity were quoted to justify an uncompromising ‘from life’ ideology. Thus Van Hoogstraten, after quoting Caravaggio’s statement, refers to Plutarch when he writes ‘that we regard with pleasure and admiration the painting of a lizard, a monkey, the ugliest of Thersites *tronies*, yea, even that which is most loathsome and despicable, if only it is natural, and say that even though one cannot make the ugly and misshapen beautiful, nor the bad wonderful, ugliness nevertheless becomes beautiful through its naturalness, and as far as imitations are concerned, they deserve the same praise that is due to the most exquisite.’²⁴ Another example of citing the ancients is the Eupompus anecdote with which Van Mander closed his chapter on the portrayal of the emotions (see chapter III). According to the biography that Van Mander adopted from Pliny, Eupompus supposedly said to his pupil Lysippos that he ought not to follow the example of the ancients but rather the examples visible all around him, pointing to the men, women and children in a market square.²⁵ These words resound in the intentionally controversial statement made by Caravaggio as cited by Van Mander.²⁶ Van Mander must have heard this exciting piece of news about Rome’s new star painter from an artist just back from Italy. As already noted, Van Mander – who was obviously quite ambivalent about Caravaggio’s extreme standpoint – stated that it was always good to imitate nature in all its diverse colors,²⁷ provided that one first learn to select the most beautiful from life.²⁸ Van Mander, however, being a more ardent supporter of working from life than any theorist before him,²⁹ ends his account of Caravaggio’s art and (bad) character by saying that ‘as regards his manner of painting (*handelinghe*), it is very pleasing, and a wondrously beautiful manner for young painters to follow.’³⁰

Van Mander could not have known that this was exactly what would happen – and on a large scale, too – to the dismay of Caravaggio’s later critics.

The debate about these two methods had been raging for some time before Caravaggio took a stand, after which it doubtless continued as a topic of discussion in many an artist’s studio.³¹ The difference between, roughly speaking, line (as the expression of the invention originating in the mind, which selects the most beautiful and the most exalted that nature has to offer) as opposed to painting from life (as the means of achieving the most natural and lifelike expressiveness) was first clearly formulated in writing by Giorgio Vasari, after he and Michelangelo had seen a painting of the naked *Danaë* by Titian (fig. 171). Vasari’s account of the clash of these divergent views was adopted in its entirety by Van Mander.³² In his second edition of the *Vite*, Vasari wrote that, after they had left Titian’s studio, ‘Michelangelo had high praise for Titian’s work and manner of coloring, but afterwards said what a pity it was that Venetian painters did not learn to draw properly from the beginning and did not study more, because, he said, if this man [Titian] had profited as much from studying the art of drawing as he had from making studies from nature and especially from life, there would have been no better painter’ – we just heard an echo of this statement in Pels’s words about Rembrandt as quoted by Houbraken – ‘for he had a great mind and his manner of painting was very lifelike and natural.’ Vasari himself added (and Van Mander repeated) that ‘those who did not practice drawing sufficiently – making studies based on beautiful examples, both antique and modern – will not be able to draw on experience to make anything perfect on their own, nor enhance the things one does from life, so that those parts which are sometimes found to be imperfect in life can be endowed with a proper grace through the knowledge of art.’³³

This, in a nutshell, articulates the controversial standpoint that will henceforth spawn both detractors and supporters, the art of Titian – whose point of departure was light and color instead of line – epitomizing the ‘painting from life’ ideology.³⁴ ‘From life’, ‘very lively’, ‘lifelike’, ‘seems to be alive’, ‘naturally flesh-like’, and ‘like reality’ are terms we encounter in Van Mander’s life of Titian, which must have been a great source of inspiration for a painter like Rembrandt.³⁵ It is striking that most of the concepts we encounter in Houbraken, Pels, and De Bisschop are already present in these few lines. In Titian’s biography Vasari also described – and this, too, occurs in Van Mander – how Titian developed a working method in which he completely bypassed the drawing stage and painted directly from life: he would ‘paint his things from life without drawing, seeing to it that he represented with colors everything he saw there, be it hard or soft. He was convinced that to paint with colors, without otherwise learning to draw on paper, was the best way to go about things and the correct way to draw.’³⁶ Vasari disparaged this method. Van Mander, however, repeated neither Vasari’s censure nor his lengthy discourse on the necessity of drawing to capture one’s ideas and to perfect one’s inventions;³⁷ instead, he recommended drawing for practical reasons, because it helps in putting together compositions.³⁸ That Venetian painters hide their inability to draw behind the splendor of color, as Vasari also said, is omitted altogether by Van Mander. Other terms used to describe Titian’s art were ‘soft’ (*poezelig*) and ‘coming forth’ (*verheven*, literally ‘raised up’, as though in relief).

The differences outlined by Vasari were obviously considered controversial by Van Mander: ‘The painters of Tuscany and Rome have always accused and rebuked the Venetian painters – I do not know whether, apart from the fact that they are right, a certain amount of envy is not to blame – for having drawn and studied too little, and for their strong and beautiful coloring, but perhaps these rebukers have themselves at times paid too little at-



171 ► see colourplate x, p. xx
 Titian, *Danaë*, 1545-46, canvas 120 x 172 cm. Naples, Gallerie Nazionali di Capodimonte

attention to good coloring and painting.’³⁹ ‘In Rome one learns to draw, in Venice, to paint’, wrote Van Mander in the margin of his introduction to the *Grondt*, when he advises young painters who travel to Italy to learn the proper manner of drawing in Rome and ‘painting/coloring well’, (*wel schilderen* being Van Mander’s translation of *colorito*) in Venice.⁴⁰ Van Mander went on to say, however, that he himself had not gone to Venice for lack of time, which means that his knowledge of Venetian painting – and his obvious admiration for Venetian artists – was based mainly on secondhand information and the few works he had no doubt seen in Rome, Prague, and Holland. That he saw the Venetian manner as something truly distinct from Italian painting in general also emerges from an interesting statement he made in his biography of the Greek painter Eupompus, who, we are told, was the first great painter of Sycionia, whose success led his contemporaries in Greece to speak of the Ionic, Sycionic, and Attic manner, ‘just as we now speak, I think, of paintings in the Netherlandish, Italian, or Venetian manner.’⁴¹

Vasari’s statement in the second edition of his *Vite* reveals his frustration in dealing with a much-admired art –

and it is obvious that Vasari, too, admired the work of Titian – which was lacking in well-defined contours and could be judged neither by the quality of its drawing nor by Vasari's basic criteria: line and modeling, form and proportion. For Vasari, whose aesthetic principles had been formed by the grand tradition of central Italian fresco painting, the primacy of *disegno* – the key to the entire imaginative process – was crucial. Essential to Vasari's concept of *disegno* was his understanding of it as an intellectual pursuit through which one gained general and universal knowledge of nature, as opposed to knowledge of the individual and particular – the 'accidental' things in nature: 'a universal judgment similar to a form or idea of all the things in nature.'⁴² For someone whose notions of art were based on the idea that contours and shapes represented abstractions of material things – and for whom color was by definition a mere accident – the great art of Titian was absolutely baffling. An artist who explored instead the possibilities of oils (in a style, moreover, that had little use for precise contours), who depended primarily on color, light, and the material substance of paint, and circumvented the fundamentals of drawing in the service of a more convincing lifelikeness – such an artist surely deserved to be censured for neglecting to perfect his art through direct study of the ancient and modern marvels of Rome.⁴³ Vasari could see Titian's art only as an art dependent on copying nature, an art whose deficient drawing was concealed by the splendor of its color, an art whose very nature prevented it from aspiring to a higher level of cognition.⁴⁴ And, to make matters worse, it was an art that did not lend itself to verbal discourse.

Vasari's comments seem to have been a reaction to the way some Venetian writers praised their hero Titian for his naturalistic achievements, in particular the lifelike effect produced by his masterly coloring. Ludovico Dolce, a great champion of Titian, argued in *L'aretino* of 1557 – a response to Vasari's first edition of the *Vite* – that by means of *colorito* the painter should captivate the

viewer and deceive his eyes in a pleasurable way by rendering nature convincingly in all its diversity, especially that most important and most difficult of natural subjects: the color, texture, and softness of human flesh.⁴⁵ Dolce maintained that colors should be blended in a diffuse and unified way so as to appear natural: contours are to be avoided, since they do not occur in nature, and he defined painting as 'nothing other than the imitation of nature.' The objective of Titian's style was described by Dolce as follows: 'Titian ... walks in step with nature, so that every one of his figures has life, movement and flesh that palpitates. He has shown in his works no empty gracefulness, but the required appropriateness of colors: no artificiality in ornament, but a masterly concreteness: no crudity, but the mellowness and softness of nature. And the highlights and shadows in his creations always contend and interplay with one another, and fade out and decrease in the very same way as nature itself has them do.'⁴⁶

It is certainly no coincidence that it was a female nude, Titian's *Danaë*, that prompted Vasari to open this discussion contrasting the two approaches. The portrayal of this subject – always morally risky – makes the problem of choosing between intimate proximity and respectful distance all the more pressing. *Colorito* – always associated with lifelikeness, naturalness, and sensuality – strove to bring the subject portrayed close to the viewer's perception; by contrast, *disegno* – seen primarily as appealing to the intellect – actually created some measure of distance to the subject. Again and again we shall see – whether coming from De Bisschop, Pels, or Houbraken, the critics of Manet's *Olympia*, or Sir Kenneth Clark discussing Rembrandt – that the debate on idealization versus naturalism rages most fiercely when kindled by the female nude. It was precisely in these representations that the rousing effect of great lifelikeness, perceived by many as a big problem, met with the strongest resistance. It was even possible to find support from a classical source for the idea that it was color, much more than



172

Michelangelo da Caravaggio, *The Deposition*, 1603-04, canvas 300 x 203 cm. Rome, Vatican Gallery

drawing, that exerted the most powerful effect on our minds and was most capable of conjuring up a convincing illusion of lifelikeness: 'The drawing alone (says Plutarch) has nowhere near so rousing a power as color: let it be noted that colors alone, by creating the illusion of a living likeness, have the power to move us', as Van Hoogstraten paraphrased Junius, expressing an idea that would have been seconded by Titian, Caravaggio, and Rembrandt.⁴⁷

After Vasari had thrown down the gauntlet, painters could choose sides in the dispute, and we have already seen with what vehemence Caravaggio was said to have done so (which is not to say that Caravaggio literally did not paint a single stroke without having nature before him, since what counted was the *suggestion* that everything was painted from life, as every painter at that time would have understood; fig. 172). The Carracci brothers, on the other hand, consciously combined the two manners. Indeed, Agucchi said that they brought together nature and ideal beauty, and stressed that the purpose of their study trips to Venice and Lombardy had been to learn to imitate nature as convincingly as the great artist who had preceded them there.⁴⁸ Annibale Carracci even called Vasari ignorant for not understanding that the great artists of the past had drawn their inspiration at first hand from nature and not at second hand from antique examples.⁴⁹ Caravaggio's statement, as quoted by Van Mander, would certainly have been considered a more extreme version of the Venetian-Lombard *colorito* ideology.⁵⁰ This is corroborated by Federico Zuccari's remark upon first seeing Caravaggio's paintings of St. Matthew: there was nothing new in them, he said, since they were in the manner of Giorgione. Later on, Samuel van Hoogstraten mentioned Titian, Giorgione, and Caravaggio in the same breath as 'painters who have valued this [*colorito*] so highly that those who were envious accused them of neglecting the art of drawing.'⁵¹

Clearly, similar terms were used when Titian, Caravaggio, and later Rembrandt were measured against the academic *diseqno* ideal. This discourse reveals the terms used to discuss their various styles, terms which the painters themselves evidently used – Rembrandt and his school, for example, and the group now known as the Dutch classicists – to describe their artistic objectives. Certain passages of the treatise written many years later by Rembrandt's pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten appear to reflect discussions that took place in Rembrandt's studio in the first half of the 1640s – the period of his appren-

ticeship. Van Hoogstraten twice repeats Vasari's story relating Michelangelo's opinion of Titian's *Danaë*,⁵² which suggests that this subject was hotly debated during Van Hoogstraten's apprenticeship – the very period in which Rembrandt was working on his own spectacular *Danaë*. Van Hoogstraten – who in the course of his career as a history painter converted from a Rembrandtesque style to an entirely different manner (as Houbraken also emphasizes)⁵³ – says he would prefer not to judge, for 'their methods and views were very different': some think it best to concern oneself only with things beautiful, whereas others believe that everything created by nature is worthy of attention. In his opinion, both schools of thought have their merits.⁵⁴ The side Rembrandt had chosen was obvious, and his decision to take *Danaë* as the subject of his first life-size nude seems therefore to have been an open declaration of his standpoint (see chapter VIII, fig. 205).

Karel van Mander continued

Van Mander, the first to record Caravaggio's much-discussed standpoint, obviously admired the Venetian manner and, although cautious in his praise, he was even sympathetic to Caravaggio's supposed pronouncement. The evident susceptibility of sixteenth-century northern artists to the *colorito* ideology was undoubtedly due to the fact that, as Ann-Sophie Lehmann convincingly demonstrated, the exploration of the oil medium in the service of lifelikeness had been of central importance in the northern tradition since Jan van Eyck. Lehmann also pointed out that in the sixteenth century the subject of 'coloring well' – mentioned not only in the defense of Venetian art, as we saw in the case of Dolce, but also in commentaries on northern art – was almost always connected with the lifelike depiction of human flesh, even as early as 1517/18, when the Italian De Beatis wrote an appreciative assessment of Van Eyck's *Adam and Eve* (fig. 173), saying that the figures are 'of an appearance seeming like

nature itself, and nude, painted in oils with so much perfection and naturalness, both in the proportion of the limbs and in the rendering of the flesh and shadows, that without doubt one can say that in panel painting these are the most beautiful works of Christendom.'⁵⁵

The same hesitation noted in Van Mander is encountered as early as 1564, when Lampsonius seconds Vasari's criticism of Titian, emphasizing the need for *disegno* and criticizing contemporary painters who depict 'soft and seductive flesh to captivate the eyes of the viewer, while neglecting the essential laws of art';⁵⁶ he then talks at length, however, about the importance of color, concentrating almost exclusively on the depiction of flesh. His discussion contains some interesting points that might have been borrowed from the Venetian Paolo Pino, as well as elucidations of phenomena hitherto undescribed. He observes, for instance, that the blood under the skin causes much differentiation in skin color, that the pigments used should be grainy to suggest the pores of the skin,⁵⁷ that shadows must be transparent, that skin should be painted in colors that 'love the light' and, of course, that the figures should seem to stand out from the surface.⁵⁸

Van Mander himself also frequently connects *wel schilderen* and *coloreren* with the depiction of human flesh. Although in many respects Van Mander adopts Vasari's notions of drawing, one always finds in his writings a particular emphasis on the combination of painting, lifelikeness, and 'from life', often linked to the rendering of human flesh. In his biography of Correggio – the painter par excellence for the 'lovely glow of the coloring' ('schoon gloeyentheydt des coloreerens') and a 'natural, fleshlike quality' ('eyghen vleeschachticheyt') (fig. 187),⁵⁹ in the words Van Mander attributes to Goltzius – Van Mander writes: 'It is certainly an extraordinary feature of our Art that we must adhere to various main precepts: one of them is drawing well, but of prime importance is painting well, to which all else tends.'⁶⁰ Not surprisingly, he opens his chapter in the *Grondt* entitled

‘Van wel schilderen, oft Coloreren’ (‘On Painting Well, or Coloring’) by saying that drawing is comparable to the body and painting to the mind or soul, a comparison he must have thought up himself.⁶¹ It is a parallel that undoubtedly struck a chord and continued to resound in seventeenth-century Dutch studios: Rembrandt’s pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten, who expressed ideas on both *colorito* and *disegno*, even wrote a verse about it in his chapter on ‘Coloring’, emphasizing that only painting could truly create the illusion of life:

If drawing should be praised as body whole,
Then painting surely is the mind and soul,
Like the heavenly fire which in Prometheus’ statue
First sparked life: the art of drawing doth imbue
With life that to which painting gives birth⁶²

In the chapter ‘On Painting Well, or Coloring’, Van Mander first praises the northern tradition of precise painting, but he follows this by saying that Titian’s work evolved from precise painting (fig. 184) into painting with smudges and coarse brushstrokes (figs. 123, 124), both of which enabled him to achieve great lifelikeness. The second manner – in which the paintings, viewed from a distance, seem almost to be alive (‘te leven schier mocht wanen’) – appears to be achieved with nonchalance and effortlessness, and yet it is especially difficult. Most of the artists who imitated this manner did not succeed at it; it is therefore better to learn a ‘pure manner’ (‘suyver manier’) first.⁶³ It then appears that Van Mander is thinking in particular of a manner with gradual transitions from highlights to shadows, striving for a ‘bodily blooming’ (‘lijfverwigh bloeyen’) and ‘a more fleshly glow’ (‘vleeschiger gloeyen’) in the painting of the flesh tones. ‘Render fairly flesh-like all your shadows, / And make your highlights look like skin that glows’, to which he adds that this will also please the eye of ordinary people.⁶⁴ He goes on to relate that Goltzius told him of a shepherd in Titian’s *Adoration* that seems to stand out

173

Jan van Eyck, The panels of *Adam and Eve* from the *Ghent Altarpiece*, 1442, panel 204 x 33.2 cm. Ghent, St. Bavo Cathedral

because of only one highlight, whereas the others recede into obscurity.

What Van Mander calls the new manner of painting is clearly the Venetian manner, which is ‘much softer and more diffuse’, and does not display flesh of the ‘stony colorlessness’ or ‘fish-like, chilly color’ often seen in northern art.⁶⁵ What one must strive for, he says a bit further on, is a glowing, flesh-like appearance. One wonders if this is not actually the voice of Goltzius, who, once back from Italy, could not stop thinking – according to Van Mander – about ‘the sweet gracefulness of Raphael, then Correggio’s lifelike rendering of flesh, the advancing highlights and receding, smoothly blending shadows of Titian, the beautiful silken materials and beautifully painted things of Veronese, and others at Venice, so that works from his native land could no longer completely satisfy him. For painters it was stimulating and instructive to hear him speak of these subjects, for his talk was full of glowing flesh parts, glowing shadows, and other unfamiliar or little-heard expressions.’⁶⁶ What preoccupied Goltzius was his search for terms to describe the specific characteristics of the Venetian and northern Italian art of *colorito*. The only Tuscan/Roman artist he mentions is Raphael, and then it was only his ‘sweet gracefulness’ that enchanted him; otherwise it was mainly the art of Correggio, Titian, Veronese, and ‘others in Venice’ that held him in thrall. There is one other place where Van Mander explicitly mentions Goltzius’s admiration of certain Italian paintings. His life of Correggio contains a passage on the *Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine*: ‘Just as the sun surpasses other celestial bodies in brightness, this painting, so outstanding in its excellence, surpasses all others. I add that I have this from the mouth of Goltzius, a man of good judgment, who, being in Rome, went to see it, his art-loving eyes drawn to it at once with great delight and pleasure, being truly amazed by the very beautiful manner of painting and the lovely glow of the coloring.’⁶⁷

Goltzius’s enthusiasm for Venetian-Lombard paint-

ing prompted him to learn to paint, in order to compete with those masters.⁶⁸ When he set about doing this after 1600, he no doubt saw himself as an artist akin to the Carracci brothers, who combined the Venetian and Tuscan/Roman manners – an objective Goltzius fully realized in his first masterpiece, the *Danaë* of 1603 (fig. 189). Van Mander instantly seized upon this, describing the figure of Danaë as ‘painted miraculously flesh-like and plastically’ and displaying ‘great study of contours and structure’ – the first half of the sentence obviously describing the Venetian manner, the second half the *disegno* ideal.⁶⁹ This striving to combine the two, especially in the portrayal of the nude – whereby ‘coloring’ was considered the pre-eminent means of achieving the lifelike rendering of human skin – was nicely expressed three quarters of a century later by Van Hoogstraten, who continually vacillated between the two poles but often could not help betraying his formative years in Rembrandt’s studio: ‘Drawing is brought to perfection by natural coloring, and coloring by unerring and well-ordered drawing. But these two never meet in a more wonderful way than in the human nude, in which nature did everything in its power, so it seems, to bestow that beautiful shape with noble coloring and skin tones.’⁷⁰

From Rome to Holland: debates in the first half of the seventeenth century

Apart from Van Mander’s reluctant approval of what he knew of Caravaggio’s ideology, the assessment of Caravaggio’s art, which was voiced mostly by his opponents, became increasingly negative. To hear more, we first turn to Rome. Between 1617 and 1621, when Caravaggio and his followers were already losing ground to the increasingly popular classicizing manner, the art lover Mancini was still writing approvingly of Caravaggio: ‘our times owe much to Michelangelo da Caravaggio for the manner of painting with colors that he introduced, which is now quite generally followed. . . . It cannot be de-

nied that for single figures, heads, and coloring (*colorito*) he attained great heights, and that the artists of our century are much indebted to him.⁷¹ Mancini divided contemporary Italian painting into four schools, one of which was led by Caravaggio: The followers of this school are ‘very observant of reality’, which they always keep before them while working, rendering ‘very strong light and very deep shadows’ to lend powerful ‘relief’ to their painting.⁷² Mancini, however, obviously approved more of the style of the Carracci brothers, ‘who combined the manner of Raphael with that of Lombardy, in order to see nature and possess it, taking the good, leaving the bad, enhancing it, and by means of natural light bestowing it with color and shadow full of movement and grace.’⁷³ Somewhat earlier, between 1607 and 1615,⁷⁴ Agucchi, a great admirer of Annibale Carracci, had made the distinction between artists who merely imitate life (Caravaggio) and are therefore admired by the masses, and artists who strive for the ‘idea of beauty’ (‘idea della bellezza’) (Carracci) – in other words, the best of all possible worlds. Agucchi admits, however, that Caravaggio is ‘most excellent at coloring’ (‘eccellentissimo nel colorire’).⁷⁵

The heated discussions Caravaggio’s work must have stirred up in Rome during the first decades of the seventeenth century clearly resound in statements made by Giovanni Baglione, a contemporary (and enemy) of Caravaggio, who began writing his *Vite* in 1620 but did not publish these biographies until 1642, by which time Caravaggio’s art had lost the day. Baglione admitted – since by this time it was a generally held view – that Caravaggio’s palette was wonderful and of great naturalness, but he criticized Caravaggio’s method of painting everything completely from life. The result, Baglione maintained, was banal, lacking in everything essential to great art. Caravaggio himself thought he had surpassed all other painters, Baglione wrote, but others were of the opinion that he had ruined the art of painting, because many younger artists, who had followed in his footsteps, ‘sim-



174

Dirck van Baburen, *Granida and Daifilo*, 1623, canvas
167 x 209.5 cm. Brussels, Musees royaux des beaux-arts

ply copy heads from life without studying the fundamentals of drawing and the profundity of art, being satisfied with color values alone.’ To his regret, Baglione was forced to admit that the finest connoisseurs of the day were great admirers of Caravaggio’s work.⁷⁶ The sharp attack on Caravaggio and his followers by the Spanish painter Vicente Carducho, whose theory of art, published in 1633, was based on the major Italian theorists (among them Zuccaro and Lomazzo), probably reflected the debates raging all over Europe when he called Caravaggio ‘an evil genius, who worked naturally, almost without rules, without doctrine, without study, but only with the strength of his talent, and nothing but nature before him, which he simply copied ...’⁷⁷ Copying nature, ignoring the rules, disparaging the value of study, depending on one’s talent alone – this describes the masters of *colorito*, of which Caravaggio had become the leading example.

This controversy – and the language connected with it – was no doubt taken back to the Netherlands by all the artists and art lovers who visited Rome in the first decades of the seventeenth century, including Rem-



175
Pieter Lastman, *De Death of Coronis*,
c. 1610-15, panel 56 x 79 cm. Present location
unknown



176
Jan Tegnagel, *Vertumnus and Pomona*, 1617,
copper 20 x 27 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

brandt's teachers Jacob van Swanenburgh and Pieter Lastman. In the first two decades of the seventeenth century, the 'from life' ideology became firmly rooted in Dutch history painting, and the art of the late sixteenth century – an art, based on a mannered stylization of forms, for which the notion of grace (*bevallicheyt*, the Italian *grazia*) was crucial – was consciously replaced by an emphasis on the ordinary and ungraceful, which often appeared deliberately graceless.⁷⁸ We see this not only in the work of the Utrecht Caravaggists Hendrick Terbrugghen and Dirk van Baburen (fig. 174), but already earlier on, in the work of such Amsterdammers as Lastman (fig. 175), Tegnagel (fig. 176), and Van den Valckert (fig. 177). Gerbrand Adriaensz. Bredero, who undoubtedly knew these painters well, put this striving into words in 1618.

Bredero, in declaring his preference for the everyday, native Dutch idiom above the jargon used by scholarly playwrights, states: 'for, as a painter, I have followed the *schilderachtig*, saying the best painters are those who come closest to life, not those who believe it is witty to strike attitudes alien to nature, to twist and bend limbs and bones, which they often elevate and contort too unreasonably, beyond the bounds of what is proper and fitting.'⁷⁹ Thus, Bredero compares the clever, stylized forms of the previous generation of painters and men of letters, and contrasts them with his objective – to write in the vernacular, the everyday language heard in the streets – as well as with the goals of a younger generation of painters who had ardently adopted the 'from life' ideology. Here he introduces the term *schilderachtig* (meaning both 'painterly' and 'painter-like'), which – Boudewijn Bakker has convincingly argued – 'means in the first place 'of painters in general' or 'as painters say', but he [Bredero] is thinking of a particular kind of painter, namely the one who chooses to work from life, as if he is the painter par excellence. As a result, *schilderachtig* acquires a powerful overtone of 'from life.'⁸⁰ This is corroborated by Bredero's second use of the term in his



177

Werner van de Valckert, *Amphitrite*, 1619, panel 108 x 75 cm. Skoyen (Oslo), Coll. E.W. Sissener

foreword to *De Spaanschen Brabander* of 1618: ‘For I place before your eyes here, nakedly and *schilderachtig*, the abuses of this modern, depraved world.’⁸¹ Again he is saying that he wants to write like a special kind of painter, one who ‘depicts reality ‘nakedly’, that is to say, unveiled and unadorned, ‘from life.’⁸² One only has to place the work of the above-mentioned painters from Bredero’s circle next to contemporaneous works by painters of the older generation, such as Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem (figs. 98, 118, 149, 328), Abraham Bloemaert (figs. 31, 204), and Joachim Wtewael (figs. 28,

133, 134, 203), in order to understand what he is talking about.

Unfortunately, during this period in the Netherlands, practically nothing was written about art; nevertheless, we catch a glimpse of the fierceness with which this battle was fought in a curious pamphlet, written by Jacques de Ville in 1628,⁸³ which I shall discuss in some detail, for despite the fact that Emmens mentioned it, it has been almost completely ignored. In this context, however, it supplies us with interesting information,⁸⁴ which involves a conversation between a carpenter who asks all the right questions and a painter-architect who gives all the right answers, while toward the end of the dialogue a Bad Painter interrupts and makes a nuisance of himself. The painter-architect is primarily an advocate of the notion that a good painter must also be an architect – and therefore well versed in geometry and the rules of perspective and proportion – and be especially interested in the correct rendering of architectural paintings containing figures (which he views as the highest form of art). For us, however, he is particularly interesting because of his remarks on a type of painter who, in his eyes, is unfit (and thus represented by the Bad Painter). And this proves to be the painter who pays no heed to correct drawing, has no knowledge of and takes no interest in geometry, perspective, and proportion, and is interested only in acquiring a particular manner and in painting from life.

The carpenter stresses the strong differences of opinion among painters: those for whom true art consists of something entirely different from mere *handeling* (manner of painting) and those whose discussions of art are ‘without foundation’ (*sonder fondament*), who spend their whole lives learning a particular *handeling*.⁸⁵ According to the painter-architect, it is not only in the Netherlands that a good *handeling* is enough to qualify one as a good master, for the evil comes in fact from Italy. Such painters, the painter-architect says, we now have here in great numbers, ‘for in all the paintings one sees

nowadays that come from there, one finds no more than a figure, or two or three figures, grouped together and painted closely from life with stopped light, in order to see a lot of brown'.⁸⁶ They are incapable of painting a whole figure, and they have no idea how to depict architecture. But witness, for instance, the sixteenth-century Italian painters who achieved greatness because of their architectural abilities – Bramante, Raphael, Baldassare Peruzzi, Giulio Romano! Now, however, painters – both here and in Italy – tend to make only 'two or three figures together, painting them against a brown background, and most of them are only half-length', and no effort is made to do any more than 'acquire a good *handeling*, which we in this country have brought to such perfection that one cannot easily attain greater heights.'⁸⁷ The Bad Painter then interrupts the conversation, declaring indignantly that the painter-architect 'thinks little of the *handeling* compared to the drawing', whereas nowadays *handeling* receives the most attention' and painters try particularly hard to do their best in this respect.⁸⁸ The infuriated answer is that they learn art backward (like trying to sing a piece of music without understanding it): a sustained effort to learn a particular *handeling* is not at all necessary.

Not surprisingly, the Bad Painter is so stupid as to ask if one must do more than merely work from life. The answer is, in part, that even though there are very good painters who 'do nothing but paint closely from life, and handle the colors in such a way that no one could surpass them in manner of painting',⁸⁹ such painters know nothing of anatomy and musculature, and could not utter a word of sense concerning the correct proportions for a figure.

Toward the end of the discussion, the painter-architect complains that art lovers are often willing to spend a lot of money on the *handeling* alone: indeed, there are even some who pay – oh, the shame of it! – 'two, three, four hundred guilders and more for a *tronie*, which is only one-eighth of the body.' Those people care more about

the manner of painting than about 'good symmetry'. No wonder, then, that most painters devote all their attention to their *handeling*.⁹⁰ In the epilogue it finally emerges that the painter-architect thinks that 'we cannot improve upon the ancient masters, but we can imitate them'⁹¹ – something that Huygens, and undoubtedly also Rembrandt, vehemently opposed (see chapter III). Even though De Ville's painter-architect is ultimately interested in depicting a building with proper perspective, with a ground plan and elevations, peopling it appropriately (this is true art, for which nobody is willing to pay much), this debate gives a good picture of the art fashionable at the time of writing – 1628 – an art, fiercely resisted by some, which was characterized by a couple of half-length figures placed against a dark background, displaying many shades of brown, boasting a virtuoso handling of paint and color, taking no pains to draw correctly and ignoring the rules and laws of symmetry, anatomy, proper proportions, and perspective – thus lacking a foundation (*fondament*) expressible in words.

These traits characterize the work of the Caravagists, and it is this kind of painting the author undoubtedly has in mind ('stopped light' and 'two or three figures ... usually only half-length' refer directly to this), though this description is for the most part just as applicable to the art of Rembrandt. But Rembrandt certainly did not see himself as an ignorant painter – as opponents were wont to characterize such painters, as emerges from De Ville's pamphlet – but as a painter of an entirely different persuasion, who believed that strict adherence to the rules of anatomy and proportion was a practice best followed by one's less capable colleagues, in the same way that Huygens scorned those who obediently followed the rules of rhetoric. In Huygens's view, an aspiring orator would do better to forget the theoretical rules of rhetoric as propagated by classical authorities like Quintilian, because the point was to get one's message across convincingly, and for that, only innate talent, simplicity, and naturalness were necessary. Of course like-minded painters

had totally turned around the idea of who the true artists were and who were foolish and ignorant. As Caravaggio's statement implied, the inferior painters were those who did *not* work directly from nature, who produced mere 'bagatelles, child's play, or trifles.'

These issues were no doubt discussed frequently in Lastman's studio, where the young Rembrandt spent part of the early 1620s, as well as in the studio he shared with Jan Lievens in the second half of the 1620s, when these two budding artists were developing their signature styles by merging the examples of Lastman and the Caravaggists and incorporating what they knew (mainly from prints) of Rubens and Titian. In the following decades, the adherents of the various standpoints would only become more set in their opinions. Rembrandt no doubt felt bolstered by Constantijn Huygens, who visited the two young artists in their studio.

In Huygens's autobiography, in which he recorded his opinions of these young painters, it clearly emerges from his discussions of both painting and rhetoric (see chapter III) that he strongly believes that the luminaries of classical antiquity have long been surpassed by contemporary painters and rhetoricians. After enthusiastically describing the expressive ugliness of Rembrandt's Judas, he exclaims that all this (i.e., Rembrandt's work) should be placed next to 'all of Italy ... everything that has survived of the wonders of earliest antiquity ... all the beauty that has been produced throughout the ages', and that this should be a lesson to 'those nitwits who maintain that nowadays nothing is created or expressed in words that was not already expressed in words or created in antiquity.'⁹² He said something similar in his discussion of contemporary rhetoric, when he named a rhetorician like Wtenbogaert as a good example, and ridiculed those who thought that one must follow the ancients' rules of rhetoric.⁹³ Of prime importance to Huygens was the observation of nature in all its fortuity (ugliness included), also, and in Rembrandt's case precisely, in the rendering

of emotions – the main point being that everything should appear natural and convincing.

The existence of various notions emerges in a completely different way from Jacob van der Gracht's introduction to his *Anatomie der wtterlicke deelen van het menselick lichaem* (*Anatomy of the external parts of the human body*), published in 1634, a little book written expressly as an example for artists.⁹⁴ When Van der Gracht praises the knowledge of anatomy, in particular the working of the muscles ('the motility of the body'), he is reacting to 'various opinions and maxims of many modern painters', whom he has considered in this respect. He then distinguishes between those who think it necessary to study only antique statues, because they teach one 'the harmonious proportions and beauty of life', and those who think it sufficient to paint 'only from life as it appears to them', concentrating merely on the convincing suggestion of space (he calls this *wel dragen*, to harmonize well, which seems to be what later writers call *houding*), so that what is in front comes to the fore and what is behind recedes toward the back.⁹⁵ When these painters portray a nude, they focus completely 'on the garment of the human body, which is the skin', something that Rembrandt, as we have seen, did with great conviction.⁹⁶ Apparently neither approach is correct in Van der Gracht's view, for without some knowledge of anatomy and the way muscles work – what goes on under the skin – one can neither portray a nude convincingly nor render motion correctly.⁹⁷

Philips Angel's approach, too, put forward in his encomium on the art of painting, an address delivered to the Leiden painters' community in 1641 and published in 1642, must be mentioned briefly, not because he juxtaposes various opinions, but because he adheres in a matter-of-course way to the 'from life' and 'coloring' school of thought. He thinks strictly in terms of working directly from life and striving for the greatest possible effect of lifelikeness (*schijn eyghentlijcke kracht*, i.e., life-simulat-

ing power), placing great emphasis on the effective organization of light and shadow to 'bestow such a magical power, and miraculous sense of space that many things, which are scarcely imitable with brush and paint, look very natural indeed.'⁹⁸ The use of such terms as 'magical power' and 'miraculous sense of space' reveals just how much value was placed on the magical power of painting to create a compelling illusion of space, of convincing 'coming to the fore' and 'receding', by means of light and dark, which is exactly what Rembrandt was praised for by Van Hoogstraten, Von Sandrart, and De Lairese.⁹⁹ As Weststeijn demonstrated, the notion of 'power' (*kracht*) – which those three writer-painters, as well as Andries Pels, explicitly applied to the work of Rembrandt, saying that this was his forte – was used to express the impact of color, light, and shadow, in particular through their power to suggest convincingly a three dimensional 'virtual reality.'¹⁰⁰ In contrast to Von Sandrart and De Lairese, Angel thought this the most fundamental characteristic of painting.

Angel constantly harps on the 'observation of real, natural things'¹⁰¹ (by which he means the observation of optical phenomena), on 'natural imitation' and the 'approximation of life', as well as on 'seeking nature, which is so abundant in its ever-changing diversity',¹⁰² to mention but a few of his wonderful expressions. He is fond of using such terms as 'real' (*eyghen*), 'like real' (*eyghentlijck*), and 'mutable' (*veranderlick*), all referring to the true-to-life portrayal of things through observation of their individual, defining characteristics – which is exactly what De Bisschop condemned as an abhorrent ideology.

Joachim von Sandrart

A loud echo of the controversies that must have exercised many minds in the 1630s and '40s is heard, finally, in Von Sandrart's description of Rembrandt's work. Although Von Sandrart published this commentary on Rembrandt's person and work in a treatise that appeared in

1678, it reflects his experiences in Amsterdam in the years 1637-1645, at which time he undoubtedly became very well acquainted with Rembrandt's paintings.¹⁰³ As mentioned above, Emmens considered Von Sandrart's pronouncements nothing but a series of art-historical clichés, based primarily on Du Fresnoy and Bellori. He thought that Von Sandrart's remarks showed no sign of first-hand familiarity with what Rembrandt produced in that period or indeed any acquaintance whatsoever with his work. It will meanwhile have become clear that Von Sandrart's art-critical clichés involve standpoints based on a much older but still-current discussion that was no doubt being carried on with great vigor, if not vehemence, precisely in the 1630s and '40s. Von Sandrart pointedly applied these clichés to Rembrandt and his work, thus creating a sharp contrast to his own person and work. His account tells us much about the positions these two men consciously took during the period of their acquaintance.

It is highly unlikely that Von Sandrart's knowledge of Rembrandt and his work was superficial, as Emmens – and also Slive¹⁰⁴ – thought: at the time Rembrandt was, after all, the most successful history painter and portraitist with whom the ambitious Von Sandrart had to compete during his Amsterdam period. In such a small world, a painter like Von Sandrart would naturally have paid close attention to what his famous rival was doing – a rival who also competed successfully for an important commission for the Kloveniersdoelen,¹⁰⁵ who no doubt attended the same auctions, and who likewise vied for favors from Amsterdam's elite group of patrons and collectors.¹⁰⁶ It is necessary to realize that Von Sandrart's text examines Rembrandt not only through the eyes of a rival who had a very high opinion of himself and his own standing, but also from the perspective of a painter who had just returned from Rome (where he sojourned from 1629 to 1635) and was well informed about the latest developments in the Roman art world: Von Sandrart, after all, had been the keeper of Vincenzo Giustiniani's collec-

tion of antique sculpture, had supervised the making of prints after this collection at a time when the antique example had gained a firm foothold in Rome as a paradigm of proportion and movement,¹⁰⁷ and was undoubtedly acquainted with Giustiniani's new protégés Poussin, Duquesnoy, and Pietro Testa.

Von Sandrart writes that Rembrandt thought nothing of 'flouting our rules of art, such as those of anatomy and human proportions, or perspective and the usefulness of antique statues, the drawings of Raphael and a proper training, as well as the academies so highly necessary to the profession; rather, he claimed that one should imitate nature alone and not bind oneself to any other rules.'¹⁰⁸ We already heard the rather rebellious, argumentative tone of that last observation in Van Mander's account of Caravaggio; indeed, it seems to have become the hallmark of a certain type of painter, a hallmark such painters would have been proud of. The 'rules' Rembrandt flouted were doubtless of great importance to such painters as Von Sandrart and a number of others – we read of them in De Ville – as principles to adhere to, principles they did not recognize in the work of Rembrandt. Naturally Rembrandt was interested in anatomy and proportion, very much so: he owned a copy of Dürer's book on proportion, he acquired plaster casts of antique sculpture, and he collected Raphael's compositions – all particulars put forward by Emmens to refute Von Sandrart's remark. Rembrandt, however, saw these not as sacrosanct standards to be followed but as examples that ought to be surpassed (and had indeed already been surpassed by such masters as Titian and Rubens) by an intense rivalry in which his own ideals would triumph. And, as we saw in chapter III, those ideals consisted in producing the most powerful suggestion of life and expression of emotion that was possible, to be achieved by observing 'life' and painting with a technique in which a specific *handeling* played a very important role, a manner described as 'coloring': a conception proceeding from color, light and dark, coming to the fore and receding – all of this serving



178

Crispijn de Passe II, *Students Drawing after a Male Nude Model*, engraving 29.7 x 37.8 cm. Frontispiece volume II, 't *Licht der Teken en Schilderkonst*, 1643-44.

to persuade the viewer that the miraculous diversity of nature was right there before his eyes.

Von Sandrart's mention of the 'academies so highly necessary to the profession' undoubtedly refers to the public instruction of drawing that took place outside the studio training involving teacher and pupil, such as the drawing school depicted by De Passe II on the title page of *Van 't Licht der Teken en Schilderkonst* (1643; fig. 178). In the foreword to that book, Crispijn de Passe the Younger relates that in his youth he attended this drawing school in Utrecht, which was led by 'the most prominent masters' of the day (such as Abraham Bloemaert and Paulus Moreelse, who are both portrayed in this print). Von Sandrart, too, took lessons there as a young student in the mid-1620s, as he makes clear in his biography of Jan Gerritsz. van Bronchorst. (Around 1625 Von Sandrart was apprenticed to Van Honthorst in Utrecht.)¹⁰⁹ That Rembrandt presumably scoffed at such preoccupations – just as Huygens derided rhetoricians who clung to the rules and people who were convinced of

the superiority of antique examples – is of course quite conceivable.

Von Sandrart suggests that, for Rembrandt, the effect achieved was of prime importance when he says that Rembrandt judged his light and shadow and contours to be good when they enhanced the painting as a whole, even when they conflicted with correct perspective. Rembrandt, therefore, did not trouble himself about clear outlines, and in Von Sandrart's opinion filled the background with blackness to conceal them – a reproach often brought by the opponents of *colorito* against painters who did not proceed from *disegno* but rather let their forms emerge from a dark background. Rembrandt, Von Sandrart writes, was bent only on 'maintaining overall harmony' ('Zusammenhaltung der universal Harmonia') through light and dark, and in this he was outstanding. He not only rendered the simplicity of nature impressively but embellished it with natural power – power (*kracht*) always referring, as mentioned earlier, to the powerful illusionistic effect produced by color, light, and shade – and brought it strongly to the fore (*stark erheben*, in the sense of *rilievo*).¹¹⁰ These are astute observations of facets of painting that were doubtless also of prime importance to Rembrandt.

The same holds true for Von Sandrart's remark that Rembrandt managed 'with great ingenuity and skill to break the colors in conformity with their character, in order to portray with the harmony of life itself the true properties of nature in a lifelike way.'¹¹¹ In doing so, Rembrandt highlighted only what he considered the most important part, around which he artfully deployed light and shadow (including carefully balanced reflections), so that the light in the shadows faded away (*wieche*) with great judiciousness, causing the colors to glow – all of which he did with great insight, according to Von Sandrart.¹¹² Even if these were not the most important things in Von Sandrart's eyes, Rembrandt would have been very satisfied with this excellent description,

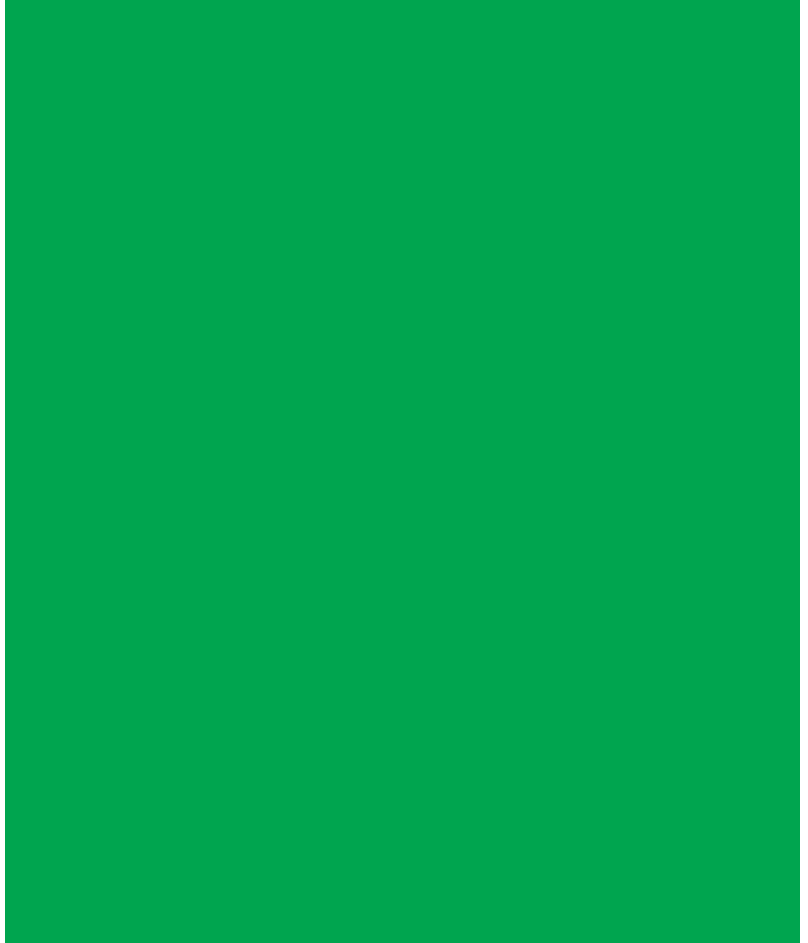
aptly expressed in contemporary terminology, of what he was striving to achieve. As Van de Wetering remarked earlier, although Von Sandrart formulated his critical remarks in retrospect, his 'words of praise may well be a repetition of opinions he had held much earlier.'¹¹³

Another passage in Von Sandrart's book, regarding the term *houding* and Rembrandt's exceptional achievements in this respect, also fits this context. The concept of *houding* – denoting the gradations in colors and tones, and how these were used relative to one another to create the illusion of space – has become well known since the publication of Paul Taylor's important article on the subject.¹¹⁴ Von Sandrart's passage speaks of 'mixing, breaking, and reducing the rawness of colors until everything in the painting comes close to nature.' One should 'observe the diminution [reduction in tone], so that things fade away correctly and the coloring follows unhindered, according to the rules of perspective, in a clear way from one figure to another, assuming its proper place: what we call in Dutch *Hauding* is a most necessary observance, but little understood. And in this we can learn ... in particular from the industrious and, in this respect, extremely intelligent Rembrandt, who performed miracles, as it were, and constantly observed true harmony, without hindering any particular color, according to the rules of light.'¹¹⁵ That this contributed significantly to Rembrandt's fame is corroborated by Pels, who said that no one surpassed Rembrandt in '*houding* and the power (*kracht*) of his coloring.'¹¹⁶ Van Hoogstraten also emphasized that Rembrandt was especially admired as a painter eminently capable of creating a convincing illusion of space by means of light and shadow and related colors: 'let your deepest darknesses be surrounded by brighter darks, that they may cause the power (*kracht*) of the light to stand out all the more forcefully. Rembrandt developed this virtue to a high degree, and was a master in the proper combination of related colors.'¹¹⁷ Coloring, light, shade, relief, *houding*, harmony, power – these concepts are all related, and it was agreed that no master was bet-

ter at rendering them than Rembrandt.

Von Sandrart's remark that Rembrandt excelled in portraying human skin and hair, thereby closely approaching life, is perfectly in keeping with the importance placed on his coloristic talents. He emphasized that Rembrandt's colors were 'truly glowing', the same words Van Mander had used to describe the painting of flesh tones in the Venetian manner.¹¹⁸ All of this is a distant echo of Dolce's praise of Titian and of the many subsequent instances – as evidenced to a great extent in Van Mander – of linking *colorito* and the capacity to render human skin convincingly. Small wonder, then, that in a 1648 play in which Rembrandt's work is referred to, the following words were used: 'There Rembrandt shows his art, how flesh-like is colored / That laughing Silenus'¹¹⁹ As Roscam Abbing convincingly demonstrated, the poet – none other than the youthful Samuel van Hoogstraten – here alludes to an aspect of Rembrandt's art at which his contemporaries apparently thought him unsurpassed.¹²⁰ Later on Van Hoogstraten would state that 'all great masters who have held the art of coloring in high esteem, have revealed in nudes and *tronies* all its power to imitate nature especially in this respect', adding that, according to Pliny, Apelles tried so very hard to do this that it seemed 'as though he wanted to challenge nature itself to do battle with him.'¹²¹ A bit further on in the chapter treating 'the coloring of the human nude' – in which the notion of 'breaking colors' is connected in particular to the painting of flesh tones ('break colors in such a way as to look like flesh'¹²²) – Van Hoogstraten concludes a passage about painters who were praised for their 'flesh-like manner of painting' by saying: 'I do not mention Rembrandt and others who hold this part of art in exceptionally high esteem.'¹²³

That Rembrandt chiefly painted half-length figures, heads of old people, small pictures of figures dressed in highly imaginative garb, and other curiosities, as Von Sandrart informs us, is of course not entirely true. Von



179 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Rembrandt, *Saskia as Flora*, 1641, panel 98.5 x 82.5 cm.
Dresden, Gemäldegalerie

Sandrart doubtless knew this all too well, but his description fits the image of a painter working directly from life. On the other hand, his list does comprise a notable part of the production of Rembrandt's studio in the 1630s and '40s: countless *tronies*, half-length figures, and small history paintings, works that were undoubtedly better known among the connoisseurs of Von Sandrart's day than the few large history paintings Rembrandt also made at that time. Further on Von Sandrart states that Rembrandt painted 'few classical poetic poems [mytho-



180 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Joachim von Sandrart, *The Month of May*, 1642-43 (from a series of *The Twelve Months of the Year*), canvas 147 x 122 cm.
Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Schloss Schleissheim

logical subjects], allegories and uncommon histories, but mostly simple things that were easily understood, things that appealed to him and were *schilderachtig* (as the Dutch say), but were nevertheless full of characteristic motifs taken directly from nature.¹²⁴ This, too, is an exaggeration, of course, but understandable if one looks at Rembrandt's work from the perspective of Von Sandrart's own pretensions.

Von Sandrart's assertions that Rembrandt read Dutch only with difficulty and that books were of little use to him, as well as the notion that he associated only with simple folk, are not at all true, though they are in keeping with Von Sandrart's picture of Rembrandt as a man vastly different from himself. Indeed, it is likely that Von Sandrart, when he first took up residence in Amsterdam, already looked down on Rembrandt. Von Sandrart, who took pride in his erudition – in his treatise he seized every opportunity to stress his learnedness and his friendship with poets and scholars – writes (speaking of himself in the third person) that in Amsterdam he 'had set up an artistic Parnassus of the noble art of painting and had straightaway gained great fame through his highly praised works, so that he was greatly esteemed, honored, and praised by many, not only for his great knowledge of the arts, but also for his virtuous conduct, polite demeanor, and elegant conversation, the likes of which few artists have previously exhibited.'¹²⁵ Thus Von Sandrart points out, in passing, that before his arrival on the scene there was no one with such qualities among the Amsterdam painters. Indeed, no sooner had Von Sandrart arrived in Amsterdam than he was admitted to the highest circles of the cultural elite: he was befriended with Vondel and Barlaeus, well acquainted with Vossius, Pieter Cornelisz. Hooft, and Samuel Coster, and soon acquired Cornelis Bicker and Johan Huydecoper as patrons.¹²⁶ It emerges from the poems of Vondel and Barlaeus that at this time Von Sandrart was already seen as someone of exceptional learning, and much was made of his contacts with poets, his schooling in Rome, and his connections

with such high-placed individuals as Maximilian of Bavaria.¹²⁷

Von Sandrart again underscored the great divide he perceived between himself and Rembrandt by reporting that the latter had not traveled to Italy to familiarize himself with antiquity and art theory and by stressing that he was of humble birth.¹²⁸ It seems quite possible that Rembrandt himself stressed the simplicity of his origins, because this is in keeping with the idea that only by possessing natural talent can one attain artistic heights. Huygens had already emphasized the humble origins of Rembrandt and Lievens, saying that no more forceful argument could be put forward to refute the nobility of blood, adding that these painters owed nothing to their teachers and everything to their innate talent. Even though he undoubtedly knew better,¹²⁹ Huygens substantiated this by saying that their teachers were, after all, esteemed only by the lower classes, because their parents had not been able to afford masters of higher standing. Van Mander also emphasizes in the opening sentence of Caravaggio's biography that this artist 'climbed up from poverty.'¹³⁰ Von Sandrart's statement in the first sentence of his life of Rembrandt – where he says that although Rembrandt came from the country (this parallels Vasari's statement that Titian came from an unknown village) he was driven by nature to pursue the noble art of painting, attaining such artistic heights through great diligence, innate inclination, and talent – could have been an image encouraged by Rembrandt himself. It recalls Jan Vos, who – contrasting himself with Vondel – rejected the authority of the poets of antiquity, emphasizing that only natural genius, 'honed by practice' ('door oefening gesleept') is important, reporting, moreover – and not without a certain pride – that Dutch was the only language he knew. Earlier, in a laudatory poem preceding the publication of Jan Vos's highly successful play *Aran and Titus* (1642), Barleaus had emphasized that Vos, the true successor to Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides, was 'an artisan, an unlettered chap' (referring to the fact



181 ► see colourplate x, p. xx
Joachim von Sandrart, *Nausicaa and Her Companions Surprised by Odysseus*, 1639, canvas 139 x 105 cm.
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

that Vos was a glazier) who, though he never learned Greek or Latin, now earns the highest praise as a poet and 'shows the world what a tragedy is.'¹³¹ Vos himself composed the following verse: 'Poets are not made; oh no, to this one must be born.'¹³²

As a painter, Von Sandrart represented an alternative to Rembrandt; Von Sandrart's colors are bright, his illumination uniform, and his contours cleanly drawn.¹³³ This clearly competitive style is nicely illustrated by juxtaposing Von Sandrart's depiction of a young woman with flowers – who personifies the month of *May* (from his 1641 series of the *Four Seasons*)¹³⁴ – and Rembrandt's *Flora* from the same year (figs. 179 and 180). Unfortunately, we do not know the 'naked Venus by Von Sandrart', mentioned in a 1660 inventory,¹³⁵ for it would have been interesting to compare it to Rembrandt's *Danaë*. Perhaps this painting was even made in competition with Rembrandt, as was clearly the case with the *Ephigenia* that Van Loo painted in an alternative style (fig. 214).



182 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
 Pieter Lastman, *Nausicaa and Her Companions Surprised by Odysseus*, 1619, panel 90 x 115 cm. Munich, Alte Pinakothek

Von Sandrart's *Nausicaa and her Companions Surprised by Odysseus*, painted in 1642 as an overmantel for Johan Huydecoper,¹³⁶ also shows the gap which separates these two painters (fig. 181). Just as Rembrandt had done so often, Von Sandrart based this painting on a composition by Pieter Lastman (fig. 182). Despite his miserable state, Von Sandrart's Odysseus kneels in a tasteful pose before the elegant Nausicaa – portrayed in *contrapposto* – and her companions who calmly observe the scene. Their poses exude *grazia* and *leggiadria*, essential elements for all artists who adhered to academic ideals, especially when depicting women.¹³⁷ The explicit rendering of terror and fear so evident in Lastman's painting has disappeared; the figures' expressionless faces, smooth skin, firm flesh, perfect proportions, and colorful, glowing draperies – all painted with bright hues and precise contours – show that the way in which Von Sandrart competed with Lastman could not be further from the manner in which Rembrandt did so, for exam-

ple, in his paintings of the startled *Susanna* (figs. 66, 73). It is not difficult to imagine what Rembrandt – who would probably have liked to depict a subject like this for an important patron like Huydecoper – must have thought of this painting!

Indeed, Von Sandrart's style was in keeping with developments (long underway in Holland) that gave rise to a competitive alternative style fuelled by differences of opinion. These developments form a continuous line, starting with the work of Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem (figs. 118, 149, 328, 329, 00) and Hendrick Goltzius (figs. 71, 94, 189, 297), and running through to Pieter de Grebber (fig. 350) and Salomon de Bray (fig. 87), a line – fertilized by the later work of Gerrit van Honthorst – which began in the early 1640s to manifest itself ever more distinctly, albeit in various ways, in the work of Jacob Backer (fig. 100), Jacob van Loo (figs. 93, 111, 162, 213, 214, 220, 305, 351), Jacob van Campen, Jan Gerritsz. van Bronchorst (fig. 106, 351), and Caesar van Everdingen.¹³⁸ The presence in Amsterdam of a notable personality like Von Sandrart no doubt gave these ongoing discussions on the divergent manners of painting a more consciously classicist tone. Von Sandrart, by showing off his Italian experiences and contacts, as well as his relations with the learned elite of Amsterdam, also had a part in lending even more respectability to a style long visible – a style in which idealization, clear lines, and the rules of proportion, anatomy, and perspective were of prime importance. It might have been Von Sandrart's doing that 'clear painting' (*helder schilderen*) came to be called the 'Italian manner', both of which terms were used by Houbraken to describe Flinck's altered style. It must have been fascinating for the collecting elite to see and discuss the completely different means by which painters like Rembrandt, on the one hand, and Von Sandrart and Van Loo, on the other, succeeded in reaching their goals.

It will be obvious from the above that even Andries Pels's criticism of Rembrandt was completely in keeping with a discussion of painting that had been going on for a century, using terms that had already been tossed about for many decades.

His error he explained away as following Dame Nature,
And all else as idle decoration ...

...

It all must be depicted or risk nature's high disdain;
His, at least, which brooked no rules, nor did he yet believe
In molding human limbs into proportions bound to please.
Correct perspective, rules of art, he did not utilize,
Preferring simply to depict whatever filled his eyes.¹³⁹

Rembrandt would have been gratified to know that Pels did in fact
place him among the great luminaries of painting, in whose
company Rembrandt could easily have imagined himself:

The great Rembrandt could not manage to hold sway
O'er Titian, Michelangelo, Raphael, Van Dyck,
So he preferred, illustriously, to stray,

...

By none of those great masters would he ever be surpassed,

His *houding* and his coloring have never been outclassed.¹⁴⁰

Pels gives an accurate description of the circles to which Rembrandt aspired and what was and was not important to him. Opinions had long differed on this score, but one thing had changed in essentials by the time Pels wrote this, namely that one of the two schools of thought had gained the upper hand, and the other was regarded as passé.

VIII

Danaë

In the same year as the Hague *Susanna*, Rembrandt started on his *Danaë* (fig. 205). This staggering masterpiece, now in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, is a shadow of its former self – despite competent restoration – owing to a horrible assault on 15 June 1985, when a young man slashed the figure of Danaë in the groin and then splashed the painting with concentrated sulphuric acid which ruined substantial parts of the original paint surface.¹ ‘The acid struck the painting at various points above the figure of Danaë, and then dribbled down over the figure; as a result the paint was at numerous places eaten away down to the ground. The most severe damage is in the face and hair, the right arm and the legs; narrower bands of paint loss affect the whole of the body.’² This is the most tragic incident ever involving a painting by Rembrandt – whose work has indeed suffered quite a few attacks – and one of the most tragic incidents in the histo-

ry of Western art. I was fortunate enough to see the painting on three different occasions in the late 1970s and early ’80s, and I cherish those memories. Although we will never know the motive of the ‘mentally deranged person’, as the attacker was described, his actions must have had something to do with the fact that this work is not only one of the greatest paintings ever made of a female nude but also a painting of almost palpable lifelikeness, exuding great sensuality, more so than any other nude painted in the early-modern period.³ In the nineteenth century *Danaë* was banned from the main galleries of the Hermitage for that very reason. Indeed, it is not difficult to see why this painting in particular frightens and incenses people with moral objections to depictions of naked women. My task here, however, is not to explain such vehement reactions but rather to explore several facets of this painting within the historical con-

text of its making, thereby obtaining insight into the interrelationship of subject, form, and effect.

Legendary paintings of Danaë

The *Danaë* was Rembrandt's first life-size female nude, and it was certainly his goal to create a masterpiece. The debate sparked by Titian's *Danaë* – recorded by Vasari in the second edition of his *Vite* and repeated by Karel van Mander (see chapter VII) – articulated for the first time the difference between the Venetian and Florentine-Roman manners by invoking Michelangelo's criticism of Titian's art, giving rise to a discussion of the different manners of painting. This confronted painters with a choice: one manner or the other, or a combination of the two. That Rembrandt zeroed in on this subject for his first life-size nude therefore constituted an open declaration of his intentions.⁴ By homing in on the long and prestigious tradition of the reclining life-size nude that had been popularized in Venice, and by selecting this particular subject at a crucial juncture in his career, he was siding demonstratively with those who believed that one should create the greatest possible effect of lifelikeness and that color and light are the prime means of achieving this. The fact that Van Hoogstraten, who was Rembrandt's pupil at the very time the master was working on his *Danaë*, twice relates Michelangelo's opinion of Titian's *Danaë* – in his discussion of imitating nature by means of color, as opposed to depicting nature's most beautiful parts with the help of cleanly drawn lines – suggests that this had been a topic of lively discussion in Rembrandt's studio, certainly during the period of Van Hoogstraten's apprenticeship.⁵

But Vasari's and Van Mander's accounts of the controversy triggered by Titian's *Danaë* were not the only thing that made this a subject of great interest to ambitious artists for whom involving the viewer emotionally was of prime importance. During the course of the sixteenth century, the portrayal of *Danaë Receiving Jupiter*

in the Guise of Golden Rain came to be viewed as the prototype of a representation whose aim was to stimulate the (male) viewer's senses, especially his sexual desire.

Pliny's mention of a painting of *Danaë* by the renowned Nicias, whom he introduced by saying that he painted women in particular,⁶ and Martial's composition of a witty epigram on a painting of *Danaë*,⁷ as well as the fact that Ovid described it as one of the subjects depicted on the tapestry with which Arachne challenged Minerva (successfully, but to her everlasting misfortune), would have made the subject interesting for Renaissance painters. However, the subject gained real fame, not to say notoriety, through Terence's mention of a painting of *Danaë* in his comedy *The Eunuch*. In this play a young man named Chaerea recounts that, disguised as a eunuch, he gained entrance to the house of a courtesan, where, as he had hoped, he was left alone with a young girl, still a virgin, with whom he had fallen in love. Hanging on the wall of the room where they were sitting was a painting that showed Jupiter descending as golden rain into *Danaë*'s lap. Looking at this painting he became aroused and thought that if the supreme ruler of the gods was permitted to do such a thing, why should he, a mere mortal, not be allowed to imitate him? Incited by this painting he then raped the girl.⁸

This passage made *Danaë* more than just one of the many appealing classical subjects to be imitated and emulated. It must have been known to many in the sixteenth century, in the first place because Terence's comedies – considering the large number of editions appearing from the early sixteenth century onwards – were undoubtedly among the most frequently read classical literature and were especially popular at the Latin schools.⁹ It was this passage from *The Eunuch*, however, that became particularly famous, for Augustine quoted it no less than four times: in the *Confessions*, in *The City of God* (twice) and in his *Letters*.¹⁰ It was one of his favorite examples of the scandalousness of the many lascivious fables about pagan gods: evil inventions, so he said, which, as Terence

had clearly shown, kindled the flames of passion and incited imitation (in this case via a portrayal of the story). In *The City of God* he cited the Danaë story yet again – along with that of the rape of Ganymede – as an example of the outrageous and slanderous stories that were invented about the gods. He also remarked in passing that the fabrication that Jupiter, in the form of golden rain, lay with Danaë, naturally means that female chastity is easily corrupted by gold (an interpretation of the story to which we will return later).¹¹

Erasmus also disparaged Danaë, together with the depiction of Ganymede, in his *De Ciceronianus* of 1528. In his criticism of ‘Ciceronianism’ he complained about devotees and connoisseurs of antiquity who were no longer interested in Christian images and representations, showing interest and admiration only for what had been produced by pagans, including the most trifling medallions and inscriptions.¹² They justified this by citing the immense prestige enjoyed at that time by all things antique, but Erasmus said this was only a front, a pretext to lead innocent young people astray. In the ‘sanctuaries’ of such Ciceronians one would find no representations of the Crucifixion, the Holy Trinity, or the apostles. After all, they found Jupiter raining down into Danaë’s lap much more attractive a theme than Gabriel announcing the incarnation of God to the Virgin, and Ganymede being abducted by the eagle more appealing than Christ’s Ascension.¹³ Erasmus’s mention of Danaë was of course an implicit reference to Augustine. Moreover, Augustine had already cited both Danaë and Ganymede when railing against the scandalousness of pagan fables. What both of them could have had in mind was a passage about a portrayal of *Ganymede* that was somewhat reminiscent of Terence’s remarks concerning *Danaë*. This was an episode from the *Satyricon* by Petronius, in which a young man is intensely aroused by seeing a number of ‘loves of the gods’ by the hand of Apelles, the first of which was the eagle who carried Ganymede off to Mount Olympus.¹⁴

As Carlo Ginzburg observed many years ago with respect to Titian’s *Danaë*, Augustine’s condemnation ensured that depictions of *Danaë* came to be seen in the sixteenth century as the prototype of a portrayal which aimed at arousing the viewer sexually, as emerges from quite a few texts – most of them expounding the strictures of the Counter-Reformation – which warned against the stimulating power of erotic paintings, citing this example as proof of the power of the image to affect the senses, erotic paintings having a particularly provocative effect.¹⁵ Politi even cited it by way of analogy, to demonstrate the potential impact of sacred representations; the other references were meant only as condemnation of such subjects. In seventeenth-century Holland the passages from Terence and Petronius were also frequently quoted in such contexts: by the moralist Jacob Cats, for instance, when railing against ‘licentious paintings’, by the physician Johannes van Beverwijck in a discussion of ‘amorous and licentious paintings which easily cause unchasteness’, as well as by Rembrandt’s pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten, when mentioning indecent subjects ‘not fit to be seen.’¹⁶ Thus Augustine’s severe condemnation was largely responsible for turning this theme into the classic example of a subject capable of arousing intense erotic feelings in the viewer. And it was precisely this quality that probably made the subject so appealing to artists. Not only could they emulate the famous painters of antiquity, but their work could vie with the classic prototype of a painting said to exert such a powerful impact on the senses. Accordingly, it is no coincidence that some of the most sensuous nudes ever painted – by Correggio, Titian, and Rembrandt – were portrayals of *Danaë*.

The subject of *Danaë* thus gave Rembrandt an opportunity to produce a painting that could compete in its lifelike portrayal of sensual beauty with a legendary painting from classical antiquity, as well as the chance to measure himself against Titian – the greatest master of the nude (fig. 183), who had painted a *Danaë* that had



183 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
 Titian, *Danaë*, 1545-46, canvas 120 x 172 cm. Naples,
 Gallerie Nazionali di Capodimonte



184
 Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538,
 canvas 119.5 x 165 cm. Florence,
 Galleria degli Uffizi

meanwhile become legendary – and to compete with a famous Dutch specialist in the depiction of the female nude: Hendrick Goltzius (fig. 189). Before Rembrandt, Goltzius, too, had chosen this subject for his first life-size female nude, thus declaring his position in the debate. Rembrandt probably did not know what Titian's composition looked like, but it seems likely that he knew Goltzius's painting, with which he could have become acquainted in his youth, since it was in Leiden, in the collection of Bartholomeus Ferreris, an amateur painter and connoisseur who undoubtedly allowed young, talented artists to visit his valuable collection.¹⁷ But first let us turn to Titian's famous masterpiece and to Goltzius's virtuoso performance in order to throw Rembrandt's fabulous achievement into relief.

Titian's Danaë of 1545

What subject was more suited to Titian, who had competition in his blood – 'jousting' (*giostrare*), as Ludovico Dolce called Titian's permanent vying with classical and contemporary artists – when he was commissioned to paint the most sensuous nude possible for a princely patron?¹⁸ For this was surely the point when Alessandro Farnese commissioned him in 1544 to paint a nude (fig. 183), after seeing the one he had made several years earlier for the Duke of Urbino (fig. 184).¹⁹ Roberto Zapperi assumed, on the basis of x-radiographs, that the commission was not originally for a *Danaë*, but rather for a nude in the manner of the Duke of Urbino's, and therefore with no reference to a specific mythological theme.²⁰ While Titian was still working on the painting for Alessandro Farnese, Monsieur Giovanni della Casa, papal nuncio to Venice, wrote in the autumn of 1544 the frequently quoted letter in which he assures Alessandro Farnese that, upon seeing the nude which Titian was now painting for him, even Cardinal San Sylvestro (official theologian of the Curia and the church's chief censor) would be possessed by the devil.²¹ Della Casa added that

the nude which Farnese had seen at the Duke of Urbino's was a Theatine nun in comparison to the woman that Titian was now painting.²² In the same letter Della Casa also asked about a sketch of a certain young woman by the miniaturist Giulio Clovio, so that Titian might make a portrait of her, and moreover give the nude her face. Zapperi argued that this must have been a portrait of a certain Angela, a courtesan favored by Cardinal Alessandro Farnese.²³

It must have been at a later stage – when Titian had arrived with the painting in Rome, where in 1545 he had set up a studio in the Belvedere at the invitation of Alessandro Farnese – that the artist decided to turn the nude into a *Danaë*, so that she would be framed by a *poesia*: ‘... una femina ignuda figurata per una Danaë’, as Vasari aptly described her.²⁴ If Titian actually effected the change by giving the figure the features of the courtesan, as Della Casa's letter suggests, then the myth of Danaë naturally offered a classically inspired context which could not have been more appropriate. As mentioned before, Augustine had already pointed out the moral of the story, that is, that female chastity is easily corrupted by gold. This interpretation, stressing the supreme power of gold and money, had been the standard reading of the fable since the time of Horace. Often repeated in early Christian times, it flourished again in numerous variations after the publication of Giovanni Boccaccio's influential *Genealogia deorum gentilium*.²⁵ In the sixteenth century it was this account that appeared time and again in mythological handbooks and commentaries on the *Metamorphoses*.²⁶ The story of Danaë was therefore seen mainly as an example of the corrupting power of gold, which nothing – not even feminine honor and virtue – could withstand. This made it a suitable subject for a painting hanging in the house of a courtesan, which is where the young man in Terence's play had seen it. Martial had also been prompted by a painting of *Danaë* to make a humorous reference to mercenary love: ‘Why of you, Ruler of Olympus, did Danaë receive her price, if



185
Master LD (Léon Davant) after a fresco by Primaticcio, *Danaë*, engraving 21.7 x 29.5 cm



186
Giulio Bonasone, *Danaë*, engraving 16.5 x 11 cm

Leda unbought was kind to you?’²⁷ Indeed, in the literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, fictional courtesans occasionally compared themselves to Danaë.²⁸ The obvious interpretation of the myth, repeated and varied endlessly since the time of Horace and Augustine – namely that Jupiter, the supreme god, had availed himself of gold and money to seduce this great beauty – made the image a self-evident one. It is therefore understandable that Titian – Primaticcio and Bonasone in his pornographic print (fig. 185) (fig. 186) had already happened upon the idea – depicted the golden rain as a shower of gold coins.

Zapperi thought that the idea of clothing the nude in mythological trappings, whereby Titian understandably chose to transform her into a *Danaë*, had been inspired by the need to give a pretext sanctioned by antiquity to a painting that would otherwise have been too compromising for a cardinal.²⁹ In my opinion, the most important stimulus for Titian at this crucial juncture in his career would have been the many possibilities this theme offered to compete with the painters of antiquity as well as with his contemporaries. Correggio's breathtaking *Danaë* would have provided the most powerful impetus (fig. 187), a painting which, after all, could compete in



187

Correggio, *Danaë*, 1531, canvas 161 x 193 cm.
Rome, Galleria Borghese

sensuality with Titian's own *Venus of Urbino*.³⁰ Titian's borrowing of the broad outlines – with respect to pose and composition – of Correggio's *Danaë* clearly shows that, formally speaking as well, this painting was his most important source of inspiration. Titian would certainly have admired Correggio's *Danaë* in Mantua. A century later Marco Boschini even wrote that Titian, who was deeply impressed by Correggio's work, admired his *Danaë* most of all.³¹ Philip Fehl has described beautifully how it must be viewed in the spirit of competition that '... the great Cupid (who is, of course, not in Ovid) has entered Titian's painting and, with a gesture that seems to complete the beckoning gesture of Correggio's, turns to leave the scene of his victory and triumph, ready to exert his power on another willing victim.'³² By this time Titian would also have seen the print which Léon Davent made after the fresco by Primaticcio in the Galerie François I (fig. 185), for he must certainly have

been aware of this composition when he created his own *Danaë*.

Titian could not have chosen a more suitable subject with which to establish his name once and for all in the highest Roman circles of connoisseurs and artists as the painter of the most beautiful, most lifelike female nude imaginable. It was a subject that could be seen not only as a response to Nicias, the famous specialist in feminine beauty of classical times, and to the 'prototype' of a sexually provocative painting described by Terence, but also as an emulation of the most sensuous nudes of contemporary reality: those of Correggio and Primaticcio as well as his own. The words of Della Casa certainly made one thing clear: everyone concerned took it for granted that this painting would surpass the nude, apparently already famous, which he had made for the Duke of Urbino, and which had so impressed Alessandro Farnese.

The nature of the theme concerning one of Jupiter's loves also made it the perfect subject with which to challenge Michelangelo's *Leda* (fig. 188), perhaps not so much the painting itself as Aretino's description of it dating from 1542. In this way he could show that his painting was far more worthy of Aretino's ekphrasis.³³ Aretino described Michelangelo's work as follows: 'One of the two pictures is a *Leda*, but in a manner tender of flesh, elegant of limb and slender of figure, and so sweet, soft and gentle of attitude, and with so much naked grace in all parts of the nude that one cannot gaze upon her without envying the swan who takes pleasure in it with a tenderness so lifelike that it seems, as he extends his neck to kiss her, that he wishes to exhale into her mouth the spirit of his divinity.'³⁴ If one forgets for a minute that Aretino is speaking of *Leda*, then this description of the effect of such verisimilitude is naturally much more applicable to Titian's *Danaë* – certainly where he speaks of 'morbida di carne, e talmente dolce, piana e soava d'attitudine, e con tanta grazia ignuda da tutte le parti de lo ignudo.' Ludovico Dolce's famous description of the Venus figure in Titian's later *Venus and Adonis* (quoted in chapter v;

fig. 107)) is also entirely appropriate to this *Danaë*, showing, as Ginzburg wrote, an important aspect of what Titian was striving for: to make an image ‘which is of flesh, which is beauty itself, which seems to breathe’, and which can therefore move any man, even one ‘chilled by the years’ or ‘hard of constitution’ to ‘feel the blood move in his veins’, in Dolce’s words.³⁵

The *Danaë* Titian made for Farnese is generally seen by art historians as a key piece in his stylistic development, a painting laid down directly in paint on the canvas without any underdrawing, and one in which all traces of linear and sculptural effects – which were still present to some extent in slightly earlier paintings – have disappeared. It is a demonstration of a naked body made completely of subtle shifts of color melting into one another, applied with somewhat dry paint on a rather coarsely woven canvas. Titian’s striving to obtain, by means of the paint, the effect of nearly tangible, breathing skin has here reached its first peak. That this had actually been his aim was confirmed as early as 1533 by the praise of his friend Pietro Aretino, who spoke of ‘the glorious, marvelous, and great Titian, whose coloring breathes no differently from flesh that has pulse and life.’³⁶ In 1557 Dolce described the objective of Titian’s style in the following words: ‘Titian ... moves in step with nature, so that every one of his figures has life, movement and flesh which palpitate. He has shown in his works no empty gracefulness, but a palette which is properly appropriate; no artificiality in ornament, but a masterly concreteness; no crudity, but the mellowness and softness of nature. And the highlights and shadows in his creations always contend and interplay with one another, and fade out and decrease in the very same way as nature itself has them do.’³⁷

Titian had probably done his utmost at just this time in order to provoke the connoisseurs in this bastion of Michelangelesque *disegno* with his amazingly innovative (especially to Roman eyes) and illusionistic painting technique, which must have been absolutely dazzling. The



188

Rosso Fiorentino (?) after Michelangelo, *Leda*, canvas 105.4 x 141 cm. London, National Gallery

clash between two different conceptions would have been the immediate result, if we can believe what Vasari wrote many years later about his visit to Titian’s studio in the company of Michelangelo (see chapter VII). That Vasari saw all of this in terms of competition is apparent from his choice of words, and Titian, a painter who must always have regarded himself as the Apelles of his day, would certainly have provoked the comparison.³⁸ And so this *Danaë* entered treatises on art as the prime example of Venetian painting.

Goltzius’s Danaë of 1603

As we have seen, Karel Van Mander adopted this passage from Vasari in its entirety for his detailed biography of Titian.³⁹ Adding to Vasari’s account as though he had detected an omission, he compared Titian and Charles V to Apelles and Alexander. As Amy Golahny has shown, Van Mander reinforced the idea that Titian had been the ‘inventor’ of the new Venetian manner of painting without preliminary drawing by attributing this role not to Giorgione, as Vasari had done, but to Titian alone.⁴⁰ When Van Mander was writing his *Levens* he would surely have



189 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
 Hendrick Goltzius, *Danaë*, 1603, canvas 169 x 198 cm.
 Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

spoken with Goltzius, who in 1603 made *his* life-size *Danaë*, a work which Van Mander also praised copiously in the biography he wrote of his friend (fig. 189).

One can think of various reasons to explain why Goltzius, who had only recently started to paint,⁴¹ chose the *Danaë* theme for his first life-size nude – precisely at a time when he was striving to present himself as a master in painting such nudes. Elsewhere I have shown in detail that Goltzius was preoccupied with the effect on the viewer of portrayals of nudes, owing to ever-present notions about the powerful influence exerted by the sense of sight, especially when it involved the arousal of love and lust (see also chapter v).⁴² And, as we shall see further on, he would have been only too aware of the fact that *Danaë* was an exemplary theme for a painting which purported to cause intense stimulation of the viewer's senses. This even gave him the opportunity to play a clever and amusing game with the subject – a subject,

moreover, which enabled him to assume a place among the most famous painters of nudes, at the same time taking up a position in the dispute as to the correct manner of painting, all of which the very ambitious Goltzius must have found irresistible.

He was, after all, a well-nigh compulsive emulator, and one for whom style, the manner of depiction itself, was also an important element of imitation and emulation (see chapter ix). Van Mander emphasized this several times in his biography when he said that Goltzius could 'take on the different shapes of all possible styles'⁴³ and that at the beginning of his career he not only tried to imitate the beauty and diversity of nature, but 'also admirably applied himself to imitating the various styles of the best masters ...'⁴⁴ As mentioned in chapter vii, Van Mander also tells us that Goltzius – after returning from Italy – was no longer so satisfied with the art that he saw in his own country, because 'he had impressed the beautiful Italian paintings as firmly in his memory as in a mirror, so that wherever he went he still saw them continuously before him; now it was the sweet gracefulness of Raphael that he enjoyed, then Correggio's lifelike rendering of flesh, the advancing highlights and receding, smoothly blending shadows of Titian, the beautiful silken materials and beautifully painted things of Veronese, and others at Venice, so that works from his native land could no longer completely satisfy him. For painters it was stimulating and instructive to hear him speak of these subjects, for his talk was full of glowing flesh parts, glowing shadows, and other unfamiliar or little-heard expressions.'⁴⁵ In Van Mander's view, it was therefore inevitable that Goltzius would turn to painting, and these words definitely indicate that it was Titian in particular who had made the deepest impression on him, for 'glowing flesh parts' and 'glowing shadows' are terms eminently suited to describing this master's art.⁴⁶

Three years into his career as a painter, Goltzius finished the painting which was intended to position him at the forefront of contemporary art: the *Danaë*, his first

life-size female nude, finished in 1603, which is indeed the high point of his career as a painter. In rendering this nude, Goltzius joined battle with the painter of female nudes par excellence. He did not adopt the pose of Titian's *Danaë* – he was probably not familiar with the composition – but this nude, turned toward the viewer and stretched out on a bed, would have represented for him a pre-eminent Venetian type. A print by Hieronymus Wierix was presumably the formal source of inspiration (fig. 190). In this print Danaë is portrayed as the Titianesque Venus type: her pose is a direct reflection of the many versions produced by Titian and his workshop in the 1540s and '50s (fig. 191).⁴⁷

Goltzius, in adopting this Venetian type, did his best to work like a Dutch Titian in 'the newest beautiful manner of working' and to render 'glowing flesh parts' and 'advancing highlights and receding, smoothly blending shadows.'⁴⁸ He also made an effort, however, to heed Vasari's criticism: he took pains to portray his nude with clear and precisely drawn contours, while ensuring that the anatomy within those contours was clearly structured. He also lent extra emphasis, within the framework of this Venetian Venus type, to his study of Michelangelo's *disegno* by incorporating the pose of Michelangelo's *Dawn*:⁴⁹ the shoulder pressed upwards, the position of the head, and the raised leg undoubtedly refer to this (fig. 192). He had previously drawn a variation of Michelangelo's *Dawn*, presumably from a plaster cast which he owned. It is clear that when Van Mander praised Goltzius's painting, he recognized the attempt to unite both of these aspects: 'his nude is painted miraculously fleshily and plastically – and displays great study of contours and structure.'⁵⁰ The terminology used by Van Mander in this description is apt indeed, because the words 'painted miraculously fleshily and plastically' clearly refer to the Venetian manner, while 'great study of contours and structure' describes the ideal of *disegno*. It must have been Goltzius's ambition to combine both manners to arrive at the 'perfect' nude.⁵¹



190
Hieronymus Wierix, *Danaë*, c. 1615,
engraving 22.3 x 28.7 cm



191
Titian and workshop, *Venus and
Cupid with a Partridge*, c. 1550,
canvas 139 x 195 cm. Florence,
Galleria degli Uffizi



192
Michelangelo, *Dawn*, 1524-26, Florence,
S. Lorenzo, Capella Medici



193
Frans Menton after Frans Floris,
Danaë, engraving 21.4 x 26.4 cm



194
Frans Francken II, *The Story of the Prodigal Son*,
(the *Carousing of the Prodigal Son* in the centre, with a
painting of *Danaë* on the wall), c. 1615, panel 61 x 85 cm.
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

Goltzius was apparently well aware – more so than any other painter – that this was a subject redolent of both money and sexual stimulation, as evidenced by the accessories with which he surrounded Danaë. The old woman beside her had meanwhile become a traditional element in representations of Danaë's impregnation, having been introduced in this role of 'supporting actress' by Primaticcio (fig. 185) and adopted as such by Titian in his second

Danaë, made for Philip II.⁵² She is also to be seen in the above-mentioned print by Hieronymus Wierix and in the engraving by Frans Menton after Frans Floris (fig. 193), which Goltzius probably also knew.⁵³ The insertion of this old woman as a pictorial contrast emphasizes the beauty and youth of Danaë and also serves to visualize the transience of all earthly desires.⁵⁴ We encounter this contrast again in subjects with other beautiful temptresses, such as Salome, Bathsheba, and Delilah.⁵⁵ As many paintings demonstrate – numerous depictions of the *Prodigal Son among the Harlots*, for example – she can also be seen as *the* stereotype of the procuress, while at the same time embodying the image of Avarice, always portrayed as an old woman.⁵⁶ Her presence in a scene concerning money and lust is obviously very apt, as underscored by the inscriptions on the print after Floris and the engraving by Wierix.⁵⁷ A brothel scene with a procuress and a portrayal of Danaë even occur together in an early seventeenth-century depiction of the *Carousing of the Prodigal Son* by Frans Francken II, which is surrounded by a series of other representations of the parable (fig. 194). In the center, a 'modern' Prodigal Son sits on the right, embracing a courtesan while being addressed by an old procuress: above their heads hangs a painting of *Danaë* (also accompanied by an old woman).⁵⁸

In his painting Goltzius shows not only a shower of coins: all around Danaë piles of coins and other golden objects are strewn about, a pointed reference to the idea – repeated in detail by Van Mander in his *Wtlegghingh op den Metamorphosis* – that no one can resist the power of money and gold.⁵⁹ This idea is represented very literally in an emblem by Otto van Veen in his *Q. Horatii Flacci emblemata* of 1607 (fig. 195):⁶⁰ money breaks through walls and soldiers give themselves up, while Danaë and the old woman are visible in the background. Pieter Isaacsz. did something similar in a *Danaë* which he drew in an *album amicorum* (fig. 196): in the background, seen through a window, cannons are firing at strong town walls, in contrast to the gold which easily surmounts 'the

highest walls ... strongest chains, iron barriers, locks, bolts, gates, and doors.'

It was certainly not Goltzius's aim, however, to provide the viewer with a moralizing lesson in this vein. He was concerned with much more appealing and amusing matters.⁶¹ While, in antiquity, Terence had already placed a painting of *Danaë* in a comic context and Martial had provided witty commentary on a painted *Danaë*, and while Correggio had created an image full of light-hearted humor (and Bonasone one with coarse humor), Goltzius, in his painting, clearly turned the whole scene into a comedy. This is obvious from the fact that everyone – except Danaë herself – laughs or grins, a highly exceptional occurrence in a history painting, and one which functions as a 'laughing prompt.'

'Next to her is a subtle old woman with a glowing face and also a cunning Mercury, and I do not know of more amiable little children who come flying in with a talon-purse, and other things',⁶² was Van Mander's tongue-in-cheek description of this painting. That the picture tells a story of sex and money is made crystal clear by the left-most Cupid: he flies merrily around with a *stokbeurs* (money pouches attached to a short staff, called a talon-purse in the translation quoted above) mentioned by Van Mander – an enormous specimen, which is not only a reference to financial transactions but also – by virtue of its form – an unambiguous allusion to masculine lust. The old procuress grinningly attempts to awaken Danaë, who does seem to realize what is going on, as witnessed by her blissful smile and her remarkable right hand with its outstretched middle finger.⁶³

To the right of the grinning old woman we see the laughing head of Mercury with his winged helmet and caduceus. Mercury, however, is completely out of place in this story, so he must have been put there for a special reason. He was, of course, the god of commerce, financial gain and even deceit, but he was always seen as the personification of sharp wit and eloquence as well, and in this role he was also patron of the arts (see chapter II).⁶⁴



195

Anonymous after Otto van Veen, *Quid non auro pervium*, engraving 18.0 x 15.0 cm. In: Otho Vaenius, *Q. Horatius Flacci Emblemata*, 1607



196

Pieter Isaacz, *Danaë*, c. 1608, drawing from the *album amicorum* of Ernest Brinck van Harderwijk, fol. 246r. Pen and brown ink with blue wash 7.8 x 13.2 cm. The Hague, Royal Library

For Goltzius, Mercury as patron of the artist had a special meaning, and he portrayed him many times as such. In his series of 'planetary children' we see the people over whom Mercury rules, gathered together under his statue (fig. 197): here a painter stands in front of his easel (working on a canvas or panel displaying a female nude), there a sculptor is at work, and in the foreground we see learned rhetoricians.⁶⁵ In the well-known painting in the



197
Jan Saenredam after Hendrick Goltzius, *Mercury and His Children*, engraving 25.4 x 17.8 cm



198
Jacob Matham, *Portrait of Hendrick Goltzius*, 1617, engraving 43 x 29 cm

199
Hendrick Goltzius, *The Artist's Emblem: "Eer boven Golt"* ("Honor above Gold"), c. 1607, drawing from the *album amicorum* of Ernest Brinck van Harderwijk, fol. 256r., Pen and brown ink, c. 15 x 10 cm. The Hague, Royal Library



Frans Hals Museum, Mercury is even depicted as a painter, with a palette and brushes in one hand and in the other his caduceus as if it were a maulstick (fig. 26). That Goltzius would be depicted in a portrait – engraved posthumously by his stepson Jacob Matham – flanked by Mercury as the representative of *Spirito* (as written above Mercury's head; fig. 198),⁶⁶ seems almost self-evident, considering that the caduceus also formed the central motif in the emblematic representation of Goltzius's own device 'Eer boven Golt' ('Honor above gold') (fig. 199). There the caduceus, symbol of intellect and eloquence, stands on a mountain of coins, gold objects and a *stokbeurs*, all referring to his name. The caduceus is crowned by the laureled cherub's head turned toward the sun, a sign of honor and virtue.⁶⁷

This 'cunning Mercury', god of commerce and financial gain, but also of spiritedness and eloquence and at the same time patron of the arts, points his caduceus – with a broad grin on his face – at the eagle, symbol of Jupiter whose lust was aroused by the sight of Danaë and from whom emanates a flash of lightning which turns into a shower of coins as it falls. This eagle, however – and Goltzius was the first to introduce it into a Danaë picture – undoubtedly refers simultaneously and cleverly to Sight, whose most common attribute is the eagle. Goltzius in particular portrayed *Visus* many times (figs. 101, 166, for example).⁶⁸ As discussed in chapter v (and as emerges from the captions to the prints engraved after Goltzius's *Visus* inventions), sight is the sense that is considered both the highest and the most dangerous, because it is capable of kindling lust as no other, and of provoking sinful thoughts and deeds.⁶⁹

In this way Goltzius wittily shows that the painter's eloquence and power of persuasion – represented by Mercury – is capable, by means of the desirable beauty he has created, of enticing the highest of the gods into pouring forth golden rain, or rather of presenting the true connoisseur with such a tempting sight that he is lured into buying the painting, for it is he who ultimately falls

in love with this Danaë and is willing to pay a lot of money to own her. Goltzius placed his signature – this is the only painting he ever signed in full – on the jewel box overflowing with money and ‘golt’ (gold) at the left, indicating that the painter is actually the one who profits.⁷⁰ Thus his own high-flown motto is playfully ridiculed and incorporated into this clever jest.⁷¹

This thought is not so far-fetched: others besides Goltzius came up with similar ideas, as witnessed by the fact that Gianbattista Marino, in a poem published in 1620 on a painting of *Danaë* by Ferrau Finzoni, actually compared the golden rain with which Jupiter ‘buys’ the living Danaë with the much larger sum of money one must pay to own Ferrau’s painted Danaë.⁷² Several decades later Vondel would twice utter witticisms concerning the temptation and deception of the viewer willing to pay for such things, in poems on paintings of *Danaë* and *Venus*, respectively.

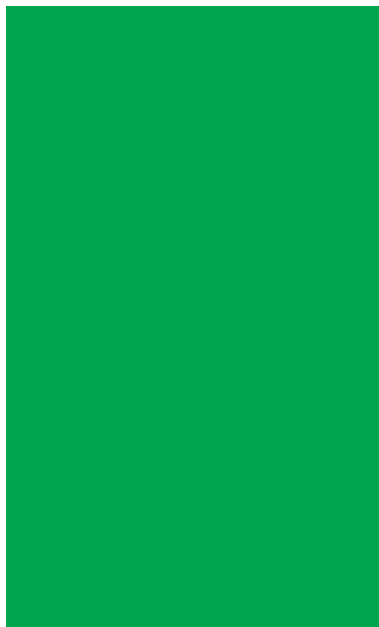
In his verse on ‘a sleeping Venus’ by Philips Koninck, Vondel in no way confused a painting of Venus with one of Danaë, as has been assumed, since he certainly knew what he was talking about. Praising the depiction of Venus because it resembled not a painting but a body of flesh and blood, he followed this up by saying that Jupiter, enamored of this beauty, descended in the form of golden rain. In contrast to Zeuxis, who only fooled birds, Koninck deceived the ‘chief among the gods with a painting.’ Vondel thus cited the comparison with Danaë in order to make the joke that the true-to-life appearance of the nude had seduced the supreme Olympic god (flattering praise for the highly placed owner) to pour forth a shower of money.⁷³

Vondel’s verses about a *Danaë* by Dirck Bleker state that the beauty of the naked Danaë is capable of charming a god who can get anything he wants with gold (‘What cannot be opened with golden keys! / A philanderer fears not alert guards’). But this womanizing god evidently allows himself to be deceived by appearances, because he ‘... finds nothing but paint and canvas.’ The

greedy Danaë has also been deceived, because to her the coins are, after all, only an illusion. Vondel ends the verse with the lines: ‘So the maiden lets trade flourish: / Art thus outwits even a god.’⁷⁴ The picture of the beautiful Danaë therefore ensures that financial transactions take place,⁷⁵ while the ‘god’ who has been taken in is, in this case, the owner who paid to possess this beautiful illusion.

In the case of Goltzius’s *Danaë* we know that the first owner was a well-known connoisseur and collector: ‘... this piece is in Leiden with the art-loving Mr Bartholomeus Ferreris, to be seen in his cabinet, or collection, together with other handsome works’, writes Van Mander.⁷⁶ This Bartholomeus Ferreris, who had north Italian roots, was the manager of the Leiden Lending Bank. He had at one time been trained as a painter – according to Van Mander, by none other than Anthonis Mor and the Pourbus brothers – and had also dabbled in art for his own pleasure. Van Mander had dedicated his ‘Lives of the Italian Painters’ to him.⁷⁷ Well-acquainted with the power of money through his job as a financier, and knowing the value of art works from his experience as a collector,⁷⁸ Ferreris undoubtedly found this painting highly amusing.⁷⁹ He would certainly have been able to appreciate the erotic appeal of the nude, which must have displayed a resemblance to life hitherto unseen in Holland: ‘painted miraculously fleshily’, as Van Mander said of it.⁸⁰

Ferreris acquired a painting which Goltzius must have viewed as an important ‘demonstration piece’ designed to direct connoisseurs’ attention to his ability to paint life-size female nudes in the latest Italian manner: a work which pointedly challenged a legendary painting of classical antiquity and the two greatest Italian painters of nudes, Titian and Michelangelo, the former a representative of the convincing imitation of nature by means of color and the latter of the ideal perfection of line (see chapter VII). This painting enabled Goltzius to place himself in the great Italian tradition, and he did so with a



200 ▶ see colour-plate x, p. xx
Anonymous (Cornelis Ketel?),
Danaë, canvas 147.5 x 89.5 cm.
Cognac, Musée Municipal



201
Jan Gossaert van Mabuse,
Danaë, 1527, panel 113.5 x 95 cm.
Munich, Alte Pinakothek

subject exemplary of the effect an image can have upon the senses, which was also a theme – the female nude – that could be viewed as a paradigm of the highest goal any ‘Apelles’ could strive for.

No one will blame Goltzius for not succeeding in surpassing Titian: that task would fall to Rembrandt.

Ketel, Wtewael, and Bloemaert

Among the works which Goltzius viewed as a challenge was perhaps also a painting mentioned by Van Mander – one made by his friend Cornelis Ketel. Van Mander spoke of ‘a Danaë with the golden shower, a large piece with life-size figures.’ Seeing as he described this Danaë a bit further on as lying on a bed ‘with her legs apart’,⁸¹ we must be dealing here with a work which, as regards the placing of the figure, more closely follows the type by Correggio and Titian, or, more likely, the print after Frans Floris (fig. 193).⁸² That is certainly the case with a life-size *Danaë* in the Musée Municipal in Cognac which was incorrectly attributed to Goltzius. One may well ask whether this is actually the piece by Ketel (fig. 200).⁸³

Ketel’s painting gave Van Mander the opportunity ‘to relate a farcical incident.’ Here again the Danaë theme emerges as a source of jesting. A peasant who saw the painting hanging in the entrance hall of the painter’s house had asked Ketel’s wife if he might be allowed to examine it, because it interested him greatly and he thought he understood it. The peasant then supposedly said: ‘Dear lady, are you able to do that? Then you will do well for yourself.’⁸⁴ The double entendre is clear: the words of the peasant can be understood in various ways, for ‘maken’ (to make) can here mean ‘produce’, ‘perform’, ‘bring about’, or ‘play the role of.’ In the first place, one can interpret this as the naïve peasant thinking that Ketel’s wife had made the picture and could therefore earn a good living by painting life-size nudes. Alternatively, it could mean that he thought she should be able to earn a pretty penny as a model posing for such paintings. After all, she



202 ▶ see colour-plate x, p. xx
 Joachim Wtewael, *Danaë*, c. 1606-10, copper 20.5 x 15.5 cm.
 Paris, Musée du Louvre

had provoked a downpour of coins. And there is yet another interpretation: that the peasant felt that she would earn a handsome living if she could do this, that is to say, play the role of Danaë, the seductive courtesan who amasses gold with her beauty.

After this somewhat risqué witticism Van Mander ridicules, in no uncertain terms, the old Christian reading of the Danaë story from late-medieval writings. The peasant, Van Mander tells us, said he knew what the painting meant: it was the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, thought the peasant, priding himself on the superb ‘judgment and insight by which he identified a flying Cu-

pid as the angel,⁸⁵ and Danaë, who lay naked and with her legs apart on a beautiful, rich bedstead, as Mary.’ Thus the peasant, ‘departed with his coarse understanding as wise as before.’⁸⁶

Van Mander arranged an encounter between the classic example of an erotic representation and the stereotypical ignoramus who knows nothing about art, in order to demonstrate that paintings like this are not intended for the eyes of such people. Those contemptible fools, knowing nothing about the prestige of pictorial and poetic traditions, will see the painting only as a manifestation of the immorality of the painter and his model, who are willing to do anything for money.⁸⁷ The current reading of the Danaë story, which revolves around money, is used here to lend weight to this witticism for the good listener. And when such simple souls think they understand it, things only get worse: they are certain to arrive at idiotic interpretations. In this dismissive way a mockery is made of the late medieval theological allegory (in which the story of Danaë was seen as the prefiguration of Mary’s virginal conception); this was considered perfectly ridiculous, and Van Mander – and since nearly a century many others as well – was dead set against it.⁸⁸

At the same time Van Mander showed that only a peasant who knows nothing of decorum would assume that the Virgin could be depicted ‘with her legs apart.’⁸⁹ It seems to be a box on the ears of twentieth-century art historians who interpreted Gossaert’s *Danaë* as a prefiguration of the *Maria humilitatis* (fig. 201),⁹⁰ and who even went so far as to assume that a *Danaë* by Joachim Wtewael ‘... connotes modesty and chastity, as she had in the Middle Ages, when Danaë was viewed as a prefiguration of Mary’ and also as ‘a warning against mercenary love’ (fig. 202).⁹¹ Van Mander – and Wtewael as well – would probably have found this incredibly funny, the more so because in this painting any semblance of ‘miraculous’ impregnation is dispelled by showing Jupiter in very bodily form, which would have caused even Van Mander’s peasant to think twice.

Inspired perhaps by Van Mander's description of the *Danaës* by Ketel and Goltzius, Wtewael also turned to this subject, which resulted in a truly hilarious rendering of the story on a very small copper plate (fig. 202).⁹² Not only does the eagle emerge through the ceiling of Danaë's room, but Jupiter himself descends in the midst of a shower of coins, as though he were a very corporeal and extremely clamorous angel of the Annunciation.⁹³ With this bodily Jupiter, Wtewael probably wanted to make the depiction both especially funny and scrupulously correct. In Van Mander's detailed description of the Danaë story in the *Wtlegghingh* – a description, copied literally from Natale Conti's mythological handbook, which deviates from the usual version – Jupiter actually reassumes his own shape and finally does what all lovers long to do: 'Jupiter ... changed himself into golden rain or gold drops, slid through the roof tiles, and let himself fall into the lap of his lady friend, who tucked these golden drops into her bosom. He then assumed his true form, enjoying the desired fruit, which all lovers are burning to obtain.'⁹⁴ The large spool held up by the old woman and the bundle of arrows sticking out of the picture in the foreground indicate Jupiter's longing, while the wooden spinning frame in the crone's right hand (which we look into from above), the slippers with their openings turned toward the viewer, and the chamber pot next to the bed all display Danaë's vulnerability. The bird sitting on the bars of the window undoubtedly has the same function as the birds in sixteenth-century brothel scenes, which often feature birds in cages at the entrances to such establishments.⁹⁵ While Goltzius portrayed the old woman with a bare, withered breast – in stark contrast to Danaë's firm flesh – Wtewael went one step further by depicting the old woman practically naked. This somewhat distasteful confrontation of young and old thus seems to constitute a satire on the motif.

That Danaë and the old woman are mightily shocked is understandable, given the great speed and unbridled energy with which Jupiter hurtles toward them. Danaë



203 ▶ see colour-plate x, p. xx
Joachim Wtewael, *Mars and Venus*, c. 1606-1610,
copper 20.3 x 15.9 cm. Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum

shades her eyes from the blinding light streaming from the clouds and turns the lower part of her body away in fright, thereby exposing to view her genitals, covered merely with a diaphanous cloth. Only Cupid – standing in a relaxed *contrapposto* and gesturing as though he is stage-managing the whole scene – looks on with satisfaction as everything goes according to plan. Perhaps this small painting formed an ensemble with the equally amusing *Mars and Venus* in the Getty Museum (fig. 203).⁹⁶ This is one of the very rare paintings in which copulation visibly takes place: the poor couple is rudely

disturbed in this activity, however, by the gods who gather round them, laughing merrily.⁹⁷ It must have been Wtewael's aim to amuse the owner and his male guests by exploiting to the full the erotic humor inherent in both subjects, which he depicted, moreover, on small copper plates that could be held in the hand to facilitate viewing.

From Wtewael's fellow townsman Abraham Bloemaert we know only a *Danaë* invention engraved by Jacob Matham in 1610 (fig. 204).⁹⁸ Here *Danaë* is still completely unaware of what is about to happen, even though the crowned head of Jupiter is sticking out of the clouds and seemingly spewing forth coins. Bloemaert must have borrowed this motif from one of Titian's later versions of *Danaë* (the one now in Vienna), of which there was an engraving.⁹⁹

Back to Rembrandt's Danaë

A younger generation of Dutch painters, active in the second and third decades of the seventeenth century, hardly ever depicted female nudes. In the 1620s even painters of the older generation – such as Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem and Abraham Bloemaert, who in earlier decades had been so prolific in depicting subjects with large nudes – seem to have abandoned this type of painting. In contrast to the Southern Netherlands, where such artists as Rubens, Van Dyck, and Jordaens produced numerous large-scale nudes, in Holland only small paintings of nudes – and a new type of landscape populated with tiny nude goddesses and nymphs – were painted during the 1620s, in which decade (following the Dordrecht Synod of 1618-19) religious orthodoxy held Dutch society more powerfully in its grip than in any period before or since. It was at this time that Geesteranus and Camphuyzen turned vehemently against such paintings, as did the moralist Jacob Cats (in 1625), though he did so much more moderately and with a sense of humor. In chapter v we saw how Samuel Ampzing, who was a Calvinist pastor and the city historian of Haarlem, felt



204

Jacob Matham after Abraham Bloemaert, *Danaë*, 1610, engraving 19.5 x 25.4 cm

compelled – even in his description of the city of Haarlem – to condemn the portrayal of nudity severely at the end of his extensive encomium on the artists of Haarlem (1628).¹⁰⁰ Many of his readers will have understood that he was disparaging a large part of the oeuvre of Haarlem history painters, including that of Goltzius and Cornelis Cornelisz., on whom he had just bestowed the highest praise, carefully avoiding the mention of any subject involving nudity. This might help to explain why no female nudes in a larger format – and no depictions of *Danaë* – were painted in this period. Moreover, the strong naturalism of the pre-Rembrandtists and Caravaggists, which dominates the art of this period, was difficult to combine with the idealizing tradition informing the depiction of nudes. As stressed repeatedly in this book, Rembrandt was the one who finally tackled this problem with success.

In the 1640s, when a few painters – Jacob Backer and Jacob van Loo in particular – again began to focus on the depiction of large-scale female nudes, the subject of *Danaë* made a comeback. It was probably Rembrandt who first took up the thread, when he started working on his *Danaë* in 1636 (205).¹⁰¹ And only Rembrandt – aware of all the implications of the theme – succeeded in competing with Titian.



205 ▶ see colour-plate x, p. xx
Rembrandt, *Danaë*, 1636, canvas 185 x 203 cm. St. Petersburg, Hermitage (before 1985)

Rembrandt would undoubtedly have had the same ambitions as Goltzius. After experimenting a number of times with nudes in a small format and even in a landscape, he turned to the really serious stuff: the prestigious tradition of the life-size reclining nude and the challenge presented by Vasari's critical comments (via Van Mander's version) on Titian's *Danaë*. Titian must have been *the* great example for Rembrandt in many respects, as evidenced by numerous works. His intense interest in the Italian artist, no doubt based in part on his knowledge of Van Mander's biography of this master, has been discussed in detail by Amy Golahny and elucidated by Ernst van de Wetering in his study of the development of Rembrandt's painting technique.¹⁰² In addition, it seems indisputable that Rembrandt knew that a painting of *Danaë* could be seen as a prime example of a depiction that had the power to elicit sensual enjoyment in the viewer. The fact that the best-selling authors Cats and Van Beverwijck referred to Terence's story in their

discussions of the dangers of paintings displaying nudes and other 'licentious' subjects – and this opinion was seconded by Van Hoogstraten – shows how obvious the 'Danaë effect' must have been, especially to a painter interested in the portrayal of female nudes.

As implied above, Rembrandt might have chosen this subject in order to compete with Goltzius. The latter's *Danaë* was probably the only large-scale female nude by a renowned master that Rembrandt had actually seen, and it would have been one of the few life-size reclining nudes in Holland that could be considered 'Italian.' Although it had been painted more than three decades earlier, it represented, after all, the 'new Italian manner' Van Mander had talked about, which was associated with Titian in particular.¹⁰³ It thus presented Rembrandt with an example and a challenge, for such life-size female nudes were no doubt rare at the time. Although at first glance there seems to be scant resemblance, many elements may point to recollections of Goltzius's work: the scale of the nude, the lower part of the body turned outwards, the slightly raised right leg, the somewhat oblique placing of the bed in the room, the bulky white cushions with their rounded forms which bend with the shape of the nude, the draperies on the right-hand side, the Cupid above Danaë's head, and the slippers in front of the bed.

As usual, however, Rembrandt also had several prints in mind when devising the pose and composition of this recumbent nude. He certainly knew the *Danaë* engraved by Hieronymus Wierix, and the engraving by Jacob Matham after Abraham Bloemaert was also an important source of inspiration (figs. 190, 204). The position of the legs and abdomen, the placing of the old woman (especially in the first version), and the pillow with the large tassel recall the latter invention. However, some of these elements, such as the pronounced curve of hip and thigh turned towards the viewer, the conspicuous abdomen, and the tasseled cushion, could also have been inspired directly by Annibale Carracci's famous etching of *Jupiter and Antiope* (fig. 295) – well known to Rembrandt –

which had also been a source of inspiration for Bloemaert.¹⁰⁴ To be sure, the stocky build of Carracci's Antiope is also seen in Rembrandt's painting. Whether Rembrandt knew the composition of another *Danaë* by Annibale Carracci (fig. 206)¹⁰⁵ or a *Danaë* by Orazio Gentileschi (fig. 207), both of which show her receiving the golden coins with outstretched arm,¹⁰⁶ or whether this motif came from a painting by Padovanino – listed in the 1657 inventory of the art dealer De Renialme – remains a matter for conjecture.¹⁰⁷ That Rembrandt knew a composition with this specific motif is evident from his first version, visible in an x-radiograph, in which the arm was more outstretched, the back of the hand turned toward the viewer, and the head more sharply tilted and seen almost in profile (fig. 208), which are features that refer directly to the Carracci-Gentileschi type. Considering the gesture of the hand as it looked in the first design, it seems possible that Danaë herself, and not the old woman, was holding the curtain aside, as in Carracci's painting.

When Rembrandt wanted to persuade the viewer with his answer to this 'exemplary' theme, he (unlike Goltzius) wholeheartedly sided with Titian, of whom Van Mander, in imitation of Vasari, had written that he had 'begun to make his things softer, more three-dimensional and in a much more beautiful manner, nevertheless painting his things from life without drawing, seeing to it that he represented with colors everything he saw there, be it hard or soft.'¹⁰⁸ Seldom has seemingly 'breathing' skin been suggested with paint in such a convincing way, and seldom has such an optimal effect of sensual beauty been achieved. Like Titian, Rembrandt must have seen as his most important objective the spectacular suggestion of true-to-life corporality by means of color and paint texture. The words of Joachim von Sandrart, who must have known Rembrandt between 1637 and 1645 when he was living in Amsterdam (see chapter VII), certainly reflected Rembrandt's aims when he wrote (admittedly



206

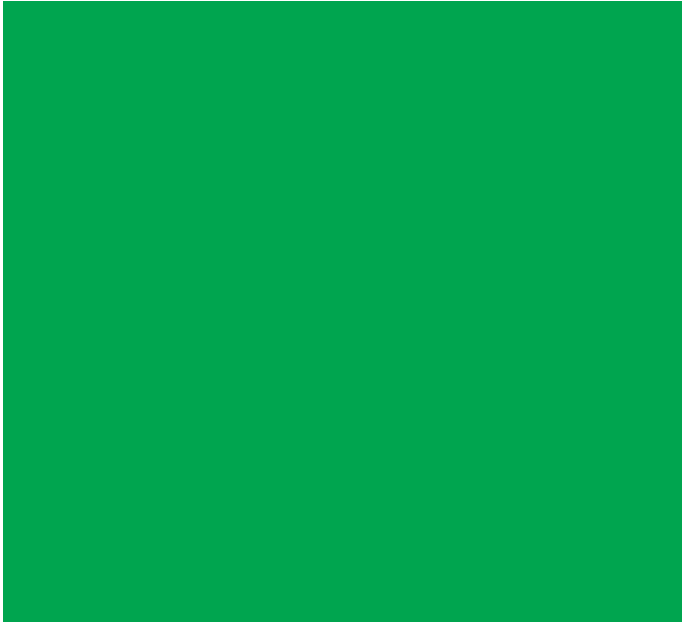
Attributed to Francesco Albani after Annibale Carracci, *Danaë*, c. 1605, canvas 170 x 344 cm. Formerly London, Bridgewater House (destroyed in World War II)



207

Orazio Gentileschi, *Danaë*, c. 1621-3, canvas 162 x 228.6 cm. Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Art

thirty years later): 'he was capable of breaking the colors [varying the tonal values] according to their own nature with great ingenuity and artfulness, and was thus able to render nature on a panel with faithful and lively genuineness and to portray it as harmoniously as in real life, opening the eyes of all who, following the common usage, tend more to fill in the colors than to paint, because they place hard and glaring colors next to one another in a most unsubtle way.'¹⁰⁹ It is precisely this *Danaë* which shows to such good effect Rembrandt's transition to a warmer palette, a 'more subtle alternation of large fields of light and half-shadow' and 'a pictorial interplay be-



208
Rembrandt, *Danaë*, x-ray



209
Rembrandt, *Danaë*, Reconstruction of the original format,
made for the Rembrandt Research Project

tween form and tonal and color values', as the *Corpus* describes this.¹¹⁰ More so than in his previous paintings, we see in this *Danaë* how he delicately models the body by means of subtle nuances of color that melt into one another, while retaining clearly visible brushstrokes that suggest the texture of human skin.

The change in Rembrandt's style during this period is easy to detect:¹¹¹ when he revised the painting around the mid 1640s he thoroughly painted over only the body of Danaë and her immediate surroundings, including the white bedclothes, the old woman and the table. The more detailed and more sharply modeled style in which the bed was rendered remained unchanged.¹¹² At the same time he must have cropped the canvas drastically: strips of considerable width were cut off the sides in particular, the most substantial being about 40 centimeters on the left-hand side. On the right it was trimmed down some 27 centimeters, at the top about 18 centimeters and at the bottom roughly 5 centimeters, which means that the overall dimensions of the painting were originally a good 2 meters in height and about 2.30 meters in width, as can be seen in the reconstruction by Ernst van de Wetering (fig. 209).¹¹³ In accordance with the altered format, which affected the placing of the figures in the picture plane, he moved the old woman and the curtain behind which she appears more to the right.

The narrower framework of the definitive version compels the viewer to focus more intensely on Danaë's naked body. The removal of the strip on the left containing the second bedpost disrupted the spatial positioning of the bed (compare fig. 216).¹¹⁴ Cropping, however, has allowed the remaining gilded bedpost, the drawn-back curtain hanging by it, the remaining ornamented border at the upper edge, and the curtain pushed back at the right to function all together as a richly accentuated frame. They now form a luxurious setting for the nude, who rests like a jewel on cushions that strongly reflect the light.

This monumental frame, emphasized by the shim-

mering radiance of the rather sharply defined and painstakingly rendered reflections of light, contrasts with the softly modeled nude which it encloses. The gilded parts, the curtains, and the upholstery of the podium display a varied handling of paint in firm and animated brushstrokes, brilliantly suggesting the surfaces of the various materials. Even its illumination distinguishes this framework from what is seen inside it: the light coming from the left side, parallel to the picture plane, and falling on the draperies, the gilded statue of Cupid, and the sensual ornament of the sculptured bed with its almost liquid forms in the highly fashionable 'lobate' style. The light falling on the nude has been altered, however: originally the figure seems also to have been illuminated by fairly strong light coming from the front left, but in the final version the effect of backlighting was created. A strong, golden glow falls between the parted curtains and brushes across Danaë from a rather low angle at the rear left. The undulating contours of her body are given extra emphasis, for its strongly lit upper side stands out against the dark background, and the transparent shadow of the lower side of her body is clearly visible against the brightly lit bedclothes. The delicate modeling of the torso, with its shadowed part turned towards the viewer, is a true tour de force in backlighting effects and a study of endlessly refined gradations of reflected light, the only deep shadow accentuating Danaë's groin.

Rembrandt made Danaë's body somewhat more taut and stylized than those of his earlier *Andromeda* and *Susanna*, probably because the nude was life-size – this fact alone gives it a much greater feeling of proximity. The striking difference between these bodies, however, is also due to the fact that this nude is not a threatened, undressed woman, whose defenseless vulnerability requires emphasis. Danaë should be as sensuous as possible, and this is underlined by the fact that she seems to welcome her lover with joy. Nonetheless, Danaë's body shows that Rembrandt wanted to suggest that this woman was painted from life, that we have a 'living'

woman before our eyes – which naturally was not always appreciated. The French connoisseur François Tronchin remarked in his 1771 catalogue of the pictures in the Hermitage that it was a great pity that Rembrandt had not 'employed the magic of his colors on a more beautiful model',¹¹⁵ while in the mid-nineteenth century the critic Louis Viardot, who thought it a painting of 'an indecent subject painted in a still more indecent manner', had characterized it as 'horrible nature, incomparable art',¹¹⁶ with which he encapsulated many opinions of this nude.

Her squat proportions,¹¹⁷ the large, almost neckless head, and especially the stomach sagging slightly to the side and the left breast pressed upwards by the hand on which she leans, are elements not found in any of the Danaës or recumbent Venuses of Rembrandt's predecessors. Rembrandt is almost the only painter who allows the law of gravity to exert its pull. The natural, lifelike quality and approachability of Danaë's naked body is enhanced by the textiles surrounding her: no generalized drapery, but a mattress that sags under her weight, no nondescript or gracefully festooned drapery, but a bedsheet shoved down to the ankles. As Ann Hollander remarked, 'not only the sweet body of Danaë, but the whole composition, consisting almost entirely of the well-furnished bed, seems to invite the spectator as well as the light to approach and climb in.'¹¹⁸ It reminds us of Cats's warning against lascivious paintings of nudes, which included the statement that the better the painter and the more lifelike his picture, the greater the effect on the viewer and thus the more 'harm' done (see chapter v).¹¹⁹ Rembrandt doubtless strove in the most consummate way to elicit the sort of response from connoisseurs that we know so well from several poems on erotic paintings written by Vondel and Vos:¹²⁰ a response of sensual rapture, in which the viewer imagines the nude to be alive.

Ambitious artists follow life, and surely don't require
 Drawings, prints, or statues, or such means to light
 the fire
 Of art lovers, but strive instead with their paints to
 impart
 The feel of living flesh, brushed on a canvas with
 great art.¹²¹

As noted previously, the notion of taking the image to be a living being (at the same time realizing that it is only paint) is admittedly a classic literary topos, but this in no way diminishes its significance. On the contrary, it was taken very seriously indeed, and both the painter and the poet (or the connoisseur and viewer) would have capitalized on such ideas (see chapter v).

Rembrandt maintained the image of a Cupid – almost always present in depictions of *Danaë* – flying, as in Goltzius and Bloemaert, right above Danaë's head. Everything was supposed to look natural, however, so he transformed Cupid into a golden statue that formed part of the elaborate ornament of the bed. His little god of love became a chained and crying child, thus referring to Danaë's deplorable situation, locked up and therefore de-



210

Anonymous, *Danaë*, c. 1638-45, canvas 47.5 x 41.5 cm. Present location unknown (Sale Milan, 6 May 1971, no. 52, as Salomon Koninck)

prived of love.¹²² Cupid's sad countenance contrasts with the joyous expression on Danaë's face, which indicates the dramatic change in her condition. The old woman was retained as a foil to the young beauty, but otherwise Rembrandt eliminated everything that might detract from the viewing of the naked body.

The color gold is present in the painting in abundance, but Rembrandt removed the jewels which lay on the table next to Danaë in the first version, and – in stark contrast to Goltzius and all his other eminent predecessors – stripped the depiction of all reference to money. The possibility that coins were present in the first version, however, cannot be excluded.¹²³ An anonymous *Danaë* sold in 1971 as a Salomon Koninck seems to reflect the first version in a number of respects (fig. 210),¹²⁴ including the arm, the hand, and the legs. There the coins stream – from an intense, glowing light at the upper left – diagonally down to Danaë's outstretched hand. This might also explain the original direction of the light in Rembrandt's painting: from the upper left and directly from the side, as opposed to diagonally from the back, as in the altered center of the painting. Doing away with the money banished all jesting about any connection between love, money, and art. Rembrandt's golden rain has become a beam of glowing light that just touches the tips of Danaë's fingers and the palm of her hand before brushing across her body in a loving embrace. Rembrandt does not allow any unnatural elements to upset this picture of joyful expectation: no flying Cupids, no shower of golden coins, not even drops of gold. The lover whose passion and desire has been aroused by Danaë's beauty is present only in the form of the warm, sensual light that penetrates the oval opening between the parted bed-curtains and is welcomed with joy by Danaë.¹²⁵

In this way Rembrandt, placing himself in an illustrious tradition of great painters of feminine beauty, created one of the most poignant and sensuous nudes in the history of the visual arts, a portrayal in perfect accordance with the theme represented. The fact that this

large painting must still have been in his possession when the inventory of his bankrupt estate was drawn up in 1656¹²⁶ perhaps means that he attached great value to it and kept it in his studio as a demonstration piece, so that no visitor could doubt that Rembrandt was the only true match for Nicias, Apelles, and Titian.¹²⁷ However, the suggestion of lifelikeness that no other painter was ever capable of producing could well have been the reason for Danaë's tragic disfigurement three-and-a-half centuries later.

Rembrandt's contemporaries

As noted, Rembrandt's portrayal of a life-size nude seems to mark a new development in Amsterdam, namely a revival of interest in painting nudes in rather large formats. Around the same time Jacob Backer and Jacob van Loo also began to paint life-size nudes, all of which are undated, however, so it is difficult to tell whether it was Rembrandt who actually gave this type of painting a new impetus. Jacob Backer's *Sleeping Ephigenia Spied upon by Cimon* (fig. 211) does not betray any obvious reflection of Rembrandt's *Danaë*, but Jacob van Loo's painting of the same subject certainly does (fig. 214). Nonetheless, Backer's painting, made in the period 1635-45,¹²⁸ might be a response to Rembrandt's painting – or the other way around. It is clear that Backer's main source of inspiration was not only a print by Jacob Matham of *Cimon and Ephigenia* (fig. 212),¹²⁹ but also Annibale Carracci's engraving of *Jupiter and Antiope* (fig. 295), which was of great importance for Rembrandt as well. This gave rise to similarities in the position of the legs and abdomen. Backer, however, was trying to rival the complicated pose of Carracci's nude by turning the upper part of the body even more – so that we see it with stronger foreshortening – and combining this pose with the traditional 'Venetian' attitude of sleep, with one arm tucked under or raised above the head. This results in an impossible contortion of the body, although this is not



211 ▶ see colour-plate x, p. xx

Jacob Backer, *Ephigenia Spied upon by Cimon*, c. 1640, canvas 150 x 230 cm. Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum



212

Jacob Matham, *The Sleeping Ephigenia Spied upon by Cimon*, c. 1602, engraving 12.4 x 22.7 cm



213 ▶ see colour-plate x, p. xx
Jacob van Loo, *The Sleeping Diana and Her Nymphs*,
c. 1645-50, canvas 35.6 x 45.7 cm. Present location unknown

immediately apparent.

What one does see at first glance, however, is how very different Backer's treatment of the nude is from Rembrandt's. The long, flowing, uninterrupted outline of the body, the shiny, viscous paint surface, the undulating transitions from light to dark, and even the proportions of the woman's body demonstrate how Backer posits his own version of a Rubenesque style as an alternative to that of Rembrandt. Backer's nude must have made quite an impression in Amsterdam, as evidenced by a painting by Bartholomeus Breenbergh of the same subject,¹³⁰ in which Backer's nude is quite faithfully copied in a small format, and by a painting of *The Sleeping Diana with Nymphs* by Jacob van Loo, whose central figure is shown in almost exactly the same pose (fig. 213). The latter is anatomically more correct than Backer's nude, however, and transformed by Van Loo's manner, with tauter contours and a smoother surface.¹³¹ Backer's painting was no doubt well known, since both Jan Vos and Ludolph Smids wrote amusing poems in praise of it (see chapter v), both later quoted by Houbraken. In Vos's

poem, the owner (Abraham van Bassen) is warned not to wake her up because 'She burns us while she sleeps; but if she should now start, / She'll turn us into ashes; for the eye doth fire the heart.'¹³²

An *Ephigenia Spied upon by Cimon* by Jacob van Loo shows how painters began to compete with one another for the favor of collectors among Amsterdam's elite by depicting large female nudes (fig. 214). As noted before, Van Loo, who was slightly younger than Rembrandt, even began to specialize in representations of nudes. Van Loo chose the same subject as Backer, but took the composition of Rembrandt's *Danaë* as his point of departure, undoubtedly intending to emulate Rembrandt and to show off an alternative style. By adopting some elements of the pose – Van Loo's nude leans on one arm, her other arm gesturing like Rembrandt's *Danaë* – he deliberately made his emulation recognizable. The proportions and bodily shape of Van Loo's nude are very reminiscent of Backer's *Ephigenia*, so much so that one wonders if the paintings were based on drawings after the same model. However, the body is drawn with clear and precise contours and modeled with a rather uniform illumination; its smooth surface displays no brushstrokes, so that its compact forms with their taut outlines, which betray no accidental distortion, appear 'colored in', as it were.

Van Loo changed Ephigenia, who is traditionally portrayed asleep, into a woman who wakes up and confronts the man who is spying on her. Unlike Rembrandt's *Danaë*, this woman is shocked by the invasion of her privacy. It is telling that Jacob van Loo opted for a subject with contrasting connotations. Boccaccio tells the tale of the coarse, uneducated Cimon, who gazes at the sleeping Ephigenia and changes from a country bumpkin into an appreciator of beauty, developing, moreover, into a sharp-witted thinker and a skilled singer, musician, horseman, and warrior. The moral of the story is obvious: love edifies, as is underlined in all the translations and adaptations of this story.¹³³ It is no coincidence that Jacob van Loo, expressly competing with Rembrandt –

whose style was then the dominant one – chose a story that underscores the ability of beauty to edify the intellect rather than to arouse the senses.¹³⁴ This was a witty thing to do if he wanted to make a statement with this painting, using a style based on line, idealization, and the selection of the most beautiful in nature – a method ever associated with intellectual appeal – rather than striving for the most lifelike expressiveness by means of color, light, and shade – a method thought to appeal primarily to the senses (see chapter VII). His nude, whose abdomen, pudendum, and thighs are well covered with a large white cloth, is definitely far less sensuous than Rembrandt’s *Danaë*, not only because Rembrandt was a much greater painter, but also because Van Loo’s manner of painting does not try to involve the viewer’s senses and emotions as Rembrandt’s does.

Although in our eyes Van Loo does not bear comparison with Rembrandt, he did have more success in depicting naked women, judging from the number of female nudes by his hand. This was not because Rembrandt’s exceptional qualities were not recognized, but because a nude in Van Loo’s more ‘classical’ style would have been less disturbing and therefore less problematic. Improbable as this may seem, most people who wanted a life-size nude would have preferred one by Van Loo – as did the couple portrayed by Egdon van der Neer (fig. 114).

Rembrandt’s *Danaë* resonates in several other paintings from the 1640s and ’50s. I have already mentioned the anonymous painting sold as a Salomon Koninck in 1970, which appears to have been based on Rembrandt’s earlier version of *Danaë* (fig. 210). A remarkable work by an anonymous pupil – attributed variously to Ferdinand Bol, Govert Flinck, Gerbrand van den Eeckhout, and Heinrich Jansen – portrays the unusual story of *Mundus and Paulina* (fig. 215): inside a pagan temple, a priest leads a young man to a nude woman lying on a sumptuous bed. Both the nude (the face seen in profile and the left hand partly covering the breast instead of pressing it up) and



214 ▶ see colour-plate x, p. xx

Jacob van Loo, *Ephigenia spied upon by Cimon*, c. 1640-50, canvas 175 x 214 cm. The Hague, Art dealer Hoogsteder



215

Follower of Rembrandt (Heinrich Jansen?), *Mundus and Paulina*, with a false “F. Bol” signature, c. 1640, canvas 81 x 100 cm. Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum.



216
 Workshop of Rembrandt (F. Bol?), *Isaac and Esau*, c. 1636-40, panel 57.3 x 69.6 cm.
 Private Coll.



217
 Ferdinand Bol, *David's Dying Charge to Salomon*, c. 1638-40, canvas 171 x 230 cm.
 Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland

the bed derive from Rembrandt's first version of *Danaë*, but have been reduced from life-size to about 25 centimeters.¹³⁵ The painting appears to be an exercise in copying the master on a different scale and in a different story (see chapter IX). It is interesting to note that the young painter, who managed to transform Rembrandt's *Danaë* into a thoroughly unexciting nude, did not realize that changing the position of the right arm would cause the right breast to assume an entirely different shape.

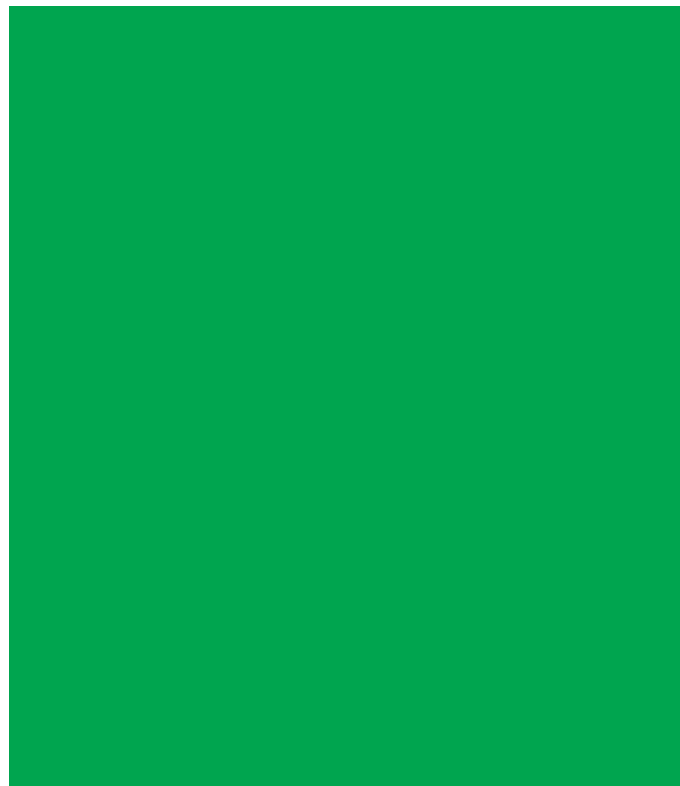
In two paintings of Rembrandt's workshop, once attributed to Ferdinand Bol – one portraying *Isaac and Esau* (fig. 216),¹³⁶ and the other, probably datable to 1643, depicting the unusual subject of *David's Dying Charge to Solomon* (fig. 217)¹³⁷ – only Danaë's spectacular bed was copied (in the former as it appeared in Rembrandt's painting before cropping) to function as Isaac's sickbed and David's deathbed. The first painting in particular gives a clear view of the second bedpost and thus of the original spatial positioning of Danaë's bed. In the second work it seems as if the artist portrayed David with a simplified version of Danaë's right hand, here indicating that the dying man is speaking.¹³⁸

Much later, in the early 1660s, we find in Bol's oeuvre a painting reminiscent of Rembrandt's *Danaë*. This time it is a depiction of another of Jupiter's sweethearts, the much less fortunate *Semele*, who, persuaded by the jealous Juno (in the guise of an old woman) to entreat her lover to come to her with the same majesty as he approached Juno, is consumed by the fire of Jupiter's lightning (fig. 218).¹³⁹ In Bol's painting she receives with flailing arms the strong light emanating from the thunderbolt which the eagle holds in its talons, while a somewhat clumsy-looking Jupiter appears at the right behind the curtains, making a gesture of apology. Bol repeated several elements of Rembrandt's painting in reverse, even such details as the slippers and the table. The figure of *Semele*, however, reveals an entirely different conception of the nude. Bol painted her body with softly rounded but precise outlines, while her flesh has a smooth,

somewhat chalky surface. He saw to it that her proportions, with broader shoulders and large round breasts, more nearly approached those of the ‘classical’ nude. In Bol’s painting, strong illumination and the light reflecting on nearby surfaces play an important role. He did not, however, risk working with much more difficult backlighting, as his master had once done. One would expect the brightness to emanate from the lightning, but the strong light comes straight from the left, parallel to the picture plane, which in fact makes little sense.

Although immortalized by Vondel, the *Danaë* by Dirck Bleker – who seems to have painted quite a few nudes – has unfortunately been lost. We will probably never know if it was in some way related to Rembrandt’s painting. It would also be interesting to know what the life-size *Danaë* by Jan Lievens looked like, which was mentioned in several late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century sales and inventories in Amsterdam.¹⁴⁰ A poor reproduction of an otherwise undocumented work might show Lievens’s painting (fig. 219).¹⁴¹ Its somewhat Van Dyckian appearance, as well as the fact that it contains elements that are related to both Rembrandt’s *Danaë* and Bol’s *Semele*, suggests that it could indeed be a work by Lievens. Judgment is hampered, however, by the inferior quality of the only reproduction we possess.

There are two striking portrayals of *Danaë* that have been attributed to various artists but are most likely by Jacob van Loo. These paintings, which are very similar, portray a nude whose pose was clearly inspired by Rembrandt’s masterpiece (figs. 220).¹⁴² Some of Van Loo’s nudes, including these two, display a more naturalistic type based on drawn studies from life.¹⁴³ In his *Cimon and Ephigenia*, he tried to turn Rembrandt’s *Danaë* into a less sensual type – and one with different connotations – painted in a ‘clear’ manner (fig. 214). These depictions of *Danaë*, although displaying the smooth technique and rather even lighting that constituted an obvious alternative to the manner of the Rembrandt school, nevertheless follow Rembrandt in such naturalistic elements as the



218

Ferdinand Bol, *Semele Receives Jupiter*, 1660-65, canvas 206 x 183 cm. Meiningen, Schloss Elisabethenburg



219

Jan Lievens (?), *Danaë*, c. 1650-1660?, no data known



220

Jacob van Loo, *Danaë*, c. 1645-50, panel 36.5 x 37 cm. Formerly Paris, coll. Walther-Louis Uhl (as Gabriël Metsu)



221

Jacob van Loo (?), *Danaë*, panel 30 x 41 cm. Present location unknown. (Sale Frankfurt a/M., Hahn, 17 March 1936, no. 61)

slightly sagging stomach and the strong suggestion that this portrays a particular woman. The intimation that she is a woman who undressed for the occasion – as opposed to a mythical woman whose natural state is nakedness – is emphasized by a motif known from several works by Rembrandt (figs. 73, 240, 346): the chemise with the clearly visible cuff hanging down. Here the connotations of the Danaë story are visualized in their most literal form: this woman is a prostitute, smugly regarding the coin in her hand. In one version this is the only sign of money; in the other, coins also lie scattered on her bed, as if a departing customer had just thrown them there (fig. 220). The directness with which Van Loo refers to the dubious nature of a woman who poses naked for a painter is quite startling. It immediately brings to mind two lawsuits, in which Van Loo played a role, which concerned women of ill repute who posed nude for money (see chapter XI).

One of the most interesting paintings of *Danaë*,¹⁴⁴ at least as regards its invention – the rest is difficult to judge, since the work is known only from a mediocre reproduction – is probably by Jacob van Loo (fig. 221).¹⁴⁵ It displays a familiarity with Rembrandt's painting as well, but the painter incorporated, as a suitable addition, a *trompe l'oeil* motif popularized several years earlier by Rembrandt and Dou: a curtain pushed to one side, which, hanging from a copper rod attached to a feigned ebony frame, seems to be suspended in front of the painting, thus wittily emphasizing the erotic nature of the subject. It was mentioned in chapter v that Mancini advised hanging such paintings behind a curtain, and we know from several inventories that some erotic art works did have curtains in front of them.¹⁴⁶ We also see this in an interior by Jan Steen: hanging behind the young woman playing the virginal and the old man instructing her is a painting of a *Sleeping Venus* partly covered by a curtain (fig. 222). Steen used it here to joke about the age-old motif of unequal love represented by the couple in the foreground.

Vondel even played with the motif of a curtain in a poem (quoted in chapter v) about a marble statuette representing *Leda and the Swan*: ‘Ay, ashamed we should draw the curtain / Before the shamelessness of Jove.’¹⁴⁷ By adding a feigned curtain as if it is hanging in front of the picture, however, the painter of this *Danaë* painting of a nude woman we are looking at, which – even though it is unmistakably a painted panel and therefore only an illusion – is nevertheless capable of stimulating the viewer’s senses. If the curtain had remained closed when Terence’s Chaerea found himself in the same room with a painted *Danaë*, nothing would have happened, except that we would have been deprived of the breathtakingly beautiful Danaës by Correggio, Titian, and Rembrandt.



222

Jan Steen, *The Music Lesson* (with a painting of *Venus and Cupid* on the wall), c. 1664-66, panel 37 x 48 cm. London, Wallace Collection

Intermezzo

Imitation, Artistic Competition, and Rapen

An important thread in my discussion of Rembrandt's paintings has been his continual dialogue with the work of other artists: artists from his immediate circle (particularly his teacher, Pieter Lastman), Dutch artists of the past (especially his great predecessors, such as Hendrick Goltzius, Maarten van Heemskerck, and Lucas van Leyden, who left a legacy of their inventions in the form of prints), and finally the luminaries against whom he measured himself (whose work he knew mainly from prints after or by these masters), including Rubens, Titian, the Carracci brothers, and Raphael. Moreover, any engraving, etching, or book illustration could trigger his thinking about the rendering of certain subjects and supply him with ideas for his compositions. It is often difficult to distinguish between his use of forms, motifs, and parts of compositions that inspired him in the invention of specific pictures and his conscious competition with

the greats in his field, undertaken to demonstrate to an audience of connoisseurs his claim to a place among the great masters. The extent to which Rembrandt's methods of achieving this were connected to contemporary ideas about the creation of good art, as well as the role played in this by notions of imitation and emulation, will be discussed in more detail below.

Despite the fact that nowadays art historians are inclined to examine the ways in which artists emulated one another, surprisingly little attention has been paid – certainly as regards Dutch painting of the seventeenth century – to how our concept of emulation compares with that of the seventeenth century, and to the relationship of emulation to imitation. What, in fact, does the contemporary Dutch art literature say about these and related concepts? And how can these concepts be connected with the practices prevailing at that time, inasmuch as

these are revealed in the art works themselves?

Since Ernst Gombrich focused attention – in several essays written in the 1950s and '60s – on the notions of imitation and emulation in the art of the Italian Renaissance,¹ research into Italian art and art theory of that period has been duly undertaken.² For the understanding of Rubens's art, Jeffrey Muller's excellent study 'Rubens's Theory and Practice of the Imitation in Art' of 1982 represents a significant milestone.³ Regarding the art of the Northern Netherlands of the seventeenth century, Jan Emmens has delved into the theory – in so far as one can speak of a theory – of borrowing from other artists.⁴ He did this in the chapter titled 'Originaliteit en ontlenen in de 17de eeuw' ('Originality and borrowing in the seventeenth century') in his famous book *Rembrandt en de regels van de kunst* (*Rembrandt and the Rules of Art*) of 1967,⁵ in which he paid particular attention to the notion of *rapen*, which he forced into the framework of his ideas on pre-classicist and classicist art theory.⁶

Since then the notion of *rapen* – so familiar to Netherlandish painters – has been discussed now and then in various contexts by such writers as Hessel Miedema in his commentary to Van Mander's *Grondt* and by myself in connection with Philips Angel's encomium *Lof der Schilder-konst* (*In Praise of the Art of Painting*) and the art of Gerrit Dou.⁷ Furthermore, studies have been published on various forms of copying as an integral part of studio practice and the learning process, and on the subject of young painters in a master's studio. The most important studies, prompted by the findings of the Rembrandt Research Project, are those written by Josua Bruyn and Michiel Franken;⁸ the latter study has been referred to in previous chapters with reference to the complicated relationship between Rembrandt's two small paintings of *Susanna*. Finally, over the last century, art historians have pointed out countless borrowings in the work of the masters they were studying; the attention lavished on Rembrandt in this regard even prompted Ben Broos to compile an exceptionally handy, 140-page book-

let consisting entirely of an index in which every Bredius, Benesch, and Bartsch number is followed by a list of references of formal sources named in the Rembrandt literature.⁹

These frequently cited formal sources were generally viewed in the Rembrandt literature in terms of 'influence', a vague and unworkable notion that art history has long clung to, reducing artists to passive recipients of forms and subjects which they absorbed as though by osmosis.¹⁰ By now the reader will have noticed that my book makes no mention whatsoever of this notion. In studying a work of art in its artistic context at the time of its genesis, my starting point is always the choices the artist made – the necessity of choosing, with every new invention, from subjects, motifs, forms, and manners of painting seen and registered from among the countless images encountered in one way or another. These images – which could be prints, or drawings and paintings seen in other artists' studios or in the collections of connoisseurs or art dealers – were stored either in the artist's memory or on paper. The resulting 'image bank' contained the raw material from which he selected – consciously or unconsciously – the ingredients that shaped his final product.

Every work of art thus has a certain amount of imitation at its base. As Quintilian (as cited by Junius) wrote: 'the greatest part of the arts ... rests on imitation, and what is more, the whole conduct of our lives consists in our continual and skillful imitation of that which we admire in others. Thus it is that children are drawn to letters until they have mastered the art of writing. Those who take up singing pay attention to the voice of their teacher. Painters take notice of the work of their predecessors'¹¹ The imitation of good examples was thus the foundation of the instruction – based on classical rhetoric – which one received at school: at the Latin school, for example, one was taught to compile and memorize beautiful imagery, turns of phrase, and figures of speech from classical authors, and to practice applying

them effortlessly.¹² The practical training a pupil received in a painter's studio would not have been much different: imitating others, copying prints, drawings, and paintings – for the dual purpose of storing up knowledge and the training of mind and hand – was in fact the very heart of such instruction.

What does it mean, though, when a fully fledged master deliberately imitates? Was the conscious borrowing of motifs, forms, and painting procedures actually a respected practice? And did it have anything to do with artistic competition? In recent decades the ways in which ambitious Dutch artists competed have been examined with increasing frequency, without, however, investigating what the concept of artistic competition, or emulation, used to mean.¹³ Ernst van de Wetering was the only one who offered any textual foundation in his essay 'Rembrandt's Beginnings', in which he studied Rembrandt's early work in the light of the artist's conscious rivalry with his teacher Lastman and in relation to a group of art lovers and connoisseurs who stimulated and appreciated such emulation.¹⁴ In particular, he quotes a number of passages on artistic competition from Samuel van Hoogstraten's *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderconst*.¹⁵

Recently, Thijs Weststeijn's doctoral research on the artistic theories of Samuel van Hoogstraten led him to study the notions of imitation and emulation as theoretical concepts.¹⁶ His dissertation contains a detailed interpretation of the theoretical implications of both these concepts in the seventeenth-century art literature, treating as well their relationship to the art theory of Italy and the ancients. He is mainly concerned with the theories underlying imitation and with the fascinating relationship between *imitatio naturae* and *imitatio auctoris*. In this chapter I shall discuss only the latter, linking several practices observable in the work of Rembrandt and other artists to statements in the art literature concerning the imitation of other masters and artistic competition.

Jeffrey Muller has already ascertained that by no

means have the terms imitation and emulation been given a precise and generally accepted meaning in the literature.¹⁷ In fact, remarkably little was written about these concepts in the art literature of that time, making it very difficult to get a grip on the meaning then attached to emulation, a concept we tend to construe (basing ourselves on Warners's seminal article on these concepts in the theory of seventeenth-century poetry) as a surpassing of the imitated example, as an activity directly connected with – yet loftier than – imitation, thereby crowning the hierarchical triad of *translatio*, *imitatio*, *aemulatio*.¹⁸ It is, however, remarkable that the literature, while speaking frequently of artistic competition, seldom links it to imitation and borrowing. Emmens saw Rembrandt's frequent borrowings from other artists as a matter of *rapen* (gathering, collecting), viewing it as a common and, indeed, recommended pre-classicist practice to which Rembrandt conformed, though it was roundly rejected by Junius and later classicists.¹⁹ As will become apparent, only some of Rembrandt's borrowings fall in the category of *rapen*; the majority can certainly not be considered as such.

Van Mander, Angel, Van Hoogstraten, and Houbraken on the subject of rapen

Let us first consider how one struggled with the notions of *rapen*, 'stealing', and 'borrowing' – by which I mean not so much the modern-day struggle as the one taking place at that time. Clearly, there was much agonizing over what was permissible and what was not. As far as we know, Karel van Mander, in his *Grondt der edel vry schilder-const* of 1604, was the first to write about *rapen* and stealing, recording in the process a saying, probably well known to painters, that contains a pun on the word *rapen* (which is also the plural of *raap* – turnip):



223

Gerrit Dou, *Kitchen Maid and a Boy in a Window*, 1652, panel 33 x 23.8 cm.
Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle



224

Jacob Matham, *Kitchen Maid and a Boy*
(in the background *The Supper at Emmaus*),
engraving 24 x 33.2 cm

Steal arms, legs, bodies, hands and even feet,
'Tis not forbidden here, but do take heed:
Play well your part in Rapiamus' troupe
For well-cooked turnips make delicious soup.²⁰

As Hessel Miedema emphasized, Van Mander clearly writes this as an exhortation to young pupils, who are permitted to steal like a Rapiamus (a greedy, thieving character). Miedema further notes that a *rapiarium* was both a model-book for painters and a notebook used at school.²¹ Students, after all, must copy good masters as much as possible, and if the copied elements are successfully assembled into a whole – as is the case when one uses *rapen* to make delicious turnip soup – one has taken another step forward in the learning process. However, turnip soup is, as Miedema remarked, a food enjoyed by the masses, which implies that *rapen* is not a high-minded activity.

In his *Lof der Schilder-konst* (*In Praise of the Art of Painting*) of 1642, Philips Angel treats Van Mander's passage in detail, interpreting it quite differently. Writing about the necessity of possessing 'sound judgment' as one of the qualities required of a good painter, he is prompted to treat the problem of borrowing, which he apparently sees as a burning issue.²² He begins by arguing at length that one is not allowed to imitate others and then, simply by adding something of one's own devising, claim the whole invention as one's own. He then asks a rhetorical question, whether one should therefore refrain from following Van Mander's advice, offering a variation of Van Mander's statement: 'Turnips [*rapen*] (said the aforementioned wit) are good fare when they are well cooked.' Angel states, then, that one may borrow if by doing so one brings one's own imperfection closer to perfection, 'for it then serves to praise the master from whom it was taken.'²³ But, Angel emphatically states, everything one borrows must be incorporated in one's own work in such a way that it cannot be perceived. He then tells the story of a certain master who showed Michelangelo a composition

consisting entirely of borrowed elements and asked him what he thought of it. Michelangelo told him that if each painter were given back what was his, he would be left holding an empty panel.

Angel, therefore, does not employ the term *rapen* with reference to a pupil's training, but applies it to the issue of borrowing in general, approving of it only if one incorporates the elements borrowed – with sound judgment – in such a way as to make them unrecognizable.²⁴ Angel is probably referring to a common practice easily discernible, for example, in the work of Angel's great hero, Gerrit Dou. This practice, which has rightly prompted many art historians to point out borrowings, must be described not as 'influence' experienced passively but as choices made actively to create something novel and personal with the help of motifs and compositional elements taken from existing pictorial traditions and iconographic conventions. Dou, for example, did this when he took motifs from the old tradition of the kitchen piece and transformed them (figs. 223 and 224). His *Kitchen Maid and Boy in a Window* in Karlsruhe, chosen for illustration here, links up – no doubt deliberately – to familiar conventions, without it having been Dou's intention that connoisseurs would recognize the derivations from Jacob Matham's print after an alleged invention of Pieter Aertsen.²⁵ This can be seen as a form of creative imitation, but there is no question here of conscious competition.

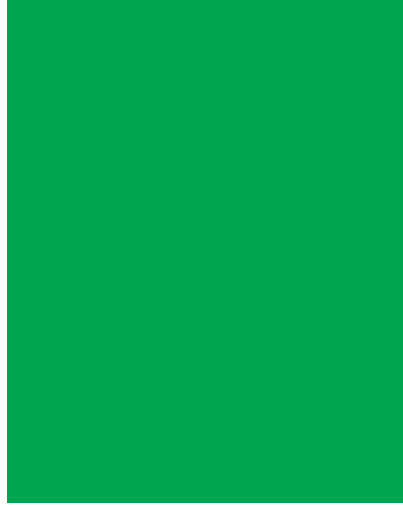
Samuel van Hoogstraten also warns that borrowing from the work of others requires the utmost caution. He quotes both the anecdote about Michelangelo and the reference to Van Mander's soup.²⁶ A bit further on he cites the well-known Senecan bee comparison (about bees who take honey from a host of different flowers), thereby linking this practice to Seneca's theory of creative imitation, for Seneca indeed propagated the view that borrowed elements, transformed by the artist's genius, should be assimilated imperceptibly into the artist's own product.²⁷

Arnold Houbraken thought that painters often took borrowing too far and that those who shamelessly indulged in it frequently appealed to Horace's pronouncement: 'The painter and the poet were both given the ability / To find sustenance in everything, which is of great utility.'²⁸ But, Houbraken writes, 'The measure of freedom traditionally granted to painters is now taken to extremes by many of them, and Van Mander's saying – 'Turnips are good if they are well cooked' – has been so stripped of its true meaning that it would be useful if an interpretation or clarification were given.' He then repeats Angel's argument that one should make use of 'the figures, draperies, and accessories of others' only in such a way 'that no one sees or discovers it.'²⁹ Like Angel, Houbraken does not confine his commentary on *rapen* to the learning process, as Van Mander did, but presents it as a general practice, which was permissible provided that 'what is stolen must be welded, molded in the mind as though it were stewed in a pot, and prepared and served with the sauce of ingenuity if it is to prove flavorful'³⁰ – and then proceeds to dish up the Michelangelo anecdote.

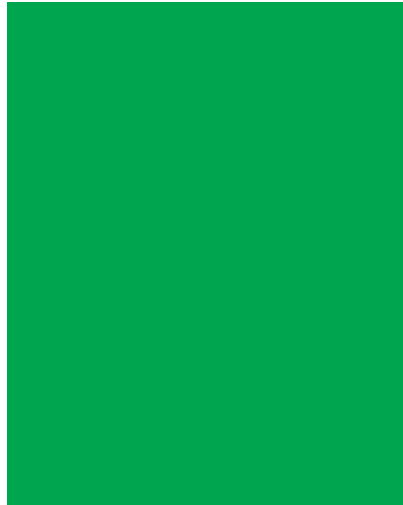
The problem posed by the bounds to which borrowing should be kept has already emerged once or twice in Van Mander's *Lives*, when he speaks, for example, of Michiel Coxie, of whom he says somewhat contemptuously 'He was not copious in his composition and in fact made use of Italian examples now and then.'³¹ He then says that Coxie was dismayed when Hieronymus Cock published a print after Raphael's *School of Athens*, which Coxie had studied closely in Rome and made much use of ever since: now, suddenly, this was plain for all to see. With regard to his own teacher, Pieter Vlerick, Van Mander writes that he was not ashamed 'to paint something after a print of Titian', thus implying that this practice was considered slightly dubious.³²

Clearly, one grappled with the concepts of 'bad borrowing' and 'good borrowing', and with the extent to which fully fledged masters could reasonably engage in a practice that had been a matter of course during their

225
Rembrandt's
workshop (Ferdinand
Bol?), copy after
Rembrandt, *Flora*,
brush in greys and
black over pen and
ink, 21.9 x 17.3 cm.
London, British
Museum



226
After Rembrandt,
copy of figure of
Susanna,
panel 63 x 47.5 cm.
Paris, Musée du
Louvre



training. Angel and Houbraken give a clear but problematic answer: borrowing is permitted as long as it is not recognizable as such, and if one does it well, it serves as praise of the master from whom one borrows. But how can something serve as praise if it passes unnoticed? This causes the clash of two principles that remain unreconciled: on the one hand, borrowings must be unnoticeable, and on the one hand, they must be seen as paying homage to a master.³³

Imitation as part of the learning process and beyond

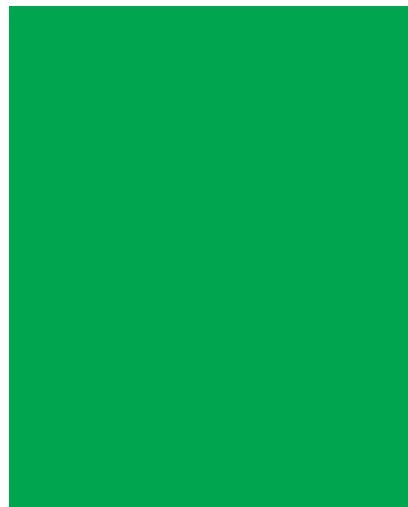
There is no talk, in any of these cases, of competing with, or even surpassing, the example of a highly esteemed master; indeed, we hear of recognizable imitation in the positive sense only in connection with the learning process. In Van Hoogstraten's treatise the latter notion occurs frequently, and one has the impression – as Weststeijn discusses at length in his dissertation – that his advice reflects many ideas acquired during his own apprenticeship to Rembrandt.

As Van Hoogstraten asserts, frequent copying of good examples during one's period of training forces the pupil to do things which are actually far beyond his ability and understanding but which will teach him the right way if only one makes sure that he 'understands the true sense of the masterpiece.'³⁴ This idea recurs continually, always with the emphasis on the importance of *good* examples, because it is difficult to unlearn a thing learned from a bad example.³⁵ This is directly connected, of course, to a time-honored practice: Van Mander, too, advises aspiring artists to seek a good master in order to acquire a 'good manner' (i.e., a good working method), in the process of which one learns the fundamentals of composition, execution, making contours, modeling, and the placing of light and shadow.³⁶ This must first be learned by copying with charcoal, then with chalk or pen (fig. 225), and finally with paint.³⁷ But, as Van Hoogstraten states a number of times, in copying others one must learn to distinguish the 'virtues of art.' One should study the virtue of a good composition, that is to say, one must become thoroughly acquainted with what other artists have attempted to achieve and what they excel at: 'If you happen upon a good print, it will not always be necessary to copy it wholly, but learn early on to discern the virtues of art', and elsewhere he says, 'Learn to enrich your mind from time to time with beautiful examples, so that you, in turn, can bring forth your [own] inventions. But above

all, study the virtues of a good composition. It is a great bonus to copy, early on, very good drawings, in order to learn a good handling, for in this way one finds in a short time that which others long sought.³⁸ It seems that Rembrandt also stressed this in his instruction by requiring his pupils to take elements from his work and to make ‘free’ copies of them. We know a few examples of these studies, which used to be seen as preparatory sketches by Rembrandt but are now considered copies painted (for the purpose of study) by pupils in his studio (figs. 226).³⁹

A pupil who could copy so well that connoisseurs took his copy to be the original was certainly regarded as a budding genius, as emerges from various anecdotes in painters’ biographies.⁴⁰ Furthermore, imitating a master’s manner of painting in such a way that everyone was taken in could also be considered a great virtue. We read of this, for example, in Houbraken’s account of Govert Flinck, who, during his training in Rembrandt’s studio, ‘learned in a short time to imitate [Rembrandt’s] handling of paint and manner of painting so well that some of his pieces were taken to be genuine works of the brush by Rembrandt and sold [as such].’⁴¹ A nice example is the *Good Samaritan*, now convincingly attributed to Flinck, which is based on an etching Rembrandt made in 1633 (figs. 227 and 228).⁴²

This recalls the fact that even great masters could be highly praised for their imitations of the manners of other great masters, an example being Hendrick Goltzius, ‘a rare Proteus or Vertumnus in art’ who could re-create himself in ‘all forms of working methods’ – as Karel van Mander wrote in response to Goltzius’s series of prints portraying the *Life of the Virgin*, in which he presented his own inventions, executed in the styles of northern engravers (Albrecht Dürer [fig. 229] and Lucas van Leyden), as though they were unknown works by those masters, and also produced imitations of a number of Italian painters, including Federico Barrocci and Jacopo Bassano, as though they were reproductive engravings of their paintings.⁴³ Constantijn Huygens gives elegant ex-



227
Pupil of Rembrandt
(attributed to Govert
Flinck), *The Good
Samaritan*, c. 1634,
panel 26 x 21 cm.
London, Wallace
Collection



228
Rembrandt, *The Good
Samaritan*, 1633,
etching 25.8 x 21.9 cm

pression to the reason for admiration: Goltzius had in fact ‘so cleverly expressed in these works that which is characteristic of the incomparable geniuses Dürer and Lucas that he had not only shown time and again how these artists were resurrected in him but had also led the greatest connoisseurs up the garden path. No amount of admiration is enough for this artist.’⁴⁴ In Italy one spoke in similar terms of, for instance, Padovanino and how he had added to Titian’s three Bacchanalia a fourth piece,



229
 Hendrick Goltzius, *The Circumcision* (in the style of Dürer), from the series of the *Life of the Virgin*, 1592, engraving 47.5 x 35.1 cm

which was greatly admired by virtuosos and artists. Moreover, jealous rivals, who mistook the picture for a Titian, were converted into admirers, according to Boschini: ‘There was such an intelligence in his own invention that in seeing this painting people were astonished.’⁴⁵ This instantly recalls Van Mander’s account of Goltzius’s engraving in the style of Dürer, which the most prominent connoisseurs in Europe took to be Dürer’s best work, saying that Goltzius would never have been able to make anything like it.

Such works – which paraphrase other artists’ figure types, attitudes and iconographic motifs, not to mention compositional elements, draftsmanship, effects of light and dark and, in paintings, the handling of the paint and the palette – show an intense preoccupation with a master’s ‘manner’ as an object not only of imitation but also of intellectual games. The youthful Annibale Carracci is said to have been so good at imitating Titian and Correg-

gio that the best experts thought they were viewing works by those masters. When someone told him that it could only be to his disadvantage if his works were seen as Titians or Correggios, Annibale is said to have replied that it was actually to his merit, because painters strive, after all, ‘to deceive the eyes and to make what is feigned appear to be real.’⁴⁶ Making things appear to be real and deceiving the eye are here applied in a remarkable way to the imitation of other artists’ manners. In this case, however, we are dealing with recognized great masters who are permitted to do things forbidden to ordinary mortals. I shall return to this subject later.

In discussions of the learning process, warnings are continually issued against clinging too much to the manner of another artist, and one is urged to free oneself from the example of one’s teacher. Both Junius and Van Hoogstraten emphatically state – and, as is so often the case, this is an oft-repeated piece of advice stemming from classical rhetoric, in this instance with reference to both Cicero and Horace – that one should seek to discover the things best suited to one’s own nature. ‘We are urged to follow the dictates of our own nature, and to adjust our considerations accordingly: for one would uselessly oppose nature in pursuing something one is powerless to do.’⁴⁷ Gerrit Dou must have been keenly aware of this, for even in his early works he scrupulously avoided the very thing at which Rembrandt excelled – the depiction of movement and emotion – and adopted from Rembrandt only motifs that were completely static and, moreover, gave him ample opportunity to enrich the picture with a wealth of finely painted detail (figs. 230 and 231).

Having arrived at this stage – imitating the work of his master while taking into account his own nature – the talented pupil can actually surpass his teacher’s example. The idea, after all, that good artists were meant to overtake their teachers at an early age must have been rooted in the minds of young, ambitious painters: in many of his biographies Van Mander tells of apprentices who quickly outstripped their teachers.⁴⁸ This must have been what

Rembrandt had in mind in 1626, when he produced a number of paintings based directly on the work of Pieter Lastman, works in which he focused on that which best suited his nature and in which (as he must have realized early on) his specific strength lay: namely the lifelike expression of emotion (figs. 43 and 44), a strength so eloquently underscored by Huygens three years later (see also chapter III).⁴⁹ Rembrandt was clearly teaching his master a lesson – probably before an audience of connoisseurs – causing imitation to cross the border into full-fledged emulation. In doing so, he went much further than the advice Van Hoogstraten gives within the framework of the learning process:

Make a habit of acquiring through ways industrious
A manner and the means of painting well
And do not blindly copy masters, though illustrious
But imitate in earnest, to excel.⁵⁰

Treating the problems of borrowing in a separate section, Van Hoogstraten first of all says that one is in fact allowed to follow the work of others if one finds especially good things in it, such as the ‘grace of linking and projection’ (by which he means the linking up of figures and the spatial relationship between figures and objects), which he compares with ‘the tune or melodic tones’ on which a poet bases a new song.⁵¹ In such cases, however, one must, in his opinion, take fresh material. In antiquity the painter was praised who managed to achieve, in a painting of Achilles, ‘the same artistic power’ found in Apelles’ Alexander; moreover, one honored Virgil – whose *Aeneid* was based on Homer’s *Odyssey* – of whom it could surely be said ‘that he sometimes imitates him’, but not ‘that he steals anything from him.’⁵² Here Van Hoogstraten no longer seems concerned with the learning process but with fully fledged painters, to whom such things are permitted. It is a practice regularly encountered in Rembrandt,⁵³ a good example being his transformation of Rubens’s figure of *Prometheus* – lying on his

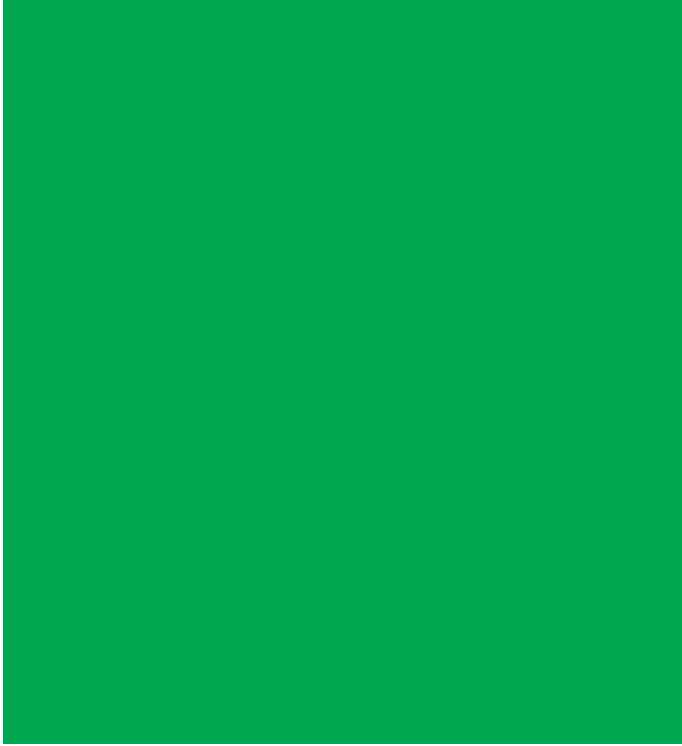


230 ▶
see colourplate x, p. xx
Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait as an Oriental*,
c. 1631,
panel 66.5 x 52 cm.
Paris, Musée du Petit
Palais



231 ▶
see colourplate x, p. xx
Gerrit Dou, *An Officer with Weapons*,
c. 1631,
panel 66 x 51 cm.
Budapest,
Szépművészeti
Museum

back, placed as a spatial diagonal in foreshortening – into a *Samson* whose eyes are being poked out (figs. 232 and 233). One representation of pain and horror is thus translated into another example of pain and horror, in which Rubens’s heroic nude, who pulls up his right leg in a reflex of pain, is transformed into a partly dressed man whose body makes no reference whatsoever to ‘classical’ anatomy. The more lifelike portrayal of the pain reflex – note the clenched toes that replace the ‘classical’ foot de-



232 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Peter Paul Rubens, *Prometheus Bound*, c. 1611-12,
canvas 243 x 210 cm. Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art

picted by Rubens – is one of the means Rembrandt used to fill the viewer with intense sympathy. In his Leiden years Rembrandt no doubt saw this spectacular work of Rubens, which could not have failed to make a deep impression, in the collection of Sir Dudley Carleton, the English ambassador to The Hague from 1616 to 1628.⁵⁴ Rembrandt certainly wanted art lovers to recognize and appreciate his rivalry with Rubens. The *Blinding of Samson* was presumably the painting Rembrandt offered to Huygens in the winter of 1639, probably in the hope of showing The Hague's elite circle of connoisseurs – who doubtless had the overwhelming image of Rubens's *Prometheus* etched in their memories – that as far as portraying extreme passion was concerned, he was ready to enter the arena with the great Rubens, whom Huygens called 'the Apelles of our time' and 'one of the wonders of

this world.' It should not surprise us, therefore, that *The Blinding of Samson* is the most violent painting of Rembrandt's whole career.

Example of Rembrandt's own work being the object of this type of emulation are the previously discussed paintings by Jacob van Loo of *Ephigenia Observed by Cimon*, and Ferdinand Bol's *Semele Receives Jupiter* (see chapter VIII), which both took the attitude and position of Rembrandt's *Danaë* as the 'tune or melodic tones' (figs. 205, 214, 218). Nowadays we would not judge these paintings to be of comparable quality, yet they represent, to my mind, a contest between famous masters fought before an art-appreciating public. Jacob van Loo, for instance, a history painter competing in the Amsterdam art world, here expressly vies with Rembrandt in an alternative style: a style based on drawing, featuring clear and precise contours, uniformly bright light, and the selection of the most beautiful.⁵⁵ Also mentioned in chapter VIII is the author of a painting of the obscure story of *Mundus and Paulina* (variously attributed to Bol, Flinck, Van den Eeckhout, and Heinrich Jansen; fig. 215), who used Rembrandt's *Danaë* for yet another subject, but this approach demonstrates the practice Angel disparaged: merely to add something to a picture that was already good, which 'works purely to the detriment of that to which it was added.'⁵⁶

These are examples of artistic competition in which the works produced refer expressly to other masters while making a conscious attempt to compose 'another song to the same tune.' The manner in which Rembrandt's early work in particular makes recognizable use of pictorial motifs from famous masters (mainly through prints after them) must have fascinated art lovers. This practice is reflected to some extent in a casual utterance of Van Hoogstraten, who said that one should cherish prints of the works of past masters, because they often 'rouse the spirit' and lead to new inventions.⁵⁷ A well-known, early example is a famous print by Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael, from which Rembrandt bor-

rowed the old woman (Anna) and subtly transformed her into the prophetess Hannah, placing her in his *Presentation in the Temple* of 1627.⁵⁸ Such means enabled him to prove himself – no doubt before an audience of appreciative experts – as a young artist striving ‘to compete for the prize on the racecourse of honor’, as Van Hoogstraten says about Virgil’s approach to Homer.⁵⁹

Artistic competition

As we have seen, contemporary texts permit borrowing only when it remains unrecognizable as such, while surpassing one’s example through imitation is mentioned only implicitly as an extension of the learning process. If a fully fledged master wants to imitate a respected example, he may not simply ‘borrow’ it, but must choose another subject in which to integrate the element he esteems in another’s composition. It is remarkable that we hear nothing of the form of emulation that entails choosing the same subject as one’s predecessor and referring to it openly. Otherwise, the need for a healthy sense of rivalry was indeed a frequently discussed topic.

Van Mander seems to avoid this subject; his few mentions of rivalry occur, as Miedema indicates, in passages he adopts from Vasari, who considers *concorrenza* the root of all progress in art. In this context Vasari also uses the terms *emulazione* and *emulo* (rival).⁶⁰ Thinking in terms of outstripping one’s rivals in continual competition became a common topos in seventeenth-century texts, however. It is striking, for instance, that in Theodorus Schrevelius’s 1648 description of the city of Haarlem, all the Haarlem artists who developed innovative types of painting – Hendrick Vroom, Frans Hals, Pieter van Laer, Philips Wouwerman, Cornelis Vroom, Pieter de Molijn, and Jan Porcellis – are described as having surpassed their predecessors.⁶¹ The marine painter Porcellis, for example, was generally thought to have taken the wind out of everyone’s sails, as Schrevelius so aptly put it.⁶² In a time of cut-throat competition, such ideas



233 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Rembrandt, *The Blinding of Samson*, 1636, canvas 206 x 276 cm.
Frankfurt a/M, Städelches Kunstinstitut

were not only an artistic mainspring but also an economic necessity: only by distinguishing oneself could one attract the attention of art lovers and potential patrons.

Earlier than Schrevelius, Huygens, too, had said of Porcellis that he had so far surpassed Hendrick Vroom that he hardly dared mention the two men in the same breath.⁶³ The way in which Huygens discusses the painters of his day in the account of his youth also reveals not only the strictly competitive framework in which he places Rembrandt’s outstripping of antiquity and the Italians, but also the emphasis he puts on his contemporaries’ surpassing one another. We have already seen how, in the case of Porcellis, painters were lined up against each other. Thus, in the field of flower painting, De Gheyn snatched the laurel wreath from Brueghel and Bosschaert, Goltzius deserved a heavenly reward more than any other engraver, Van Mierevelt had outshone Van Ravesteyn and all other portrait painters of the past, Rubens was inimitable in richness of invention and the boldness and gracefulness of his forms, and so on.

Van Hoogstraten wrote repeatedly that one should let oneself be driven by competition: ‘Come now, my youthful painters, who are stimulated by the honor and glory of the great masters to exercise diligence, freely let your rivalrous spirit be ignited. Let ambition prevent you from sleeping, for virtue also has a way of rousing the passions to zealously in overtaking the frontrunner. *It is no Herezy to outlymn Apelles.*’⁶⁴ One should not only strive to equal the fame of the living; one should also endeavor to surpass all who were ever held in high esteem. Through rivalry (*naeryver*) and the urge to imitate (*volgzucht*) one is driven to such heights of accomplishment that one will outdo oneself, in Van Hoogstraten’s view. Further on he states: ‘It was by means of rivalry that Zeuxis attained such peaks in the art of painting And this same fire sparked Raphael of Urbino to surpass the great Buonarroti, and Michelangelo to climb to unparalleled heights. Do not hesitate, O pupils, to look at one another’s art with, dare I say, envious eyes, yet without offending against the proprieties of an irreproachable life.’⁶⁵ Elsewhere he says that ‘noble envy will impel good minds to the top’,⁶⁶ and it ‘has always been a passion for rivalrous competition which has brought forth so many wonderful masters in art.’⁶⁷ Quite a bit was said, therefore, on artistic rivalry and the urge to excel; Van Hoogstraten’s writings even give the distinct impression of reflecting an ideology that was vigorously adhered to in Rembrandt’s studio. Just how common the idea of out-doing others was, and how matter of course it must have been for a poet friend of Rembrandt to compare him to the greatest of artists (and likewise for Rembrandt to compare himself to the greats) emerges from a poem by Jeremias de Decker. Following custom, he calls Rembrandt ‘the Apelles of our time’, and then maintains that in Rome ...

... thousands strike the flag, where
 one is free to marvel at his strokes,
 and those of Raphael and Angelo compare,
 and see he has indeed surpassed them both.⁶⁸

That Rembrandt, as of 1633, began to sign with his first name only – like Raphael, Michelangelo, and Titian – shows how consciously he felt himself part of that league.⁶⁹

However, that one should compete by referring visibly to the work of others is something we seldom hear about but rather see all the more often.

The few cases we do read about involve anecdotes featuring great artists who competed with one another, thus constituting a reference to a practice engaged in by the luminaries in the field and not necessarily a piece of advice to be followed. The only case in Van Mander’s *Schilder-Boeck* – which Van Mander borrowed from Vasari – is a passage from the life of Lucas van Leyden, which relates that Lucas and Albrecht Dürer ‘tried to compete against and outdo one another, and that on occasion Lucas immediately engraved the same histories or other subjects which [Dürer] had made and that they regarded each other’s works with great admiration.’⁷⁰ This clearly tells of emulation undertaken with a view to outstripping one another, involving two artists who consciously chose the same subject and kept a sharp eye on each other. This is precisely what the youthful Rembrandt and Lievens did in their Leiden period, again undoubtedly before an audience of expert art lovers.⁷¹ Of the many examples, let us take, for instance, both their versions of *Samson and Delilah* (figs. 234 and 235). These works are obviously the product of mutual competition, at the same time visibly emulating a famous invention by the greatly admired Rubens (fig. 236), which they knew from the beautiful engraving by Lucas Vorsterman.⁷²

Another anecdote involving a great master who recognizably borrows is the one Van Hoogstraten tells about Rubens. Having quoted the above-mentioned sentiment – that while turnips (*rapen*) admittedly make good soup, those who always follow will never progress – he makes a mental leap to a master who was an outstanding example of an artist who made spectacular progress

by means of copious borrowing, though he certainly did not cook up a soup whose ingredients were no longer distinguishable. After insisting that when an antique example is borrowed for insertion into one's own work, the rest of the work should equal or preferably exceed the example in virtue, Van Hoogstraten goes on to relate that Rubens was once reproached for borrowing whole figures from the Italians, to which end he even sent draftsmen to Italy to bring back examples. Rubens supposedly responded to this criticism by saying, "They are free to do the same, if they see any advantage in it", thereby suggesting that not everyone was capable of benefiting from imitation.⁷³ Here, the great master addresses condescendingly those who consider this an appropriate practice only when it escapes notice. It is, after all, up to a great master like Rubens to measure himself against antique examples and illustrious predecessors in such a way that connoisseurs can clearly see who or what he is up against.

Junius seems to be the only writer who clearly states what this practice entails – when engaged in by the great masters – when he says that the work of a 'good master' should not display too much similarity to that of 'other renowned Masters', but if this is indeed the case, he must render the similarity 'with intentional brilliance' Every artist is free to honor another in this way, for '... in my opinion, the artists who surpass all others are those who diligently pursue the old art with a new argument, thus adroitly bestowing their paintings with the pleasurable enjoyment of dissimilar similarity.'⁷⁴ This privilege is reserved for 'good artists' who may measure themselves against other 'renowned masters.'

When Junius complains of painters who take bits and pieces from all kinds of histories and 'combine them unartfully and infelicitously' – scornfully adding that they are even proud of such works, going so far as to point out their 'powerful and superhuman inspiration' – he seems to be criticizing painters who think they should be allowed to adopt the working methods of such a truly



234
Rembrandt, *Samson and Delilah*, c. 1629,
panel 61.3 x 50.1 cm.
Berlin, Staatliche
Museen,
Gemäldegalerie



235
Jan Lievens, *Samson and Delilah*, c. 1628,
panel 27.5 x 23.5 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum



236
Jacob Matham
after Rubens, *Samson and
Delilah*,
engraving
37.6 x 44 cm



237

Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael, *The Judgment of Paris*, engraving 29.8 x 44.2 cm

great artist as Rubens, though they lack precisely his ‘powerful and superhuman inspiration.’⁷⁵

Rembrandt no doubt wanted to assume what he considered to be his rightful place among the truly great, whose exceptional and innate talent allowed them to compete with other luminaries. Previous chapters have shown that this must have been on his mind continually when depicting subjects with female nudes. Several examples are yet to come, showing other instances in which he undoubtedly wanted connoisseurs to recall works (or parts thereof) by acknowledged great masters, works that such connoisseurs would occasionally have seen in reality but more often knew only from prints or at least from hearsay. In such works Rembrandt was responding to the expertise of an informed, art-loving public.

Italian art literature often speaks of this working method, revealing that it was not always approved of, certainly not when it was done badly, in which case it was considered a failing. The discussions surrounding Domenichino’s explicit reliance on a work by Agostino Carracci bear witness to this. Passeri presents a superb defense of this practice, saying that Domenichino’s borrowings do not produce works displaying ‘weakness in invention’, nor do they lack ‘good structure, because through his theft, Domenichino makes us discover a

greater truth, which knows how to use a pose, applying it in such an adept manner as it deems necessary and appropriate. Adapting [the figures] to a precise end that renders them perfectly placed and successful, Domenichino always gives a clear demonstration of a profound knowledge and a most perfect taste in all of his works.’⁷⁶ This shows that the viewer was meant to look beyond the immediate picture and the initial similarity in order to find the deeper truth by perceiving the *paragone* arising from the confrontation of the two. The viewer must discern the ‘new argument’ in the ‘dissimilar similarity’, as Junius puts it. And, as Poussin testifies, this was the perfect way to parade novelties (*novità*). Likewise speaking of Domenichino’s borrowings from Carracci, Poussin stated the following: ‘Novelty in painting does not consist above all in choosing a subject that has never been seen before but upon a good and novel arrangement and expression, thanks to which the subject, though in itself ordinary and worn, becomes new and singular.’⁷⁷

It was this attitude that led to the proliferation in European – and not least Dutch – painting of portrayals of such themes as *The Judgment of Paris* and *The Discovery of Callisto’s Pregnancy*. The engravings made by Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael (fig. 237) and Cornelis Cort after Titian (fig. 140) continued for nearly two centuries to stimulate artists to demonstrate in their own compositions how creatively they re-invented such great examples, thereby also displaying the innovation and individuality of their own approach.⁷⁸ We often see that it was mainly young, ambitious painters who placed themselves in this emulative position, but Rubens, for example, kept up a dialogue, in works spanning his entire career, with Raphael’s *Judgment of Paris* invention (figs. 238, 239).⁷⁹

Although Rembrandt’s work does not immediately call to mind Poussin, this line of thought is completely in keeping with the way Rembrandt treated the internationally conventional subjects previously discussed. And, as we have seen, the ‘novelty’, the ‘new argument’ by means

of which Rembrandt intended to surpass his predecessors and contemporaries, was first and foremost a lifelike and convincing rendering of the emotions: the expression, in the most natural way possible, of emotional nuance, to be achieved by capturing the movements of the body's limbs as though observed directly from life (see chapter III); not by means of the classical poses, gestures, and proportions to which Rubens and Goltzius clung (a thread that would be taken up by such rivals as Backer and Van Loo), but by depicting lifelike and plausible actions and reactions by suggesting *natuereelste beweeghelickheit* – 'the most natural (e)motion' – using a technique so brilliant that human skin thus rendered actually seems to breathe.

There must have been an art-loving public highly appreciative of such endeavors. This point is well illustrated in a revealing passage by Roger de Piles, written in response to a work produced by Rubens for the famous collector Lucas van Uffelen, whose collection – containing many Italian paintings – was sold in Amsterdam in 1639. The work in question, a drunken Silenus, was thought by De Piles to have been painted by Rubens in competition with 'Domenichino, Guido Reni, Guercino, Albani, Poussin, Van Dyck, Rembrandt, and other painters who at that time occupied an important place in the republic of painting.' He added that 'Van Uffelen, one of the greatest connoisseurs who ever lived, took pleasure in putting all these illustrious individuals to work at the same time, in order to judge the result in the surest and most honest way in the world, I mean by comparison, placing them side by side.'⁸⁰

That utterance puts Rembrandt exactly where he thought he belonged – in an international 'republic' of illustrious painters who vied with great predecessors and contemporaries alike.



238

Peter Paul Rubens, *The Judgment of Paris*, c. 1600, panel 133.9 x 174.5 cm. London, National Gallery



239

Peter Paul Rubens, *The Judgment of Paris*, c. 1632-35, panel 144.8 x 193.7 cm. London, National Gallery

Prints and Related Drawings: Modeling the Nude

Andries Pels's damning words about the naturalistic ugliness of Rembrandt's nudes, repeated by Houbraken (quoted earlier in chapter VII), were probably written with Rembrandt's early etchings of naked women in mind, the *Diana Bathing* and the *Nude Woman Seated on a Mound* (figs. 240, 245). Those were Rembrandt's best-known nudes and the ones that have most shocked many generations of art lovers, connoisseurs and art historians ever since. Kenneth Clark even went so far as to say: '[They are] some of the most unpleasing, not to say disgusting, pictures ever produced by a great artist.'¹ In those etchings Clark saw the 'pitiful inadequacy of the flesh ... more unflinchingly portrayed than in any representation before or since ... painful visions of human nakedness As a sort of protest Rembrandt has gone out of his way to find the most deplorable body imaginable and emphasize its least attractive features. ... his eye

dwelt on every baggy shape, every humiliating pucker, everything, in fact, that the convention of the nude obliterates but that Rembrandt is determined we shall see.'² For Andries Pels, as almost three centuries later for Clark, no other nudes deviated so much from the classical ideal, from what Clark called the 'convention of the nude' that 'obliterates' the accidental (see chapter XI). In the eyes of Pels, this made Rembrandt 'the first heretic in art' ('de eerste ketter in de kunst'), whereas Clark saw it as 'a sort of protest' and a 'defiance of classicism.'

Art historians of the later twentieth century, on the contrary, have often refuted any rebelliousness or an 'anti-classical attitude.' Fiercely turning against Clark, Josua Bruyn maintained that the *Nude Woman Seated on a Mound* 'must be seen in connection with, for instance, Annibale Carracci's print of *Susanna and the Elders*. The lady would seem, therefore, to be of quite impecca-



240

Rembrandt, *Diana*, c. 1631, etching 17.8 x 15.9 cm

ble classical origin, classical in the sense that Annibale's reputation at this moment of history certainly amounted to classical authority.' (fig. 62) According to Bruyn, this nude was erroneously called anti-classical only because of 'the degree of realistic veracity with which the particulars of the body, the folds of the skin and the light-effect have been rendered.' He considered these criteria irrelevant because they lead us to judge Rembrandt's work of around 1631 with a notion of the 'classical' that was determined by ideas and styles developed only in the course of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Bruyn maintained that 'Rembrandt emulated a classical prototype (Annibale's etching) as well as nature – in complete

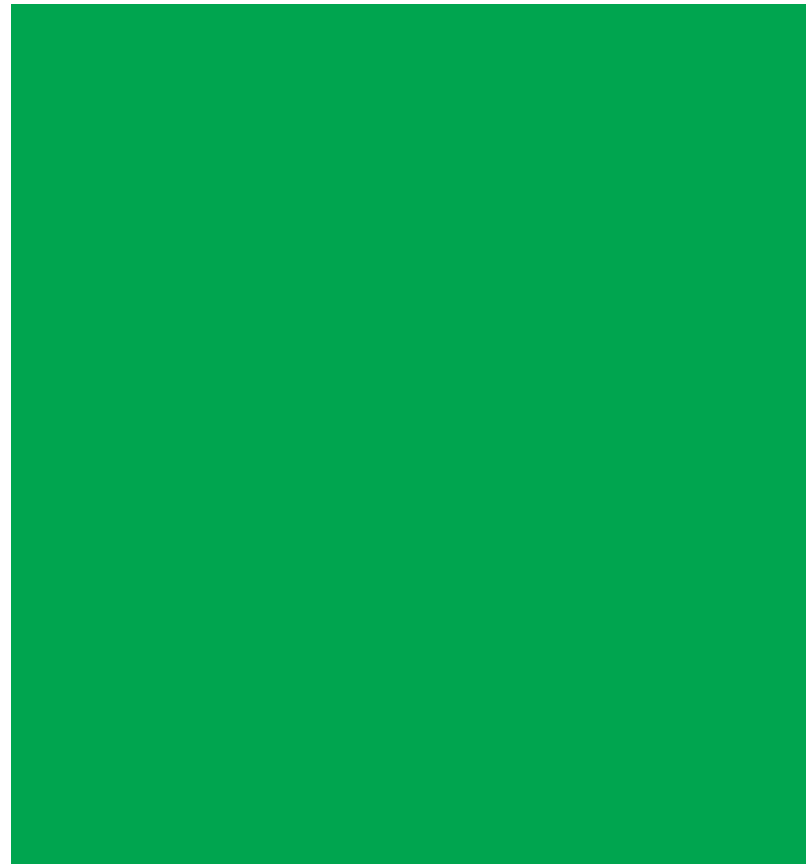
conformity with the most orthodox theoretical rules. These he interpreted, however, in a rather peculiar way by allowing naturalistic observation to play a much greater part than any Italian artist, steeped in a figurative tradition entirely unknown in the north of Europe, would have done.'³

Bruyn is certainly right in pointing out Rembrandt's 'classical' model, but the rest of his argument is rather surprising. The 'peculiar way' by which Rembrandt allowed 'naturalistic observation to play a much greater part than any Italian artist' thus seems an external, unconscious force to which all Northerners unwittingly succumbed. However, precisely the fact that Rembrandt took a 'classical' example as his point of departure makes clear how much he deviated from current conventions. Rembrandt had these examples before his eyes, and he consciously chose to do something entirely different. To talk about a 'figurative tradition entirely unknown in the north of Europe' is just as surprising: two generations of successful northern artists, precisely those who had been specializing in depicting the nude in great numbers of prints and paintings, had represented nude figures in a highly stylized, 'Italianate' way. Not only had the generations from Frans Floris and Anthonie Blocklandt to Hendrick Goltzius, Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem and Abraham Bloemaert – artists who dominated the field for more than half a century – turned to Italian examples as well as to classical antiquity, but even Rembrandt's much admired townsman Lucas van Leyden, whose work Rembrandt studied carefully, had essentially followed the 'Raphaelesque' type he found in Marcantonio Raimondi's engravings in many of his nudes (see figs. 267, 288).

In particular, the numerous engravings of nudes by and after Goltzius, Cornelis Cornelisz., and Bloemaert would have been the images that every Dutch connoisseur immediately thought of when considering or discussing representations of the nude female body, as discussed in chapter II in reference to representations of

Andromeda. Cornelis Cornelisz. was still producing a type of ‘classical’ nude in the first years of Rembrandt’s career (figs. 118, 149, 329), as was Adriaen van Nieulandt, who lived and worked right across the street from Uylenburgh’s studio, where Rembrandt settled in the early 1630s, and who was, as far as we know, about the only Amsterdam artist who painted female nudes occasionally around this time and who followed the type developed by Cornelis Cornelisz. (figs. 148, 161).⁴ For Huygens this was probably the reason to state that Cornelis was a celebrity in his own time, but that he would not have been much appreciated had he been born later.⁵ In short, Cornelis’s figures were considered old-fashioned by an up-to-date connoisseur like Huygens. And indeed, highly divergent styles had been developed during the preceding two decades. However, as outlined in the introduction to this book, the younger generation working in this period who turned towards a more naturalistic idiom rarely depicted nudes; only in small ‘Italianate’ figure paintings like those of Cornelis van Poelenburch, did female nudes continue to be popular (figs. 136-139, 150, 151). The rare nudes represented by such artists as Lastman (figs. 66, 175, 336), Van den Valckert (figs. 103, 177), and Buytewech (figs. 242, 332, 333) certainly ‘allowed more naturalistic observation’, but they did not deviate as drastically as Rembrandt’s etchings from the conventions that would still have been considered the rule by most connoisseurs.

In chapter VII, I discussed the fierce opposition which the changes towards a strong ‘from life’ ideology could elicit all over Europe, including Holland. Precisely around this time the comments of Jacques de Ville (1628) were clear enough about that. De Ville turned against an approach he found reprehensible, characterizing it in the negative terms that would recur time and again. In his text we have already found the reproach that certain artists (and connoisseurs) had no notion of the rules of proportion, anatomy, symmetry, proper posture, beauty, and pure line, and that their art had no foundation be-

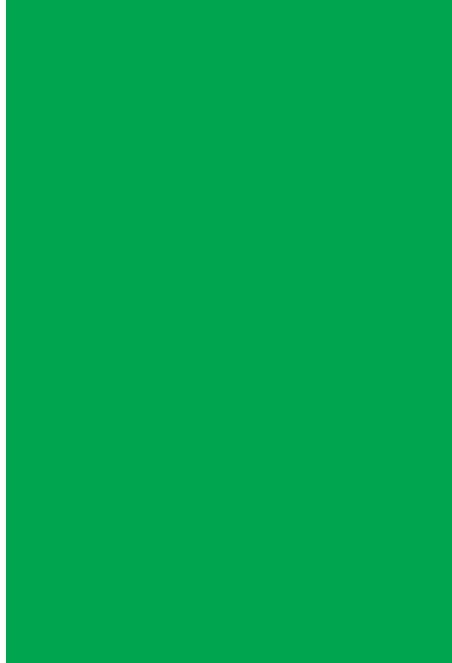


241

Rembrandt, *Diana*, c. 1631, black chalk, 18.1 x 16.4 cm.
London, British Museum

cause they merely worked from life, depended on their innate talents only, and were just interested in *handeling* and color.⁶ The targets of such criticism were those artists who, indeed, were of the opinion that everything not done from life was ‘child’s play or trifle’ and that the ‘observation of real natural things’, including nature’s ‘ever changing diversity’, had to be depicted unconditionally⁷ – the latter line of thought being supplemented with the idea that the ancients were by no means infallible and had been far surpassed by modern artists (see also chapter III).

Rembrandt could not have made his position more clear than with his first two etchings of a female nude,



242
Willem Buytewech, *Bathsheba Combing Her Hair*, c. 1615, etching 15.4 x 10.4 cm

both produced in the early 1630s (241, 246). In chapter VII we came across the opinion of Jacob van der Gracht (1634), who chastised the artists who thought it necessary to only study antique statues, since they teach one ‘the harmonious proportions and beauty of life’, as well as those of the opposite camp who thought it sufficient to paint ‘only from life as it appears to them’, blaming both groups for not having true knowledge of anatomy and musculature. The latter group Van der Gracht characterized as depicting no more than ‘the garment of the human body, which is the skin.’⁸ This observation is remarkably apt where it concerns Rembrandt’s nudes. In the past chapters, when discussing *Andromeda*, *Susanna*, *Diana and Her Nymphs*, and *Danaë*, we often dwelled on the particular type of nude that Rembrandt depicted and the deviations thereof from current conventions. Since such deviations are even more conspicuous in his first two etched nudes, I will, when discussing these etchings,

have another look at this type of nude, trying to determine its dependence on the live model, as well as considering in what respect this type may have depended on another kind of stylization.

The Diana and the Nude Woman Seated on the Mound

Although there were a few predecessors in Holland – Willem Buytewech and Werner van den Valckert in particular had experimented with rather naturalistic nudes – Rembrandt set a new standard in terms of lifelikeness with these two early etchings, apart from introducing an entirely different type of nude (figs. 240, 245). Moreover, to publish etchings of female nudes that at first sight look like representations of naked models posing for the artist and the viewer (even returning the viewer’s gaze) was highly unusual to begin with. No other artist had dared to do such a thing.

When producing these etchings Rembrandt was competing with prints by other famous masters, such as the Italian Carracci brothers and the Dutchman Willem Buytewech, as well as with prints after famous sixteenth-century Italian masters, foremost Raphael. Although transformed into a radically new idiom for depicting the nude, the motifs Rembrandt introduced here were mostly culled from such earlier examples. These were conventional motifs that would play a role throughout his career, up to his painting of *Bathsheba* of 1654 and his late etchings of female nudes.

Rembrandt’s portrayal of *Diana*, for which a preparatory drawing also exists (fig. 241), was probably the earliest of the two. The etching is generally dated c. 1631, around the same time or perhaps a little later than the *Andromeda* in the Mauritshuis. After his first painted nude, Rembrandt now demonstrated as an etcher his unequalled virtuosity in representing as lifelike as possible the female body. When he first made the drawing, he must have had several examples in mind: in the first place

a *Bathsheba* combing her hair by Willem Buytewech (fig. 242), a print which would not only have been inspiring because of the nude figure, but also for its new and experimental etching technique. But Rembrandt also looked at the two prints which had functioned as models for Buytewech:⁹ an engraving of a sleeping nymph after Agostino Carracci (fig. 244) and an etching by Sisto Badalocchio after *the* artist of the classical ideal of grace and beauty, Raphael (fig. 243). It was there that Buytewech had found the posture of a *Bathsheba* doing her hair. Whereas Buytewech already changed the proportions by enlarging the head and lengthening – and emphasizing – the belly, Rembrandt did so far more emphatically, while practically eliminating the woman’s neck, as he would always do in his early female nudes. Moreover, he ‘corrected’ the naked bodies of his examples by deleting everything that intimated muscles under the skin and not allowing any tautness of line or smoothness of surface.

Although Buytewech tried to suggest soft flesh with his fine etching technique, his nude still has quite virile muscularity in the arm, flank and midriff. More than any artist before him, Rembrandt literally followed Van Mander’s advice ‘But the women should not have any hardness / In the muscles, which should recede and fade softly / In tender flesh, with folds and creases / And with dimples in the hand, like children.’¹⁰ The voluminous shape of the torso of Rembrandt’s nude is close to that of the nymph by Agostino Carracci (and the torso of Raphael’s nude is, incidentally, almost as full), but the emphasis on the ‘vouwkens, kerven en kuylkens’ (folds, creases and dimples) in the soft skin is entirely new. As Kenneth Clark rightly observed, the etching shows even more emphasis on the creases (‘every baggy shape’ and ‘every pucker’) than does the preparatory drawing. This demonstrates that, more than anything else, Rembrandt wanted to suggest that this woman was portrayed from life – that this is what he saw before his eyes, sharing it with the viewer.



243
Sisto Badalocchio after Raphael, *Bathsheba Spied Upon by David* (detail), etching 17.8 x 14.5 cm. In: *Historia del Testamento Vecchio*



244
Francesco Brizio after Agostino Carracci, *A Satyr Spying upon a Sleeping Nymph*, c. 1605, engraving 18.7 x 12.7 cm

With the etching needle Rembrandt tried to suggest the texture of skin as no one had done before, working up the plate 'with an elaborate mesh of strokes for the most part short in length, in order that the print should be conceived entirely in terms of light and dark. The form of the body is largely defined by the placing of one area of tone against another. Single outlines are reduced to a minimum and not given additional emphasis by deeper biting. In its final appearance the impersonality of handling and the elaborate chiaroscuro give this etching the appearance of a grisaille.'¹¹ More than in the drawing (fig. 241), every crease and rippling of the flaccid skin of the midriff and belly is emphasized, as is the soft fat of the thigh and arm. It is, however, a *suggestion* of being observed from a nude model. As we will see, we may wonder if the drawing actually was done entirely from life.

After having drawn the figure and carefully shading the background to set off the brightly lit body, Rembrandt quickly sketched in with a few lines a quiver with arrows, turning this woman into *Diana Bathing* (fig. 241). In the etching he elaborated on this: her legs are in the water of a pond, a tree and shrubbery are etched in behind her, the quiver filled with arrows now lying before her; she is leaning on a sumptuous shiny brocade cloak and sits on a chemise of which the cuff is hanging down (fig. 240). (The latter elements would, for that matter, return in almost all his painted nudes.) Even the darkness of an arched grotto, described in Ovid's tale of Actaeon chancing upon the bathing Diana and her nymphs, is suggested in the right background (see chapter VI). Rembrandt placed the woman in a pose that was inspired by representations of women spied upon – the Bathshebas by Buytewech and after Raphael, as well as the nymph by Agostino Carracci – but he consciously transformed her into Diana, another woman who undressed to bathe and was watched by a man. In this way, he indicated to the informed viewer that he is, like Actaeon, a voyeur, and that his gaze might be considered an illicit one. Most remark-

able, however – and completely unusual in prints with such subjects (and in prints of nudes in general) – is that she quietly returns the viewer's gaze.

The only previous example of a print with a nude looking straight at the beholder is the *Susanna* after Rubens (fig. 67). We have already seen how Rembrandt employed this motif a few years later in a narrative context to make the viewer aware that he is the intruder who makes Susanna start in fear and from whom she is hiding her body (fig. 73). In the case of the *Diana*, however, the deadpan gaze of the woman seems to emphasize that we are watching a model who undressed for the artist and, through him, for the viewer. Although turning her into Diana makes the informed beholder conscious of the act of spying on a nude, Rembrandt did everything to bring her as close as possible to the world of the viewer. He sought not to engage the viewer in the emotions evoked by a narrative, as in his *Andromeda* or *Susanna*, but to involve him in looking at a brilliant suggestion of lifelikeness: the breathing warm body of the 'real' woman posing for the artist in the nude, suggested not even by paint, but, much more difficult, by the lines and dots of the etching needle.

Indeed, Rembrandt would have had a model pose for him, but she did not pose naked. The suggestion of soft rippling flesh makes the shape of her breast and belly appear 'like real', but, in fact, those shapes are less 'real' than those of Raphael's *Bathsheba*, to name one example. To begin with, it would have been impossible to see the shoulder, breast, back, midriff and belly in this way simultaneously. Moreover, a woman sitting, even leaning forward would not have this expanse of stomach sloping downward, but rather two bulging rolls (as they are, indeed, visible in Raphael's nude). It is striking that the contours of those parts of the body conform to that of Rembrandt's dressed women painted in this period, as a comparison with the *Artemisia* (fig. 247), or *Woman at Her Toilet* (fig. 341) makes clear.¹² What we see is a shape determined by a clothed figure. At the same time the

artist is trying to show many aspects of the female body simultaneously, but doing this *uit de geest*, giving it the form which he imagined as lifelike, while convincingly bringing the body and skin to life. Rembrandt certainly succeeded in doing so, since this woman, as well as the one in the next etching, has always been considered as the ultimate in naturalism.

The *Nude Woman Seated on a Mound* might have been conceived as a companion to the other print (fig. 245).¹³ Rembrandt posed this nude woman in another conventional pose. Again he is competing with one of the most 'classical' of examples in print, Raphael's figure of *Roxana* dressing for her marriage with Alexander, engraved by Jacopo Caraglio (fig. 348).¹⁴ And again, not only does the shape of her body show a startling difference from Raphael's figure, but the fact that this woman is aware of the presence of the viewer and returns his gaze turns Rembrandt's etching into an image that would have been a complete novelty. This time, however, she does not have the indifferent look of the model: with a rather coy turn of the head, even with a slight smile, she appears to ogle the viewer while openly displaying her massive body, which is not covered by one shred of cloth. Undoubtedly, the directness with which she confronts us would have been one of the reasons why, more than any other nude, this etching has had such a disturbing effect on generations of viewers.

Rembrandt was certainly aware that he was doing something for which there was no precedent. A print of just a female nude model eyeing the viewer would have been too startlingly new, so he distanced her a little by referring to the convention of the nude woman bathing, suggesting that she is a nymph or goddess sitting in sylvan surroundings. She is seated on a mound, and signs of shrubbery and an incipient tree trunk rising on the right can be seen behind her. On this mound also lies her chemise – we see the cuff at the right – intimating playfully that she has just undressed and that the viewer sees

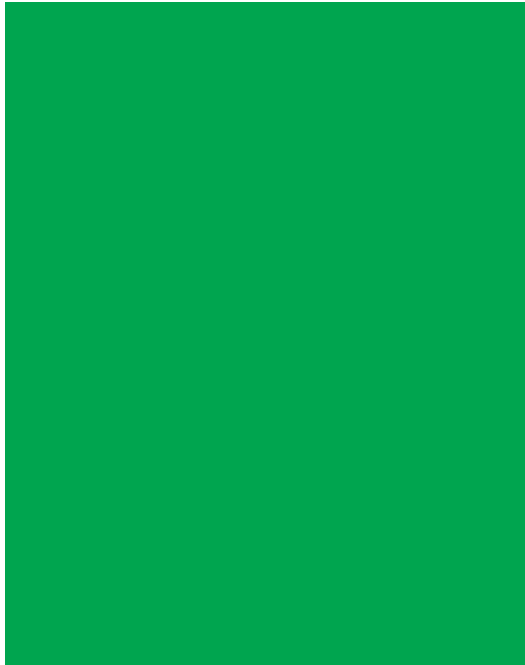


245

Rembrandt, *A Nude Woman Seated on a Mound*, c. 1631, etching 17.7 x 16 cm

something he is not supposed to see. However, references to a recognizable subject have been omitted: it has been left to the viewer to see her as either Susanna, Bathsheba, Diana, or one of her nymphs (with all the accompanying voyeuristic implications), or simply as a model posing for the artist. In the latter case the viewer would have considered her to be a faithful portrayal of a dissolute woman, presumably a prostitute.

Also in this case Rembrandt certainly did not draw from a model posing completely nude. The strange shape of the expansive belly, sloping down from the somewhat peculiarly placed, high breasts in an almost uninterrupted line – the whole section between breast and groin be-



246

Wenzel Hollar after Rembrandt, *A Nude Woman Seated on a Mound*, 1635, etching 8.6 x 6.9 cm

ing one mass of rippling flesh that obliterates the distinction between midriff, waist and abdomen – has little to do with the real body of a fat woman sitting in this pose, but much more with the silhouette of his sumptuously dressed goddesses and heroines (figs. 247, 341). She is, in fact, an undressed version of the *Woman at Her Toilet* in Ottawa (fig. 341), which was painted two or three years later (dated 1633). In this painting she has become a biblical heroine dressed up in a sumptuous fantasy costume and draped with jewels. The latter's figure – the narrowness of the upper part of the body giving way to the enormous sprawl below – is the same. If we imagine this woman undressed, then the lower part of her body would, if possible, be even more massive than that of the nude. For the *Nude Woman Seated on a Mound*, Rembrandt might have been working after a model that only bared the upper part of her body and perhaps her lower legs (the strange form and proportions of the too-long

right thigh was certainly not done from life), as we do see it in a few drawings after the model in the 1630s and 1640s (figs. 260, 261, 86).

In 1635 Wenzel Hollar made a reduced copy of this etching, which is often seen as proof of its commercial success (fig. 246). Hollar may have wanted to emulate Rembrandt, but it has also been suggested that it was a trial for employment as Rembrandt's reproductive engraver.¹⁵ If this motivation were the case, one can imagine that Rembrandt would not have been content. Although the etching is of a high technical quality, the body of the woman is completely smoothed out. As Albert Blankert rightly observed, Hollar tried to 'correct' Rembrandt's work by stylizing the forms, giving her a sleeker, tauter and less wrinkled abdomen and smoother shins.¹⁶ I am not sure if this was meant to make her more 'attractive' as Blankert assumes. But Hollar certainly diminished the suggestion of direct confrontation with a soft mass of female flesh. And he certainly tried to make the body conform somewhat more to current conventions: the breasts became rounder, the shoulders and arms more muscular, and there is even an indication of muscles at her flank. He also must have found the shape of the whole section below the breasts too unusual and tried to correct it by indicating two rather solid rolls below the breast, so that the body has a distinct midriff section, followed by a more rounded abdomen, at the same time slightly shortening the distance between breasts and groin. Hollar also tried to revise her left arm, which we see simultaneously from two different angles: the upper part is shown from the inside, the lower from the outside. This is, of course, impossible, but Rembrandt did not even bother to suggest a strong torsion from the inside of the elbow turned towards us to the hand that faces away from us. Hollar strengthened the lines in the inside of the elbow that might suggest some torsion but ended up emphasizing the strangeness of its forms; the same happened with the foreshortening of the other arm. Rembrandt would not have been happy with such 'corrections.'

The shape and proportions of this nude show in a more extreme way the same traits that characterized Rembrandt's painted nude women of the 1630s: *Andromeda*, *Susanna*, *Diana and Her Nymphs*, and *Danaë*. Although we saw distinct differences in slenderness or stockiness, each of these women had a large head, almost no neck, narrow sloping shoulders, high small breasts, a very high waist, no midriff, a soft protruding belly that begins directly under the breasts and no visible muscles. There could not be a greater contrast with classical proportions, upon which, albeit in many different degrees, the depiction of the nude since the early sixteenth century had been founded.

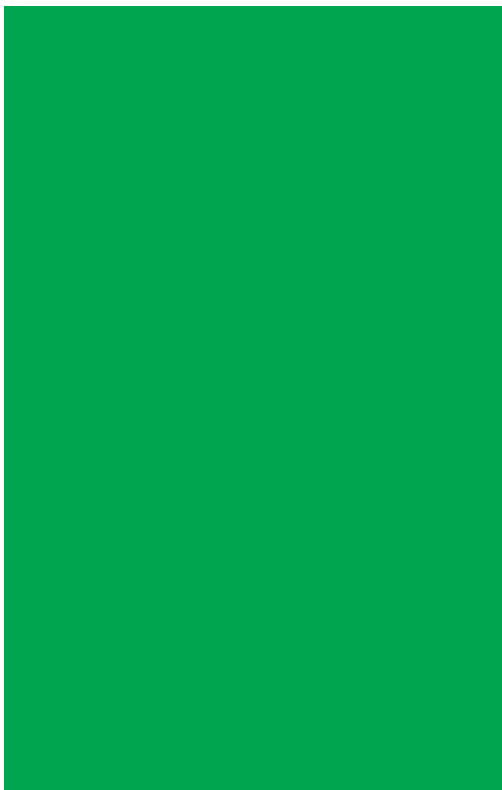
Some art historians have observed that Rubens would have been the source of inspiration for this type of nude.¹⁷ Such a thought, however, can only be caused by a very superficial equation: fat + puckers + dimples = Rubens. However, Rubens's nudes are profoundly different. When discussing Rubens's *Andromeda* in chapter 11, we noticed that classical proportions and muscularity were a standard to which Rubens would always adhere: a rather small head (one-eighth to one-ninth of the body length); broad shoulders; almost geometrically round breasts; a wide ribcage; distinct waist; clearly articulated muscles under the skin in the shoulders, arms, midriff and flank; an even distance from breast to navel and navel to groin; and strong legs with rather long calves (figs. 21, 37, 67-69, 239). Rubens always showed his ideal of imitation by bringing antique sculpture to life through the suggestion of soft, fatty female tissue and living flesh in a way that only the art of painting is capable of achieving (see chapter 11). Apart from adding rippling fat onto this classical structure, he made his nudes attractive and 'natural' for the contemporary viewer by giving them a more protruding belly than was usual in classical sculpture. Rembrandt certainly wanted to emulate Rubens's nudes, but he did so emphatically by *not* following the 'classical' model that Rubens revered. He also tried to make the suggestion of 'breathing' skin even more convincing.

Rembrandt's nudes certainly have some similarity to the later nudes of Jacob Jordaens, as well. However, although Jordaens's nudes may be fat (much fatter than Rembrandt's), their bodies also have an entirely different structure and are differently proportioned. Reznicek saw a striking resemblance between the *Woman Seated on a Mound* and the seated nymph in Jordaens's *Pan Punished by Nymphs* in the Mauritshuis, but we should realize that this painting has to be dated around 1640. If there is a connection – and also here the shape of the body is quite different – it is Jordaens being inspired by Rembrandt's etching.¹⁸ The same is true for the nymph in *Jupiter as a Child Being Fed by Amaltheia* in Kassel, which might have been inspired by the etching of *Diana*. If this was indeed the case, Jordaens corrected the belly and midriff, demonstrating what these body parts look like when a fat woman poses in this attitude.

I pointed out that Rembrandt's women in this period have similarities to early Netherlandish nudes (chapter 11, fig. 33, 34, 173), elements of which, especially the narrow shoulders, small breasts, high waist, wide hips, and protruding belly, were quite persistent in sixteenth-century northern nudes. This means that Rembrandt referred to a respectable, specifically northern tradition, which constituted an alternative type on which he could build. However, the shapes of the nudes in the etchings – and this also holds for Rembrandt's painted nudes in the 1630s – are most of all in line with his own depictions of classical or biblical heroines dressed in fancy costume, that is, clothed women who are supposed to be great beauties (figs. 247, 341). Moreover, the shapes of the nudes, as well as the contours of these women in fantasy costume, correspond entirely to the silhouette of the fashionable dress of that time. Oopje Coppit's expensive costume, in the latest Amsterdam fashion, shows this to its greatest advantage (fig. 248), but such costumes are also worn by the many ladies of fashion that populate the merry companies of Pieter Codde, Anthonie Palamedesz., Jan Olis, or Dirck Hals in the 1630s: a lace



247
Rembrandt, *Artemisia*, 1634,
canvas 142 x 153 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado



248 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Rembrandt, *Portrait of Oopjen Coppit*, 1634,
canvas 207 x 132 cm. Paris, Private Collection

collar that starts directly under the chin so that no neck is visible and slopes down quite steeply over narrow shoulders; a narrow upper body with high breasts and an immensely wide skirt that seems to cover a huge stomach and shows an expanse of shimmering silk that flows down directly from under the breast.

In her book *Seeing Through Clothes*, Anne Hollander argued convincingly that, in Western culture since the fourteenth century, the general perception of nude bodies at any given time has been conditioned by the silhouette of the clothed body in the fashion of that period. This implies that the idea of what a body should look like is always 'edited' in conformity with the forms that fashion dictates, as even nude photographs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries demonstrate. This creates an order in the variety of human forms according to the needs of the contemporary eye, trained by the appearance of contemporary clothes.¹⁹ Since the Renaissance, the forms of Greek and Roman antiquity were always present as a point of reference for artists. However, modeling the undressed body to a greater degree in accordance with the fashionable, clothed appearance makes the nude look more 'real' for its epoch. 'Artistic idealizations of the nude are not confined to tailoring them into the type of generalized beauty beyond the possibilities of nature. They may also go in the opposite direction – towards realism, towards a celebration of the acutely specific. This method may be disguised as no idealization at all, as unedited expressions of fact; but such facts are already unwittingly edited by direct and indirect awareness of the clothes. Truth in nude art, like beauty, follows the mode', Hollander contends.²⁰ Assuming that fashion is always erotically expressive and enhances the desirability of the inferred nude bodies underneath, Anne Hollander observes when mentioning Rembrandt's etchings: 'The intention to make these bodies look not only 'realistic' but specifically desirable is conveyed by their resemblance to the currently modish clothed look for ladies.'²¹ It is hard to prove that these nudes by Rembrandt were

meant to be sexually desirable, as Hollander maintains, but the artist certainly intended to show attractive women that look ‘real.’ As we have seen, contemporary artists who brought their nudes more in line with classical ideals – and the degree to which they did so could differ greatly – undoubtedly intended to place the nude more at a distance and to make them easier to accept.²² Only Rembrandt came this close to the ‘fashionable’ silhouette, which he also used in his clothed classical and biblical beauties in fantasy dress. Nearest to Rembrandt’s type come the portrayals of *Diana and Her Nymphs* by Jacob Loys and Pieter Codde (figs. 158, 159), who both emphasized the erotic, almost pornographic, nature of their images, which might suggest that these shapes were, indeed, considered particularly sexy.

In his endeavor to bring the women depicted close to the beholder’s world of experience and to powerfully involve him, Rembrandt consciously dismissed all ‘classical’ stylization in proportions and poses, and imbued his women with an appearance that the contemporary viewer must have perceived as most ‘natural’ and ‘real’, although it was as stylized as the more conventional nudes. But most of all Rembrandt emphasized their ‘realness’ by an unprecedented and highly self-conscious attention to the surface and texture of skin, suggesting this by a brilliant wielding of the brush as well as the etching needle. Therefore, Van der Gracht’s remark that those who depict life ‘as they have it before them’ only focus ‘on the garment of the human body, which is the skin’, seems, in the case of Rembrandt, strikingly to the point.²³

Sleeping Woman Approached by a Satyr

Rembrandt’s first etching with a nude in a clearly narrative context was thematically much more conventional than the two etchings discussed above, which were produced around the same time. In this little etching we see a nude woman fast asleep, stretched out on a bed, while a naked hairy man with a beard approaches her from be-



249
Rembrandt, *Jupiter and Antiope*, c. 1631,
etching (I) 8.4 x 11.2 cm



250
Rembrandt, *Jupiter and Antiope*, c. 1631,
etching (II) 8.4 x 11.2 cm

hind, pushing the bed curtain aside on the point of scrambling into her bed (fig. 249, 250). For this voyeuristic and sexually charged subject, Rembrandt had a lot of inspiring examples of well-known masters at his disposal. Since the inception of its popularity in Venice,²⁴ the defenseless sleeping nude – such as nymphs, Venus, Diana, and Antiope, often being observed or approached by

251

Agostino Carracci,
*A Sleeping Nymph
 Approached by a
 Satyr*, c. 1590-1595,
 engraving
 15.1 x 10.6 cm



252

Agostino Carracci,
*A Sleeping Nymph
 Approached by a
 Satyr*, c. 1590-1595,
 engraving
 15.2 x 11.7 cm



lusty men (mostly satyrs with obvious intentions) – had become a favorite in prints of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries throughout the rest of Italy, as well as in the North. In Holland the subject of the *Sleeping Ephigenia Watched by Cimon* was added to the repertoire with Jacob Matham's print of c. 1602 (fig. 212),²⁵ but for Rembrandt the main sources of inspiration were two engravings of a *Sleeping Nymph Approached by a Satyr* by Agostino Carracci (both from his *Lascivie* series) (figs. 251, 252), a *Jupiter and Antiope* (also called *Venus and Satyr*) by Annibale Carracci – a combination of etching and engraving (fig. 295) – and, finally, an etching by Werner van den Valckert of *Venus Approached by Two Satyrs* (fig. 253).²⁶ These were undoubtedly the prints that challenged him and those which he wanted to surpass in liveliness and lifelikeness. He certainly succeeded. Working with these prints and obviously not having a nude model before his eyes, though, also had its dangers.

For the figure of the sleeping woman, Rembrandt combined elements of the three sleeping women of the Carracci brothers: the general posture of the body from one engraving by Agostino (fig. 252) and the idea of the outstretched arm with the limp hand from the other (fig. 251). For the position and the shape of the breasts and belly he looked at the much more complex pose of the nude in Annibale's print (fig. 295). This brought him trouble because these forms belonged to a body with strong torsion. The right breast pointing upward and the navel placed too high make clear that Rembrandt had no model posing naked before him. He placed the legs in a different position from his examples and, there again, he ran into difficulty. Being aware that their shape was somewhat strange and the foreshortening not at all convincing, he covered the lower part with a cloth in the second state of the etching (fig. 250), thus arriving at a solution he would use again in his painting of *Danaë*. Other parts, such as the carefully observed hands limply hanging down and the sleeping face of the young woman, must have been drawn after the model.

With these elements Rembrandt made the lifelike impression of total abandon in a heavy sleep more convincing than any of his examples, thus heightening simultaneously the tension and the empathy of the viewer. It is obvious that this young woman will not notice her assailant before it is too late. The brightly lit body and inviting soft upholstery of the bed give her a much more vulnerable appearance than the sleeping nymphs of his predecessors, which were all engraved or etched with a rather heavy, sculptural chiaroscuro. Body and cushions are set off against the dark curtains, which recall Van den Valckert's engraving, and contrast with the heavily shadowed figure of the man. Rembrandt left out the too-obvious gestures of the satyrs in the other prints, who are either admonishing silence, grabbing their crotch or removing drapery. He transformed the man's action into an unconventional and rather comical movement of clambering into the bed, which makes the intentions of this creature just as clear. Although Rembrandt had some trouble adjusting the motif of the right arm on which the man leans – which he had seen in one of Agostino Carracci's etchings (fig. 252) – to the different attitude of the body, the cheerful liveliness of this man's movement makes the viewer's confrontation with his intentions more direct than the satyrs of the other masters.

Rembrandt is not at all clear about the precise story depicted, but most of his predecessors were just as ambiguous: representations of the myth of Jupiter approaching the sleeping Antiope in the guise of a satyr and of Venus, Diana, or some nymphs watched by (a) satyr(s) were all easily interchangeable. The artists of many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century prints, such as the Carracci brothers, do not seem to bother with precisely which subject is meant. In fact, the subject of one of the earliest and most famous depictions of this theme, Titian's so called *Pardo Venus*, is also still disputed (fig. 254).²⁷ Rembrandt, however, seems to have made the subject even vaguer: rays of light, in which we may discern coins that seem to come from between the curtains



253

Werner van den Valckert, *The Sleeping Venus Spied upon by Satyrs*, 1612, etching 29.7 x 37.6 cm



254

Titian, *The Pardo Venus* (detail), c. 1540-45, canvas 196 x 385 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre



255

Rembrandt, *An Artist Drawing from the Nude Model*
(the so-called *Pygmalion*), c. 1639, etching (I) 23.2 x 18.4 cm

at the upper left, immediately recall the conventional attribute of *Danaë*. Indeed, he would use the general layout of the composition for his painted *Danaë* of a few years later.²⁸ Representing *Danaë* asleep was not new; Goltzius had depicted her as such in a painting which Rembrandt probably knew (fig. 189; see chapter VIII), whereas showing the physical presence of Jupiter had also been represented earlier (fig. 202). Rembrandt seems to have changed his original intention, adding some lines to make the coins look like shrubbery, but the small round

shapes hanging in the air remain somewhat unconvincing as leaves. However, there is no question about what is happening. A few years later, in his breathtaking painting of *Danaë*, he would brilliantly elaborate on this motif, using many of the elements he tried out here. By then the lover – the golden light itself, falling in through the curtains – seems to be entirely welcome.

The Artist Drawing from the Nude Model (‘Pygmalion’): Apelles Drawing Victory?

If Rembrandt did not work from nude female models in the etchings discussed above, etchings in which the emphatic suggestion that the naked women had been observed from life seems to be the main reason for their existence, what about the so-called *Pygmalion* etching and the related drawing in the British Museum? Does not this etching show the practice of Rembrandt himself drawing from a nude model? I will argue that precisely the fact that this nude, too, was not drawn from life might be the cause that he left this etching unfinished (figs. 255, 256). It had been meant as a highly ambitious undertaking that represented notions about the status of his art. But he failed in what he wanted to achieve and probably did not finish it for that reason.²⁹

When examining this print, generally dated around 1639,³⁰ we should first of all realize that this subject was unusual. The only depictions of artists in their studio drawing or painting a nude model were those representing well-known stories of artists from antiquity:³¹ *Apelles Painting Campaspe* and *Zeuxis with the Girls of Croton*. Of the first subject we know a few examples (paintings and drawings), the second is almost non-existent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The only print with an artist painting a nude model is Goltzius’s allegory of *Visus*, in which a painter watches Venus looking in a mirror (fig. 101). A tradition of an artist working from a nude model did not exist. Even depictions of the subject of *Apelles and Campaspe* were rare,³² which might sound

surprising since the story of Apelles and Campaspe was undoubtedly the best-known of the anecdotes about this artist, whereas a comparison with Apelles was the most common cliché in any praise of a painter or of painting. This was also true in Rembrandt's case, as is testified by the eulogy of Constantijn Huygens and by the poem of Jeremias de Decker, who calls Rembrandt 'the Apelles of our time' (chapter IX). Considering the important place Apelles must have occupied in the artistic consciousness, one would expect that *Apelles and Campaspe* to be a popular subject. However, we only know two large, ambitious paintings with *Apelles Painting Campaspe* by Joos van Winghe (in which he himself played the role of Apelles; fig. 301) and a few drawings of this subject which date from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (fig. 300).³³ Hence, to portray an artist and a nude female model while not even referring to Apelles would have been highly unusual. For that reason it seems likely that Rembrandt had a historical or allegorical subject in mind when he conceived of this etching; but even then the depiction of such a subject, especially in the widely circulated medium of etching, would have been perceived as a novelty.

The model, standing on a kind of platform, bears a huge palm, a sign of fame and victory. The artist, recognizable as a painter because of the large canvas on the easel behind him, is not dressed in contemporary costume. His quite fanciful dress, which will return in later self-portraits, situates him in a historical period.³⁴ Thus, Apelles, famous for his portrayal of the female nude, which he rendered from life, seems after all to be the most likely candidate. Indeed, a painting of *Victory* is mentioned by Van Mander as one of Apelles's works.³⁵ The idea to depict Apelles, who had surpassed everybody in the art of painting (as was so emphatically underlined by Pliny and Van Mander), drawing the personification of *Victory*, a figure which recalls *Venus* at the same time, would have been an inventive, but not an unthinkable idea.³⁶ Rembrandt seems to have transformed the exist-



256

Rembrandt, *An Artist Drawing from the Nude Model* (the so-called *Pygmalion*), c. 1639, etching (II) 23.2 x 18.4 cm

ing, albeit rare, subject of *Apelles and Campaspe* into an Apelles who observes and renders from life the cause of his triumph: female beauty and grace in nude figures.³⁷

As has long been recognized, the direct incentive to conceive of this etching and to do so in this arrangement must have been the print by Pieter Feddes van Harlingen representing *Pygmalion* (fig. 257).³⁸ This mythic sculptor contemplates the statue of a young maiden he has made and with which he has fallen in love, 'deceived by the art that conceals art', as Ovid says.³⁹ Eventually the statue



257
Pieter Feddes van Harlingen,
Pygmalion, etching 22.3 x 15.6 cm



258
Jacopo de' Barbari, *Allegory of
Fame and Victory*, c. 1498-1500,
engraving 18.1 x 12.3 cm

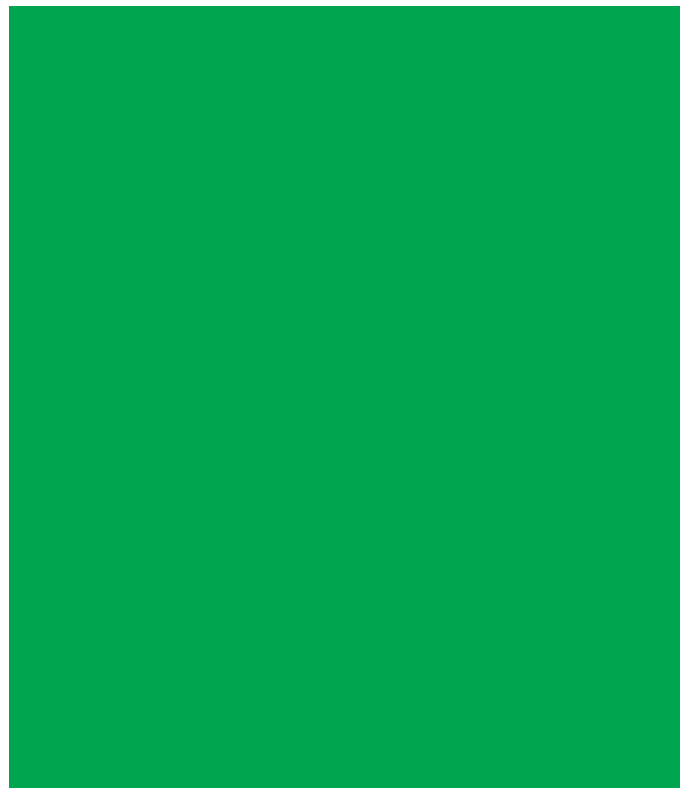
would come to life – but then it is no longer art. The ever-fascinating motif concerning the ‘magic’ of art that comes to life in the mind of the maker/ beholder⁴⁰ obtained its best-known literary expression in this old myth, elaborately told by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*.⁴¹ Pieter Feddes’s etching is one of the rare renderings of this subject; only much later, in the nineteenth century, did it become a popular theme to depict.⁴²

Rembrandt must have realized that a print by Jacopo de Barbari was the model for Pieter Feddes’s female figure (fig. 258). This print shows two nude female figures; remarkably, one of them, the figure seen from behind, also holds a palm, they represent *Fame and Victory*. Seeing this print and knowing the subject of *Apelles and Campaspe* (and perhaps having read in Van Mander, or being told, that Apelles, apart from making several paintings of *Venus* and *Diana*, also depicted *Victory*) might have triggered the idea to portray this entirely new subject: Apelles – representing artistic greatness in general – who creates from life figures that are more lifelike than a sculptor (Pygmalion) can ever make them. Rembrandt does not show a depiction of three-dimensional art that comes to life, but of life itself that is made into two-dimensional art, an art that is able to present a more convincing illusion of having life before our eyes than sculpture.⁴³ Rembrandt, the painter-etcher, might have wished to demonstrate that he was able to achieve this even with his virtuoso etching technique, in which not the line, but – as in his paintings – the suggestion of light and dark, and the *houding* that causes the effect of receding and coming forward, are the constituting factors.⁴⁴ The sculpted bust, placed near the ‘living’ nude, must have been meant to visualize this *paragone*: it shows that the painter/etcher can imitate the art of the sculptor, but that the sculptor’s work will always clearly look like stone next to the ‘living’ image that the painter/etcher is able to render. Rembrandt would have intended to make the skin of this nude, in contrast to the sculpted bust, appear as ‘breathing’ as possible, as he did in his earlier etched

nudes. Not only as a painter, but also as an etcher is he capable of rendering this contrast; the sculptor will never be able to do the same.⁴⁵ The creator of this work is the one who truly merits the palm.

For the figure of the model posing, Rembrandt now devised a nude seen from behind. In this case his examples, the prints by Feddes and De' Barbari, already showed elements of the type of nude that Rembrandt favored, such as the rather narrow shoulders and expansive lower part of the torso. However, all signs of musculature and of compartmentalization of the body were erased, while the contrast between the width of the shoulders and the hips and buttocks was enhanced. With a few strokes Rembrandt suggested creases in the skin that emphasize the sagging buttocks. Rembrandt also wanted to change the elegant, conventional *contrapposto* of his direct examples to a livelier and more lifelike pose. Jacopo de' Barbari had used the *contrapposto* correctly, while Pieter Feddes had made a mess of it because he did not realize that a hip which swings out should connect with the weight-bearing leg. Rembrandt's model places one foot in front, as if to take a step, and turns simultaneously to the left, while her weight still seems to rest on the right leg. She does not have the disposition of weight-bearing leg to outward-swinging hip that would be usual for a traditional *contrapposto* pose. As a result, when drawing this posture, Rembrandt, like Pieter Feddes before him (but even more conspicuously so), ran into trouble. For one thing, the higher-placed hip that swings out a little and slightly higher buttock make no sense in if it is the opposite leg that bears the weight. This causes a peculiar friction in the figure. One way to have solved this problem would have been to lift her left foot, as if placing it on a step, but that would have resulted in a strange pose.

Rembrandt was wrestling with the feet and the lower legs anyway. Initially he wanted to change the proportions of the long calves of Feddes's woman into his own ideal and shorten them considerably. The outcome was not satisfactory, however. He then lengthened the legs



259 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Rembrandt, *An Artist Drawing from the Nude Model*,
c. 1639, pen and brown iron-gall ink on paper, washed
brown 18.8 x 16.4 cm. London, British Museum

with a few strokes and sketched in the platform. In the second stage of the print he defined this platform more clearly and added a pot of coals underneath (fig. 256).⁴⁶ He probably planned to cover the problematic left ankle and foot entirely with drapery, as a few lines suggesting this drapery make clear (a solution he had also used in the early etching of *Antiope*). Rembrandt might have used a model when he drew the figure, but one that only uncovered the upper part of her body. Unsatisfied with the result, he made a new drawing to get the pose and the proportions of this unsuccessful figure right (fig. 259).⁴⁷ In this drawing, one leg has been positioned more clearly behind the other, while the lengthening of the legs has been maintained; the buttock and corresponding hip are

now in their right place. The necessary changes in the legs that he would subsequently have had to make in the etching – altering the line of the hip and the position of the buttocks, the right one slightly higher, the left a bit lower – would have been quite drastic. I assume that he was tired of messing with an etching that had been meant to demonstrate his ideal – and his victory – in the representation of lifelike female beauty. One can imagine the annoyed frustration with which he put aside the etching plate; he would never return to it.⁴⁸ This failure might have been the reason that it took a long time before he ventured again to make an etching of a female nude – not before he really had begun to draw from live models posing in the nude.

Cleopatra and Adam and Eve

As far as can be gathered from the evidence, drawing from a nude model would only begin in the course of the 1640s in Rembrandt's studio, first with young men as models and, somewhat later, also with young women. In Rembrandt's etchings the latter would not appear before the late 1650s. As noted before, from the 1630s there only seem to be a few drawings of partly undressed models, like the beautiful drawing of a young woman seen obliquely from behind who has bared her upper torso, but holds a cushion over her breasts (fig. 260). The arm, the shoulder, the curve of her back and also her neck and profile are drawn in black chalk with a few quick lines. On the verso of this drawing, the same woman standing is even more sketchily rendered (fig. 261). It is striking that this woman, in contrast to the other nudes of the 1630s, which for the most part would have been drawn or painted *uit de geest* (figs. 240, 241, 245, 29, 73, 152), actually has a neck, even a rather long one. The waistband of her skirt is situated directly below her breasts, so that the fashionable silhouette of the time is maintained.

However, there is a drawing from the same period, *A Nude Woman with a Snake*, often assumed to depict

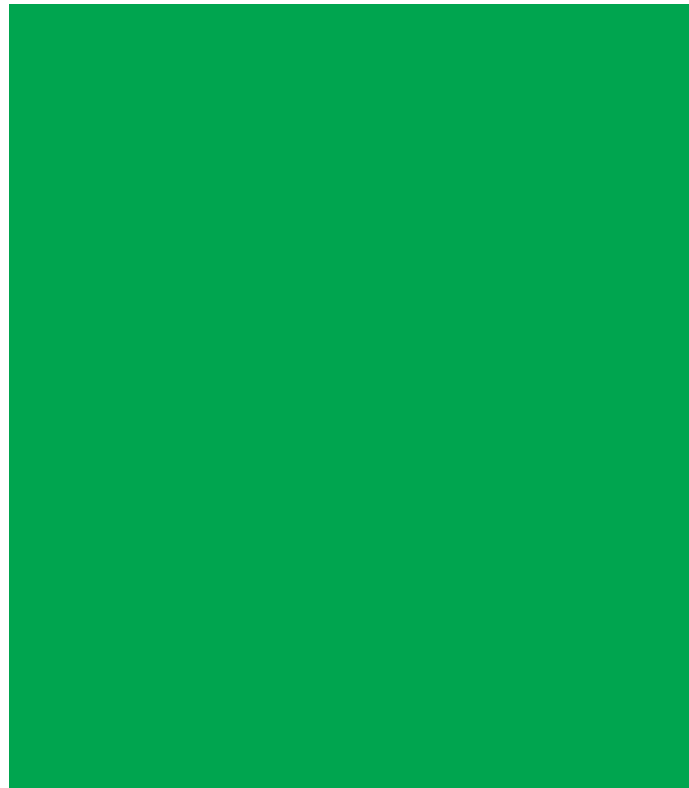
260

Rembrandt, *A Seated Woman, Naked to the Waist*, c. 1637, black chalk touched with white 19.9 x 15.3 cm. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen

Cleopatra, executed in red chalk and usually dated around 1637, that does show a completely naked woman (fig. 262). This woman, too, must have been drawn after a model posing with only a bared upper torso. The high waist, the unlikely long distance between breasts and navel, and the insecurity in form and position of the legs make this quite obvious. The gesture by which she holds one breast is not drawn from life either; few people would be able to spread the index finger and the middle finger this far. The gesture is, however, a very conventional one in depictions of women suckling children; we see it in many portrayals of *Mary and the Christ-child*, *Caritas Romana*, personifications of *Caritas* and *Venus* spouting milk from her breast (figs. 105, 167).⁴⁹ The wide splaying of the fingers – which makes more of the breast visible than would be possible in reality – is apparent in all these images.

The motif of the drapery hanging down from one arm, especially, seems to indicate that both the classical *Venus Felix* and a *Venus Pudica* type were in Rembrandt's mind (figs. 11, 78). Here, he wanted to avoid at any price the traditional *contrapposto*, which we always see in one form or another in standing female nude figures depicted since the Renaissance. This woman has her weight on both legs. Because Rembrandt could not have had any examples in his head for this pose and did not draw the lower part of the body from life, the right foot has been placed too far in front of her, so that she stands in an attitude that would make her fall backwards.⁵⁰ Fortunately, we do not realize this immediately when we observe this beautifully drawn figure offering her breast while she, seemingly relaxed, looks at some indeterminable point at the left. If this woman was originally meant to represent *Venus* or *Caritas*, we will never know. The serpent is clearly added as an afterthought,⁵¹ which turns her apparently into *Cleopatra*.⁵²

The *Cleopatra* nude is related to the figure of Eve in the etching of *Adam and Eve*, dated 1638 (fig. 263). This ren-



261

Rembrandt, verso of the same sheet: *A Standing Woman, Naked to the Waist*, c. 1637, black chalk 19.9 x 15.3 cm. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen

dering of Eve has elicited many negative comments because of her 'ugliness.' With the figure of *Cleopatra* still in his fingers, Rembrandt must have drawn Eve on the etching plate, giving her a similar build. We see her from the same low viewpoint, but Rembrandt turned her figure more frontally. Eve does not show any hint of *contrapposto* either, although her weight is on her right (for us, left) leg; this gives the impression that she is slightly leaning forward towards Adam. Her totally neckless figure, extremely short upper body, hips that reach almost to the breasts, the lack of a midriff section, and the long distance from breasts to navel represent to an extreme degree Rembrandt's ideal figure: the undressed version of his biblical or classical heroines (figs. 247, 341), fash-

schetsscan



262

Rembrandt, *A Nude Woman with a Snake*, c. 1637, red chalk touched with white, 24.7 x 13.7 cm. Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum

ionable portraits (fig. 248), or of the fashionable women in genre paintings by Pieter Codde and others in the 1630s.

The figure of Adam appears to be drawn from life. Eve's body shows insecurities in the anatomy at the junction of the legs to the torso, which are entirely absent in Adam's figure. His pose and anatomy are highly accurate. Rembrandt positioned the body of Adam a little off balance: he steps down, but does not yet have his full weight on the lower-placed leg, which suggests his hesitation with brilliant precision. Earlier Rembrandt did something similar with the figure of the soldier in *Samson and Delilah* (fig. 235).

It would not have been Rembrandt's intention to portray Eve as an older woman, as has often been assumed. More than before, even more than in the *Cleopatra*, he omitted wrinkles and puckers and suggested a rather smooth, but soft skin. The emphasis on Eve's private parts is exceptional. Thus, Rembrandt underlines that this scene takes place before the Fall, when Adam and Eve were not yet aware of their shame. However, the explicit visualization of the vulva had only occurred in images that are meant to be lascivious: we see it, for example, in Agostino's series of the *Lascivie*, in several 'pornographic' prints by Caraglio and Bonasone (figs. 186) and in some prints by Hans Sebald Beham. Just this conspicuous aspect of the body must have caused the shocked reaction of many later spectators (although, until recently most authors kept silent about this obviously embarrassing feature). Considering the exceptional nature of the motif, it would not have remained unnoticed by contemporary viewers. The time-honoured image of Eve as seductress seems to be forcefully advanced because the sight of the vulva would have elicited thoughts about the then-current notion – stemming from antiquity – of the female genitals as insatiably hungering for the male seed.⁵³ Rembrandt had employed this motif already two years earlier when representing the example of a straightforwardly lascivious seductress, the wife of Potiphar, in his unusually hard-boiled version of *Joseph*



263

Rembrandt, *Adam and Eve*, 1638, etching 16.2 x 11.6 cm



265
Jacob Matham after Hendrick Goltzius, *Adam and Eve*, 1606,
engraving 30.7 x 38.7 c



266
Albrecht Dürer, *Adam and Eve*, 1504,
engraving 25.2 x 19.5 cm



267
Lucas van Leyden, *Adam and Eve*, 1529,
engraving 16.0 x 11.5 cm

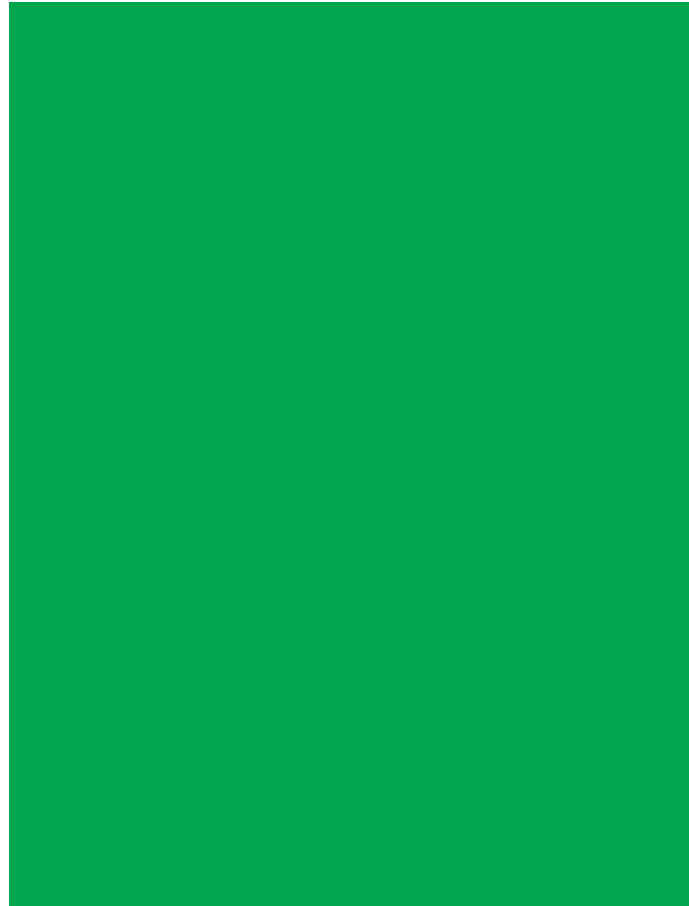


264
Rembrandt, *Joseph and the Wife of Potiphar*, 1634,
etching 9 x 11.5 cm

Fleeing Potiphar's Wife (fig. 263). In that case there was an – equally exceptional – precedent for this motif in an engraving of 1544 by Hans Sebald Beham of the same subject.⁵⁴

There were two ‘classical’ models for this subject, Albrecht Dürer’s famous print of 1504 and Marcantonio Raimondi’s engraving after Raphael (figs. 266, 268). By referring to the latter, in particular, Rembrandt makes clear that he emphatically reacted against conventional representations of this subject, including those by near-contemporary artists which he knew from many prints. The elegant engravings by Jan Saenredam after Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, Abraham Bloemaert and Hendrick Goltzius, as well as the one by Jacob Matham after a rather late drawing by Goltzius (fig. 265),⁵⁵ all of which are in some way in dialogue with Albrecht Dürer’s print of 1504 (fig. 266), would have incited Rembrandt to do something entirely different. Only the last mentioned print after Goltzius, in which Adam is on the point of seizing the apple that Eve holds up to him, shows some emotional expression that Rembrandt would have appreciated. The others were entirely without any expression of passion. Dürer’s engraving, in which the great master recorded ideal proportions that would have been considered a standard by many and which was undoubtedly one of his best-known works, would have prompted Rembrandt to compete. The more so because he would have realized that this was a good example of how ‘Albert Dürer and he [Lucas van Leyden] tried to compete with and to surpass each other, so that Lucas sometimes engraved several of the same histories or other things.’ (fig. 267)⁵⁶ The fact that a well-known engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael existed as well made this a subject with which Rembrandt could join the greatest in the art of printmaking; (fig. 268).

As is the case with Dürer’s print, Raphael’s figures in this etching demonstrate a conceptual ideal. In 1516 Raphael wrote in a letter to Castiglione: ‘In order to paint a beautiful woman I should have to see many beautiful



268

Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael, *Adam and Eve*, c. 1515, engraving 23.9 x 17.6 cm

women ...; but since there are so few ... I make use of a certain idea that comes into my head.’⁵⁷ It is representative of a belief in which Aristotelian (selection of the most beautiful from nature) and Platonic (beauty as idea) concepts of beauty are smoothly intertwined. That Rembrandt took this most classic of examples, based on an invention by Raphael, as his point of departure makes all the more clear how much Rembrandt endeavored to place his *natuereelste beweeshgelickheijt* against this perfect example of the ‘wonders of beauty’ (Huygens). The way in which both figures have been placed between two trees, with a view towards a light background that is situ-



269

Peter Paul Rubens, *Adam and Eve*, c. 1598-1600,
panel 158 x 180 cm. Antwerp, Rubenshuis

ated on a lower level, directly recalls Raimondi's print after Raphael. The tense posture of Adam addressing Eve also resonates in Rembrandt's Adam.

In one of his earliest paintings, an *Adam and Eve* directly based on Raimondi's print, Rubens had already activated the Adam figure by giving him a vigorous gesture of speaking and admonishing with raised index finger (fig. 269). Rembrandt, who would not have known this painting, thought of this same motif, but he intensified the action further by having Adam reach for the apple simultaneously – a movement that, together with his wavering attitude, suggests that he comes forward and recoils at the same time. Initially Rembrandt tried out a more violent *ogenblikkige beweging* in a pen sketch that shows Eve offering the apple with an urgent gesture (fig. 270), while Adam rejects her offer vehemently. In this sketch the sexual implications of Eve's role are em-

phatically indicated by Eve's gesture of grasping at Adam's genitals – thus explicitly equating Original Sin with sexual awareness – a motif that Jan Gossaert depicted more than a century earlier.⁵⁸ However, the wavering Adam, the restrained Eve and the suggestion that Adam is on the point of taking the apple give the final solution greater tension. It is a moment of suspense, in which evil is on the verge of taking place, while the way back appears to remain open. The dragonlike snake seems to watch Adam with a malicious sneer, knowing the outcome.⁵⁹ The motion of being on the point of grabbing the apple can also be found in two prints by Lucas van Leyden from 1529 (fig. 267) and c. 1530, in which Lucas brilliantly varied in different ways on motifs from both Raimondi's *Adam and Eve* and his even more famous print of the *Judgment of Paris* after Raphael (fig. 237). Rembrandt dramatized the gesture by placing the dark, shadowed palm of Adam's hand behind the apple, the fingers making a gesture of grasping, while the thumb still seems to hesitate.

Rembrandt elaborated on the sharp contrast between background and foreground, the one very light, the other rather dark, which was also conspicuous in Raphael's *Adam and Eve* invention, and by which a radiant paradise is opposed to a dark future – the world after the Fall in which the viewer is situated. For Rembrandt, this meant that the figures of Adam and Eve had to be placed against backlighting, which gave him the opportunity to display his virtuosity in an exceedingly subtle modeling of volumes by way of light and dark. This fascination with portraying the nude body against backlighting, with light reflecting from the foreground on the shadowed front of the body so as to create a breathtaking play of half-shadows and deep shadows, culminated a few years later in the revised version of *Danaë* (see chapter VIII). The front of the bodies of Adam and Eve have been modeled in many gradations of half-shadow by means of an extremely fine mesh of cross-hatchings. Deepest, but still revealing all the forms, are the shadows around the genitals, thus de-

cidedly attracting the viewer's attention. From this moment Adam and Eve will procreate as mortals in sin.

Arnold Houbraken was probably the first to criticize in print the figures of Adam and Eve. He writes that the first human couple has to be 'depicted after the most consummate beauty', therefore, one should 'not gape at, and even less, follow, such a misshapen portrayal of Adam and Eve, as one finds in the prints of Rembrandt van Ryn; to his shame and to the praise of Dürer, it has to be said that the latter, in the springtime of art, already early in the fifteenth century, published a much more perfect print (which, in comparison with the one mentioned earlier, is still highly valued by the lovers of the art of print-making).'⁶⁰ Indeed, artists used the portrayal of the first couple pre-eminently to represent ideals of human beauty. Since they were created after God's image this idealism was considered a prerequisite. Naturally, Rembrandt's couple was far removed from the classicist ideal to which Houbraken adhered and which had become the absolute norm a few decades earlier. The standards established by Raimondi's and Dürer's prints, which were stamped on the memory of every connoisseur, were pointedly repudiated by Rembrandt.

Does Rembrandt show mankind in all its pitiful ugliness and not in God's likeness, as has often been suggested?⁶¹ Rembrandt certainly would not have had blasphemous intentions. As was argued above, from Rembrandt's point of view these figures were not in the least 'misshapen.' In his conception of Adam and Eve the religious dimension of the 'from life' ideology seems to come to the fore. 'Two drops are not alike, two eggs, two pears / Two countenances neither. The glorious might / Of the first Creator shows itself in the eternal differences / Of all that is and will be', wrote Huygens in *Oogentroost (Solace of the Eyes)*.⁶² In keeping with this are Van Hoogstraten's words: 'that she [art], by means of continually reflecting on God's miraculous works, elevates the sincere student of art to the highest contemplation of the



270

Rembrandt, *Studies for Adam and Eve*, c. 1638, pen and brush and brown ink with wash 11.5 x 11.5 cm. Leiden, Prentenkabinet van de Universiteit Leiden

Creator of all things.'⁶³ Within this context, Rembrandt's suggestion that these figures are closely observed from life, and that his portrayal does not show a generalizing ideal, but an individual human body – figures which do not conform to classical conventions in form and movement, but stand, move and gesture as Rembrandt imagined that they would in such a situation – can be understood as eulogizing God's Creation.

At the same time, Rembrandt created with the figure of Eve a type that conforms to his own 'realistic' ideal that is grafted onto the contemporary image of what a well-shaped female body would look like. Rembrandt might have considered Dürer's book of human proportions, which he had in his possession,⁶⁴ as a precedent. In this book Dürer had abandoned the conceptual ideal of his *Adam and Eve* and demonstrated that a universally valid norm of beauty did not exist. Based on empirical

271
Rembrandt,
*Male Nudes,
Seated and
Standing*
(“*The Walker*”),
c. 1646, etching
19.4 x 12.8 cm



measuring of human proportions, he arrived at a great variety of body types with diverging proportions.⁶⁵ This may have encouraged Rembrandt, in his response to conventional representations, to follow his own path in developing a new type of female nude as an alternative to the ideal proportions of Raphael's nudes and Dürer's earlier print of *Adam and Eve*.⁶⁶

Studies from the nude model, 1646-1661

Drawing from the nude model, by both Rembrandt and his pupils, only started in his workshop after 1646, initially exclusively from male models. The publication of Crispijn de Passe the Younger's *Van't Light der Teken en Schilderkonst* in 1643, which Rembrandt would have considered to be unsatisfying as examples for his pupils, may have stimulated him to make his own etched examples.⁶⁷ These etchings are truly academic studies, which originated in drawing sessions with a few advanced pupils,⁶⁸

and of which the results would have been meant as examples for drawing.⁶⁹ This is underlined by the motif that Rembrandt added to one of these prints, for which Emmons offered a convincing interpretation: we see a child learning to walk, which refers to the necessary training of the budding artist (fig. 271).⁷⁰

One of the pupils attending these sessions was undoubtedly Samuel van Hoogstraten, who, thirty years later, appears not to be content with the way he himself learned to draw from life.⁷¹ Advising young artists to draw nude men or women from life in 'drawing schools or academies', he states that one should see to it that figures are posed in a graceful attitude,⁷² adding sourly: 'When I survey my own old academy drawings, I pity myself that one taught us so little in our youth; after all, it does not require more effort to imitate a graceful figure than an unpleasant and repulsive one.'⁷³ This follows his warning that one should not make the mistake of relying solely on the example of antiquity; many have thought that they would always be on the right track if they do so, but this results in unnatural stiffness. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary 'to turn to living nature.' Unlike Van Hoogstraten later in his life, Rembrandt was not interested in graceful poses but in an unqualified lifelikeness that by the 1670s had become appalling for the former pupil.

The only study from a female nude model dating to the 1640s is a drawing to which I referred in the chapter on Rembrandt's *Susannas* (chapter IV) and in which the model exposed only the upper part of her torso (fig. 86). It was meant to get the curve of Susanna's back and the position of her arm right for the final solution of his Berlin *Susanna and the Elders* (1647; fig. 81). For the position of Susanna's legs in this painting, Rembrandt harked back to the pose he had developed for the figure of Adam. It would take approximately another ten years before Rembrandt worked occasionally together with his pupils from female nude models, which resulted not only in drawings but also in a few etchings. As will be discussed in the next chapter, others, like Govert Flinck, Ja-

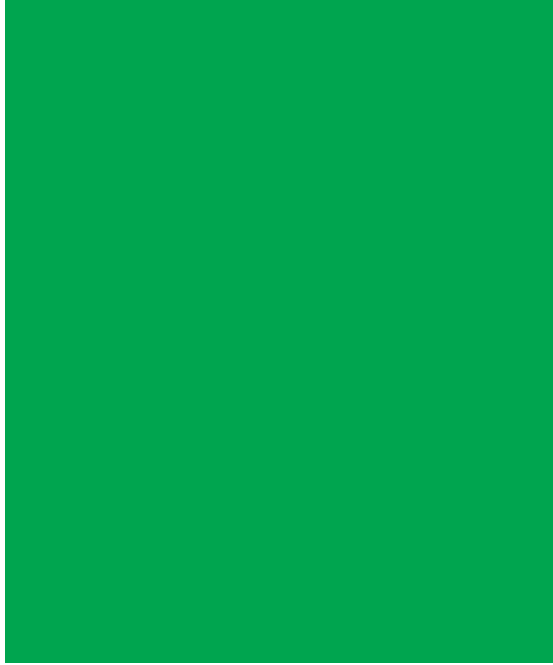


272

Rembrandt, *A Studio with a Seated Model*, c. 1654, pen and brush and brown ink and wash, 20.6 x 19.1 cm. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum

cob Backer, and Dirk Bleker, already drew together from a naked female model in the late 1640s. However, Rembrandt's drawings and etchings, as well as those of his pupils working with him concurrently, have little in common with the much more conventional and polished drawings after nude models that we know from his Amsterdam colleagues, some of them former pupils, like Govert Flinck, Ferdinand Bol, Jacob Backer, and Jacob van Loo (figs. 278, 279, 293).

Rembrandt's touching drawing of a woman sitting in his studio shows once again a model with a bare upper torso. This beautiful study of sunlight falling through the high window and reflecting on walls, floor, furniture and the fair skin of the young woman was made around 1654 (fig. 272). The cradle on the table, drawn with a few quick strokes and probably added to give the scene a lifelike setting, suggests that the woman has been suckling a child. However, this motif is lacking in a drawing by a pupil



273
Pupil of Rembrandt (Abraham van Dyck?),
A Studio with a Seated Half-Nude Woman,
c. 1654, pen and bistre, wash 25 x 20.7 cm.
London, Speelman Collection (1973)

who must have been sitting on Rembrandt's left (fig. 273); Peter Schatborn suggested that Abraham van Dyck was the young draftsman concerned.⁷⁴ In his drawing we only see the model with bare shoulders and breasts.

In Rembrandt's famous etching of a posed model sitting before a stove the woman has also stripped down only to the waist (figs. 274, 275). This relatively large etching, made in 1658, must have been of special importance for Rembrandt, considering the attention he paid to the execution, which resulted in a sequence of no less than seven different states. In the pose of the woman Rembrandt returned to the *Nude Woman Seated on a Mound* (fig. 245): the woman leans on her right arm, the upper part of the body turned towards the viewer and the left leg parallel to the picture plane. This also recalls the pose of his painting of *Bathsheba* of 1654, but in this etching all the

artificialities of Bathsheba's pose are absent (see chapter XII).⁷⁵ Rembrandt carefully recorded the pose of the woman as she sat before him. Unlike the woman in the earlier etching, this woman does not look defiantly at the viewer but has lowered her eyes, which also recalls *Bathsheba*. However, her expression does not seem to be pensive, as is Bathsheba's. She is represented as the model she is: resignedly letting the artist, and through him the viewer, observe her body.

Thus, she is pointedly presented as a posing model in the studio. This time the shape of her body demonstrates that she is really observed from life and is not largely drawn from the imagination with few components from life added. Her breasts are naturally placed in relation to the shoulders and she has a clearly articulated diaphragm, which was lacking in Rembrandt's early nudes.⁷⁶ Rembrandt shows how he is able to evoke the suggestion of breathing skin with magnificent perfection, in a combination of sketchily drawn lines, exceedingly fine hatching, parts which have been treated with drypoint and lines accentuated with the burin. This 'living' skin is contrasted with the hard stone of the wall, the iron of the stove, the woolen fabric of the skirt and the linen of the chemise and cap (fig. 274). In the sixth state of the etching he removed the strongly lit cap so that a texture of soft, floss-like hair could be added, enabling the viewer to focus even more on the body of the woman (fig. 275). In the earlier states the white cap, in particular, made the figure stand out sharply against the background, which is at its darkest around the head. After this change the transition from the figure to the deep darkness behind her head and shoulders is less abrupt, so that she seems to be enveloped by the dim atmosphere of the room, even if the fair skin of her face, arm and bare upper torso vividly reflects the clear light falling from the upper right.

The fact that there seem to be traces of a tree in the first state might indicate that Rembrandt had meant initially to transform the model into a figure bathing in the



274
Rembrandt, *A Half-Dressed Woman Seated before a Stove*, 1658,
etching (III) 22.8 x 18.7 cm



275
Rembrandt, *A Half-Dressed Woman Seated before a Stove*,
1658, etching (v1), 22.8 x 18.7 cm

countryside⁷⁷ – as he had done in his two earlier etchings. What began in his *Diana and Nude Woman Seated on a Mound* as a highly idiosyncratic rivalry with the seated nudes of several renowned predecessors, in which Rembrandt demonstrated in a rather showy and polemical way that lifelikeness could be achieved by emphatically suggesting that the figure was drawn from life, now ends with a demonstration of what life looks like if one really has the nude model before one's eyes: we see a somewhat tired-looking, posing woman, who, without any trace of grace, sits next to an iron stove that heats the cold studio.⁷⁸ The gesture of the right hand, with which she tensely grasps the folds of her chemise, seems to indicate that she does not feel at ease. The relief on the stove, representing the penitent sinner Mary Magdalene, gives the viewer food for thought about the status and situation of this model.⁷⁹ The result is not to be compared with anything that other artists had depicted; all conventions to which artists were wont to adhere have here been jettisoned. For the contemporary collector it must have corroborated the image of Rembrandt as an artist who went his own way: 'his mind was very different from other people as well as his behavior, and as unusual was also his manner of rendering', as Baldinucci, who was well acquainted with Rembrandt's etchings, wrote on the basis of information from a former pupil of Rembrandt.⁸⁰

In the four other etchings of a female model, three of which are dated 1658 and the fourth 1661, the women are completely naked. In two etchings of 1658 the same model appears to be employed, but she is distinctly different from the woman portrayed in the etching discussed above. These etchings, too, deviate from the nudes drawn by any other artist from the live model. Perhaps we may view the *Woman Sitting with a Hat beside Her* (fig. 276) and the *Woman Bathing* (fig. 277) as comments on drawings after the model, such as those by Backer and Flinck (figs. 278, 279), the more so since their poses are often quite similar. One can imagine that ex-pupils like



276

Rembrandt, *A Seated Nude Woman with a Hat Beside Her*,
1658, etching 15.6 x 12.9 cm



277

Rembrandt, *A Nude Woman Bathing Her Feet in a Brook*, 1658, etching, 16 x 8 cm

Bol and Flinck who changed their style about a decade earlier, and also Van Hoogstraten, who was converted as well by this time, would have reacted with exasperation when seeing these prints. Not only did they have, as Van Hoogstraten underlined, an entirely different conception of the necessity to stylize and add grace to the figures, but the attention focused on the individuality of these female bodies also forms a great contrast. The specific characteristics of the body of this woman, who, by nature, seems to have a slightly stooped back and a neck that sticks forward a little, would have been scrupulously avoided by other artists. This contrast is well expressed by Van Hoogstraten when he states that when drawing from life, one will only find beauty if one learns to avoid the flaws in the model by training after nudes of stone or plaster first.⁸¹

The recognizability of this model is striking, especially of the *Woman Sitting with a Hat beside Her* (fig. 276). If Rembrandt, with the *Woman Sitting Half-Dressed before a Stove*, introduced the subject of the undressed model posing in the studio for a work of art that had a public circulation, he went a step further in this etching by showing the body and face in all its characteristic individuality. The obvious reference to a man, caused by the presence of the hat, emphasizes her situation as an undressed, and thus immoral, woman being watched by men. In the second etching the specificity of place, time, individuality and status of the woman has been softened by having her profile fade into the darkness and by adding a suggestion of bathing in nature (fig. 277). However, the last feature is at the same time negated because Rembrandt did not bother to remove the back of a chair or couch behind her. Moreover, she is seated on soft cushions, which harmonize well with her body, but not with the represented situation of bathing in a pond or stream. Her body is modeled in soft round shapes, but still possesses great individuality. Clark described her justifiably as ‘a most noble piece of bodily architecture’,⁸² but to say in the same breadth that she looks like ‘an old woman ... the

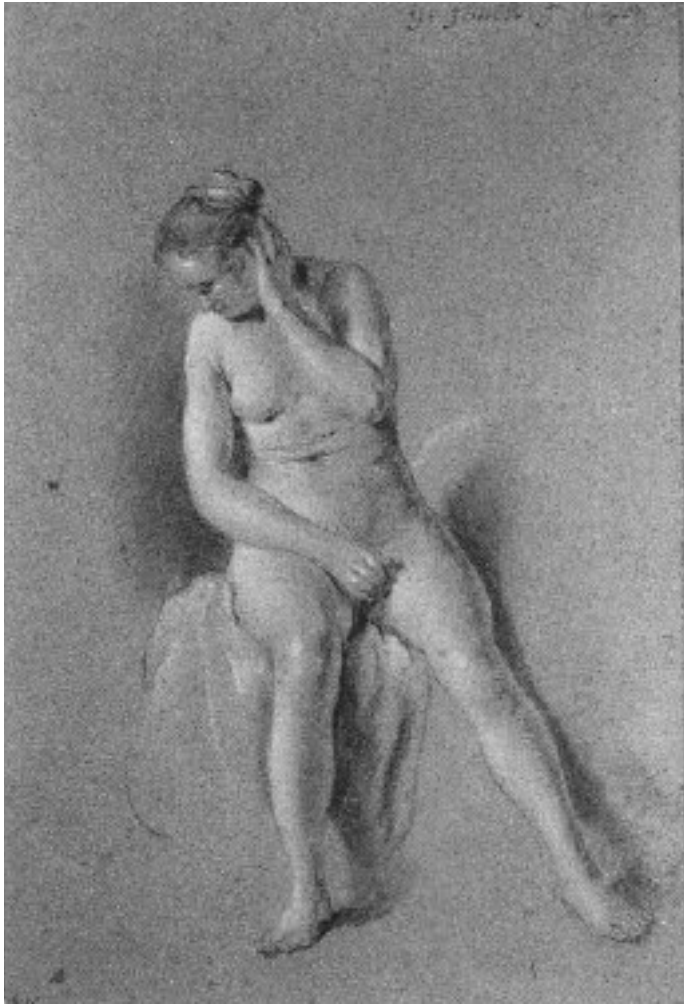


278

Jacob Backer, *A Seated Nude Woman*, 1648, Boston, black and white chalk on blue paper 32.3 x 23.2 cm. Boston, Maida and George Abrams Collection

obstinate undefeated shape, as of an old boat’ indicates that Clark’s sensitivity and generally great power of observation must have been clouded by his incapacity to judge female forms that fall outside the scope of his ideal canon.

The third etching of 1658 represents a reclining nude seen from behind, a pose with a respectable tradition (fig. 280). She has long been called *Négresse couché* or *Sleeping Negress*, but more recent authors (with the exception of Thomas Rassieur)⁸³ have continually denied that a black woman is portrayed.⁸⁴ With the help of the



279

Govert, Flinck, *A Seated Nude Woman*, 1648, black and white chalk on blue paper 363 x 249 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett

rare first state, it was argued that this is a pale-skinned woman, of which Rembrandt 'increased the modelling and darkened her back with fine shading, so that the figure now disappears into a mysterious world of half-shadows.'⁸⁵ Christopher White concluded that 'the theme of this print was clearly intended to be the magical quality of dark tones, and not of dark skin.' However, when we compare this woman with the women represented in other etchings of the same period, it becomes apparent

that Rembrandt meant to render a black woman from the start. This is not a white body modeled by way of shadowing, but the body of a black woman modeled through light that falls on her shining dark skin. Moreover, the contrast with the white bed sheets – there is no reason why these would reflect more light than the body – and the light edges along the soles of her feet make clear that Rembrandt portrayed a dark-skinned woman.⁸⁶ This was his goal in the first state, as well, but that one shows an unfinished experiment.⁸⁷ In the second state the effect of light brushing over the dark skin, suggested by an extremely fine network of cross-hatching across the woman's body, has been convincingly represented.

This type of nude is based on a prestigious tradition which can be traced back to the well-known engraving of a *Nymph in a Landscape* by Giulio Campagnola from c. 1510, probably based on an invention by Giorgione (fig. 281).⁸⁸ This print was followed shortly by a similar reclining nude engraved by Marcantonio Raimondi,⁸⁹ and by Agostino Veneziano's print of *Venus Reclining on a Fur* (fig. 282) (These were also the sources of inspiration for Velazquez's famous *Rokeby Venus*.) Directly based on Agostino Veneziano's print is a German engraving by Barthel Beham with *The Penance of Saint Chrysostomus*.⁹⁰ This Venetian tradition gave rise to an extensive following in Holland, from the works of artists like Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem and Abraham Bloemaert, up to a Jan Gerritsz. van Bronkhorst etching after Cornelis van Poelenburch (fig. 96) and Crispijn de Passe the Younger's engraving after Abraham Bloemaert, published in *Van 't Light der Teken en Schilderkonst* (fig. 283). However, remarkably close in pose is a little grisaille on panel by Abraham Bloemaert of c. 1635 (fig. 284) and a drawing by the same master.⁹¹ Thus, Rembrandt's most conventional, 'classical' nude seems an answer to the highly stylized engravings after the still-famous Bloemaert, whose studies had been recently published in prints for the instruction of young artists.⁹² Rembrandt chose this type for a virtuoso per-



280
Rembrandt, *A Reclining Female Nude*, 1658,
etching 8.1 x 15.8 cm



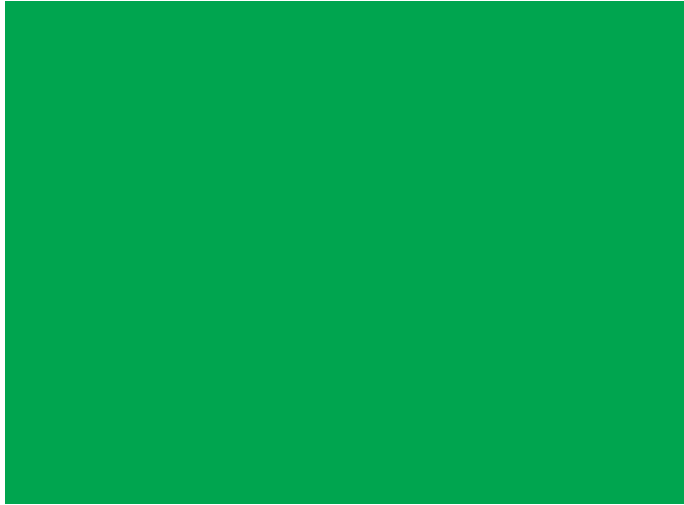
281
Giulio Campagnola, *A Nymph Sleeping in a Landscape*,
c. 1510, engraving 12 x 18.1 cm



282
Agostino Veneziano (de Musi), *Reclining Venus
with Cupid on a Fur*, engraving 11.5 x 13.2 cm



283
 Christijn de Passe II, *Reclining Nude Seen from the Back*,
 engraving 19.2 x 28.7 cm. in: *'t Light der Teken en
 Schilderkonst*, 1633-34



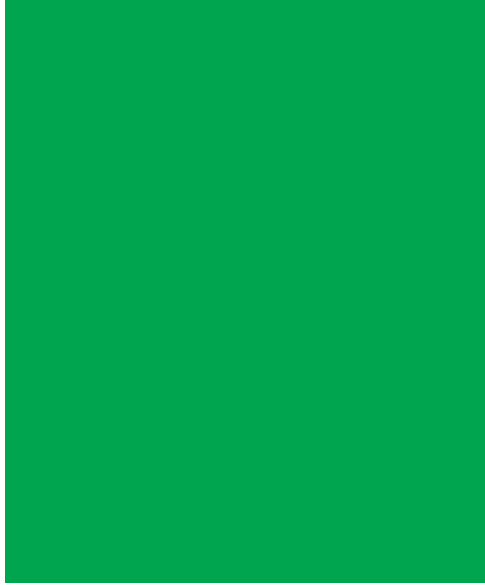
284
 Abraham Bloemaert, *Venus and Cupid*, "rosaille", c. 1635,
 panel 27.7 x 37.5 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen,
 Gemäldegalerie

formance in the reflection of light on a dark skin, showing what a truly great artist can do with etching needle and burin. Simultaneously he used a tradition that had been employed for erotically charged images, which was made explicit in the lines under the print after Cornelis van Poelenburch (fig. 96), to represent a nude black woman. What this would have meant for the contemporary Amsterdam viewer, we will probably never know.

Rembrandt's last variation on the theme of the nude, a 'perfect representation of soft light breaking into a dark space', represents the 'final mastery of all that he had searched for in his last group of studies', to quote the words of Christopher White (fig. 285). This print of 1661 was probably his penultimate etching. Considering that we know of several drawings of this model in the same pose which are now attributed to his pupil Johannes Raven,⁹³ the first design of the etching must have been made during a drawing session with pupils (figs. 286, 287). Perhaps it was not even in Rembrandt's own studio, but during the kind of gathering of artists drawing from the nude model to which a few legal documents refer (see chapter XI). This might explain the conventionality of the pose in which the model is placed. In this case Samuel van Hoogstraten would have been quite content. From the drawings it appears that the model holds a support rope. When he worked up the etching, Rembrandt gave this arm a function by having the woman hold up an arrow. He placed the figure seated on a bed and added the familiar chemise with the sleeve hanging down as a contrast to the texture of her skin. He gave her a richly elaborated headdress, which places her outside the quotidian. In the dark recess of the bed, next to her left arm, he indicated a head with a little stubby nose, undoubtedly that of Cupid. Thus, he referred to the pictorial tradition well known from paintings and prints of Venus who, usually in a playful manner, confiscates Cupid's arrows or bow because of the trouble he elicits among gods and mortals by shooting his arrows indiscriminately.⁹⁴ An early example which Rembrandt would have known well is Lucas



285
Rembrandt, *A Woman with an Arrow (Venus and Cupid)*, 1661,
etching 20.5 x 12.3 cm



286

Attributed to Johannes Raven, *A Seated Female Nude*, c. 1661, pen in black, brush in brown and grey, 19.1 x 15.5 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



289

Rembrandt, *Lucretia*, 1664, canvas 116 x 99 cm. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art

288
Lucas van
Leyden, *Venus
and Cupid*,
1528,
engraving
16 x 11.3 cm



287

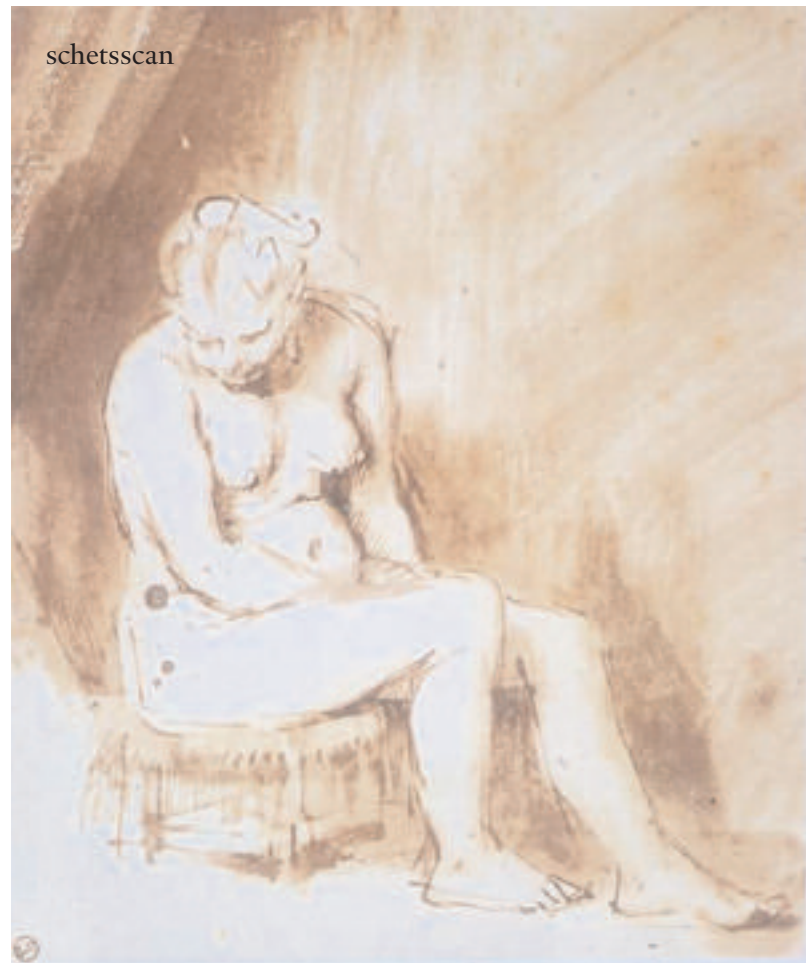
Attributed to Johannes Raven, *A Seated Female Nude*, c. 1661, pen in brown ink with grey-brown and brown wash, with white over some light indications in black chalk 28.7 x 18.5 cm. London, British Museum



van Leyden's print of Venus grasping Cupid's arrow (fig. 288).

The body of this Venus is far removed from the silhouette of his early nudes. Rembrandt even made her more slender than the model in the drawings attributed to Raven and changed the shape of her body considerably. Remarkably, he seems to have lengthened her neck and has given her a clearly indicated, quite slender, low waist under a carefully articulated thorax and diaphragm, while the shoulders are relatively wide. Rembrandt not only seems to have changed the shape of the body of the model at several points, but precisely these altered forms show a drastic deviation from those of his early nudes. Most of these forms had already appeared in his depiction of *Bathsheba* from seven years earlier, as we shall see in the next chapter.

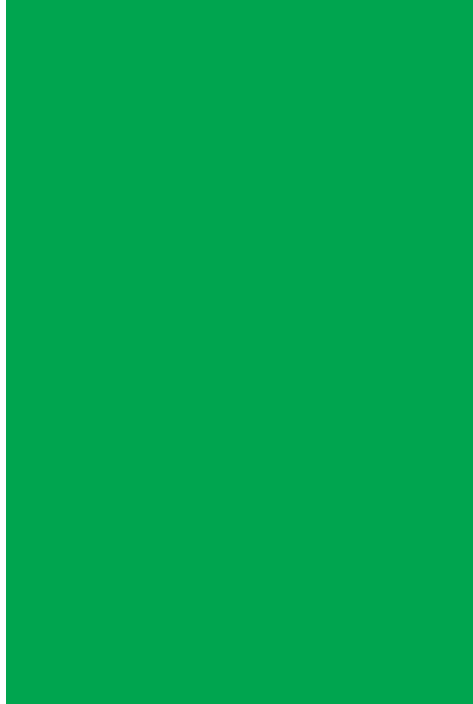
Does this mean that when representing Venus or another woman of legendary beauty Rembrandt had, at last, turned to a more classical type of nude? And why does she not have the folds, creases, dimples and puckers of the early nudes? To answer the last question first: by now Rembrandt possessed such an ability to suggest a palpable softness of the surface of a lifelike female body with a layer of fat under the skin that he did not need these devices to create a 'from life' effect. And concerning the first question: it seems probable that this type of body does not necessarily show Rembrandt's adjustment to more classical forms, although this possibility should not be ruled out. However, it may be more important that the contemporary ideal of female beauty had gone through quite a radical change, as we can see in the fashion of the time. By now a rather long bodice with a narrow waist had become fashionable. We not only see this in portraits and genre paintings of that period, but even in the fantasy dress Rembrandt employed in his own *Lucretia* of 1664 (fig. 289). She represents emphatically the silhouette of an entirely different ideal of beauty than his heroines in fantasy dress of the 1630s (figs. 247, 341). To make the appearance of his nude as lifelike as possible,



290

Rembrandt, *A Seated Female Nude*, c.1660, pen and brush and brown ink with wash and white wash, 21.1 x 17.4 cm. Chicago, Art Institute (Clarence Buckingham Collection)

tiful drawing of c. 1660, Rembrandt sketched the shape of a woman who is simply sitting there to be drawn with astounding simplicity in a few well-aimed lines and light washes (fig. 290). This woman has been asked to sit in this pose to be watched by Rembrandt and his pupils from different angles, and she does so without pleasure. The accuracy with which the heaviness of her body has been rendered – a body that, through an entirely natural-looking slump, seems to express tiredness and resistance – is completely lacking in the drawing made by a pupil sitting at the other side of the model, possibly Aert de Gelder (fig. 291).⁹⁶ A reclining nude, probably of a slight-



291

Attributed to Aert de Gelder, *A Seated Female Nude*, c. 1660, pen and brush in brown 29.2 x 19.5 cm. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen

Rembrandt gave her the forms that had come to be considered attractive. As we can see most clearly in nude photography of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the image of what a sexually appealing woman is supposed to look like changes continually – a phenomenon that, as was argued convincingly by Anne Hollander, we see in Western culture reflected in the fashionable look of the dressed body throughout the last 700 years.

Around the same time as the etching discussed above, a group of drawings from the nude model were made in drawing sessions with pupils. Only four of those drawings are accepted as autograph by Peter Schatborn; he was able to attribute some of the other drawings convincingly to Aert de Gelder and Johannes Raven.⁹⁵ In a beau-

ly earlier date, was also executed with a few thick, free strokes of the reed pen and a little wash to denote the shadows (fig. 292). The entirely natural way in which she lies on her side, the arms hanging around her body, her head falling slightly forward, contrasts sharply with the conventions of the long tradition of the reclining nude, which we see, for example, emphatically represented in a drawing by Govert Flinck that was made from a nude model at around the same time (fig. 293).

Jupiter and Antiope

In the same period – 1659 – the reclining nude returns in Rembrandt's last rendering of a narrative from classical mythology (fig. 294). With this subject Rembrandt goes back to where he began: the internationally traditional – and pre-eminently voyeuristic – theme of the sleeping nude spied upon by one or more male figures, which can be filled in with many subjects, such as *Jupiter and Antiope*, a *Sleeping Venus* or a *Sleeping Diana* (with or without nymphs) *Approached by Satyrs*, or *Cimon and Ephigenia*. As in his earliest print of a nude (fig. 249), Rembrandt does not bother much about the precise subject, although this time the man is obviously a satyr with little horns on his head. Sometime later, a text was added on the plate by an anonymous author who evidently found it necessary to specify (and moralize) the subject: 'Jupiter, when he opens the female lock, / Becomes a satyr or beast or bird, or fool.'⁹⁷

In this etching, the utter naturalness of the sleeping nude that Rembrandt drew from the model around the same time is entirely absent (fig. 292). This nude reclines in the highly artificial sleeping pose that stems from antiquity and had, in the sixteenth century, quickly spread from Venice over the rest of Italy and across the Alps. Many famous artists, from Titian, Correggio, and the Carracci, up to Rubens and a number of Dutch artists, preferred this pose for a voyeuristic situation.⁹⁸ Several of Rembrandt's Amsterdam colleagues and competitors,



292

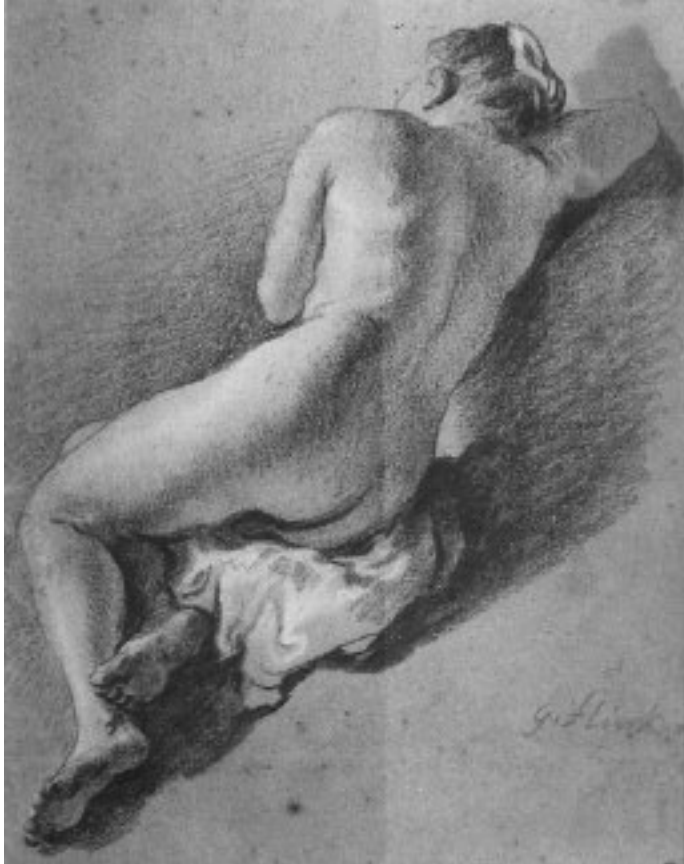
Rembrandt, *A Sleeping Nude Woman*, c. 1658, pen and brush and brown ink with wash, touched with white 13.5 x 28.3 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

like Jacob Backer (fig. 106/211), Bartholomeus Breenbergh, Jacob van Loo (fig. 213), and Jan Gerritsz. Van Bronchorst (fig. 106), achieved success with it, and, as we have seen, it was also a pose in which a model drawn by Flinck and others had been placed (fig. 293).

When devising his early depiction of the theme (fig. 249), Rembrandt had many examples in mind – varying from several prints after the Carracci to Werner van den Valckert (figs. 251-253) – and at that time he transformed those examples pointedly into a pose that looked as lifelike as possible, not only where it concerned the sleeping nymph, but also the man clambering into the bed. Now, in his old age, he once again entered into competition with the most famous of those examples, the print by Annibale Carracci (fig. 295). Not only the powerful erotic charge of this invention, but also the humor would have challenged him. This time the suggestion of lifelikeness was no longer of overriding importance.

Rembrandt seized the opportunity to show connoisseurs and colleagues that he was still able to exploit the possibilities of such a theme as no other artist could, demonstrating simultaneously how his style and etching technique had evolved over thirty years. With a virtuoso combination of quickly etched lines and deft accents in drypoint and burin, he has left all other graphic art behind in the suggestion of form, surface texture and atmosphere. If Annibale Carracci's print was an important experiment in achieving new effects with the combination of etching and engraving, Rembrandt brought this technique to the limit of its potential. Annibale's nude looks hard and sculptural in comparison; the viewer does not perceive the texture of her skin as essentially different from the materials around her.

We see Rembrandt's nude from the same extremely low viewpoint as Annibale's, while the lower part of the body is brought even closer. Rembrandt added the motif



293

Govert Flinck, *A Sleeping Nude Woman*, c. 1645-50, black and white chalk on blue paper 24.7 x 41.3 cm. Paris, Fondation Custodia (Coll. F. Lugt), Institut Néerlandais

of the arm slung over the head onto the pose of Annibale's sleeping nymph. This motif stemmed from antiquity and had been employed by numerous predecessors when depicting sleeping nymphs or goddesses. Because the head is not turned towards the viewer, as had been the common application of this motif from the classical statue of the *Sleeping Ariadne*, but falls backward as in Carracci's example, and since Rembrandt moved the other arm as well, unusual things are happening.⁹⁹ The breasts are stretched in such a way that they seem to be flattened almost completely. The head is even more strongly foreshortened than in Annibale's print, so that

we look into her nostrils and are confronted with the open mouth of a woman fast asleep. We almost seem to hear her snore. Probably painted shortly after the appearance of this print, Dirck van de Lisse would employ this amusing motif in a painting in which Diana, snoring with open mouth, is approached by satyrs (fig. 296).¹⁰⁰

A blinding light comes from the right background and brushes over the nymph's body, casting a deep shadow over the place in the center of the print which attracts the gaze of the satyr as well as that of the viewer. However, the satyr does not look at her lower abdomen with a lecherous smirk, as we are accustomed to seeing in many satyrs (fig. 297). On the contrary, he seems to contemplate the woman's body with the eye of an expert. On the one hand he recalls the coarse Cimon who, after gazing for some time at the body of the sleeping Ephigenia, is transformed into a sophisticated and cultured connoisseur of beauty, but on the other hand this man remains a satyr who cannot free himself from lust. Indeed, even the legendary artist Apelles, the greatest connoisseur of beauty, could not free himself from his carnal appetites, at least according to Van Mander's version of the story of Apelles and Campaspe: 'Because Apelles had more knowledge than Alexander about the perfect beauty of the human body and the appearance of a beautiful woman, so too was he more powerfully confronted with and overcome by unchaste love due to the constant observation of her when he was painting.' The Amsterdam Apelles thus showed for the last time his connoisseurship of, and his love for, nude female beauty.



296

Dirck van der Lisse, *The Sleeping Diana Spied upon by Satyrs*, c. 1655-65, panel 44 x 51.8 cm. The Hague, Mauritshuis



297

Hendrick Goltzius, *Jupiter and Antiope*, 1612, canvas 126.5 x 175.5 cm. Haarlem, Frans Halsmuseum (on loan from The Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage)



294

Rembrandt, *Jupiter and Antiope*, 1659, etching 13.8 x 20.5 cm



295

Annibale Carracci, *Jupiter and Antiope (Venus and a Satyr)*, 1592, etching and engraving 15.6 x 22.7 cm

Intermezzo

The Nude, the Artist, and the Female Model

When introducing in chapter x Rembrandt's early etchings of *Diana Bathing* and *The Nude Woman Seated on a Mound*, I referred to Kenneth Clark's opinion that these prints 'are, to our eyes, some of the most unpleasing, not to say disgusting, pictures ever produced by a great artist.'¹ Clark's judgment is an appropriate beginning for this chapter, as well, because we can safely state that Clark brilliantly synthesizes and acutely formulates notions about the early modern nude in European art that were generally held during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Clark makes clear that no other nudes in the early modern period – that is to say, of those which he considered great works of art – deviated so fundamentally from what he thought of as *the nude*. He observed that Rembrandt depicted '... everything ... that the convention of the nude obliterates but that Rembrandt is determined we shall see.'²

The nude and the naked: 'ideal' versus 'real' from Kenneth Clark to the seventeenth century

In the first paragraph of the introduction to his famous book *The Nude. A Study in Ideal Form*, Clark opposed the words 'naked' and 'nude.' 'To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word 'nude', on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenceless body, but of a balanced, prosperous and confident body: the body reformed.'³ To illustrate this, Clark adduces photography which is, he states, for this reason always disappointing: '... we are immediately disturbed by wrinkles, pouches, and other small imperfections, which, in

the classical scheme, are eliminated. By long habit we do not judge it as a living organism, but as a design; and we discover that the transitions are inconclusive, the outline is faltering. We are bothered because the various parts of the body cannot be perceived as simple units and have no clear relationship to one another. In almost every detail the body is not the shape that art had led us to believe it should be.⁴ This description of what he sees as the problematic nature of photographs of nudes is formulated in terms that are similar to those levelled at Rembrandt's nudes since the seventeenth century. They make us understand why Clark, and generations of critics before him, felt highly 'uncomfortable' when looking at them: 'we can hardly bring our eyes to dwell on her', he says of the *Diana* (fig. 240), but he is also of the opinion that 'they achieve a kind of horrible fascination.'⁵ It is clear that these images so strongly evoked the presence of 'the living organism', the naked women who had been, supposedly, the models, that it caused an anxiety that clashed with Clark's attitude towards art.

In Clark's approach to art, there is a strong distinction between the aesthetics of representation on the one hand and the things represented on the other hand – in the case of the nude, between the 'design' that we should judge and 'the living organism' to which it refers (and which should not interfere with the aesthetic experience).⁶ However, Clark does not go as far as some of his contemporaries: as exemplary for a current attitude towards nudes in art, he disapprovingly quotes the philosopher Samuel Alexander, who maintained, 'If the nude is so treated that it raises in the spectator ideas or desires appropriate to the material subject, it is false art, and bad morals.'⁷ Clark objects that some associations of the human body are inevitable and that therefore the nude, 'however abstract, should not fail to arouse some vestige of erotic feeling, even though it be only the faintest shadow.' He is convinced that the desire to grasp and to be united with another human body is such a fundamental

part of our nature 'that our judgement of what is known as 'pure form' is inevitably influenced by it.' However, such feelings should remain a 'faint shadow' because there is always 'the risk of upsetting the responses from which a work of art derives its independent life.'

By dissociating the aesthetic experience of the image from the 'material subject' it represents, one could avoid 'upsetting' such responses as much as possible. This explains the troubles of many nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors when confronted with Rembrandt's nudes. It was out of the question to judge these images only as a 'design' and not to think about the 'living organism' because, as in a photograph, one cannot avoid being reminded of the 'reality' of the naked model posing for the artist. To keep control over this potential 'risk' the naked body had to be 'clothed' in the conventions developed in classical art.⁸ And this had to be done consistently. Clark assessed, for instance, Jan Gossaert's 'unresolved mixture' of Italian conventions and Flemish realism as 'curiously indecent. They seem to push their way forward till they are embarrassingly near to us, and we recognize how necessary it is for the naked body to be clothed by a consistent style.'⁹ (fig. 298)

Thus, the body needed to be contained and tamed in the geometrical proportions of antiquity with as little emphasis as possible on its biological functions.¹⁰ However, to his dismay, Clark often finds himself reminded of such biological functions in northern art. The curve of the stomach of Jan van Eyck's Eve 'does not take its shape from the will but from the unconscious biological process that gives shape to all hidden organisms.'¹¹ As Lynda Nead rightly pointed out, the classical ideal of the female nude, 'in which the threat of flesh is remorselessly disciplined', is in many respects remarkably masculine.¹² In the previous chapters, we have often noted that Rembrandt rejected precisely the wide shoulders, the low waist and the muscularity in arms, midriff, and flanks of existing representations in favor of narrow shoulders and a high waist that gives way to a massive lower part of the



298

Jan Gossaert van Mabuse, *Neptune and Amphitrite*, 1516, panel 188 x 124 cm.
Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie

torso. Instead of muscles, we see an abundance of soft, rippling flesh. These characteristics were, as we have seen, in line with another kind of convention: the ideals of contemporary femininity as reflected in the silhouette of the clothed body of that time. As was discussed in chapter x, the perception of the shape of the female body would have been conditioned by the current clothed look of the time. Precisely where Rembrandt's bodies deviate from classical proportions, they conform to bodily shapes that a contemporary viewer would have perceived as more 'real' and lifelike because they came closer to his own world of experience. As a means to involve the viewer, these female bodies were, indeed, intended to look like 'women deprived of their clothes.' By endeavoring to do this, Rembrandt consciously deviated from the conventions of stylization that were dear to the artists he emulated.

Clark's approach contains many elements that can be traced in art literature back to Alberti. It is based on a conception of art in which the knowledge of material objects is abstracted through contour and clearly structured shape, a conception that was also at the core of the *disegno* ideal of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (see chapter vii). This 'intellectual' approach to art was able to hold the sensual aspects of the visual arts in check, and it would enable nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics, like Clark, to appreciate the representation as an aesthetic object detached from what it represented. However, a powerful ideology had arisen, particularly in the first half of the seventeenth century, that was opposed to the *disegno* ideal and that emphasized the contingencies of nature through color, light and the material substance of paint. In this conception, working from life and portraying the things observed with convincing lifelikeness was paramount.

Naturally, in the case of the portrayal of nudes this approach was potentially problematic and resulted in criticism, which was not only true of twentieth-century critics like Clark, but also, in a different form, for con-

temporaries of the artists. For seventeenth-century viewers – and in this respect they were far removed from Clark, who wanted to prevent the viewer from doing just this when looking at art – it was self-evident that one should empathize as much as possible with the scene represented (see chapter iii) and perceive the things observed in a painting as a 'virtual reality', as an *eygen-schijnende gedaente*, an image that appears to be reality (see chapter v).¹³ To be able to 'judge a represented figure as a living organism' was, in fact, an important expectation for many contemporary beholders. I recall here a statement by Franciscus Junius, quoted in chapter v, that 'through full attention of our art loving mind we should imagine that we are confronted by the living presence of the things themselves, and not with a painted representation.'¹⁴ More than any other artist, Rembrandt was a painter who did everything he could do to involve the viewer as forcefully as possible in the scene represented. The suggestion of 'life itself' is presented to the eyes with all the 'sensual' means the pictorial arts can muster. In the case of the nude figure, however, it was just this suggestion that would have caused reactions that are similar to Clark's, even among some of the very people who would in other subjects have approved of it. However, there must have been a group of art lovers at the time who accepted as the highest aim of art the depiction of nudes in accordance with Rembrandt's beliefs, but these representations would have been controversial in his own day.

As a consequence of the approach towards images mentioned above, combined with the then-current notions about the exceptional power that the sense of sight holds over the mind (see chapter v), moral problems surfaced forcefully in the case of lifelike depictions of the female nude. Remember Jacob Cats's admonishment: 'The closer he [the painter] is able to come in his suggestion of life / The more he can arouse all passions / Until heaven knows what; precisely the best of minds / Can breed the

worst evil and cause the greatest harm',¹⁵ not to speak of the frenzied rage of Camphuyzen, particularly where it concerned the portrayal of nude women: '... while the eyes are deceived, / And the heart astonished by the beautiful lies of painting, / One wants to do and to have / Everything one beholds in a painting.'¹⁶

If, when portraying a nude woman, the artist intends to depict the greatest possible suggestion of lifelikeness by observing and depicting closely 'life itself' in all its variety and contingency, then the living body outside the representation, the real woman 'deprived of clothes', as well as thoughts about her social class and moral nature, will urge itself upon the viewer. When Jan de Bisschop, in 1671, turns against the 'naturalism' in the art of the generation that began to fall out of favour by that time ('this wrong manner, which, until recently, had been deeply rooted with many prominent and respectable minds of our fatherland [...] that everything that was reprehensible for the eye was chosen to be painted and drawn'),¹⁷ it is precisely the depiction of the female nude at which he aims his arrows. It bothers him because particularly this prestigious 'classical' type of subject should be rendered in a 'high form'; one should not be confronted with the 'low' reality of the contemporary woman which the artist makes visible and with which he degrades the theme: *Leda* or *Danaë*, portrayed as 'naked women with a fat and swollen stomach, pendulous breasts, marks of the garters in the legs, and much more of such monstrousness.'

This is even more emphatically the case in Andries Pels's criticism. In contrast with Clark and other nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics, it was natural for Pels to look at an image as if he had the real thing before his eyes. When he writes that Rembrandt did not choose 'a Greek Venus' as his model but 'a laundress or turf treader', he means that Rembrandt did not fashion his figure after the example of antiquity, thus making it impossible to imagine her as 'a Greek Venus', but confronted the viewer with the real woman that sat for him – and such a woman would have been of the lowest sort; women

posing in the nude were, as a matter of course, considered as such by the contemporary beholder. This reaction is remarkably similar to that of nineteenth-century critics responding to photographs of the female nude that were presented as art. It recalls a statement by Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, a portrait photographer and inventor of the *carte de visite*, who, in 1862, described nude photographs as, 'those sad nudities which display with a desperate truth all the physical and moral ugliness of the model paid by the session.'¹⁸ Even the critical responses to Manet's *Olympia* – a painting that was so shocking for contemporaries because one saw in the woman depicted the posing prostitute – has similar traits.¹⁹ There is a difference, however. In the nineteenth century, expectations created by the strict conventions concerning the nude as being 'clothed' by art were drastically overturned by Manet (and in a different way through photography), in a time that, when looking at images of the nude in particular, thoughts about the reality behind the image were emphatically repressed. In the seventeenth century, on the contrary, one of the main purposes of art, to evoke a 'virtual reality', was pushed to its extreme by an artist like Rembrandt; as a consequence, the ideology which held the sensual, 'dangerous' aspects of art in check through the stylized idealization of *disegno* was advanced with renewed force by critics like De Bisschop and Pels. However, because in both Manet's and Rembrandt's cases the nude was not generalized enough and showed too much the particularities of a specific woman, the image came too embarrassingly near the viewer's own experience and carried along sexual and social connotations which were unacceptable for a segment of the audience of the day. In his portrayal of nudes, Rembrandt seems constantly to have explored the boundaries of what was possible within society's norms and the standards prevailing among a certain group of collectors who valued his work – norms and standards that were determined by both artistic and social conventions.

Dirck Bleker, *Mary Magdalen*, 1651, canvas 112 x 83 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



It appears that in the seventeenth century the intention to depict lifelikeness and the fact that, through this, the viewer felt all the more to be confronting the person ‘behind’ the image could also become a source of serious problems in real life. We know of two lawsuits in which someone claimed to recognize the real person portrayed in the nude. One of those concerns a case in 1658 in which the painter Dirck Bleker testified that the prostitute Maria de la Motte was ‘the usual model’ who openly posed naked for a group of painters. He had been called as a witness because a woman collecting evidence against her husband brought up a painting of *Mary Magdalene* by Bleker as evidence of the infidelity of her husband (fig. 299). Her maid had testified that the indicated Maria de la Motte was portrayed in this painting and that the husband in question had also visited her brothel.²⁰ For the wife and her maid, this painting was not an image of *Mary Magdalene*; they only saw the whore with whom the man in question supposedly had a relationship.

The other case regards an amusing lawsuit in 1676 between Lodewijk van der Helst and Geertruijt de Haes, who obviously sat as a model for the painter. Lodewijk was said to have made the latter a promise of marriage, but had later spread rumors that she was a whore.²¹ A witness called by Geertruijt against Lodewijk informed

the court that she had seen in the house of the painter a painting of the ‘nude Venus in a very dishonorable pose’, in which Geertruijt was to be recognized easily.²² She also maintained that Lodewijk had said to her that he only ‘painted the face and the hands from life and that he had added the body from the imagination’, which proved that Geertruijt did not pose naked for him, as might be assumed from the painting.²³ To clear her honor and her good name, Geertruijt wanted the painting in which she was portrayed to be destroyed. The painting probably survived this case; surprisingly, the fighting parties appear to be married the next year! In an unusual way the case seems to correspond to then-current clichés regarding the painter falling in love with his model, which will be discussed below.

Fictions about the artist and the nude female model

The moral problems that could be elicited by looking at paintings with lifelike female nudes were aggravated – and this was already implicated by Pels – by the low status of the model, attitudes towards posing naked, and by current ideas about beholding naked women in reality. Jacob Cats’s admonishment, cited earlier (see chapter v), made clear that seeing naked female bodies could be considered truly perilous: ‘It is not possible to fully express by language / To what extent lascivious sight manages to drag down the soul; / How far the fire of lust will shoot through all limbs, / When a loose youth only sees a naked bosom.’²⁴ We also remember Cats’s examples of mythological and biblical heroes who came to grief by looking at nude women: even a high-minded prince only has to see a naked woman to immediately become a beast, he wittily wrote about Actaeon, while no less a biblical hero than King David succumbed to sin and was fired by evil lust when seeing a naked woman, to name only a few of the many instances of such warnings. To be sure, Cats’s work presented a set of moral norms that was not neces-

sarily ingrained in the minds of the well-to-do Dutch burghers or reflected in their daily practice. However, as the best-selling author of the seventeenth century, he was doubtlessly the representative of a normative system of which any literate person must have been very much aware. And the endlessly repeated commonplaces about the dangers of the sense of sight certainly were ingrained in the minds of those burghers. In the 'official' moral code of the Dutch burgher, of which Cats can be considered the most influential mouthpiece, seeing women naked in real life was under a strong taboo.²⁵

As we will see in the following pages, women posing without clothes on were considered immoral by definition. As far as we know, these women, like the already mentioned Maria de la Motte, were usually prostitutes. Hence, not only was observing nude women morally reprehensible, the fact that the audience assumed as a matter of course that the artist needed lewd women as models in order to depict a female nude made portraying nudes even more problematic; for the viewer, however, this made it also more thrilling. This can be heard in a poem from the 1650s by Jan Vos on a painting of *Susanna and the Elders*, quoted in chapter III. In the last lines, Vos connects the lifelike quality of the painting with the thought that the painter was able to achieve this by observing an immoral model: 'In order to make this chaste one [Susanna] appear real / Art painted her after Unchastity itself, to be true to life. / One need not fear the poison of her mind, however / ... / The brush never displays more than physical appearance.'²⁶ The viewer does not have to be afraid that he will be affected by the pernicious influence of the prostitute, which the art of painting is able to render after life – after all, she is just paint. Simultaneously it is implicated that, unlike the viewer, the painter is indeed exposed to those dangers.

Jan Vos's fascination with the idea that the painter had the loose, naked model before his eyes stands in a long tradition that has its roots in classical antiquity. The im-

age of the painter as someone depicting 'lifelike' nudes, and the moral problems related to this, produced a tradition of commonplaces about the painter and his (nude) model which continues up to our own times in many variations. The revival in the Renaissance of classical legends around these commonplaces – in particular the story of Apelles, who falls in love with the mistress of Alexander the Great when she posed for him in the nude – often makes it difficult to separate the reality of painting after the nude model from the fiction which has been woven around it.²⁷ The related topos 'love bears art' ('liefde baart kunst') and the intertwined sexually charged metaphor of *Pictura* as a beautiful, but jealous woman with whom the painter is married and fathers children²⁸ create an inextricable tangle of, on the one hand, the reality taking place in the studio, and, on the other hand, the fascination of the viewer with the relation between painter and nude model, a fascination on which the artist could capitalize. Such commonplaces would partly have determined the attitude of the viewer when confronted with the depiction of a female nude *and* of the painter when portraying it.

At the end of the preceding chapter, I related how Karel van Mander, digressing from his source, a French translation of Pliny, concluded his version of the story of Apelles and Campaspe with the words: 'Because Apelles had more knowledge than Alexander about the perfect beauty of the human body and the appearance of a beautiful woman, so too was he more powerfully confronted with and overcome by unchaste love due to the constant observation of her when he was painting.'²⁹ Van Mander underscores on the one hand that the artist is pre-eminently a connoisseur of female pulchritude, but also emphasizes the morally doubtful fact that by scrutinizing his subject intensely, the artist is all the more prone to be sensually aroused.

Directly related to the Apelles and Campaspe legend and the erotic implications emphasized by Van Mander is the motif of the painter incited by love for his model. This is



300

Werner van den Valckert (?), *Apelles Painting Campaspe*,
pen and brown ink, wash in various colors 44 x 35.5 cm.
Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet

splendidly elaborated upon by Van Mander in his life of Hugo van der Goes (based on older texts by Lucas d'Heere and Marcus van Vaernewijck). While painting from life a girl with whom he was in love, Van der Goes's brush was guided by Cupid and Venus, yielding a beautiful and exceptionally lifelike result.³⁰ Lucas d'Heere was the first to introduce the motif of the enamored painter in Netherlandish literature with a few short poems, in which he played with the concept that the beauty of the model with whom the painter is in love actually surpasses the capacities of his art.³¹ In one of these poems the painter portrays his sweetheart as Venus, hoping that his reward would be that he might dally with her as Mars.

Here, love for the model is thus also transposed with a playful metaphor onto the lifelike quality of the painting of the girl as Venus.

In some cases the motif of the painter who falls prey to Venus's power is carried to the extreme.³² The image of the painter as someone erotically stimulated by painting a woman could even go so far that an explicitly dirty poem (in the little 'pornographic' volume *Nova Poemata*, of which the third and only known edition appeared in Leiden in 1624, addressing an audience of students) revolves around a loose young lady who had a painter render her 'likeness' (*conterfeyten*); this *conterfeyten* serves as a metaphor for copulating. The reader will understand what his brush, for example, stands for, with which he could 'rub' so well and which he could handle 'so softly and nicely.'³³ Here, in a comic-erotic context, the fact that a stereotype existed of the painter as a person driven by his libido – and addicted to observing and depicting women – is all too clear.

The same stereotype could have negative consequences in real life. It played a role in the case of Johannes Torrentius, where it functioned within the context of someone who was considered to be a heretic and to have a despicable character. His baseness was underlined by referring to the fact that he made obscene paintings and worked with nude models. Theodoor Schrevelius wrote in 1648: 'Johannes Torrentius was not the least of painters; he was, however, an infamous man: he was a second Apelles, as he would paint nude women who presented themselves to him like whores' and 'his indecency in painting nude women grew daily, he led an Epicurian life: thereby offending many citizens.'³⁴ Evidently, even a connoisseur like Schrevelius, who owned paintings with nudes (for instance a *Judgment of Paris* by Karel van Mander),³⁵ could, if needed, adduce the depiction of nude women for a serious moral condemnation, and in this case even posit a reference to Apelles in a negative light.

In keeping with the moral dilemmas surrounding women posing in the nude, it seems to have been deemed improper to depict a painter observing a nude female model. This must have been the reason why portrayals of the artist with a nude model, as in Rembrandt's 'Pygmalion' (figs. 255, 256), are so rare. As was pointed out in the previous chapter, before circa 1650 we come across only allegorical depictions of such scenes, such as Goltzius's *Visus* print (fig. 101) and a few portrayals of *Apelles Painting Campaspe* from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. As was pointed out in chapter x, the small number of depictions of this subject is surprising if one realizes that the story of *Apelles and Campaspe* was undoubtedly the best known of the anecdotes about this artist with whom every painter wanted to be compared (and with whom all the famous ones, Rembrandt no less, were indeed compared).³⁶

The few portrayals of this subject that we know from this period,³⁷ most of them drawings, show Apelles working on a large painting of Campaspe as Venus, while we see at the same time that he is fired by love: Cupid pierces his heart with an arrow. In this way they represent the arousal of love as well as the erotic inspiration through which the artist creates his work – in a period when working from the nude female model was still extremely rare (see chapter x). A drawing attributed to Werner van den Valckert presents an artist, perhaps a self-portrait, who looks out at the viewer with amusement (fig. 300).³⁸ Here, the artist seems to indicate humorously the implications of the story of Apelles as articulated by Van Mander, implications which seem to capitalize on the commonplaces surrounding the painter and his nude model as fuelled by this anecdote from antiquity. However, this painter assumes the role of Apelles in a drawing, not in the more public medium of painting. The latter we only see in two paintings by Joos van Winghe, and he produced these works within the exceptional climate of the Rudolphian court (fig. 301). A painter could present himself with a painted or drawn image of a female nude



301

Joos van Winghe, *Apelles Painting Campaspe*, c. 1600, canvas 221 x 209 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum



302

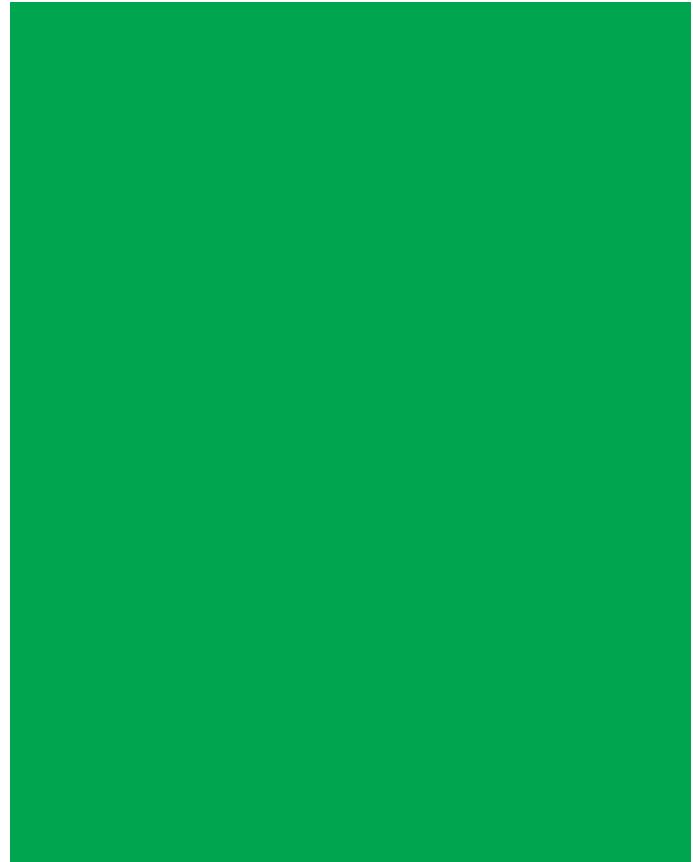
Johannes Wierix after Frans Floris, *Portrait of Frans Floris (holding a panel with a nude figure)*, engraving 22.5 x 13 cm. From: *Pictorum Aliquot ... Effigies*, 1572

to parade as an Apelles of his time, as did Frans Floris (fig. 302),³⁹ but to depict a painter who really observes a female nude was obviously another matter.

Drawing after the nude female model

In the previous chapter it was argued that only late in his career did Rembrandt begin to work from female models posing completely nude, and that the depiction of the nude in his early works was based on the knowledge any artist would have gained from, on the one hand, studying and drawing after prints (individual prints or in books with examples after which to draw), sculpture (mainly plaster casts, among them plaster casts of individual limbs), and paintings by other masters, and, on the other hand – if live models were used – by drawing from male models posing nude, or observing and drawing dressed women. Sometimes naked limbs of women, such as legs and arms (fig. 303), were studied directly from life, while in the 1630s Rembrandt also drew women stripped to the waist (figs. 260, 261). Baring the breasts seems to have been considered the least problematic, as evidenced by the fact that in the course of the century it even became possible in certain circles to have a portrait painted of a woman with bare breasts – albeit exclusively within the context of an allegorical, mythological or historical role – that is, in a *portrait historié*. In such paintings, however, the belly, buttocks, pubic area and/or the upper legs were never exposed.⁴⁰

In general, working from the nude female model seems to have commenced rather late in the century, and even then it remained, as we shall see, a thorny affair which would not have made it easy to do openly. Before the 1640s the practice probably hardly occurred, and in the cases that it might have happened and that have come down to us, the – extremely rare – utterances regarding this practice are very negative, as we saw in the case of Torrentius.⁴¹ To be sure, Van Mander did recommend drawing figures from life often, adding that there are no



303

Rembrandt, Study of a Woman's Legs, red and white chalk
22.6 x 17.6 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

better examples to draw after than 'perfect nudes of men and women.'⁴² This does not mean, however, that we can conclude that Van Mander advised drawing after nude female models. It appears that Van Mander's use of the word *naeckt* does not so much refer to 'a nude' as to uncovered limbs, which is especially clear when he praises the *naeckten* in Lucas van Leyden's *Healing of the Blind Man of Jericho*, in which no nude figure is to be found.⁴³ In the case of an *Adam and Eve* by Maarten van Heemskerck and a *Venus* by Pieter Vlerick, Van Mander informs us that these have been done from life; however, in both cases he added 'as one maintains' ('soo men seght'), thus making clear that this is hearsay and that he

considers it as something highly exceptional of which he cannot guarantee the truth.⁴⁴ Pieter Vlerick (Van Mander's own master) was supposed to have used his own wife as a model, and, according to Van Mander, the painting was highly praised. Here resounds the topos of the painter who has surpassed himself because of the love for his model.

In the rare instances before the 1650s that an 'academic' drawing class was represented, they concern men posing in the nude (fig. 178). Thus, it is not at all self-evident that Rembrandt's *Pygmalion* etching of an artist drawing after the nude female model represents 'pre-eminently an academic situation', as Emmens stated, because as far as we know artists did not draw after nude female models in academic situations, neither in the Netherlands nor Italy.⁴⁵ Cornelis, Goltzius, and Van Mander would not have used female models in their 'academy' where they drew together from life. We only know two drawings by Goltzius which appear to have been drawn after the nude female model, but it should be noted that it is evident that the abdomen, genitals, and the upper part of the thighs of these models must have been covered. In the one drawing these parts have been rendered schematically, in the other there are obvious uncertainties where the legs join the pubic area (fig. 304).⁴⁶ However, it seems likely that the public assumed that Goltzius, pre-eminently an artist for whom the female nude played a crucial role in his work, studied the female nude from live models. This may have been the reason, as I argued elsewhere, that he was wrongfully accused of licentious behavior with his maid.⁴⁷ People who wished to harm Goltzius and who had incited this maidservant to accuse him of sexual intercourse with her had thus resorted to filing a charge which many people would likely have found credible for an artist who supposedly worked after naked female models.

Most drawings which we assume were drawn after live models, in Italy as well as north of the Alps, from Raphael to the Carracci and Rubens, are probably drawn



304
Hendrick Goltzius, *Study of A Nude Woman Sleeping*, 1594,
black chalk 25.8 x 30.2 cm. USA, Private Collection

without models, or, if a model were used, with the help of young men posing. In the latter circumstance, it must have been easy for an artist who was well-trained in drawing after prints and plaster casts to add shapes characteristic of the female body during the process of drawing. I share Goldstein's opinion that until far into the seventeenth century, in Italy as well as in the Netherlands, artists rarely drew after female models. Not only does he argue that working from the live female nude was taboo, as appears from the fact that in the early years of the Accademia di S. Luca it was prohibited to have nude women pose (such a prohibition, as a matter of fact, suggests that some artists used female models now and then),⁴⁸ but he also observes that only men are mentioned in treatises in which study from the live nude model is mentioned; nude male bodies were the only ones worth studying and measuring.⁴⁹ That artists thought that studying nude men would suffice need not surprise us if we realize that also in the medical world, still in the beginning of the

eighteenth century, people took for granted that male and female skeletons were the same.⁵⁰ As Londa Schiebinger demonstrated, in the late seventeenth century the Dutch anatomist Godfried Bidloo and the Englishman William Cowper – like Vesalius one-and-a-half centuries earlier – still did not attribute differences in the male and female contours to any deep structural differences between men and women, ‘either in their whole frame, or in the intimate Structure of their Parts’, as Cowper writes.⁵¹ The distinctions in external bodily forms were mainly attributed to the difference of the organs of procreation, minus muscles and ‘the great quantity of Fat placed under the skins of women.’⁵² These were aspects that a well-trained artist could add easily when drawing from male models. Neither did one make distinctions between male and female in the rules of proportion, apart from the invariably repeated notion that in the female and the male bodies the relation between the width of shoulders and hips was reversed.⁵³

It is rarely possible to prove that artists had naked women pose for them in the studio.⁵⁴ An exceptional case is Benvenuto Cellini, who brags in his autobiography about a female model that posed naked for him and whom he also abused sexually, but in such an instance fact and fiction seem to be inextricably tangled.⁵⁵ It cannot even be established if Albrecht Dürer really used female models posing in the nude for his many studies of nude women. Most likely this was not the case, according to Bonnet in her recent study on Dürer’s drawings of the nude,⁵⁶ and we can be fairly sure that Rubens drew only after male models.⁵⁷ As mentioned above, when working with female forms from life, only uncovered parts, like hands, arms, feet, lower legs and sometimes shoulders and breasts would have been studied. For poses and motifs suggesting movement, young men or mannequins sufficed. (Apparently, in the North, mannequins with female forms existed since the sixteenth century, while in Italy artists only had sexless lay figures).⁵⁸ However, although I assume that Rembrandt did not have live female

models posing in the nude for his early etchings (see chapter x), he emphatically *suggested* that these were in all details observed from life, in accordance with his vigorous ‘from life’ ideology.

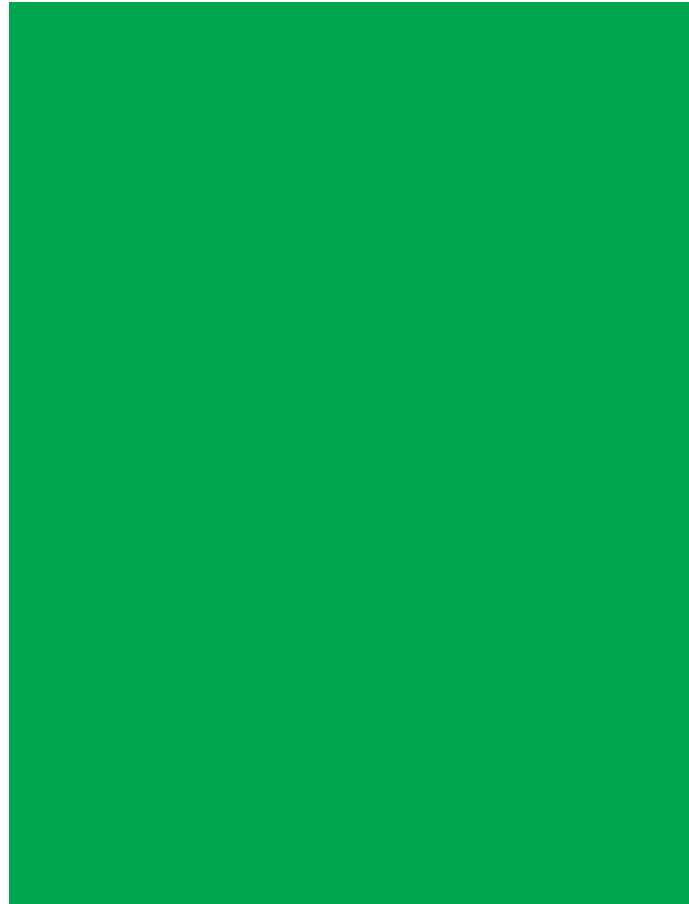
It appears that the exceptional drawings by Goltzius, mentioned above, were followed by comparable examples only in the course of the 1640s. As of that time we hear of artists practicing from live female models posing in the nude, while there are quite a number of drawings that corroborate this practice. Apart from the lawsuits quoted above and below, the only, but highly interesting, information about drawing from nude models comes from a letter written in 1649 to Constantijn Huygens by the aforementioned Dirck Bleker. Apparently, not only did Bleker draw from the nude female model together with other artists, as was evident from the lawsuit quoted above, he himself also had models at his disposal. With reference to a sketch for a painting of *Venus* commissioned by the Stadtholder (the same painting on which Vondel composed an amusing laudatory poem quoted in chapter v), a discussion arose about the proportions of the belly of the woman in the drawing. Bleker writes that he will confer with Jacob van Campen about aspects that ‘would serve to improve the beauty.’⁵⁹ He adds, ‘I also found a very beautiful model of whom, to my opinion, the underside is more beautiful. I will spare neither efforts nor art to represent, as far as possible, a perfect beauty and to execute it in the most wonderful manner.’

⁶⁰ We may conclude that this model also uncovered her ‘underside.’ At the same time we are informed that the shape of the belly in the drawing was critically scrutinized by connoisseurs and that, to get this part right, it was deemed necessary to draw it from life. We notice how Bleker, as Zeuxis did with the maidens of Croton, chooses the most beautiful parts of different female bodies and really observes these from life. To correct the problem spotted by connoisseurs, one must study the nude model. Obviously he did not see this as a problem

and was convinced – probably rightly so – that Huygens would find this a good idea. The letter also indicates that around this time it was thought imperative to work from the live model if one wanted to render the nude body well.

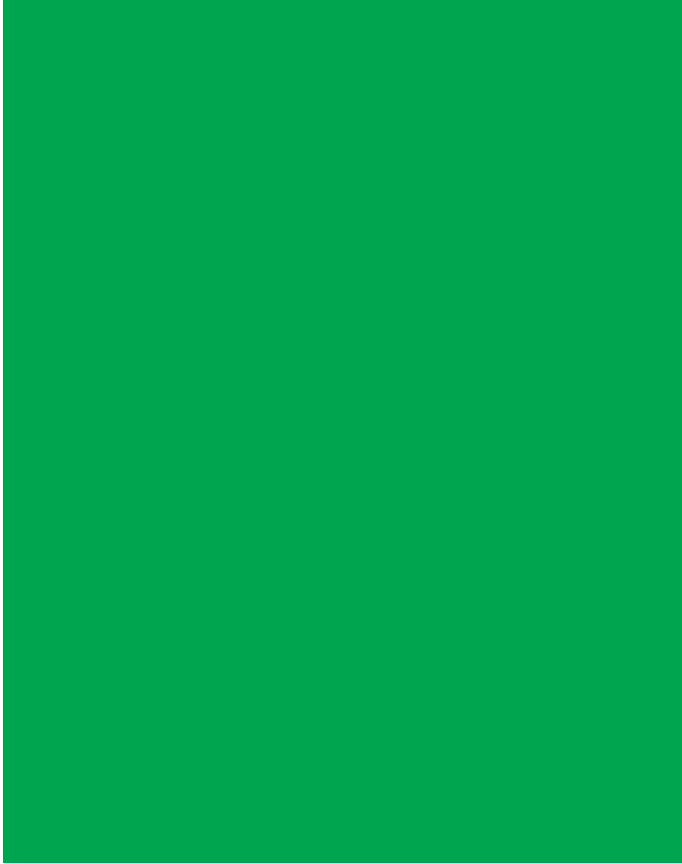
The other reports about drawing from nude female models – all the known information from seventeenth-century sources was assembled by Volker Manuth in an enlightening essay – invariably concern lawsuits in which posing in the nude is adduced as a supplementary argument to prove the morally objectionable behavior of the women in question. Inherently, the nature of the sources that inform us about these models – cases which are taken to court – may present a distorted picture, but it becomes evident that posing naked could be considered as a truly serious moral offence. As noted above, the women who lent themselves to this practice were prostitutes or were perceived as such. The earliest case in which we hear of women posing in the nude is Schrevelius’s mention, already discussed, of the reprehensible practice of Torrentius, which must have taken place in the 1620s. It is impossible to say if this really occurred or if it concerned only malicious gossip. Remarkably, in the lawsuit Torrentius defends himself against accusations of visiting a brothel by stating that he went there as a painter to see if he could find women with beautiful limbs and bodies and to inquire ‘if they were willing to show some of their naked parts with the purpose of being drawn ...’⁶¹ Thus, Torrentius himself underlined that such models did not pose totally nude, but only uncovered some limbs.

A lawsuit of 1642 presents similarities. A certain prostitute, with the name of Sara Jans, claimed that Jacob van Loo wanted to use her as a model.⁶² Interestingly, Van Loo confessed to having been in the inn where she worked and to having ‘suggested an improper act and touching her in an indecent manner’, but he denied having asked her to pose for him. This intimates that to have a prostitute pose in the nude was, at this time, something that was better not said aloud, and was even less accept-



305 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Jacob van Loo, *A Female Nude*, c. 1650-55, canvas 105 x 80 cm.
Paris, Musée du Louvre

able than proposing improper acts and ‘touching in an indecent manner’ while being in an inn of ill repute. It seems that this attitude had changed in the 1650s, at least, as far as we can infer from the few cases we know. At that time there are cases of painters who testify that they drew together from the nude model, and every time this concerns lawsuits in which the morality of the women concerned was under dispute. For the painters themselves there were no legal consequences; we can only guess about social consequences. The lawsuit mentioned above, in which Dirck Bleker testified about ‘the usual model ... who ordinarily posed publicly at the assembly



306 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Bartholomeus van der Helst, *A Female Nude*, 1658, canvas
123.5 x 96 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre

of painters, and was used for these ends', occurred in 1658. Bleker talked about the period 1648/49, which means that at least at that time there must have been a group of painters who paid women of easy virtue to pose for them. This is corroborated by several drawings of the same model from the hands of Jacob Backer and Govert Flinck (figs. 278, 279), one of which is dated 1648.

Govert Flinck was also involved in a case in the 1650s. To prove the licentiousness of the women, a number of witnesses testified that three sisters had posed for Flinck 'stark naked ... lying on a cushion in a very dishonorable way' (figs. 293) and that they had seen three large paintings of this in the studio of the painter.⁶³ In a case of 1652

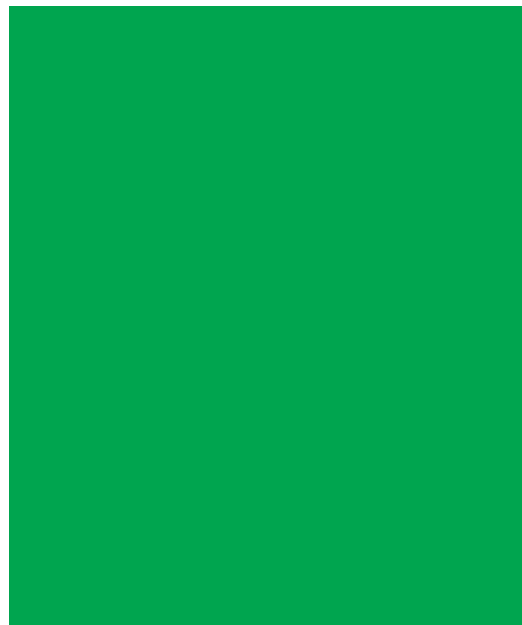
in Delft, it was charged that a certain woman 'had been accused of letting herself be painted naked and that she had earned quite a bit of money thereby.'⁶⁴ Other cases of women posing naked are from later dates,⁶⁵ except for the well-known document of 1658, which informs us that a whole group of painters, Jacob van Loo, Ferdinand Bol, Govert Flinck, Nicolaes de Helt Stockade, and Willem Strijcker testified that a certain Catarina Jans 'sat stark naked before these witnesses and other colleagues as a model, and that they, the witnesses, drew and painted her thus.'⁶⁶ We may conclude that posing in the nude was highly compromising for the women. As we have seen in the amusing case of Lodewijk van der Helst and Geertruijt de Haes, Geerttruijt, the woman who could be recognized in a nude *Venus* by this master, tried to clear her name by having another woman testify that Lodewijk had told her that he only painted Geertruijt's face and hands from life and her body '*uit de geest*.'⁶⁷

Hence, there must have been a strong tension between the wish to draw from nude female models – which we know with certainty became customary among certain painters as of the 1640s – and the actual practice in which this was considered highly improper. As was evident from the poem of Jan Vos, the painter's audience – most certainly around the middle of the seventeenth century – would have assumed as a matter of course that artists who made paintings of female nudes worked from live models; for Vos, it was also obvious that such a model would have been a lewd woman.

One may wonder what this information can tell us about two highly exceptional paintings by Jacob van Loo and Bartholomeus van der Helst, in which nude young women with individualized faces are portrayed life-size outside of the context of any traditional subject (figs. 305, 306). Although they are quite different in character – the one by Van der Helst looks provocatively at the viewer, while Van Loo's woman seems to want to hide from the viewer with a coy expression – it seems most likely that both are portraits of high-class prostitutes or mistres-

ses.⁶⁸ There was already a tradition of portraits cropped beneath the breasts of scantily dressed women in pastoral or other fancy costumes in which the Venetian courtesan portrait found a Dutch counterpart. A number of such paintings, from Van Honthorst and Moreelse to Backer and Bol (fig. 307), might have been intended for luxury brothels. If we may believe the title print of Crispijn de Passe the Younger's *Spiegel der Alderschoonste Courtisanen* (1630) and an illustration in Pieter Baardt's *Deugden-Spoor, in de On-Deughden des Werelts affgelbeeldt* (1645), there were in some brothels portraits of prostitutes from which the client could make his choice (fig. 308).⁶⁹ We can only guess if the nude women by Van der Helst and Van Loo, who go several steps further in presenting their charms, belong to this category. With a trompe-l'oeil effect, Van der Helst imbued the woman with a forceful presence suggesting that her body comes forward into the viewer's space, out of the feigned picture frame. Between other paintings of prostitutes, she would have seemed to burst off the wall. A painting of *Venus* by the same master is, in regards to her face as well as her body, much less individual (fig. 112); she rather seems, like many Venuses from this period, to belong to another category, that of the wedding gift (see chapter v).

Two drawings from the school of Rembrandt have often been cited to demonstrate what the practice of collective drawing after the nude model in Rembrandt's studio must have looked like (figs. 309, 310). Although the drawings are not considered to be by Rembrandt himself any more, not only the drawing style raises doubts, but the scenes depicted are also peculiar. They are certainly not earlier than the second half of the 1650s, and, in my opinion, it is even doubtful whether or not they were made during Rembrandt's life. I fully agree with Miedema, who rightly remarked that the drawing in Darmstadt has been reworked later or is a copy (fig. 309), while the drawing in Weimar does not seem to date from the sev-



307
Ferdinand Bol, *A Woman Holding her Necklace*, c. 1653, canvas 88 x 77 cm. Stockholm, National Museum.



308
Crispijn de Passe II, *A Man Choosing a Woman from Painted Portraits in a Bordello*, engraving 11.2 x 15.1 cm. Frontispiece of *Le miroir des plus belles courtisannes de ce temps* (*Spiegel der Alderschoonsten Cortisanen*), 1630



310

School of Rembrandt (copy or later pastiche?),
Rembrandt and his Pupils (?), pen and ink
18 x 31.8 cm. Weimar, Schlossmuseum



309

School of Rembrandt (copy or later pastiche?), *Rembrandt and his Pupils* (?), pen and brush with brown ink, black chalk heightened with white 18 x 26.6 cm. Darmstadt, Hessisches Landesmuseum

enteenth century (fig. 310).⁷⁰ The latter is a later variation of the first drawing. We should realize in the first place that these drawings depict a highly unusual subject, of which there are no other seventeenth-century examples. Considering the drawings of nude models seen from different angles by Rembrandt and a few pupils,⁷¹ a situation like the one represented did occur in Rembrandt's studio. However, if we observe the drawings more closely, the scene rather seems to mock such a situation than

to give a serious image of 'academic' study in Rembrandt's studio; it looks more like a satire on working from the nude model, catering to then-current clichés.⁷²

The somewhat older artist with a beret on his head, drawing with concentration and not noticing what happens around him, might be meant to represent Rembrandt. However, the master is not surrounded only by young pupils. Next to him sits an old man, in fact, the most conspicuous figure, who is intently peering through his glasses at the nude model. He has more the appearance of the stereotype of the ridiculous old man lusting after young women – like one of the Elders who spies on Susanna – than of a serious artist.⁷³ This impression is even stronger in the Weimar drawing: there the old man wears a curious headdress that immediately recalls one of the Elders in Rembrandt's *Susanna* of 1647. In the Darmstadt drawing a young man stands behind him; he does not belong to the studio, but seems to be a visitor; he wears a hat and a cloak, as if he has just entered. The artist who made, or reworked, this drawing tried hard to suggest that – while the others are working arduously – this young man is eying the nude model with a stealthy, voyeuristic glance. Moreover, the costumes of the figures have little to do with contemporary dress. The shoes of 'Rembrandt' and of the young man at the left are of a sixteenth-century type. The boy in the back seems to wear fifteenth-century clothes, while the young man at the far left is dressed in a sixteenth-century, seemingly Italian, costume (with contemporary garters, however).⁷⁴

Another, even more doubtful picture of Rembrandt's studio is a little painting in Glasgow that was considered to be a work of Rembrandt in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries – and was called *Rembrandt Painting Hendrickje Stoffels* – but which has been relegated to an anonymous painter in the school of Rembrandt (fig. 311). We see a painter sitting before his easel while he paints a woman posing in the nude. Here we have at last a painting of an artist in his studio working from the nude model that is not an allegory or a history.⁷⁵



311

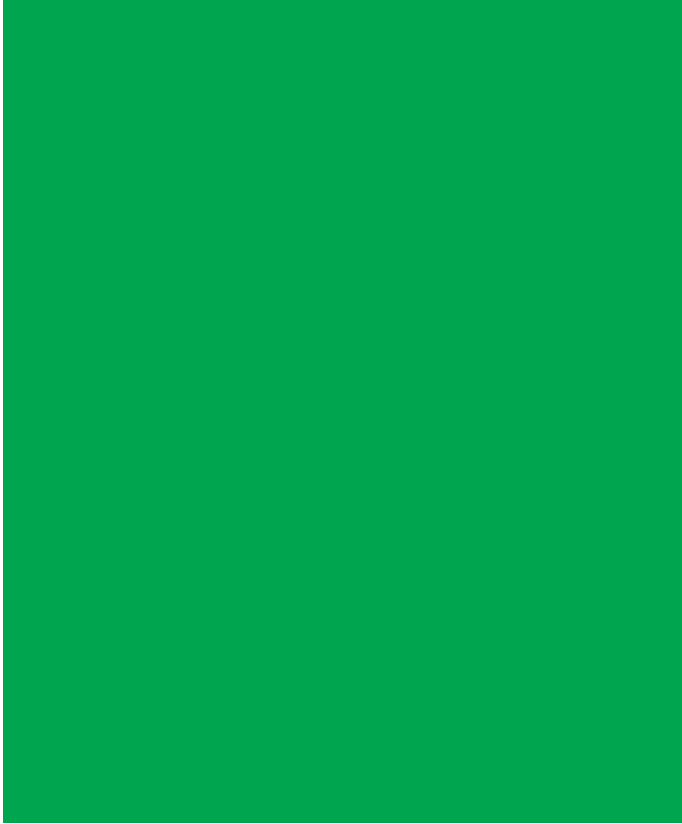
School of Rembrandt (later pastiche?), *A Painter and his Model*, panel 51 x 61 cm. Glasgow, Art Gallery and Museums, Kelvingrove

However, with closer scrutiny we may notice quite a few peculiarities. The artist who produced this painting copied the nude model from Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* of 1643 (fig. 346), while the painter recalls the one in the 'Pygmalion' print (fig. 255). The facial type of the model, her coiffure, the type of body, the elegant pose of the upper torso and head, the rather anecdotal motif of the pile of books on which she leans, the indeterminate draperies (in the nudes by Rembrandt and his school they can always be recognized as a chemise or cloak), convince me that this is a much later work, probably a pastiche from the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century.⁷⁶ Hence, as bearers of information about the practices of Rembrandt and his studio, we are better off leaving this painting, as well as the two drawings, out of consideration.

Rembrandt's models: Hendrickje?

The fascination with the relationship between the painter and his (immoral) model still lingers in the generally held notion that Rembrandt painted Hendrickje in the nude from life. However, from the discussion above, we may conclude that it is highly unlikely that Rembrandt would have recognizably portrayed women from his household in the nude in paintings or etchings. Precisely because viewers at that time wanted to see the image as a 'virtual reality', it is not to be expected that Rembrandt would have rendered the women in his surroundings in such a way that clients would have been able to recognize them in his nudes. It was so self-evident to associate posing in the nude with immorality that Rembrandt would not have exposed them needlessly to such compromising thoughts. Depicting one of the women from his household in the nude together with his pupils would have been out of the question, as well.⁷⁷

To this day it has been customary to see the women in Rembrandt's life in many of his paintings and also in his portrayals of nudes. Of Saskia van Uylenburgh, Geertje Dircks, and Hendrickje Stoffels, we only know Saskia's face with certainty. She is not to be recognized in one of his nudes, as is to be expected. We have no indications whatsoever for Geertje's looks, which makes speculation pointless.⁷⁸ However, for generations many viewers have believed, as many still do, that they knew the appearance of Hendrickje, and she has been recognized invariably in many works of the 1650s. Of Rembrandt's nudes in this period, it is the 1654 *Bathsheba* in particular in which some assume – or decisively assert – that Hendrickje is portrayed (fig. 356). Quite a number of interpretations of this painting, in particular those by Gary Schwartz, Simon Schama, Svetlana Alpers, Margaret Carroll, Petra Welzel, and Anat Gilboa, hinge completely upon this identification.⁷⁹ In such interpretations the painting has been connected, in various ways, to Hendrickje's summons before the church council because of her out-of-



312
Rembrandt, *Hendrickje Stoffels (?)*,
c. 1654-59, canvas 101.9 x 83.7 cm. London, National Gallery

wedlock relationship with Rembrandt that resulted in pregnancy; this occurred in the same year that the painting was made. For this transgression she was punished with exclusion from the Lord's Supper.⁸⁰

However, Rembrandt would not have further encumbered their relationship, which was already considered socially degrading by contemporaries, by publicly depicting Hendrickje – the mother of the child that was baptized as his daughter in the same year – as an immoral woman. Moreover, there is no reason to assume that in this painting the face (and body) of Hendrickje has been depicted. If one compares the large number of etchings, drawings and paintings with the purpose of recognizing the face of Hendrickje, it appears that more often than

not there is little mutual resemblance between the various candidates. It is surprising how, still, in recent art historical literature, numerous works are named *Hendrickje Stoffels* as a matter of course.⁸¹

The women in the few drawings and etchings – discussed in the previous chapter – of whom one can say with some certainty that they have been drawn from live models (figs. 274-277, 290, 292) bear no resemblance to the women in the paintings that are often titled 'Hendrickje.' The cases in which these nude women have explicitly been rendered as posing models represent entirely different women. The etchings of the *Woman Sitting Half-Dressed before a Stove* and the *Woman Sitting with a Hat beside Her* (figs. 274-276) are, as I argued, truly exceptional images – the more so since these models are represented in a public medium. What makes the etchings even more unusual is that the women depicted possess highly individualized faces. Probably, these were women of such a low status that Rembrandt did not deem it problematic that their faces were recognizable; obviously, he did not think it necessary to hide their individuality. It was more important for him that nothing disrupt the 'from life' effect, which is in no other work as strong as in those two etchings. These women do not show any mutual resemblance, while any similarity with paintings of the 1650s that have been titled 'Hendrickje' is lacking. Rembrandt's drawings from nude models of the 1650s, as well as those by pupils made during the same sessions (figs. 286, 287, 291), represent again different women and have just as little in common with the paintings of 'Hendrickje.' Hence, of the etchings and drawings of nudes which are with some certainty drawn from life, none show an appearance that resembles in any way the painted 'Hendrickje', which seems strange if Rembrandt had used her as a model.

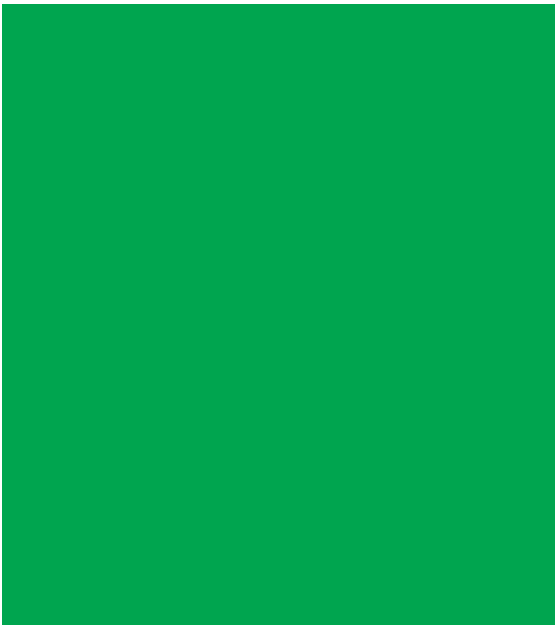
If one compares the paintings which, with much confidence, have always been named 'Hendrickje', there are several that show similarities, although there are also significant differences. A number of the female 'tronies' of



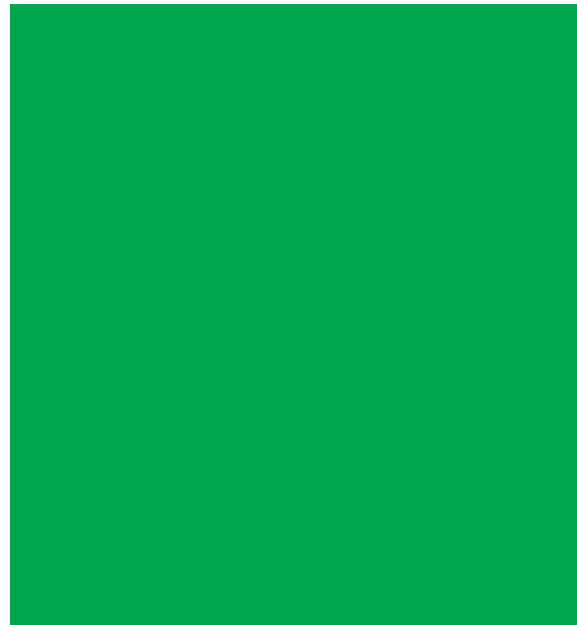
313
Rembrandt, *Hendrickje Stoffels* (?), c. 1652,
canvas 74 x 61 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre



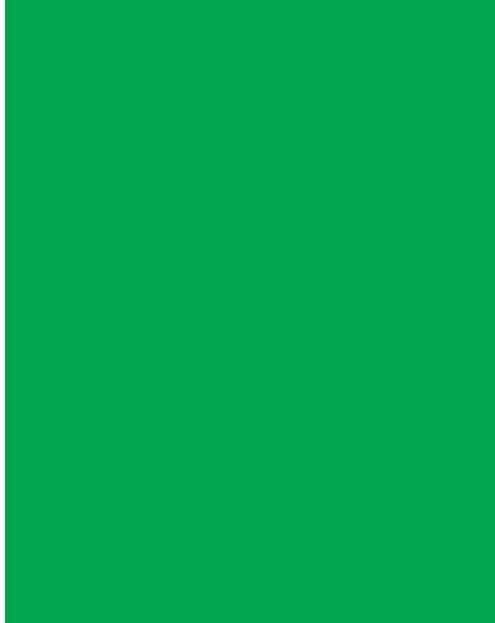
315
Rembrandt, *A Young Woman Sleeping*
(*Hendrickje?*), c. 1654, brush and
brown wash, some white mixed into
some parts of the wash, 24.6 x 20.3 cm.
London, British Museum



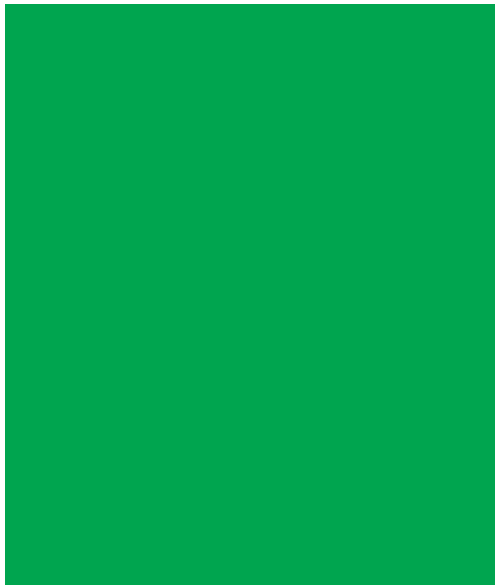
314
Rembrandt, *Hendrickje Stoffels* (?), c. 1654-60,
canvas 78.4 x 68.9 cm. New York, Metropolitan
Museum



316
Rembrandt, *Flora*, c. 1654, canvas 100 x 91.8 cm.
New York, Metropolitan Museum.



317
Rembrandt, "Saskia" with a Red Hat,
c. 1633-34, panel 99.5 x 78.8 cm. Kassel,
Gemäldegalerie



318
Rembrandt, *Hendrickje Stoffels* (?), c. 1660,
canvas 56 x 47 cm. Montreal, Museum of
Fine Arts

the 1650s, half-figures in which Rembrandt represented young women in fancy dress and which fit in the tradition of the Venetian courtesan portrait, show a similar broad, rather low forehead, full cheeks and round jawline. Nevertheless, there are obvious differences: the women in the paintings in London (fig. 312) and Berlin greatly resemble each other,⁸² but the woman in the Louvre clearly has a different mouth, while the shapes of the chin and the much lower eyebrows also deviate from these two paintings (fig. 313). The woman in the Metropolitan Museum shows other divergent features, such as her rather high forehead, high eyebrows and a differently shaped chin and jaw (fig. 314).⁸³ All these women have rather dark, somewhat reddish hair, but that is a characteristic we see earlier as well, for instance, in Rembrandt's *Susanna* of 1647 (fig. 81), a woman that cannot possibly be associated with Hendrickje.

Drawings that are called 'Hendrickje' also give us little to hold on to because they are not detailed enough. Only a drawing of a sleeping woman in London (fig. 315) and a woman in fantasy dress sitting in an armchair show the same forehead, a feature we also recognize in the little painting of a *Bathing Woman* in the National Gallery in London. Hence, it would seem that we are dealing with an ideal type that can be elaborated upon in various ways and not with paintings which are intended as images of Hendrickje. Most characteristic of the women discussed above is the broad, rather low and curved forehead; but this is precisely the feature we encounter in many earlier works – long before Hendrickje appeared on the stage – even in the early etching of c. 1630 (figs. 240, 245).

The face that *Bathsheba* resembles most is that of *Flora* in the Metropolitan Museum (fig. 316); it too has been regarded invariably as Hendrickje. However, these two have little in common with the so-called 'Hendrickjes' discussed above. To be sure, they also have the low, curved forehead, but with the other women we did not yet see the high eyebrows, sloping down at the ends. The shape of the mouth shows similarity to the women in

London and Berlin (fig. 312), but the chin, cheeks, and long, narrow jaw of *Bathsheba* is utterly different, while the line of the jaw of the *Flora* has yet another shape. In fact, some of the features of *Bathsheba* – the eyebrows, the eyes, the nose and even the long line of the jaw – can be traced back to the *Susanna* of 1647 (fig. 81). It is even possible to go a step further: the same line of chin, double chin, and jaw, as well as the curved forehead, are to be recognized in the profile of the *Woman with a Red Hat* in Kassel, which always thought to be Saskia (fig. 317).⁸⁴

The features of *Bathsheba* have more in common – more than with any of the ‘Hendrickjes’ discussed above – with the type of face we see in the *Young Woman with a Feather in Her Hair* in Montreal (fig. 318), with Asenath in *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph* (1656), even with features of the much later *Lucretia* in Minneapolis (1666) and the women in the *Family Portrait* in Brunswick (c. 1666) (figs. 319, 320). These are all reason enough to abandon the assumption that Hendrickje was the model for *Bathsheba*, or for any other nude, as well as the belief that she would have been recognizable.⁸⁵ In the next chapter this identification, and all the interpretations based on it, will be left aside. Although the viewer of that time would readily have imagined the portrayed nude as a real, ‘sinful’ woman, I venture to say categorically that Rembrandt would not have suggested any resemblance to Hendrickje and certainly not a connection with her predicament of 1654.



319

Rembrandt, *Asenath*, detail of *Jacob Blessing Ephraim and Menasse*, 1656, canvas 175.5 x 210.5 cm. Kassel, Gemäldegalerie



320

Rembrandt, *Lucretia* (detail), 1666, canvas 111 x 95 cm. Minneapolis, Minneapolis Institute of Arts

Bathsheba Contemplating King David's Letter

When Rembrandt painted a life-size *Bathsheba* in 1654 (fig. 356), a rich visual tradition of this subject already existed, particularly in the countries north of the Alps.¹ Like the other narratives that Rembrandt chose for paintings with nude women – *Andromeda*, *Susanna*, *Diana and Her Nymphs* and *Danaë* – *Bathsheba* was one of the most traditional subjects of the female nude as the focus of an image. As in his portrayals of the other narratives, Rembrandt responded intensely to the pictorial traditions of this subject. At the same time he deviated radically from certain conventions connected with the theme, which, like the other subjects, dealt with the arousal of desire through looking at a beautiful naked woman.

The large number of representations of *Bathsheba* in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century pictorial arts were inspired by three brief verses (2 Sam. 11:2-4): ‘And it came

to pass in an evening tide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon. And David sent and inquired after the woman. And one said, Is not this *Bathsheba*, the daughter of *Eliam*, the wife of *Uriah the Hittite*? And David sent messengers, and took her; and she came in unto him, and he lay with her; for she was purified from her uncleanness: and she returned unto her house.’

Rembrandt's painting of 1654 depicts a life-size *Bathsheba* whose nude body completely dominates the canvas. At her feet sits an old woman, her figure cropped on two sides by the frame and enveloped in a deep shadow, who is attending to *Bathsheba*'s right foot. In her right hand *Bathsheba* holds a letter, of which only the blank back is visible. This conspicuous letter and the old



321
Lucas Cranach I, *Bathsheba*, in:
Das Ander teyl des alten
testaments, Wittenberg (Döring
and Cranach) 1524, woodcut



323
Heinrich Aldegrever,
Bathsheba, 1532,
engraving 14.6 x 9.9 cm

woman, together with the young woman's nudity and beauty, were the motifs that enabled the seventeenth-century viewer to recognize the main figure as Bathsheba. However, in order to identify the young woman in Rembrandt's painting, the viewer needed some knowledge of the pictorial conventions of the theme and the implications of certain motifs. Except for the beauty and nudity – the latter justified by the text that describes Bathsheba as bathing ('... he saw a woman washing her-

322
Lucas Cranach I, *Bathsheba*,
Wittenberg (Hans Lufft), 1534



324
Hans Sebald Beham, *Bathsheba*,
woodcut 5 x 7 cm. In: *Biblia, Altes*
und Newen Testament, Frankfurt
a/M (Christian Egenolph), 1534

self; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon') – there are, in fact, no elements in the painting that refer directly to the biblical text: even the figure of David gazing upon her is absent. Neither of its two other identifying signs, the letter and the old woman, appear in the biblical narrative. Over the course of time, however, they had become conventional in visual representations of the story.

The pictorial tradition

The portrayal of the biblical narrative of David and Bathsheba as a subject in which gazing upon a bathing woman constitutes the central theme (that is to say, the depiction of Bathsheba in or near a basin as a focus of the composition) had already appeared in late medieval illuminations.² Along with many other subjects of unchaste or seductive women, the topic became popular in German and Netherlandish prints in the first half of the sixteenth century.³ In Bible illustrations as well as in individual prints, motifs were introduced that would recur time and again. The motif of Bathsheba sitting with her bare feet in the water while a servant washes one foot can, for example, be found in a Bible illustration by the studio of Lucas Cranach the Elder of 1524 (fig. 321).⁴ In this engraving, David, sitting on a windowsill and playing the harp, has a good view of Bathsheba, who is fully dressed and lifts only her skirts. David sees her frontally, while she looks up at him, fully aware that she is being watched. In a later illustration by Cranach (1534), the distance between David and Bathsheba has increased considerably, so that David would need sharp eyes to observe her beauty. Bathsheba presents her front towards David, who stands with other people on the terrace of an elaborate palace, but she has now turned her back towards the viewer (fig. 322).⁵ Quite similar, but without the servant at her feet, is Brosamer's illustration in a series of the *Power of Women*, in which Bathsheba now and then makes an appearance (1545). Around the same time, in an engraving by Aldegrever of 1532, Bathsheba is depicted

completely nude; she has become a large figure, placed in the foreground, and looks up at a nude servant standing before her (fig. 323). The viewer sees her face and nude body from close proximity; her upper body is slightly turned towards him.⁶ At quite a distance, David, on the other hand, looks down upon her from a balcony and has to be satisfied with a view of her back. Only two years later Bathsheba appears in the nude in a Bible illustration as well: a woodcut by Hans Sebald Beham shows a quietly bathing woman who is completely alone (fig. 324). To position David at a great distance looking down from a balcony or roof terrace has become the current convention.

Around the middle of the sixteenth century David was reduced to no more than a tiny figure in the background, functioning primarily as an attribute of Bathsheba in order to identify the subject. However, as the viewer scrutinizes the picture, this little figure confronts him with the fact that he is like a 'David' himself. Only by careful examination of Maarten van Heemskerck's influential invention from the 1550s, for example, can the viewer make out the tiny figure standing on the gallery of his palace (fig. 325).⁷ It seems miraculous that this David would have been able to see that the 'woman washing herself' was 'very beautiful to look upon.' He is there only to remind the viewer of the consequences of Bathsheba's beauty, which is displayed while she is at her toilet. It is the beholder who is granted a full view of her figure seen from close proximity. By showing Bathsheba's legs from the side, but turning the middle and upper parts of her torso frontally towards the spectator, the artist guarantees a maximum view of Bathsheba's body. Variations on this position would be employed frequently in paintings of the subject. Rembrandt, too, placed Bathsheba's legs parallel to the picture plane while turning the rest of the body – from her stomach to her shoulders – in the direction of the viewer.

The male messenger who comes to Bathsheba to convey David's wishes had been introduced in an engraving by Cornelis Massys (1549), but it was Maarten van



325

Harmen Jansz Muller after Maarten van Heemskerck, *Bathsheba Receiving David's Message* (from a series of *The Ten Commandments*), c. 1566, engraving 21.3 x 25 cm

Heemskerck who placed a letter in his hand. This new motif proved to be a success; it would have a long and persistent life in the seventeenth century, but the gender of the messenger changed.⁸ In his composition, Van Heemskerck applied another motif that was still used by Rembrandt: the maid that attends to one of Bathsheba's feet, this time not washing it, as in the Cranach illustration, but clipping the nails with scissors. By combining this action with objects such as the ointment jar, jewel box, and mirror – objects that are displayed in the foreground as attributes of vanity, and which, as pictorial motifs, evoke associations with *Mary Magdalene* and allegorical figures like *Superbia*, *Vanity*, and *Luxury* – Van Heemskerck emphasized the fact that Bathsheba is elaborately preening herself. This would have been considered fitting for an image of a woman who is emphatically presented as adulterous and sinful, for the print is part of



326 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, *Bathsheba*, 1594,
canvas 77.5 x 64 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

a series of the *Ten Commandments*. This subject was selected to illustrate the sixth law, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.'

Although the print after Van Heemskerck's invention seems far removed from the beautiful painting of Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem of 1594 (fig. 326), it was certainly very much in Cornelis's mind when he made this composition. The servant taking care of Bathsheba's right leg is placed in the same position, but she is transformed into a black woman to set off the alabaster whiteness of Bathsheba's smooth skin.⁹ The woman seen from

behind in the left foreground is a translation of Van Heemskerck's woman in the same position (the left leg, somewhat incongruously raised, repeats the movement of Van Heemskerck's figure who climbs onto the rim of the basin); she is now stripped of her clothes and shifted slightly to enable her to tend to Bathsheba's right foot. Also the naked female fountain figure at the left, now turned into a *Venus lactans* so that it becomes a fountain for a real garden of love,¹⁰ points to Cornelis's familiarity with this print. However, the messenger has been eliminated and, more importantly, David has also disappeared. There is even no indication of his palace.

The viewer looks upon this scene from a rather high viewpoint. He seems to have assumed the same position as the figure of David in an illustration from the famous 1574 Strasbourg edition of Flavius Josephus's *History of the Jewish Antiquities*, a woodcut by Christoffel van Sichem I after Tobias Stimmer (fig. 327).¹¹ It has an exceptional composition: David is situated in the foreground, and he gazes upon a pensive Bathsheba, who is seated on the edge of the basin on a somewhat lower level in the middleground, with inclined head, downcast eyes, and leaning on one arm. Although this unusual arrangement – with David in the foreground – attracted no following, Cornelis Cornelisz., just like Rembrandt 60 years later, seems to have had it in the back of his mind when he devised his composition. Cornelis's painting represents the first and only time before Rembrandt that the viewer is emphatically placed in the position of the absent David, watching a Bathsheba who seems to be lost in deep thought. However, Cornelis's Bathsheba is not yet aware that she is being desired by the voyeur who is watching her.

That Cornelis knew Stimmer's engraving or the copy by Christoffel van Sichem is corroborated by his composition of 1617, in which the prominent overgrown garden porch echoes the pergola in Stimmer's composition; the geometrical basin and garden also recall the print (fig. 328). Now Cornelis surrounds Bathsheba with nude

women in attitudes and poses taken from his rich repertoire, which he applied to many different subjects.¹² Because of this working method, his bathing Bathsheba with attendants of 1624 seems at first sight quite similar to his *Diana and Nymphs Discovering the Pregnancy of Callisto* of 1623 (figs. 329, 149).¹³ Only upon closer scrutiny does the viewer realize that the woman in the middle must be Bathsheba, who is being watched by a David standing on a tower in the far distance. It is foremost the conventional motif of a young female servant attending to one of the feet of the nude woman, which is present in all of Cornelis's portrayals of Bathsheba, that gives the viewer a clue when he is trying to identify the subject.

In Rembrandt's painting, however, it is not a young maid but an old woman who cares for Bathsheba's feet. A crone accompanying Bathsheba, a motif that would play such a striking role in many seventeenth-century depictions of *Bathsheba*, began to appear in images as of the end of the sixteenth century. We meet her, for example, in a print dated 1603 by the engraver Johan Barra (fig. 330).¹⁴ In this print, the figure of Bathsheba and the young maid at her feet are clearly inspired by the engraving after Van Heemskerck, but here Bathsheba turns towards an old woman who is speaking to her and points to David standing on the roof of his palace. That such an image of a crone was perceived as a procuress is confirmed by a description by Karel van Mander of a now unknown *Bathsheba* painted by Frans Badens around the same time as Barra's print: '... a *Bathsheba*, bathing: a letter is brought to her and an old procuress keeps on fawning and whispering in her ear.'¹⁵ The 'old procuress', a designation that certainly did not have an innocent connotation in this period, was the stereotype of the bad woman who made it her purpose to corrupt young women (and men). We know the image of the old woman as a bawd from many sixteenth-century brothel scenes and depictions of the *Prodigal Son Carousing* (fig. 194).¹⁶ Increasingly over the course of the sixteenth century, she



327

Christoffel van Sichem I after Tobias Stimmer, *David Spying upon Bathsheba*, woodcut 8.5 x 13 cm. In: Flavius Josephus. *Historien und Bücher von alten Jüdischen Geschichten*, Strassbourg 1574. fol. 97r



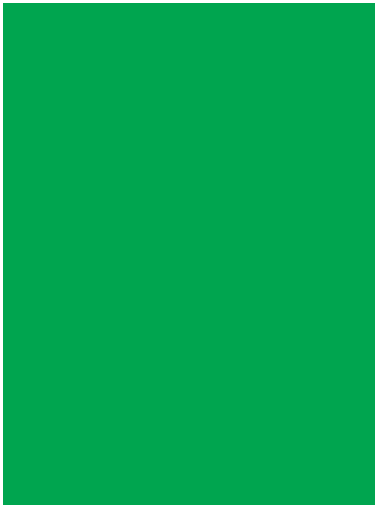
328

Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, *Bathsheba*, 1617, canvas 103 x 130 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie

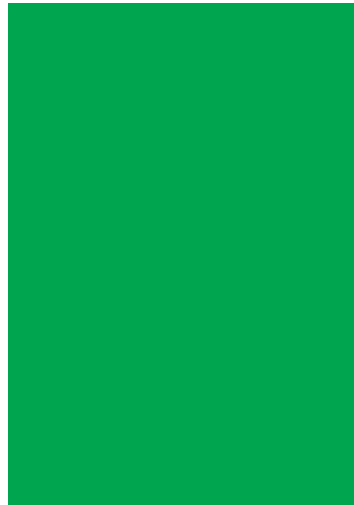
also began to appear in the company of such seductive beauties as the biblical *Delilah* and *Salome* or, as we have seen in chapter VIII, the mythological *Danaë*. Just as in the narrative of Bathsheba, no crone is mentioned in these stories. However, her presence underlines the



329
Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem,
Bathsheba, 1624, canvas 100 x 134 cm,
Pommersfelden, Schloss Weissenstein



330
Johan Barra, *Bathsheba*, 1603,
etching 26.3 x 19.5 cm



331
Hans von Achen, *Bathsheba*,
c. 1612-15, canvas 163 x 113 cm.
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches
Museum

doubtful morals of the women they accompany.

At the same time, the proximity of the old woman emphasizes the beauty of the young women and literally embodies the transience of earthly beauty. This is, for instance, underlined in a painting by Hans von Aachen of c. 1612-15, in which the crone holds up a mirror before Bathsheba (fig. 331), so that at first sight this seems to be

an allegory of *Vanity*.¹⁷ A few years later this reminder of vanity and transience, visualized by juxtaposing a young and an old woman, was spelled out by Willem Buytewech in an etching dating from about 1616. In this *Bathsheba* (fig. 332), a large silver plate embossed with the word 'VANITAS' stands behind Bathsheba, who is addressed by the crone.¹⁸ The motif of the old woman in depictions of Bathsheba seems to have been popularized particularly by Buytewech's prints. In another etching dated 1615 he had also portrayed a crone speaking to an attentively listening young nude woman (fig. 333).¹⁹ In an etching by Moyses van Uyttenbroeck of a few years later we see the crone holding up the letter while talking to an intently listening Bathsheba (fig. 334). In the second etching by Buytewech, 'BERSABE' is written as identification on the print. As a matter of fact, this picture, which shows only an old woman addressing a young nude seated in a garden, could just as well represent *Vertumnus and Pomona*. Precisely from this point onward, beginning with the beautiful engravings by Jan Saenredam of 1605 (a large one after Bloemaert, a small one of his own invention), the subject of *Vertumnus and Pomona* became very popular in the Northern Netherlands, and its pictorial scheme often closely approached that of Bathsheba (fig. 335).²⁰ With the addition of a tree and a vine, or some fruit on the ground, we are looking at Vertumnus who, in the guise of an old woman, tries to persuade Pomona to love him.²¹ This suggests that the general theme itself of these images – the juxtaposition of a young beauty and an old woman/procuress – became a reason for their great popularity.

In Rembrandt's painting the old woman has replaced the young maid attending Bathsheba's feet. Rembrandt's teacher Pieter Lastman, like Barra before him, had portrayed both the young maid at Bathsheba's feet and the crone (fig. 336). Rembrandt conflated the two servants into the old woman. By including this figure, the contrast between the radiant young beauty and shrivelled old age – enhanced by the brilliant light and deep shadow – re-



332
Willem Buytewech, *Bathsheba Reading King David's Letter*, c. 1616, etching 16.2 x 15.2 cm



334
Moyes van Uytenbroeck,
Bathsheba, etching and
engraving 13.2 x 8.8 cm



335
Jan Saenredam, *Vertumnus and
Pomona*, 1605, engraving
12.8 x 9.8 cm



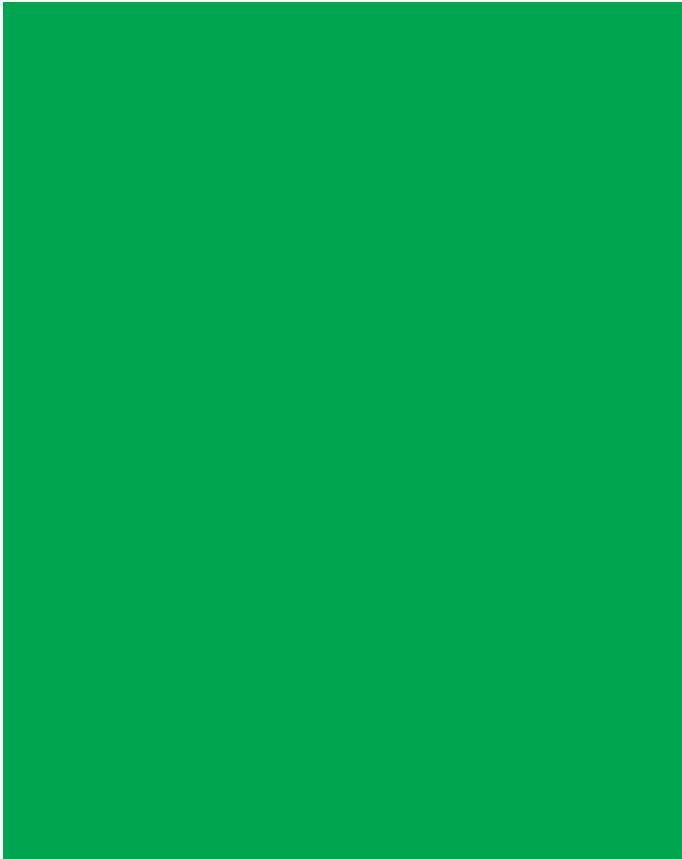
333
Willem Buytewech, *Bathsheba and an Old Woman*,
1615, etching 17.1 x 15.7 cm



336
Pieter Lastman, *Bathsheba*, 1619, panel 41.5 x 61.5 cm.
St. Petersburg, Hermitage



337
Crispijn de Passe, *Courtesan and Procuress*,
engraving 10.9 x 15.4 cm. In: *Le miroir des plus
belles courtisannes de ce temps (Spigel der Alder-
schoonsten Cortisanen)*, 1630, plate 15/16



338 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Jan Lievens, *Bathsheba*, c. 1631, canvas 135 x 107 cm.
Studio City (Cal.), Coll. Mr. and Mrs. Cooney

mains an important theme in Rembrandt's painting. Due to this motif, associations with the stereotypical image of the old procuress remained present as well. To be sure, in Rembrandt's painting such associations are considerably toned down by her role as a caring attendant, but the addition of the traditional motif of the letter (which, in earlier as well as contemporary paintings, is invariably offered or discussed by the old woman) could remind the viewer of her function as a procuress.

Praising extensively the invention of a presently unknown *Bathsheba* by Jan Lievens, Philips Angel wrote in 1642 that Lievens, when devising his composition and thinking about the person who came to communicate David's wishes, decided that 'the messenger must have been an old woman with a lot of experience in matters of love – that is to say, a procuress, as one calls them – because these are often used for such matters, and that she did not pass on the message simply verbally, but doubtlessly brought a letter (as proof of superior power) which she handed to Bathsheba.'²² These words once again verify that the image of the old woman was seen as an obvious stereotype of a procuress, while they also indicate how selfevident was the association of the letter: it notifies the viewer of the existence of a lover, whose message is being conveyed. We already encountered the motif of the letter in the engraving after Van Heemskerck in which the missive is handed to Bathsheba by a male messenger (fig. 325). However, in Van Mander's description of the *Bathsheba* by Badens cited above, it was the old procuress who passed her the letter. Even more popular became the motif (introduced by Buytewech in his etching of around 1616; fig. 332) of Bathsheba holding the letter in her hand while the crone addresses her.

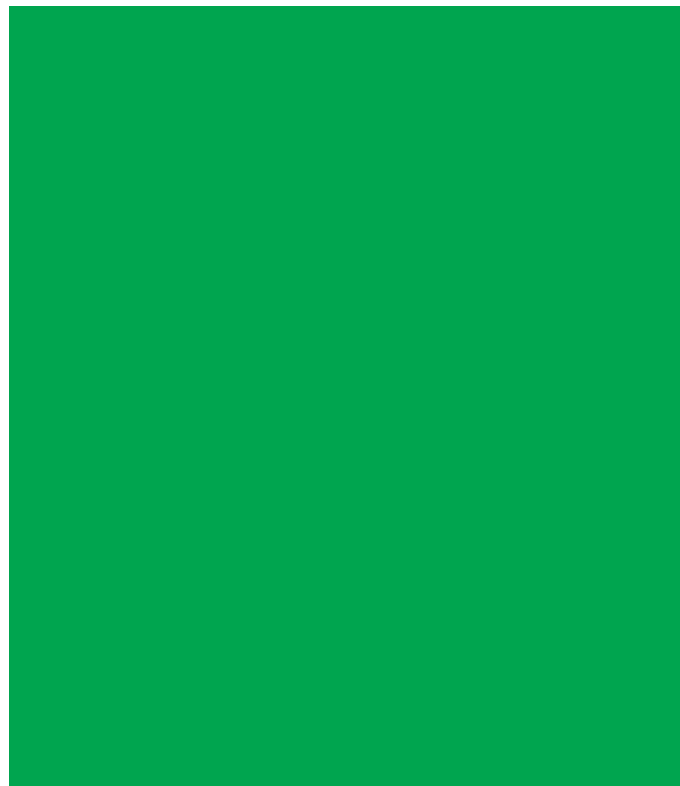
That depictions of a young woman and an old attendant with a letter could also be used to represent a courtesan and her procuress/madam is evident from several illustrations in *Le Miroir des Plus Belles Courtisannes de ce Temps*, a little book published by Crispijn de Passe II in 1630. Among the many prints with portraits of these

available beauties, the only motif that is occasionally included consists of an old woman who passes a letter or holds up a mirror (fig. 337).²³ The old woman, as well as the letter and the mirror, could thus apparently function as self-evident attributes for the courtesan. In fact, a *Bathsheba* painted around 1631 by Rembrandt's friend Jan Lievens (fig. 338) recalls De Passe's courtesans and their procuresses.²⁴ It depicts a fully dressed Bathsheba with an old woman, who are completely isolated from their surroundings and portrayed as large, half-length figures filling the picture plane. Next to Bathsheba leans a mirror, emphasizing thoughts about vanity and transience. Bathsheba seems to be reflecting on the letter that she holds, and in that respect this composition seems to point ahead to the emphatic contemplation in Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* of 1654.

Rembrandt situated the letter – by this time a traditional motif – in the center of the painting. The bright light reflected by the unfolded sheet gives it unprecedented emphasis. If other painters (except for Lievens in the painting mentioned above) included the letter in the context of a gesture – passed by the old woman, received or read by Bathsheba – here the letter has no function in a narrative action. It still denotes, however, the invitation to make love. In Lievens's painting, the letter and the longing gaze of this courtesan-like Bathsheba merely seem to anticipate the meeting with her lover. Rembrandt turns our attention instead to Bathsheba's reflection upon the content of the letter.

Rembrandt's images of Bathsheba before 1654

In order to gain insight into the development of Rembrandt's approach to the theme and its culmination in the painting of 1654, we should first consider more closely his earlier treatments of the subject. His first composition, dating from about 1632 and today known only from copies (fig. 339) and a print by a pupil (fig. 340), is unas-



339
Probably old copy after lost Rembrandt, *Bathsheba*, c. 1632, panel 24.5 x 20.6 cm. Rennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts



340
Isaac de Jouderville (?), probably copy after a lost Rembrandt, *Bathsheba*, c. 1632, etching 12.4 x 9.4 cm

suming in every respect.²⁵ Nonetheless, Rembrandt appears to have responded to several earlier examples, while the composition is also related to more striking experiments of his own during the early thirties.

Although Rembrandt's later works testify to his intimate knowledge of the *Bathsheba* by his teacher Pieter Lastman (fig. 336), he chose a much simpler scheme for his first treatment of the subject. It recalls more the three *Bathsheba* etchings by Buytewech that doubtless were an important source of inspiration. As in one of Buytewech's etchings (fig. 332), Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* is only partly disrobed and placed against shrubs. The palace with the almost invisible figure of David (who must have had a telescope at his disposal!) seems to have been inspired by yet another etching by Buytewech, this one dating from about 1615 (fig. 242).²⁶ The clothed middle and lower parts of the body that constitute a massive base for the tapering upper torso, the arched shape of her back and even the position of her bare foot strongly recall a print after a composition of *Bathsheba* by none other than Raphael (fig. 243),²⁷ which must have also been the starting point for the etching by Buytewech.

Already in this first *Bathsheba* composition, Rembrandt conflated the two traditional figures of the young maid and the crone. A motif that Rembrandt included on his own authority and did not repeat in any subsequent depictions of *Bathsheba* (although he elaborated upon it shortly afterwards in his paintings of *Flora*) is the bunch of little flowers that Bathsheba holds. These flowers are located in the middle of the dominant diagonal running from the smooth and fresh face of the young woman to the wrinkled visage of the old one, underscoring the temporality of Bathsheba's blooming, youthful beauty. In combination with Bathsheba's unfocused and pensive stare, this motif, along with the old woman, pointedly invites the viewer to contemplate the consequences of female beauty and its transience.

Bathsheba's pose – her head turned toward the spectator – recalls Rembrandt's well-known nude studies that



341 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Rembrandt, *A Young Woman at Her Toilet*, c. 1633, canvas
104.2 x 94.4 cm. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada

he etched around the same time: the *Nude Woman Seated on a Mound* (fig. 245) and the *Diana* (fig. 240), both probably dating from 1631. In both prints the women meet the gaze of the viewer and seem to acknowledge his presence, and in both Rembrandt also indicates that the women are seated in the open air (in contrast to his etchings of male nudes; fig. 271). As has been argued in chapter x, these women thus appear to be undressed not because they function as nude models, but because they are bathing in the countryside. By showing a cloak and a chemise with a clearly visible sleeve – not the usual indefinable drapery – Rembrandt underlines that they have removed their dress. That they did so to bathe in the open air is made explicit in the *Diana* etching: this woman, whose position relative to her chemise and shimmering cloak with embroidered borders anticipates the *Bathshe-*

ba of 1654, sits with her calves in the water. With the addition of a bunch of arrows in a quiver she has been transformed into a *Diana*, thus making the associations with illicit spying more pronounced.

When deciding upon a related theme for a painting – a medium which, as Van Mander asserted, can employ color to produce a much stronger suggestion of seductive lifelikeness, especially in the portrayal of young women²⁸ – Rembrandt chose the subject of *Bathsheba*, a bathing woman explicitly spied upon. He apparently did not yet depict this woman, who is so obviously the focus of a voyeur's gaze, completely nude, but there is a strong suggestion that she has partly undressed herself. He also seems to have avoided a direct confrontation with the viewer by way of eye contact, as he established in both of the etchings just mentioned and in the *Young Woman at Her Toilet*, painted less than a year after he created his first *Bathsheba*.

The rather large canvas of the *Young Woman at Her Toilet* from c. 1633, showing a fully dressed beauty (fig. 341), must have been produced in response to the *Bathsheba* by Lievens of about 1631 mentioned above (fig. 338).²⁹ Lievens had reduced the theme of *Bathsheba* to an image of two fully dressed half-length figures; one is reminded of the subject only by the letter in the hand of the young woman and, as we have seen, by the combination of a young and an old woman with letter and/or mirror that could also function as the image of a courtesan. In Rembrandt's painting, the attributes referring to a biblical narrative are even further reduced, with the result that the painting was given many different titles. Apart from *Bathsheba*, the painting has been called *Esther before Meeting Ahasuerus*, the *Toilet of Judith before Her Visit to Holofernes*, or simply *Young Woman at Her Toilet*.³⁰

Rembrandt depicted a beautiful, richly clad young woman whose hair is being combed by a crone. The motif of the old woman standing behind the young beauty and combing her hair is directly lifted from Lastman's



342

Jan Lievens, *A Young Woman with a Crone*, c. 1631, panel 66 x 53 cm. Present location unknown

Bathsheba (fig. 336). By doing so, Rembrandt was the first to elevate the primping duo, which would become such a popular subject in the following decades, to an autonomous theme for a painting.³¹ Around the same time Lievens painted a picture in which only the faces of a young and an old woman are visible (fig. 342). In this painting, the suggestion of verbal interaction – the old woman watches the girl rather intently – may refer to *Bathsheba* as well as to *Vertumnus and Pomona*. However, it can also be seen as ‘a beautiful head of a woman with an old crone next to it’, as a painting by Lievens, most likely this painting, is described in the will of Jacques de Gheyn III, who left it to Johan Uytenbogaert.³² That no subject is mentioned in the will of an artist bequeathing the painting to a connoisseur seems to be quite telling.

Thus, in the early 1630s, Lievens and Rembrandt



343
Salomon Koninck, *Bathsheba or Esther Holding a Letter, with a Crone*, c. 1635, panel 75 x 57 cm. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst. (cat. 1946, no. 271)



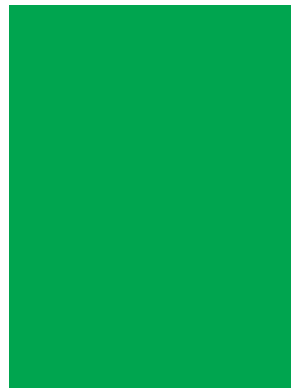
344
Jan Miense Molenaer, *A Young Woman at her Toilet (Vanitas)*, 1633, canvas 102 x 127 cm. Toledo, Toledo Museum of Art

launched several related paintings that do not involve precise subjects based on a specific text but use from those subjects familiar motifs and the connected associations. In the *Young Woman in Ottawa*, Rembrandt created a painting that could be interpreted as a scene from the *Bathsheba* story: a Bathsheba who is dressed and whose toilet is being prepared for David. This 'Bathsheba' looks at the gazing viewer for whom she is preening. However, the painting may also be regarded as an attractive scene of a young courtesan at her toilet ('a courtesan preening herself', as a later painting by Rembrandt, mentioned in his own inventory, was called),³³ or as a *Vanitas*.³⁴ The main figure may even be perceived as representing other biblical heroines preening themselves for men whom they have to entice with their beauty, like Esther and Judith.³⁵ It is left to the beholder to specify the identity according to his own preferences,³⁶ but their essential character would have been clear to the public for which these paintings were meant: a seductive beauty is preening herself for her lover, and this lover is, in fact, the beholder, who is like 'David' (or an 'Ahasuerus', or 'Holofernes').

Some artists from Rembrandt's circle – such as Salomon Koninck, who produced quite a number of paintings of this theme – retained historicizing dress so that their paintings still contained biblical associations (fig. 343).³⁷ Other artists would transpose this theme into their own time, as did numerous genre painters as of the 1630s; the first were Jan Miense Molenaer and Hendrik Pot, who both made the female duo the center of a straightforward *Vanitas* (figs. 344).³⁸ In subsequent years, many of the motifs I have discussed became highly popular in genre paintings in which the central figure of a young woman is meant to represent a seductress of men. Particularly in the many scenes of young women at their toilet by painters from a younger generation, thoughts about vanity became more often than not completely implicit. However, for the informed viewer, associations with Bathsheba would have remained inherent in such

images of seductive young women, especially when these women are depicted receiving or reading a letter. Jan Steen was the one to make this entirely explicit in several paintings of a young woman in contemporary dress – in one case even clearly a harlot (fig. 345) – holding a letter on which the name ‘Bathsheba’ is written.³⁹

Several years later Rembrandt ventured to create a composition with a completely nude Bathsheba who looks archly at the viewer (fig. 346). Opinions about the attribution of this painting, dated 1643, differ widely. Horst Gerson saw stylistic discrepancies between the figure and the rest of the painting and suggested that Rembrandt reworked an earlier painting by one of his pupils;⁴⁰ others, among them members of the Rembrandt Research Project, consider it the work of a pupil because of its ‘finicky technique’ and ‘weak parts, especially the old woman.’⁴¹ Colin Eisler, who wrote a short essay about this painting, sees it as a reworking by Rembrandt himself of an earlier version, while Amy Golahny maintains that the reasons to remove it from Rembrandt’s oeuvre are insufficient.⁴² Most recently, Walter Liedtke and Hubert von Sonnenburg showed themselves entirely convinced of its authenticity. Considering Von Sonnenburg’s technical arguments, my own observations and my view of the way in which Rembrandt developed the theme of the seated nude with great consistency – from his first etchings (figs. 240, 245), via his first *Bathsheba* composition (fig. 339), his *Susannas* (figs. 73, 81) and up to the *Bathsheba* of 1654 (fig. 356) – I am also inclined to accept this painting as wholly by Rembrandt’s own hand. The difference in the rather free execution of the body and the detailed technique of the surrounding area might point to the fact that Rembrandt repainted the body in 1643, and that the rest of the painting dates from the mid-thirties,⁴³ when Rembrandt also elaborated in other paintings upon the Susanna and Bathsheba compositions by Lastman (see chapter IV). But even if this were not the case, I am convinced that the composition is



345
Jan Steen, *A Harlot with a Letter
and a Procuress with a Client*,
c. 1670-72, panel 61.6 x 46 cm.
Budapest, Szépművészeti Museum



346 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Rembrandt, *Bathsheba*, 1643, panel 57.2 x 76.2 cm. New York,
Metropolitan Museum of Art



347
Tintoretto, *Susanna*, c. 1550, canvas 167 x 238 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre



348
Jacopo Caraglio after Raphael, *Roxana and Alexander*, c. 1535, engraving 22.3 x 30.8 cm

Rembrandt's invention, that it originated in his imagination, and was created in his studio. When studying this painting, one has to take into account that the background on both sides of Bathsheba is badly abraded. Little is left of the middle ground, originally consisting of trees, foliage, and shrubs, so that this area no longer provides a transition to the distant background.⁴⁴

The image shows again a young beauty at her toilet; in fact, she is the undressed mirror image of the *Young Woman* in Ottawa (fig. 341). However, her nudity and her position in the open air, with a palace in the background

(upon which one might discern with some difficulty a tiny dot that may indicate the presence of David), are straightforward signs that this woman is Bathsheba. Rembrandt took as his starting point Lastman's *Bathsheba* of 1619 (fig. 336).⁴⁵ The bespectacled old woman taking care of Bathsheba's feet remained from his earlier *Bathsheba* composition, although she is now turned in profile and, more comfortably, has taken Bathsheba's right foot into her lap while she pedicures with complete absorption. The crone combing Bathsheba's hair in Lastman's painting is replaced by a young black woman, who, because of her color, recedes into the dark background, so that our gaze is not distracted from Bathsheba's brightly lit body. It seems quite a coincidence that Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem had included a black servant in his striking depiction of *Bathsheba* of 1594; one might wonder if this painting gave Rembrandt the idea to do something similar.

Other objects that ask for our attention in Lastman's painting are omitted as well, such as the fountain figure of Cupid sitting on a dolphin, which Lastman cleverly placed in the middle of the sightline running from the tiny figure of David standing on the roof terrace of his palace to the face of Bathsheba, and which explains quite emphatically that love is fired in the one who watches Bathsheba's nude body. Only the peacock was kept, but it was moved to the right foreground to complete the stable pyramid, giving the eye the chance to rest for a moment on this symbol of pride and vanity.

In contrast to Lastman's painting, however, the figure of Bathsheba is blazingly spotlighted and stands out sharply against the background. As we have seen, Rembrandt had already experimented with such focus on a brightly lit nude body surrounded by deep shadow in his paintings of *Andromeda* and *Susanna* (figs. 29, 73, 81). In those works he had used this device to enhance the effect of the women's helplessness and vulnerability amidst a threatening atmosphere. In this painting of Bathsheba it only emphasizes the body more powerfully since any sugges-

tion of vulnerability is dissipated by the self-confident way in which she looks out of the picture, exhibiting her body openly for the beholder. Especially with regard to the direct and defiant way she turns to the viewer, it seems likely that Rembrandt was inspired by Tintoretto's famous *Susanna* (fig. 347), which – considering the role it played as a formal source in Lastman's work – he might have known through a drawing by his master after Tintoretto's work. The engraving of Jacopo Caraglio after Raphael of *Roxana and Alexander* (fig. 348) was certainly also one of the images he had in mind when conceiving of the posture of this Bathsheba.⁴⁶

Rembrandt surrounded Bathsheba with luxurious materials, her body placed like a jewel in a sumptuous setting: the elaborate gown of the old woman painted in several layers of purple over a pure red lake underlayer,⁴⁷ the lavish carpet spread over the bench and the steps on which she sits, the rich brocade of the cloak lying at her right, the ornate – but considerably abraded – dress of the black servant, and a silver, partly gilded ewer and dish on which a golden chain is draped. They are all painted with extreme care and might demonstrate how Rembrandt continued to employ a precisely descriptive technique, which we also see in many passages of the *Visitation* of 1640, when he thought it appropriate to the subject and the small scale of the work, as Liedtke rightly remarked.⁴⁸ The other possibility, already noted above, is that only the body was repainted in 1643 – the X-radiographs show some considerable changes in the body only – and that the rest of the painting dates from the mid-thirties. What has been considered as stylistically inconsistent, in my view definitely serves a purpose: either he painted it consciously like this, or he left the luxuriant and detailed setting of the nude body deliberately unchanged when reworking the painting, as he also did in his *Danaë* (see chapter VIII).

Remarkable is a rather clumsy variation by a pupil, or some painter in Rembrandt's circle, who obviously knew this *Bathsheba* well (fig. 349).⁴⁹ At first sight the painting



349 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Circle of Rembrandt (Gijsbert Jansz. Sibilla?), *Bathsheba*,
c. 1635-45, panel 54.5 x 70.5 cm. The Hague, The Netherlands
Institute for Cultural Heritage

looks like a free copy, but there are quite a few significant differences. This artist followed the more frontal position of the old woman from Rembrandt's earlier *Bathsheba* composition (known only through a copy; fig. 339) and kept the position of the body and arms closer to the Raphael invention (as is especially clear from the position of the arms), but modelled Bathsheba's torso rather faithfully upon the *Nude Woman Seated on a Mound* (fig. 245) – making the proportions (large head, tiny upper part of the body, huge stomach, short legs) even stockier – while also retaining the turn of the head, which is now directed towards a woman behind her who hands her the letter of David. In fact, because of the insertion of the *Woman on a Mound* type, this painting demonstrates how radically Rembrandt had changed the proportions since his earliest seated nude. One might wonder if this composition reflects a *Bathsheba* invention by Rembrandt of around 1630 out of which grew the one of 1643.⁵⁰



350 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Pieter de Grebber, *Bathsheba*, 1644, canvas 124 x 170 cm.
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (on loan to the Muiderslot)

Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* of 1643 is fully conscious of the viewer's presence, but – in contrast with his *Susanna* of 1636 (fig. 73) – she does not respond to him as a threatening intruder. However, she also does not stare impassively like the two etched nudes (figs. 240, 245), nor does she observe the viewer like the *Young Woman at Her Toilet* (fig. 341). Because of her somewhat tilted head and slight smile, she becomes a 'coquette' who knows the power of her enticing beauty. She invites the spectator to admire her nude body, which is situated exactly in the center of the image. For this reason she took off her clothes: behind her lies the rich cloak, embroidered with gold thread along the borders – the same as the beauty in *Young Woman at Her Toilet* wears – and she sits on her white chemise, a sleeve of which hangs down between her legs. She has not yet received the letter, so the effect of her seductiveness, and its moral consequences, are not indicated. She is an unconcerned, seemingly amused, seductress of the one who watches her. No *Bathsheba* had ever been presented so overtly as a provocative object of visu-

al enjoyment. In the case of such a defiant, direct presentation of the nude body, Rembrandt might have felt it necessary to create some emotional distance with a certain degree of stylization. Perhaps this is the reason that her body is more traditional in its proportions – the reduced size of the head and the lengthening of the upper torso are especially striking – and more stylized and taut than that of *Andromeda* or *Susanna* (not to mention the women in the two etchings).

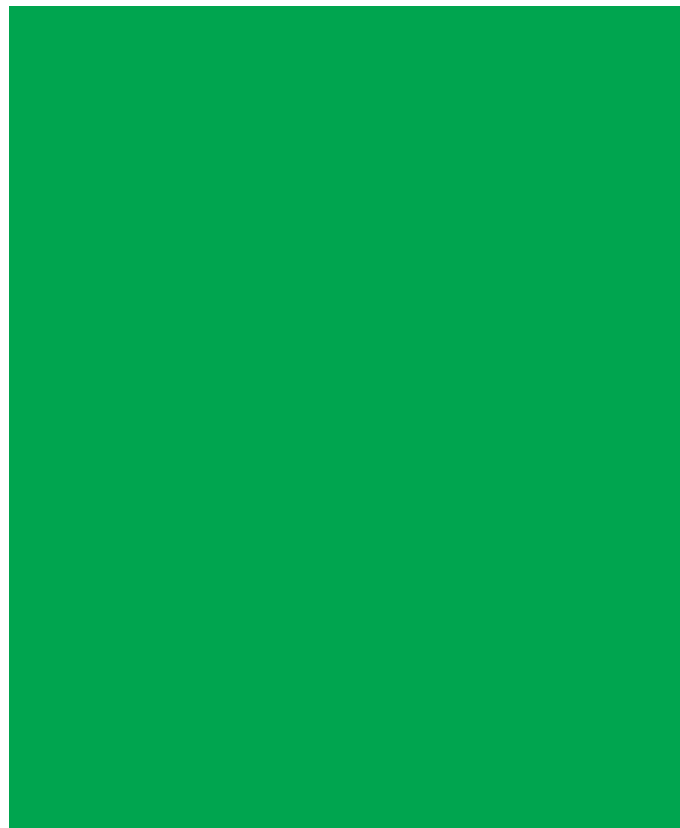
Some paintings of Bathsheba of the 1640s and 1650s by Rembrandt's colleagues

More than ten years later Rembrandt again returned to the theme of *Bathsheba*, this time in a life-size nude (fig. 356). Painters like Cornelis Cornelisz. and Goltzius had depicted many life-size female nudes in the late sixteenth and first two decades of the seventeenth centuries, but it was only in the 1640s and, especially, the 1650s that a number of painters of a younger generation ventured to do so again in the Northern Netherlands. Indeed, it was Rembrandt, and perhaps also Jacob Backer, who had led the way: Rembrandt began in 1637 his *Danaë*, and Backer's *Ephigenia* might date around 1640, or even some years earlier (fig. 100, 211).⁵¹ Those paintings must have been quite exceptional around that time. In turning to the theme of *Bathsheba* in a nude of this size during the early 1650s, Rembrandt may have been stimulated by the many life-size nudes that had recently been created in Haarlem and Amsterdam by such artists as Pieter de Grebber, Caesar van Everdingen, Jacob Backer, Bartholomeus van der Helst, Ferdinand Bol, Jacob van Loo, Jan Gerritsz. van Bronchorst, and Johannes van Bronchorst. From the majority of those painters, one or more paintings of *Bathsheba* are still known (naturally, there would have been many more). It might be possible that a patron, stimulated by such paintings, asked Rembrandt to depict a life-size nude; he might even have asked specifically for a *Bathsheba*. It is not unlikely that

not only artists were vying with each other in depicting such paintings, but that wealthy connoisseurs had begun competing in acquiring impressive life-size female nudes, as well. But even if the direct incentive to paint this *Bathsheba* came from a patron, this would not change my view of Rembrandt's approach to the subject: I perceive a consistent logic both in Rembrandt's development as a painter of nudes as well as in the subjects he depicted vis-à-vis the preceding tradition, the work of his contemporaries, and his own work.

In contrast to Rembrandt's painting, all paintings of Bathsheba from this period show the act of David's message being conveyed, verbally or by way of the letter which Bathsheba receives or reads. They depict a narrative action and emphasize David's invitation to commit adultery. Pieter de Grebber's large painting dated 1644 is unusual in that it shows Bathsheba not outside, but in a bathroom (fig. 350).⁵² She is absorbed by the letter she is reading, while a maid points out of the window at a palace in the distance; we must assume that David spied upon her through this window. The source of inspiration for De Grebber's Bathsheba, whose body is for the greater part covered by a thin drapery which only leaves bare the shoulders, arms and legs, must have been the etching by Buytewech of c. 1616 (fig. 332). The word *vanitas* inscribed on this print must have inspired De Grebber to place in the center a motif that directly refers to the vanity of earthly desire as well as to the sense of sight: the young child – like Cupid in Goltzius's *Visus* invention (fig. 101), holding up a mirror and looking knowingly out at the viewer. By inserting such a motif, the painting immediately brings to mind straightforward *vanitas* images of the woman at her toilet by his fellow townsman, Jan Miense Molenaer, of 1633 (fig. 344).

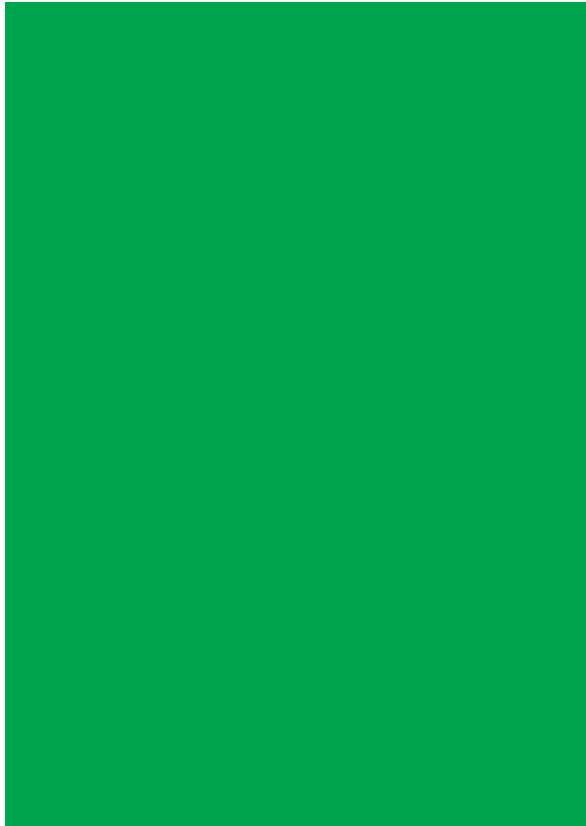
In most of the other inventions of the late 1640s and 1650s it is the familiar old woman who conveys David's wishes to Bathsheba. In a few cases she does her work without a letter and persuades an attentively listening Bathsheba while pointing to a figure of David in the far



351 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx

Jacob van Loo, *Bathsheba*, c. 1650-60, canvas 81.5 x 68 cm.
Paris, Musée du Louvre

distance, as in Jacob van Loo's painting in the Louvre (fig. 351), a second canvas by Pieter de Grebber and a painting attributed to Paulus Bor.⁵³ In the others she hands or has handed the letter to Bathsheba. An etching by the Haarlem master Hendrik Heerschop dated 1652 (that is, two years before Rembrandt's work) is quite remarkable because this master devised a *Bathsheba* based on Rembrandt's *Nude Woman Seated on a Mound* (fig. 352, 245). He changed the proportions by making her a bit slimmer, lengthening her torso, giving her a neck, and diminishing the size of her head. He placed an old woman with a letter behind her, as in the Barra print, so that the turn of the head of Rembrandt's *Woman on a Mound* is used to relate her to the old woman. We saw the



352
Hendrik Heerschop, *Bathsheba*, 1652,
etching 20.4 x 14.2 cm

same solution already in the work of the pupil of Rembrandt (fig. 349), who made a free copy of the painting of 1643, also with the help of the *Nude Woman Seated on a Mound*.⁵⁴ Some elements, such as the pointed left foot and the somewhat peculiar limp arm, make clear that Heerschop had been looking hard at Rembrandt's etching, while the drapery bunched around her other arm as if to hide the awkwardness of that arm in Rembrandt's etching, her strange right leg and foot, the water before her, and the fountain in the right foreground show that Annibale Carracci's *Susanna* print was also near at hand (fig. 62).

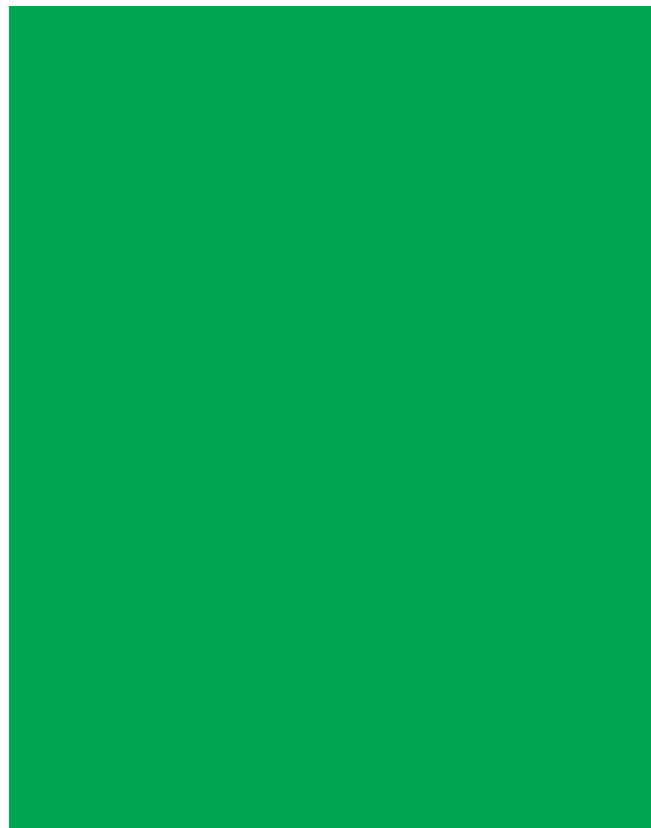
Entirely different is Jacob van Loo's composition of

Bathsheba, probably from the 1650s (fig. 351). In this painting quite a lot of activity is going on. The nude Bathsheba, reclining among a great deal of drapery, still looks like one of Van Loo's classicizing variations on Rembrandt's *Danaë*.⁵⁵ The general layout, with the old woman to the left and the curtains above, also recalls that painting. We see the old motif of Bathsheba's foot being treated by a maid while she looks up to the crone pointing to her admirer barely visible on the balcony. To the right of Bathsheba lies a robe of bright blue shining silk that diverts the viewer's gaze from Bathsheba's extremely smooth body. She reaches for this robe as if she wants to cover her body after being told that a man is watching her – an original motif that we have not seen before.

The two paintings of *Bathsheba* by father Jan Gerritsz. and son Johannes van Bronchorst were convincingly dated by Thomas Döring to 1654/55 (the son, Johannes, died in 1656), when both painters were working in Amsterdam;⁵⁶ this means that these paintings must have originated in close proximity to Rembrandt's work (figs. 353, 355). The old woman plays an active role in both works; Jan Gerritsz. reduced Bathsheba to a half-figure, but he maintained the familiar motif of turning towards and listening to the old woman who hands her the letter and stands closely behind her (fig. 353). It is the only painting that, owing to the pose of Bathsheba – leaning forward on one arm while facing the figure behind her – seems to reflect knowledge of Rubens's glorious *Bathsheba*, a late work of c. 1635 (fig. 354). Rubens had replaced the old woman with a young, anxious-looking black messenger, towards whom the beautiful Bathsheba turns without any embarrassment; only the little dog senses the approaching dangers. Jan Gerritsz. van Bronchorst brought back the 'old procuress [who] keeps on fawning and whispering in her ear', as Van Mander had described the now lost *Bathsheba* by Badens. Quite a contrast with Jan Gerritsz.'s *Bathsheba* is the much more interesting painting by his son, Johannes van Bronchorst.

Up till now, all of these images accentuated the inter-

action between Bathsheba and the old procuress (only in De Grebber's painting was the messenger a young woman).⁵⁷ Although Johannes van Bronchorst retained the narrative action of the old procuress pointing to David, Bathsheba's attitude has definitely changed (fig. 355). Bathsheba, placed parallel to the picture plane in an architectural setting that emphasizes the rigid horizontals and verticals of the composition,⁵⁸ holds David's letter (with Hebrew script) in her right hand. With slightly inclined head and seemingly unfocused eyes she looks down at the letter, while the old woman is obviously talking to her and gesturing towards the palace in the far distance, where David stands on the roof. Bathsheba's shaded profile accentuates the pensiveness of her expression. The viewer looks up at Bathsheba, who is sitting on a parapet; the conspicuously low viewpoint seems to point to the fact that the painting might have been a chimney piece. The extremely smooth surface of Bathsheba's quite muscular body, the hard contours, the bright orange skirt and colorful cloak (old rose shot with pale violet), the Italianate background with its cypresses and ornate fountain, could not be more different from Rembrandt's painting. However, as Thomas Döring rightly remarked, this should not blind us to the remarkable similarity in the moment chosen and the compositional means to depict it:⁵⁹ we see a Bathsheba who, with bent head, is contemplating the letter that she holds limply on her knee. Döring assumed that Johannes van Bronchorst must have been deeply impressed by Rembrandt's *Bathsheba*. However, one may wonder if the opposite was not the case. It might have been this painting by the young Van Bronchorst, who had recently returned from Italy, that provoked Rembrandt to paint his large *Bathsheba* to demonstrate how only he was able to evoke simultaneously the viewer's sensual rapture as well as true empathy. Rembrandt's point of departure was not only the pensive expression of meditation upon the content of the letter – the relief-like structuring of all the components of the composition might also have been in-



353 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Jan Gerritsz. van Bronchorst, *Bathsheba*, c. 1654-55, canvas
115.5 x 90.7 cm. Helsinki, Stadtmuseum



354
Peter Paul Rubens, *Bathsheba*, c. 1635,
panel 175 x 126 cm. Dresden,
Gemäldegalerie. (inv. no. 965)



355 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Johannes van Bronchorst, *Bathsheba*, c. 1654-55,
canvas 118 x 157 cm. Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica,
Palazzo Barberini

spired by the younger painter. It seems as if Rembrandt – easily incorporating new methods for constructing a composition – set out, for once and for all, to vanquish his colleagues on all fronts in the depiction of the female nude, deeply convinced of the value of his ‘Venetian’ manner and showing at the same time that no artist working in the new ‘clear, bright manner’ of the *Italiaansche penceelkonst*⁶⁰ (nor the ‘true connoisseurs’ supporting that style) need tell him what to do.

Rembrandt's Bathsheba of 1654

Ernst van de Wetering demonstrated in 1998 that the original canvas of Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* in the Louvre must have been considerably larger and the shape quite different (fig.s 356, 357). He argued convincingly that the canvas was about 10 centimeters wider at the left,⁶¹ while it would have been at least 20 centimeters higher and probably more, since – due to the vertical seam – the painting must have had a vertical format.⁶² Recent x-radiographs of the painting presented some new informa-

tion, but offered no arguments for an alternative view on the original format of the canvas.⁶³ I have no doubt that Rembrandt trimmed down the canvas himself: as in the *Danaë*, this had the effect of bringing the nude closer to the viewer and concentrating his attention on the woman's face and body.⁶⁴ In Rembrandt's first set-up, the pose of Bathsheba was different too. From the x-radiograph it appears that Rembrandt first depicted the woman turning her face and looking up (fig. 358).⁶⁵ In this stage the head was placed higher and slightly more to the left, while Rembrandt seems to have conceived of her as looking from the corner of her eyes (the white of the eye is clearly visible).⁶⁶ The face that shows up in the x-radiograph, has a striking similarity to the head – but then adapted to a more upright position – of the drawn study of c. 1647 for the *Susanna* finished in that year (fig. 86). In fact, the turn of the head and its expression as we see them in that drawing seem to be much closer to the first version of Bathsheba's countenance than to the final solution of Susanna's face in the painting for which this sketch from life was made (fig. 81). The possibility that Rembrandt originally planned to depict a large painting of *Susanna* – and that the head appearing in the x-radiograph represents the first stage of this painting – cannot be ruled out, but it seems more likely that Rembrandt meant this woman as a Bathsheba from the start, using the expression and pose for this other biblical heroine who is observed while bathing.⁶⁷

If we consider this pose within the series of earlier portrayals of Bathsheba, among them the works by Rembrandt and his circle, it seems possible that he originally wanted to depict Bathsheba as if looking up, out of the picture, at a David who is watching her from a higher vantage point. At the same time she might be listening to a woman standing closely behind her, which was a rather conventional motif. This woman might have been whispering in her ear while doing Bathsheba's hair (as in Lastman's painting [fig. 336], Rembrandt's work of 1643 [fig. 346] and the painting that used to be attributed to

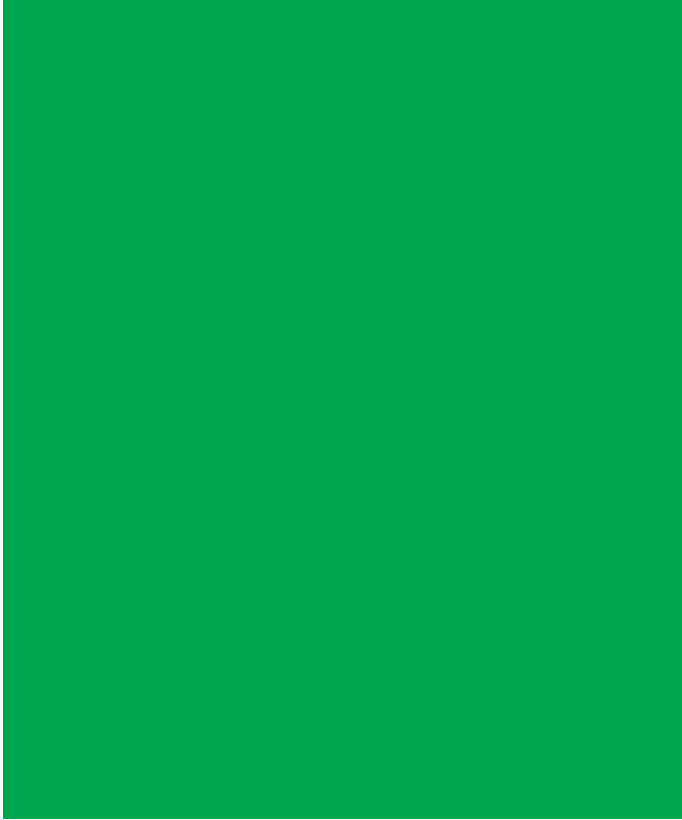


356 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Rembrandt, *Bathsheba*, 1654, canvas 142 x 142 cm.
Paris, Musée du Louvre

Sibilla [fig.349]), or bringing the letter to Bathsheba (as in the engraving by Barra [fig.330], the painting by Jan Gerritsz. van Bronchorst [fig.353] and the etching by Hendrick Heerschop [fig.352]).⁶⁸ This would fit with the fact that in the first set-up there was no letter in Bathsheba's hand.⁶⁹ There might have been a fountain at the left side of the painting, as in many *Bathshebas*, and possibly some reference to a palace at the upper left.⁷⁰ The original Bathsheba must have been less nude as well; not only were her thighs and lap covered, there also seems to have been a bunch of drapery around her right arm, as in the etching by Heerschop. Naturally, most of this remains speculation since the x-ray is hard to read.⁷¹ However,

that Rembrandt subsequently changed the position of Bathsheba's head in a radical way is certain. When the first composition was started we do not know – it might have been around 1647, at the time he made the sketch from life mentioned above. As happened with the *Danaë* and the *Susanna* finished in 1647, there might have been many years between the first and the final versions. When Rembrandt resumed working on the painting in 1654, he transformed the composition considerably and the mood drastically. As suggested above, Johannes van Bronchorst's painting might have been an incentive to do so.

In contrast to all the paintings by his contemporaries,



357
Rembrandt, *Bathsheba*, Musée du Louvre, reconstruction by Ernst van de Wetering of original orientation and probable size

Rembrandt now decided not to depict any narrative action. However, elements of his previous *Bathsheba* inventions remain present, as well as some specific motifs that had become conventional. From the fact that Rembrandt repeated the depiction of the old woman and her foot-tending occupation almost verbatim over a period of more than twenty years in three paintings (which are otherwise highly different), we may conclude that she must have perfectly fit the image of Bathsheba that he wished to present; she is, however, much less conspicuous in this work. Moreover, with exception of the white chemise and the shimmering cloak with gold embroidery that he had already employed several times, Rembrandt omitted

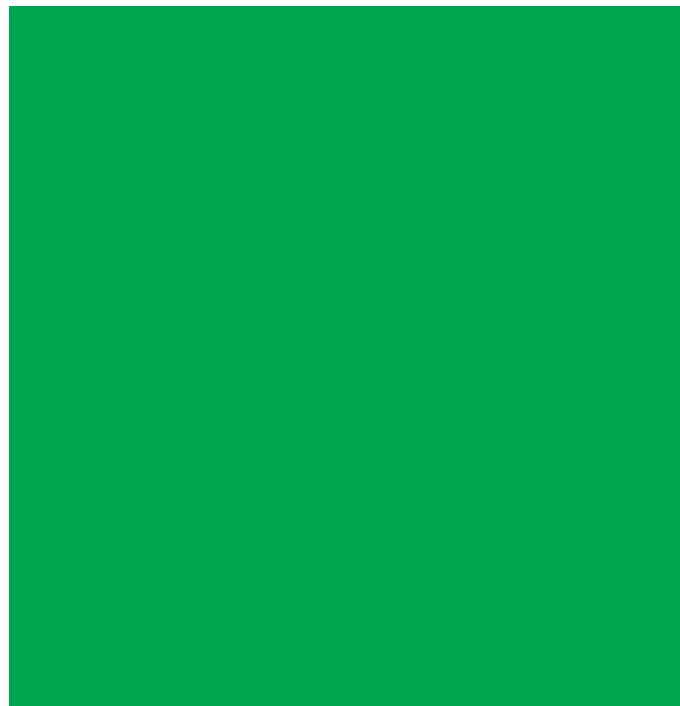
all other auxiliary objects and motifs. A pillar is only vaguely visible at the right side and a curtain is stretched behind the figures, parallel to the picture plane.

These deviations from the usual ways in representing Bathsheba result in focusing all attention on Bathsheba. No other painting – neither by Rembrandt nor by masters from the past or his own time – established her nude figure as such a dominating presence. If in earlier paintings Rembrandt had made the bodies of his nudes stand out sharply against a dark background through strong lighting, he pushed this effect to the limit here. Not only is the result enhanced by situating the nude in the immediate foreground, life-size and occupying a large part of the picture space (the fingertips of the left hand almost seem to emerge from the picture, which is emphasized even more by the large size of Bathsheba's hand), but the background has become absolutely impenetrable. Since a view of the rear is blocked by a flat curtain stretched across the width of the picture, the viewer is not even given the illusion that a space extends behind it. This flat darkness seems to push the figure forward, an effect heightened by the slight inclination of the body towards the viewer. Everything conspires to create an effect of a palpable nearness. The beholder is unable to get around her, literally and figuratively speaking. Only the richly textured paint surface of the shimmering gold brocade of the cloak and the thickly painted white chemise in the foreground, both enhancing the suggestion of the distinctive quality of human flesh that these textiles enclose, offer the gaze of the viewer a chance to occasionally glide away. No painter, certainly not a Dutch one, had dared to create an image like this before.

The viewer inescapably takes David's place: not only is the gazing David absent,⁷² the suggestion that someone may be watching Bathsheba from the background, the King's traditional location, is also radically obstructed by the curtain. The viewer is the only one looking at her and he does so from the same position as the figure of David in the illustration of *Bathsheba* after Tobias Stim-

mer (fig. 327), published in an edition of Flavius Josephus that Rembrandt owned.⁷³ Just like Cornelis Cornelisz. more than half a century before him, Rembrandt seems to have had this print in mind when he devised his composition of 1654. This is corroborated by the pillar on a high plinth and the curtain behind Bathsheba. Consciously or unconsciously, Rembrandt was inspired by an invention from the preceding century which, more than any other, emphasized David's beholding of Bathsheba. In Stimmer's composition we follow David's gaze as he watches a Bathsheba who meditates quietly, with down-cast eyes, leaning on her left arm and with her right arm resting relaxed on her right leg.

Some of his earlier nude studies, particularly the etching of the *Nude Woman Seated on a Mound* of about 1631, still played a role in his elaboration of Bathsheba's posture (fig. 245).⁷⁴ The immobile seated pose of the heavy nude, the turn of the torso, the placement of the left arm – and even the absolutely impossible position of this arm, of which one sees simultaneously the inside of the elbow, with the upper arm and hand viewed from the outside – unmistakably bring this etching to mind. In his *Bathsheba* of about 1632 Rembrandt had already employed the motif of the leg crossed over the knee – in fact, an extremely natural and relaxed attitude for someone receiving a pedicure, but which had not been used for a *Bathsheba* by other artists (fig. 339). However, Bathsheba's inclined head with lowered eyes, and especially the left hand on which she leans, remind us again of the figure of Roxane preparing to be crowned by Alexander in a print by Jacopo Caraglio after Raphael (fig. 348), one of those images which must have constantly been on his mind as examples with which to compete when devising a seated nude woman.⁷⁵ Finally, the print by François Perrier after a Roman bas-relief (fig. 359), so often cited in the Rembrandt literature, may have inspired the placement of the figures rigorously parallel to the picture plane and against a flat, closed-off background. In addition to bolstering the rather extraordinary conception of



358

Rembrandt, *Bathsheba*, 1654, Musée du Louvre, x-ray photograph



359

François Perrier, *Antique Relief*, engraving 16.2 x 22.7 cm. In: *Icones et Segmenta* 1645

space, a lingering memory of this print also seems to have played some role in reconciling the different viewpoints of the legs and stomach, as discussed below. However, it must be stressed that the postures of Bathsheba and the maid can be traced back to earlier works by Rembrandt (and even to older conventions in the depiction of Bathsheba) and are not borrowed from this engraving in particular.⁷⁶

Each element in his composition of 1654 seems to have been designed to avoid any suggestion of movement and physical tension, so that nothing might disrupt the viewer's quiet contemplation of her body. All of the motifs that might have inspired Rembrandt – both from earlier works of his own as well as from many pictorial examples he had stored in his mind – seem to have been used, consciously or unconsciously, to attain this goal.

If we compare the body of the 1654 *Bathsheba* with Rembrandt's earlier nudes and with the contemporary large-scale nudes painted by other artists in Haarlem and Amsterdam, we may conclude that in this painting the type of body Rembrandt depicted has changed considerably, and that it is still very different from the current types of nudes painted by his contemporaries. At first sight, it looks much more classical than before because of the rather long neck, the shoulders which have become much broader and do not slope down, and a clearly indicated thorax and diaphragm and a distinct waist, which received now even more emphasis than in the nudes of his colleagues. We saw the same phenomena, but more pronounced, in the etching of *Venus with an Arrow* of seven years later (fig. 285). When discussing that etching I argued that this might be connected with the fact that the contemporary ideal of female beauty had gone through a radical change, as we can see in the fashion of the time: a rather long bodice with a marked waist had become fashionable in the course of the 1640s and early 1650s. This is clear from the modish portraits and genre paintings from the early 1650s. When depicting fantasy dress we see that

Rembrandt began to accentuate the waist below a distinct thorax section – as in the *Flora* of the same year (fig. 316) – which is very different from the hugely expansive skirts beginning immediately below the high breasts with which he outfitted his heroines of the 1630s and that had the same silhouette as both his nudes of that period and the real fashion of the time (figs. 247, 248, 341). The body seems not so much generalized towards a more classical ideal, as has been suggested; it seems rather to have been adapted to a more recent contemporary ideal of beauty.⁷⁷ As a consequence, Bathsheba's body indeed approaches a more conventional ideal of the nude, but simultaneously the extremely long distance from breasts to navel and the soft, somewhat flaccid, rippling skin, defy this and make her body deviate from those of his colleagues.

When we have a closer look at Bathsheba's body, the structure and proportions of the torso and legs appear to be quite peculiar. They make emphatically clear that Rembrandt did not have a model posing in this attitude before his eyes when he conceived of this nude. Had it been his goal to depict a woman as she really looks in this pose, one glance at the model would have sufficed to change all the artificial elements in the body. Paradoxically, with the unnatural structure and proportions he strove to attain the suggestion of an entirely natural attitude of complete tranquility. Considering the long tradition of assuming that Hendrickje sat for him in this pose – continued among present-day art historians – he obviously succeeded completely.⁷⁸ I already mentioned the impossible twist in her left arm, which shows no sign of torsion even though we see the upper part from the outside, the elbow from the inside and the wrist and back of the hand again from the outside – which recalls the *Nude Woman Seated on a Mound*. To this can be added that the right arm of Bathsheba is far too long; however, Rembrandt lengthened the arm to suggest that the underarm rests in relaxed repose on the right leg. Moreover, the turn of the upper body in relation to the position of the

legs – placed parallel to the picture plane – is entirely unnatural: the woman’s navel is situated too far to the right and one should see more indications of torsion in the stomach. The incongruity between the upper and lower parts of her body is thus due in part to the fact that the viewpoint of the torso is more to the left than that of the legs, which leads to the realization that both body parts can never be perceived in this way at the same time. Concerning the proportions of the torso, the distance from breasts to the groin is impossibly long (in great contrast to Danaë) and unnaturally stretched: we can see what more natural proportions look like when Rembrandt really worked from nude female models in his later etchings and drawings. The pose of the woman sitting half-dressed before a stove of 1658 looks, at first sight, to be similar of that of Bathsheba, but the many slight differences in the position of her legs, torso and arms make clear that she was indeed observed while sitting before the artist’s eyes (figs. 274, 275).

Not only is there a slight shift in viewpoint from left to right, there is also a shift from a higher to a lower point of view. It is strongly suggested that we see the upper part of Bathsheba’s body – from the waist upwards, in particular her breasts and face – from a rather low viewpoint, although the ‘perspective’ lines through the shoulders, breasts, midriff and navel indicate a horizon somewhere at the level of the breasts. Her stomach, lap, and right leg, however, are definitely viewed from a rather high standpoint, while the left leg, as well as the passage where it joins the hip, is seen straight on. If the right leg had been viewed from the same position, it would have sprung from a much lower point and the upper contour would have been slightly sloping down from left to right, but in that case it would have become too obvious that we see the stomach from a different angle. The fact that the upper contour of the right leg now runs parallel to that of the left, which means that it springs from too-high a place in the torso, indicates that Perrier’s print, in which we see the same peculiarity, must have lingered in Rem-

brandt’s mind when he conceived this body.⁷⁹ Originally he had covered this passage with drapery, while the legs seem not to have been crossed in this stage. In the final stage he uncovered them and crossed the right leg over the left knee, which resulted in the right calf being positioned at an impossible angle. With the hand and letter covering the knees, this is not immediately conspicuous, but it does cause uncertainty about the spatial positioning of the two calves. By indicating that the right underleg is casting a strong shadow on the left calf, it is clear that Rembrandt suggests that the right one comes closer to the picture plane than the left, but both appear simultaneously to be parallel to the picture plane.⁸⁰

It is clear that we see different parts of the body from different angles, so that more of the body is shown than would be possible if it were seen from one viewpoint.⁸¹ However, none of these ‘deficiencies’ are immediately apparent. On the contrary, Bathsheba’s body looks entirely natural and in total repose, which is due precisely to the avoidance of any indication of torsion and to the fact that the body is shown from different angles, so as to suggest as much as possible a parallelism of all the body parts to the picture plane. Rembrandt achieved this effect primarily by applying motifs from the rich array of images that crowded his memory.

The surface of Bathsheba’s body is painted with the utmost care. In great contrast to the extremely smooth, almost glossy, surfaces and rather even lighting of the bodies of the nudes by Van Loo, Drost, and Van der Helst that can be seen in the Louvre in the rooms near Rembrandt’s *Bathsheba* (and which make excellent comparisons with it, as they were created around the same time in the same city for the same audience of critical connoisseurs; figs. 351, 361, 306), Bathsheba’s skin shows endless differentiation in surface treatment, lighting, and tone. (Although a thick, yellowed varnish disfigures the painting, this can still be seen. If the painting were to be cleaned, the depiction of Bathsheba’s skin would undoubtedly be even more breathtaking.) The strong light-

ing of the middle section of the body,⁸² and the highlighted areas above and below the navel and above and below the breasts, together with the rather broad brushstrokes which left an emphatically visible paint texture – the directions of which follow the soft, slightly sagging shapes of Bathsheba’s flesh – draw the attention of the viewer’s eyes time and again and compel them to focus on this area. They enhance what Van Hoogstraten called the *kenlijkheid*, literally the knowability, because the texture of the paint offers the eyes the opportunity to focus, suggesting a palpable proximity.⁸³ The tender shadows in this brightly lit section modulate with infinite variation from grayish at the underside of her belly to light brown above her navel to a transparent, shining pink tone over dull gray at the underside of the breasts. Above the breasts the surface becomes smooth: the paint surface of the collarbone, neck, and face, with colors that shift towards a slightly darker general tone, shows hardly any visible brushstrokes. The sensual effect of the palpability of the apparently breathing skin of the torso, powerfully drawing the gaze of the viewer, makes way for an entirely different viewing experience when the eyes move upward and reach the ‘higher’ part of the body. Through this handling of light, paint, and color, the most sexually charged areas of the female body strongly appeal to touch, while the smoothly painted section of the shoulders, neck, and face, the pose of which is designed to express contemplation, invites an entirely different kind of involvement, as we shall see below. The slightly darker tonality and smoother surface of the arms, the darker hands, and the shadowy lower legs (although the latter are more roughly painted, the paint texture here shows, unlike the stomach area, little relief) compel the eyes to return continually to the torso and face.

Like the shape of the body, Bathsheba’s face, too, shows Rembrandt’s ideal of feminine beauty. Although until today Hendrickje Stoffels has always been considered to have been the model for this face (and body), I demonstrated in chapter XI – in my view, conclusively –

that this is most certainly *not* the case. The face conforms to an ideal type, aspects of which Rembrandt employed in works created over a long period of time.⁸⁴ It will also have become clear that the nude was not portrayed directly from a model sitting in this pose – no model could ever assume this pose – but constructed out of elements he used over a long time, with shapes he adapted to new ideals of beauty and applied in such a way that they all contribute to the suggestion of tranquil repose.⁸⁵ In this ambitious lifesize nude – unique in the later phase of his career – Rembrandt seems to have done everything in his power to create the epitome of beauty and to confront the viewer with a sense of intensely tangible corporality. With the elimination of any intimation of movement, nothing impedes the eye as it contemplatively surveys the nude body. That it was Bathsheba that Rembrandt rendered in this manner reveals that he must have been conscious of the specific implications of this subject as a pictorial theme in which moral and erotic concerns were indissolubly linked.⁸⁶

Bathsheba, the sense of sight, and the depiction of beauty

In chapter V the relation between seventeenth-century preoccupations with seductive female beauty and arousal by sight and various popular subjects, such as *The Bathing Bathsheba Seen by David*, *The Bathing Susanna Spied upon by the Elders* (the two most popular subjects from the Old Testament in the Northern Netherlands), and *The Bathing Diana and Her Nymphs Seen by Actaeon* (the most popular mythological subject in Holland) have extensively been discussed. Seventeenth-century treatments of all three subjects locate the viewer in the same position, watching the same enticing beauty, as the men in the stories depicted – men who were aroused by looking and were afterwards severely punished. For the informed beholder of the time, these images would have been all the more attractive because they involved

the titillating tension between looking at and enjoying nude beauty, while also reminding him that this very act is illicit. Rembrandt chose precisely these themes for the majority of his relatively few paintings that included nude women. The other subjects of female nudes that he painted, *Andromeda* and *Danaë*, are similarly about paragons of female beauty, the sight of whom immediately incited a fierce love in men.

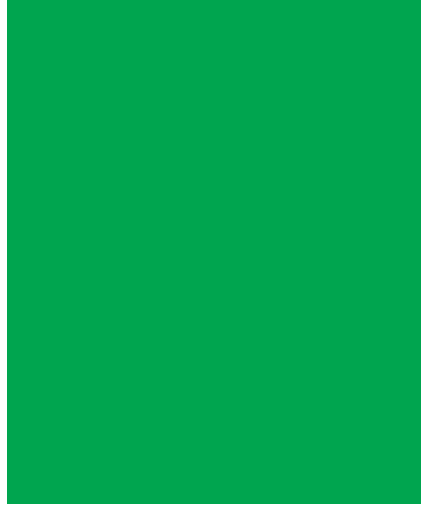
The story of *David and Bathsheba* seems to have been one of the most obvious examples used by moralists when they warned of the dangers of viewing naked women in relation to the almost obsessively repeated belief that of all the senses, sight has the most immediate and powerful effect on the mind, particularly in the excitement of desire and lust. In fact, the church father St. Jerome had already quoted the story in this context in the fourth century: ‘David was chosen as a man after God’s heart ... but as he walked upon his housetop he was fascinated by Bathsheba’s nakedness and added murder to adultery. Notice for a moment that even in one’s own house the eyes are never safe from danger.’⁸⁷

It is not surprising, therefore, that Jacob Cats refers to David and Bathsheba in his book *Houwelijck (Marriage)* – the seventeenth-century bestseller – when he extensively discusses the dangers of looking at unclothed women, a passage already cited in chapter v. Cats sternly warns women that it is almost impossible to express how seriously the minds of young men may become deranged and how their lust will be kindled when they see naked breasts. He then cites with gusto several examples, among them Actaeon seeing the naked Diana (see chapter vi) and David and Bathsheba: ‘Oh! Even David succumbed to sin, not only by being aroused, but really making love. And behold! it was a beautiful woman washing herself who fired this evil lust.’⁸⁸ Also doctor Johannes van Beverwijck cited David and Bathsheba in his *Schat der gesontheyt (The Treasure of Health)* of 1642, a medical handbook that was almost as popular as the works of Cats. In a chapter about the disease of foolish love, an ill-

ness contracted primarily through the eyes, he writes that physical beauty is able to hit the heart with lightning speed and cause festering wounds in the mind, as happened to David when he beheld Bathsheba.⁸⁹ Needless to say, moralizing preachers also liked to refer to this biblical story: ‘Therefore (oh Christian soul!), if you want to stay pure, avert your eyes from all beautiful women. Her noble beauty will cause your doom; it has seduced many a sincere heart into adultery.’⁹⁰

As we have seen in chapter v, the thought that images of nude female beauty are equally able to arouse lechery in the viewer appears to have been an often-discussed issue. Although portrayals of *Venus* and *Danaë* were singled out in texts from antiquity (and quoted again in many later passages that were directly inspired by them), it was depictions of the bathing Bathsheba to which Erasmus referred in a text that, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, initiated a wave of censorship of ‘arousing’ pictures. In his *Christiani Matrimonio Institutio* he wrote about the sinfulness of rendering biblical subjects in a shameless manner. Asking why it was necessary to depict, for example, *David and Bathsheba*, he wondered ‘how much wickedness the artist adds’ in such an image.⁹¹

When in the following century the strictly religious Dirk Rafaelsz. Camphuyzen, following in the footsteps of his friend Hendrik Geesteranus – as we have seen, both extremists in their opinions about the dangers of painting – violently attacked the art of painting as ‘food for evil lust’, he also cited the depiction of *Bathsheba* (bracketed together with *Susanna*).⁹² With fierce indignation that is sometimes quite witty, Camphuyzen thinks it a disgrace that there are today so many Bathshebas present in paintings when the original who made David’s senses run wild was already bad enough. Who wants to see a portrayal of precisely that which one has to avoid, he exclaims (quite naively, we would say now). For Camphuyzen it is firmly established that such paintings, just like depictions of *Susanna*, function only as ‘venom for



360
School Cornelis van Poelenburch,
Bathsheba, canvas 48 x 38 cm.
Stockholm, National Museum

the eyes'; they are as bad as reality because one wants to do and to have what one sees in a painting.⁹³ The depictions of *Bathsheba*, this time bracketed together with *Lot and His Daughters*, were also mentioned by the much less extreme Jacob Cats as serving only lechery, when he warned against 'lascivious' paintings.⁹⁴ As to be expected, Doctor Van Beverwijck repeated Cats's lines approvingly when gravely cautioning against 'amorous and frivolous paintings that easily lead to lasciviousness.'⁹⁵

It is clear that the *story* of *David and Bathsheba*, like that of *Susanna and the Elders* and *Diana and Actaeon*, functioned as one of the most obvious moralizing examples about the dangers of sight and its sinful effects, while its *depiction* was considered by many to count pre-eminently among the 'lust-arousing' subjects with female nudes, and was one of the most severely criticized. As argued in chapter v, from the wide currency of such statements, and the fact that they were vented in different cultural circles, we may conclude that painters as well as their public would have been very conscious of such opinions and that their erotic impact must have been considered a fundamental aspect of paintings of *Susan-*

na, *Bathsheba*, and *Diana and Actaeon*. Very striking in this context is a painting of *Bathsheba* by a painter from the school of Van Poelenburch, which shows a garden statue of Actaeon as he begins to be transformed into a stag (fig. 360)!⁹⁶

In earlier chapters I discussed several examples that demonstrated how, as of the middle of the century, poets like Joost van den Vondel and Jan Vos playfully employed the same ideas in laudatory poems about paintings of *Susanna*, *Ephigenia*, *Venus*, or *Danaë*. While the collectors of such paintings did not write about their own motives, they would of course have had no such scruples in owning them – the severe criticisms of moralists notwithstanding. In so far as such paintings were, indeed, visualizations of narratives that could be read as moral exempla about the risks of beholding beautiful nude women who aroused male voyeurs, they could be justified on a moralizing basis. However, at the same time the paintings were thought to effect the same alluring arousal of the senses that these stories abjured. This mutually reinforcing dynamic between the rigors of narrative chasteness and the seductive charms of painted flesh would have been all the more reason for their appeal.

For both the painter and the connoisseur, however, it would have been of the greatest importance that the depiction of consummate female beauty could boast a long and prestigious tradition, beginning with Apelles, the greatest painter from antiquity, and that it could be considered one of the highest goals of the art of painting, as argued in chapter I.⁹⁷ Every ambitious painter aspired to be 'an Apelles', whose name not only epitomized the highest art in general, but the depiction of beauty, grace and lifelikeness of the female nude in particular, notably of the nude Venus – beauty and seductiveness personified.⁹⁸ If this was considered a paradigmatic subject for painting, one had to accept the obvious consequence: the enticement of the beholder's senses. In fact, depicting *Bathsheba*, this 'biblical Venus', could even be considered

a greater challenge than rendering the mythical Venus. More than any other woman, Bathsheba should be imagined as the summit of physical beauty: it was after all David, the Old Testament example of piety and strength, who lost control over his senses when he saw her, and not some fabled pagan lad who was seduced by the sight of Venus or Diana, nor a foolish Elder who went crazy over Susanna. Several painters in Amsterdam and Haarlem around the middle of the century, among them Rembrandt, seem to have accepted this challenge and competed with each other in depicting the most beautiful woman imaginable.

In 1643 Rembrandt had still portrayed the image of Bathsheba as an ‘active’ seductress (fig. 346). The more passively Bathsheba is represented, however, the more it has to be credible that it was solely her physical beauty that caused David’s fall. Only her striking appearance could answer Adrian Poirter’s question as to how it was possible that David, a man after God’s heart, could fall so far.⁹⁹ If Vondel, in a poem praising a painting of *Susanna*, complimented the artist through rhetorical exaggeration by exclaiming that beholding this beauty ‘entices us to trespass the punishing laws’,¹⁰⁰ then a painter has to aspire to such an effect all the more when depicting Bathsheba, whom even David could not resist. In chapter v, we saw that Jacob Cats, who, unlike Vondel, considered such an enticing appeal in a negative light, left no doubt that the better the painter in rendering lifelikeness of the nude, the stronger the effect on the senses of the beholder: ‘To paint in detail the downfall of Lot or David, / Causes – I do not know how – the lascivious senses to stray ... The higher the painter strives in this case / The deeper he can wound, and the stronger he hurts; / The closer he is able to come in his suggestion of life / The more he can arouse all passions / Until heaven knows what; precisely the best of minds / Can breed the worst evil and cause the greatest harm.’¹⁰¹

As we have seen, in the *Bathsheba* of 1654, Rem-

brandt did everything possible to paint an almost palpable lifelikeness in a subject that could rank as the prime example of lustarousing images. That Rembrandt consciously strove to compete with all other such paintings in exerting a strong effect on the senses of the viewer and wished to surpass all other painters in this respect becomes all the more plausible when one realizes that his only preceding lifesize nude, the *Danaë* (fig. 205), was, as we have seen in chapter VIII, precisely a subject that was always quoted as *the* example from antiquity of a depiction that could arouse desire in the beholder.¹⁰² In my opinion, images of *Bathsheba*, like those of *Danaë*, could be regarded as paintings with which artists emulated each other in representing a theme which, since Erasmus, ranked as a pre-eminent example of an arousing subject. With the life-size nudes of *Danaë* and *Bathsheba*, Rembrandt undoubtedly aspired to position himself in the line of the great painters of the nude and to surpass his predecessors in the rendering of lifelike female beauty and the sensual effect of this upon the beholder.

The biblical Bathsheba

Nevertheless, Rembrandt’s *Bathsheba* also shows that these were not his only goals, as I intimated already when pointing out the differentiation in the surface treatment of the most sexually charged part of Bathsheba’s body – her torso – on the one hand, and the ‘higher’ part of her body – above the breasts – on the other. Rembrandt certainly strove to incite a powerful emotional response: ‘It does not suffice that an image is beautiful; there has to be a certain *beweeqlijkheyt* [movement that expresses emotion] that exerts power over the viewer’, to quote again this line from his pupil Van Hoogstraten (see chapter III).¹⁰³ In this late *Bathsheba*, however, he united emotional and erotic effect in an entirely different way than in his earlier nudes. To understand the kind of emotions he wanted to express in his late *Bathsheba*, we should turn

for a moment to the changing views on the character of the biblical figure of Bathsheba at the time.

It is no coincidence that his portrayals of Bathsheba led Rembrandt to two contrasting solutions in the character of the woman and her attitude towards the viewer. The biblical figure of Bathsheba is, after all, full of contradictions. In contrast with Susanna (and also Diana), it is impossible to regard this woman, one who committed adultery without offering resistance, as an example of chastity. And, as we have already seen, unlike the Elders or Actaeon, David, God's favorite and the most important ancestor of Christ, could not function smoothly as a paragon of repugnant wickedness or foolishness. Thus, the main actors are of a much more complex nature than the protagonists of these other stories with their much simpler contrast between chaste and unchaste.

In the middle ages the moral dilemma in the Bathsheba story could be solved by typological explanations, the most widespread one being that Bathsheba stood for the church, David for Christ, and Uriah for the devil.¹⁰⁴ However, from the late Middle Ages onward, when stories from the Old Testament began to be read directly as moral examples, the approach to Bathsheba became distinctly negative; she was the target of blame, as for instance in *De spiegel der duecht* (*The Mirror of Virtue*) of 1515, a booklet for the instruction of women: 'This sin [of David and Bathsheba] was caused by the pride and vanity of Bathsheba which she exhibited when bathing. Therefore any good woman should bathe and wash herself in secrecy and never, to please the world, show her head, neck nor breast uncovered.'¹⁰⁵ As conjugal ethics of the urban bourgeois society were consolidated, absolute chastity and unconditional faithfulness to the husband were elevated to the position of the prime female virtue (and this went hand in hand with the concept of woman as the cause of all sin). Bathsheba thus became an example of the dangerous seductress against which all men, even King David, stood powerless. She even appeared sometimes in the series of popular prints depicting the

theme of the 'power of women', as one of the examples of women who used their seductive tricks to bring about the downfall of powerful men. In these subjects, women are presented as the provokers of all lasciviousness of which men are the helpless victims.¹⁰⁶

As we have seen in the engraving after Maarten van Heemskerck (fig. 325), the subject could also be used in the sixteenth century as an illustration of the sixth commandment, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.' In this context Bathsheba is blamed for the betrayal of her husband; she is presented as a sinful seductress, one of the many that populate the graphic arts of the sixteenth century. As a matter of fact, the ninth commandment, 'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife', would have been very applicable to David and Bathsheba, but then casting David as the guilty party. In the same series of prints, however, this was illustrated with the story of Joseph fleeing the wicked wife of Potiphar, so that the image of the man as the victim of a voluptuous and sinful woman was sustained consistently.

Absolute condemnations of Bathsheba continued to be voiced in the seventeenth century by strict Calvinist preachers such as Godfried Udemans. In the strongest of terms, Udemans versified that Bathsheba might indeed have been attempting to wash the filth from her body, but the diabolical filth in which she, as an adulteress, had been wallowing could never be washed away.¹⁰⁷ Remarkably, it was Calvin himself who had already voiced a much more moderate attitude towards Bathsheba. He concentrated on the guilt of David, who was not able to withstand the temptations of the devil. He did not want to fully condemn Bathsheba for washing herself, otherwise one would also have to condemn the chaste Susanna who did the same. However, since she was obviously not discrete enough – even if she thought she was not seen – she should, after all, be considered unchaste, he has to concede.¹⁰⁸

In the course of the seventeenth century David was more often approached with less and Bathsheba with

more consideration. For the Calvinist writer Johan de Brune, for example, David was certainly not free of guilt. He wrote that one ought to avoid such circumstances and should not expose the eyes to such temptations. But it also remained selfevident to him that Bathsheba was an unchaste woman, ‘an open chest’ as he called her.¹⁰⁹ Jacob Cats, who often seems to represent the most current ‘official’ morals of the wellto do Dutch burgher, was even more severe in his condemnation of David. Although Cats had put him down as a victim of beholding female beauty in *Houwelijck*, elsewhere Cats appears to have regarded Bathsheba as a victim, as well. It was David, after all, who took the initiative and who, yielding to the ‘vicious assaults of the flesh’ confounded Bathsheba.¹¹⁰ A kindred opinion was expressed by the popular Antwerp Jesuit Poirters, the ‘Brabant Cats’ as he has been called, who wrote in the same period: ‘How is it possible that David could fall so deep? He went to his Belvedere, and let his eyes roam, and his eyes played freely with Bathsheba. He besmirched his soul; she washed her body, sitting in the water, his fire was kindled; beholding generated desire, desire consent, consent adultery and adultery manslaughter. A small spark, a big fire. Who would have dared to suspect this from a man after God’s heart?’¹¹¹

Rembrandt’s Bathshebas

In his inventions of 1643 and 1654, more emphatically than any other painter of his time, Rembrandt incorporated two current but different approaches to Bathsheba as a biblical figure, the earlier one representing a more traditional view than the second. In 1643 Rembrandt had convincingly portrayed Bathsheba as a voluptuous seductress of the one who beholds her (fig. 346). In the *Bathsheba* of 1654 there are almost no indications of a similar role (fig. 356). Only the old woman may have evoked, as we have seen, some recollection of moral dubiousness, since she is reminiscent of the pictorial stereotype of the procuress, so often the attribute of young

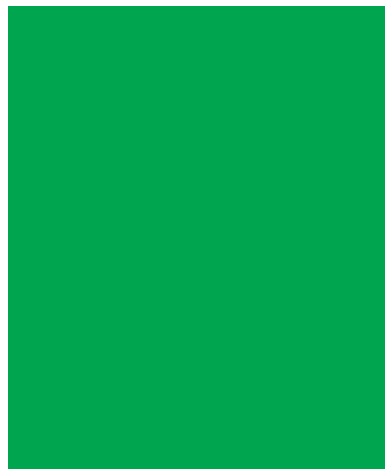
women of questionable morals. However, the intensely moving expression on Bathsheba’s face, with tilted head and lowered, unfocused eyes, generate other associations. Not only does her expression suggest an extended period of deep thought, the huge undifferentiated dark pupil that catches no light, the heavy shadow under the eye, as well as the eyebrow and the accentuated shadow above the upper eyelid which both slightly slope down, signal the tragic nature of her thoughts.¹¹²

As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, Rembrandt gave the traditional letter, a motif which he also used here for the first time, more emphasis than it had received in paintings by any other artist. He did not, however, include it in such customary narrative actions as being offered by the old woman, or received or read by Bathsheba. Rembrandt used it instead to focus the attention of the viewer on that which cannot be visualized: Bathsheba’s thoughts, provoked by David’s request. Apart from the sensual contemplation of her nude body, incited by the palpable beauty of her torso, the beholder is thus forced to dwell upon Bathsheba’s thoughts, the more so since any action or indication of conversation is lacking. The letter and the empathy evoked by Bathsheba’s face and pose are the only elements that give clues to the beholder when he contemplates the situation depicted. While he cannot avoid thinking about Bathsheba’s response, at the same time he is left to his own devices in trying to interpret the invisible. Rembrandt provides no clue to the content of her thoughts. This is exactly the opposite of the effect produced by the now lost Bathsheba by Jan Lievens that Philips Angel praised so profusely. Angel noted enthusiastically that by adding a Cupid shooting a fiery arrow, Lievens had made clear that ‘a hot fire of lust must have been kindled in Bathsheba when she received the request of the king’ because no matter ‘how mighty a king he might be, nobody is obliged to be ready to serve him in sin.’¹¹³

As we have seen, in great contrast to most of his history paintings of the 1630s, Rembrandt avoided here any



361 ▶ see colourplate x, p. xx
Willem Drost, *Bathsheba*, 1654, canvas 103 x 108.7 cm.
Paris, Musée du Louvre



362
Palma Vecchio, *A Venetian Courtesan*, panel 73 x 58 cm
Berlin, Staatliche Museen,
Gemäldegalerie

reference to the *ogenblikkige beweging* (instantaneous [e]motion) and to *eenstemmigheid* (unequivocality). All visible evidence of action and reaction which we see in all the works of his contemporaries has been omitted. In connection with the second version of the *Susanna* (chapter IV), I argued that Rembrandt was turning to an approach in representing the passions that seems more comparable with the ideas that Vondel was developing precisely at this time than with the Senecan-Scaligerian concepts of drama that showed parallels with his earlier works (chapter III). In the 1654 conception of *Bathsheba*, his changed attitude towards the expression of the passions and the role of the engaged beholder seems to be fully developed. Now one may speak of a pictorial parallel to the process of *staetveranderinge*, which, apart from a reversal of emotions, includes a recognition and understanding of the tragic situation in which the protagonist finds him- or herself.¹¹⁴ Applying the Aristotelian theory of tragedy, which replaced the Senecan-Scaligerian approach in Vondel's work (but not in that of Jan Vos) in the course of the 1640s, Vondel no longer aimed at involving the viewer through an alternation of quickly changing strong emotions, but desired to elicit an emotional response through a continuous development of the individual protagonist's inner passions throughout the plot.¹¹⁵ From endeavoring to grab the viewer and to summon a strong affective response by representing (e)motions that were sudden, thrilling, and unequivocal, Rembrandt turned to a much more ambiguous and subtle way to engage the emotional response of the viewer, striving to represent that which is most difficult to visualize: the development of conflicting, inner emotions which the viewer is compelled to contemplate. This change in approach culminated in the 1654 *Bathsheba*.

In Rembrandt's painting the letter indicates that Bathsheba knows that she is being watched and that she is conscious of the consequence of her dazzling beauty. The viewer can only conclude that she is pondering the harrowing choice she must make: either she chooses to

lose her honor (which, as Angel says, she should not sacrifice even for the mightiest king; and, indeed, it was the most sinful action a woman could ever undertake according to seventeenth-century morality),¹¹⁶ or she chooses to disobey the king (and her destiny, to be the mother of Solomon). It is a moral dilemma of the kind that provides material for an opera aria or a soliloquy in a tragedy, full of conflicting emotions. When viewing this ‘mute’ painting, however, the beholder has to supplement this ‘interior monologue’ according to his own preferences. The letter with its broken red seal in the corner, which looks more like a blood stain than a seal, might compel him to think about the consequences of David’s deed and Bathsheba’s decision, that is, the death of Uriah.¹¹⁷ In his *Bathsheba* of 1654, then, Rembrandt did not portray her as an obviously dishonorable seductress but rather as the passive victim of her own fateful beauty to which no man – least of all the viewer – can offer effective resistance.

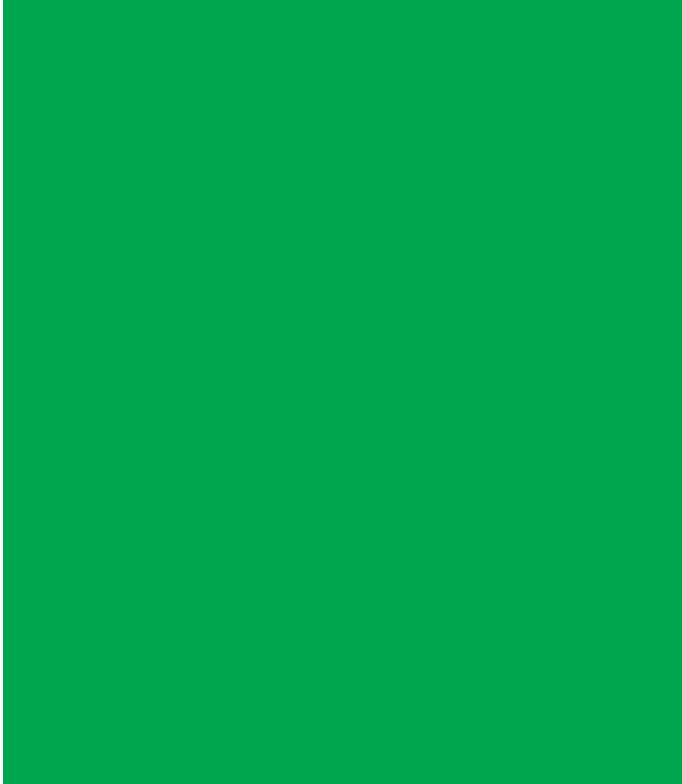
A painting of *Bathsheba* by Willem Drost, also dating from 1654, constitutes a striking, and probably deliberate, contrast with Rembrandt’s work (fig. 361). The relation between the two paintings has often been pointed out, and doubtlessly the pupil wanted to compete with his master.¹¹⁸ The result is an antipode to Rembrandt’s *Bathsheba*. The two paintings are similar in two respects. Even more starkly than did Rembrandt, Drost isolates Bathsheba against a dark, completely impenetrable background and portrays her with the letter in her hand. In contrast, however, Drost emphatically depicts Bathsheba as a seductive courtesan through a pictorial scheme that had been in circulation for decades. He conflated the theme of *Bathsheba* with the popular type of the life-size, half-length female figure looking enticingly at the viewer, a type that had been employed especially for frivolous shepherdesses or music-making courtesans in the work of Utrecht painters like Moreelse, Van Honthorst, and Van Bylert.¹¹⁹ This type had also found a new life in Amsterdam in paintings by Backer, Bol, and Flinck, with fresh



363

Govert Flinck, *Bathsheba*, 1659, canvas 116.8 x 88.6 cm.
St. Petersburg, Hermitage

inspiration from Venetian images of courtesans.¹²⁰ Drost employed an image by Palma Vecchio (fig. 362),¹²¹ the same one that Rembrandt also used several years later for his so-called *Hendrickje in a Doorway*. The unusually large breast, with a nipple that stands out strikingly through its strong pink color, seems to underline her provocatively seductive nature. The smoothness of Bathsheba’s skin and the evenness with which the shadows are painted also seem in deliberate contrast with Rembrandt’s work.



364
Cornelis Bisschop, *Bathsheba*, c. 1660-65,
panel 38.4 x 33.4 cm. Pasadena, Norton Simon Foundation

Drost's *Bathsheba* looks defiantly at the beholder, the potential David who will 'possess' her. This attitude reminds us of the way in which Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* of 1643 turned to the viewer. In fact, Drost's painting may be regarded as the ultimate consequence of Rembrandt's earlier *Bathsheba* type. In the painting by Drost, the letter situated in the shadow functions only as a means of identification. His *Bathsheba* does not contemplate the letter, the loss of her honor, or the destiny she has to fulfill. The painting presents instead a convincing image of a very beautiful woman who is all the more exciting because of her obvious availability. She is 'a *Bathsheba*' who will give herself to the one whose desire is aroused by beholding her.

The only other painting that might be considered a re-

sponse to Rembrandt's (and Drost's) work is Govert Flinck's elegant but rather dull *Bathsheba*; in it, *Bathsheba*, with an unfocused stare turning to the right, holds a huge epistle (fig. 363). She certainly exemplifies what Houbraken described as the 'clear, bright' manner into which Flinck had changed his style. Many *Bathshebas* with a letter in hand or receiving a letter would follow, ranging from the endearing *Bathsheba* seen from the back, quietly reading David's letter attributed to Cornelis Bisschop (fig. 364),¹²² to Jan Steen's witty insertion of a pointed reference to *Bathsheba* into the by-then popular subject of a contemporary young woman with a letter (fig. 345),¹²³ the refined, loosely clad ladies of Caspar Netscher (fig. 365) or the stylized, porcelain-like nudes of Willem van Mieris (fig. 366).¹²⁴

As a subject for a female nude, however, the theme of *Bathsheba* had reached its unequalled climax in Rembrandt's painting of 1654. For his first life-size female nude, Rembrandt had chosen the subject of *Danaë* to make a statement in the ongoing discussion about color and line, working from life, and selecting the most beautiful, and to compete with his greatest predecessors in this field – in particular, Titian and the legendary masters from antiquity – in the depiction of the apogee of lifelike sensuality. His choice for *Bathsheba*, his second and last life-size nude, implied that he had even higher ambitions in surpassing all his predecessors and peers in the depiction of seductive female beauty. After all, this biblical heroine represented the greatest challenge imaginable, because she must have surpassed even *Danaë*, *Diana*, *Venus*, or *Susanna* in this respect; simultaneously, none of the other subjects included such complexly intertwined moral and erotic concerns. By forcing the viewer intensely to contemplate the visible (her physical beauty that holds the eye) as well as the invisible (her thoughts and conflicting emotions concerning the grave moral dilemma caused by her beauty), Rembrandt created one of the most impressive paintings of a female nude – for many,

perhaps the most impressive. No portrayal of Bathsheba tallies so perfectly with the nature of the theme, a theme about looking at consummate beauty, seduction of the beholder, and the moral ambivalence this generates. It was Rembrandt who was able to visualize this in its most sublime way.

The involvement Rembrandt demanded of the viewer could explain why he did not paint a female nude more often. Arousing strong feelings and emotions through a maximum lifelikeness was his primary aim, but this was risky in the case of nudes. A painter like Jacob van Loo concentrated much more on the depiction of nudes; the greater distance created by stylization through taut contours, smooth surfaces, and more conventional and generalizing proportions and anatomy would have made his paintings more easily acceptable for the audience. Not surprisingly, such Rembrandt pupils as Govert Flinck and Ferdinand Bol did not apply themselves to the nude until they had exchanged their Rembrandtesque style for the ‘Italian way of painting ... the clear, bright manner’, as Houbraken called their later style. Although Rembrandt was always in intense dialogue with the famous Italian artists and the great master of Antwerp, he willfully followed another path. In the case of the female nude – more than in any other type of subject – this path would have been controversial even in his own day. However, there must have been art lovers who, like the artist himself, considered Rembrandt’s representations of nudes to be the pinnacle of a respectable tradition, and within this tradition their extraordinary effect could be held in high regard. They would have accepted as the highest aim of art, even in the case of depictions of nudes, Rembrandt’s belief in the need to incite the greatest possible empathy in the viewer by means of paintings experienced as being ‘like life itself’ and expressing the ‘greatest and most natural motion and emotion’, or, in his own words: ‘die meeste ende die natuereelste beweegheijckheit.’



365
Caspar Netscher, *Bathsheba*, 1667,
panel 42 x 36 cm. Bamberg,
Gemäldegalerie



366
Willem van Mieris, *Bathsheba*,
1708, panel 37 x 32 cm. Notre
Dame, Art Gallery of Notre Dame
University