

## Rembrandt

*and the Italian Renaissance*

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This is a book written by an art historian, but also of a connoisseur, who is mostly concerned with establishing provenance and authenticity. Is this a painting or drawing by Rembrandt or not? Such expertise, as far as it can be authenticated as such, is of a forensic quality. Apart from a general gut feeling based on the direct impression of a picture as a picture and as it is supposed to be taken in, there is also a more technical aspect focusing on the marginal minutiae, taking the 'fingerprint' so to speak or making an 'isotopic analysis'. Those metaphors can be pursued literally thus going beyond the purely visual inspection, into a chemical and physical analysis of the matter of which the painting is made. This is 'science' in a sense, and focuses on the painting as a physical entity succumbing to the ravages of wear and tear through time. But of course Clark does not don a white coat, nor does he want to get his hands dirty, the eye is all what it takes to judge a piece of visual art.

Now the book is lavishly illustrated with pictures, mostly those by Rembrandt himself, on almost every page, yet the book is of pocket size, and the pictures are correspondingly reduced, and all in black and white and not of the greatest technical quality. But it is foremost a scholarly book, not a coffee table book to be subjected to merely cursory glances, but an extended lecture, based on a passing idea of the author, namely that the Italian Renaissance painting had a decisive influence on Rembrandt, and it is his project, to trace this putative influence and make a sufficiently convincing case as to engage the readers attention long enough to intrigue him. This is classical art criticism. Not a science, but a conversation undertaken in a thoughtful and measured way. In particular he wants to show that Rembrandt more specifically was influenced not only by the likes of da Vinci, Raphael and Titian, but also by minor artists of the Italian Renaissance. Because even minor artists may contribute something of interest, be it only technical. On the other hand the technical aspects is what influence is all about.

First what kind of pictures are shown? There are three distinct kinds. The finished paintings of course, which are prominently displayed in museums around the world, and some of whose images may have already been indelible imprinted in the minds of many readers, because the reader that seeks out such a book tends to be one who is already quite familiar with the painter, thus there is no attempt to give any kind of biography on Rembrandt, not even his enclosing dates of 1606-1669 are stated anywhere. Then there are etchings, some of them may also be familiar to the reader, although probably not from museum visits but from books. Etchings displayed in a dimmed room seldom are as arresting as a full size oil painting commanding a prominent presence on a wall in full day-light. And a painting by Rembrandt, or any other of the great classics, always occupies

pride of place, and to seek it out and look at is a kind of pilgrimage<sup>1</sup>. Now etchings were very important in old times, as it was the simplest way of obtaining cheap copies of a work of art. Thus in particular etchings were made of major old paintings to spread the images around. Those images were more or less necessarily mirror images of the originals, as few if any etchers took the trouble to use a mirror. The etchings have by necessity quite another feel than an oil-painting. First they are much smaller, secondly there are no colors involved, but they are all black and white, and all effects have to be conveyed by line. Thus they are not as seductive as an oil-painting, nor as easily appreciated by the untutored eye. In particular they are less realistic, they cannot be taken for a slice of reality. And finally we have the drawings. Those are sketches of a private nature. Thus they are unfinished and concentrates on the technical aspects that occupy the interests of the artist. In another way to put it, is that they are studies, not meant for the public eye, but fragments of work in progress, not unlike the scribbles on the back of an envelope by a mathematician.

Now the classical way of learning to paint was to copy the masters. This might seem to us very mechanical and uncreative, but copying by hand is just a more intensive way of looking. Looking at a painting not as a mere spectator but as a craftsman, paying close attention to details. Thus to copy rather than just to gaze is to deepen the visual impression by integrating it with the tactile sense. A painter is not just an eye, but even more importantly a hand. The visual impression must be translated into a muscular one. Thus the tradition of copying, which may be likened to learning by heart, is a time honored one with benefits not obvious to someone brainwashed by another more modern attitude towards pedagogy. Just as learning by rote has didactic advantages scorned upon by us today. Now we have a problem, how would an artist of the 17th century get to see paintings, they were not flooded with visual images as we are today, but each visual image was precious, one may almost say sacred, and most of the visual images ordinary people saw were in the churches. Nowadays paintings are in museums for all and sundry to look at, in those days there were no public museums, to see paintings you had to approach private collections. Rembrandt never went to Italy, but if so how could he possibly be influenced by paintings he never saw? The fact is that there was a flourishing business of auctions, where paintings changed hands. Rembrandt was at some time quite wealthy, having for one thing married advantageously. He was also a spendthrift and accumulated a big collection of paintings which he hoarded as precious items from which he could study and learn. Thus he was not collecting for investment or prestige, but in the same way as you acquire a library, to have books close to you, to consult whenever you feel like it. Eventually Rembrandt went bankrupt and his collection and possessions had to go on auction. The list of his belongings is preserved, invaluable information for the modern art

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<sup>1</sup> The case of the Mona Lisa in the Louvre perfectly illustrates the iconic status achieved by some paintings. When I first encountered it in the Louvre in the summer of 1972, it was just hanging on a wall, now it is protected by glass, and shielded from too intimate contemplation by a discrete fence. More likely than not a human guard stands to attention. It is visited by hordes of people, mostly Oriental tourists, who do not look at it, but take flash pictures by their mobiles. Thus the painting as a visual entity is replaced by the painting as a sacred object. What those people do in fact is to offer their prayers to the relics of a saint, only being far more confused about their mission than the ordinary religious devotee.

historian, especially in his role as a forensic investigator. In addition to that paintings were expensive, etchings more available, and of which you no doubt could amass a sizable quantity.

Now Rembrandt copied. In copying he took a rather free attitude, often modifying the originals to his likings. Now creativity may somewhat prosaically be seen as mere modifications. You do not create in a vacuum, you always have a point of departure. Then of course you may have a mission, thus knowing what you want to do, giving you a direction as to what modifications to do. It is here that the true genius of a Rembrandt expresses himself. He took what he needed, he rejected the rest. A pose, a gesture, a composition, all being gist to his mill. And by borrowing it he transformed it to something we unmistakably recognize as a 'Rembrandt'. What did this consist in?

One explanation, although of course not an exhaustive one, is the striving for realism, of rejecting set formulas. Here he had no models, as models can only serve so far. Their purpose is to instruct when it comes to technical matters, and to inspire when it comes to ideas. The last mile the creative artist has to walk himself, and how he does it, as a mystery as Clark admits, saying that an art historian can only lift a little on the veil by making explicit the chronological sequence of development as well as borrowings and influences, of which the author has unearthed sufficiently many to justify the writing of the present book.

What is so special about Rembrandt. He has been likened to a Shakespeare with a brush. Meaning that what makes him stand out is his special humanity, that his figures are suffused with a warmth that gives them life and reality. Add to that a special atmosphere conveyed, particular for each specific theme, often expressed by a certain lightening, for which he is famed. But once again how he managed this, no detective work performed by the forensic art historian can shed any light. We just have to bow and admire.

Rembrandt had many students. Instruction consisted in emulation, just as in science today. The students copied the works of the teacher, who corrected their attempts. When they got more accomplished they were allowed to contribute to the marginal parts of a painting and eventually they could strike out on their own after an extended period of apprenticeship. A handful of Rembrandt students are known to us by name, such as Dou, but one can only speculate as how many would remain anonymous leaving no trace for posterity. This brings up another thing. Many paintings were done at the time, but many of them have disappeared, not until the 19th century were catalogues being systematically kept keeping count, and not only an eye, on the masterworks. Many of the paintings that may influenced Rembrandt may be lost, erasing for ever the historical record.

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