



# Who Was Rembrandt?

## A Question of Identity

By Robert Kenner

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**He was the most powerful self-portraitist of all time, but the old master behind the masks remains a mystery. Now, as the authorship of half his paintings has been challenged, long-smoldering debates return to their most basic questions. Who was this man who so profoundly transformed the visual arts? And will we ever know?**

The face you are looking at is the most familiar in the history of art. Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn (1606-1669) painted, drew, and etched his own likeness at least seventy-five times over the last four decades of his life. No artist had ever attempted such an obsessive campaign of self-portraiture. Yet no critic or biographer can be quite sure what to make of the artist's tireless record of his changing visage. Do these pictures—by turns playful, arrogant, poignant, and repellent—comprise an intimate autobiography or an extended indulgence in vanity?

Like so much of our information about Rembrandt, the self-portraits give us just enough to argue about, and not much more. There can be no consensus; he is too well known and at the same time too unknown. Each generation has found a different aspect of Rembrandt to seize on: his handling of paint, his power as narrator, his dramatic use of light, his unflinching realism, his radical compositions, his absolute command of emotion.

The most recent attempt to pin down this elusive figure has only left us deeper in doubt. Twenty-three years ago, seven of the Netherlands' most distinguished scholars formed the Rembrandt Research Project, whose purpose was to start from scratch, questioning every "Rembrandt" in the world in hopes of solving problems of attribution that have plagued the master since he first took up a brush. They've counted the fibers in canvases and the rings in wood panels, and exposed the works to X-rays, ultraviolet light, and every other scientific test available. But as they pared the *oeuvre* down from as many as 700 paintings to under 350--sending shock waves through prestigious collections--they were always thrown back on what Volume I of their report calls a relatively primitive tool: the human eye. This month, an exhibition opens in Berlin that will lay the case before the public eye.

"Clearly, the whole nature of our idea of Rembrandt is changing," says Christopher Brown, director of the National Gallery in London, and an organizer of "Rembrandt: The Master and his Workshop." This first traveling Rembrandt retrospective in history dives headlong into the controversy. Hanging undisputed works by the master alongside recently deattributed paintings and other efforts by his students, the curators expect to raise more disputes than they settle. "Yes, it will be controversial," says Brown. "This is not meant to be the last word. The exhibition is part of a continuing debate."





*Spendthrift, crooked art dealer, loving husband, unrepentant fornicator, compulsive collector, Latin-school dropout, pedagogue, and "the foremost heretic in the art of painting."*

For over 300 years, our image of Rembrandt has largely consisted of half-truths and suppositions based on very few hard facts: scattered contemporary anecdotes, seven obsequious business letters, and a handful of legal documents. With so little to go on, Rembrandt tends to become whomever we want to make him. The romantics cast him as an isolated genius; the classicists as an ill-mannered scoundrel; the moderns as an intemperate radical. Two American dentists, after examining his self-portraits, pronounced him a "dental cripple" who suffered from cavities and decalcification because of an incurable sweet tooth. As one perplexed scholar asked in 1936, "Is not every formula applicable to this Proteus?" Prevailing wisdom describes

Rembrandt as spendthrift, crooked art dealer, loving husband, unrepentant fornicator, compulsive collector of curiosities, Latin-school dropout, pedagogue, hotshot, has-been, and "the foremost heretic in the art of painting."

Born into a prosperous family in the medieval town of Leiden, Rembrandt owed the name van Rijn to the river beside which his father's windmill ground corn and malt. He was the ninth of ten children, and probably one of the brightest, for while his older brothers and sisters worked at the mill, Rembrandt went to Latin school. Little is known about his studies there, save that enrollment exempted the fourteen-year-old boy from military service and from paying taxes on beer. In any case, according to a contemporary biographer, young Rembrandt "hadn't the least urge or inclination in that direction, his natural bent being for drawing and painting only. His parents had no choice but to take him out of school and, in accordance with his wishes, apprentice him to a painter who would teach him the basics of his art."

Rembrandt was no child prodigy; scholars have only begun to recognize what a struggle he had with drawing early on. His first paintings do not correspond to our idea of a "Rembrandtesque" style—the young artist had not discovered the magic of *chiaroscuro* (the strong contrasts of light and darkness that have become his hallmark), and his command of line and color was rather clumsy. (Some of these early works have only been accepted as Rembrandt's during the last twenty years.) His first teacher was Jacob van Swanenburgh, an undistinguished Leiden dauber who earned a reasonable living from his portraits and hellscapes. Van Swanenburgh may have convinced Rembrandt's parents that their son could support himself through painting, but it was a second teacher, Pieter Lastman, who made a profound impression on the fledgling artist.

Lastman, an Amsterdam history painter, developed Rembrandt's powers as a visual narrator. He taught his eighteen-year-old apprentice to translate biblical subjects into dramatic human spectacles, a theme that fascinated Rembrandt for the rest of his life. On this first trip to the big city, Rembrandt also learned something about the pecking order among artists. Though the society portraitist might earn a lot of money, the maker of history scenes was exalted as a poet among painters. Besides mastering and combining every specialty—portraiture, landscape, still life, genre scenes—the history painter had to be familiar with the Bible and classical mythology. Whether he knew it or not, Rembrandt had glimpsed his own destiny.

After only six months with Lastman, Rembrandt returned to Leiden and set up a studio at his parents' home, taking on his first pupils by the time he was twenty. It was about this time that the work of Rembrandt and Jan Lievens, another Leiden artist, attracted the attention of Constantijn Huygens, a young aesthete who served as secretary to the Prince of Orange. "I tell you," wrote Huygens of Rembrandt's *Repentant Judas*, "that no one, not Protogenes, not Apelles, and not Parrhasios, ever conceived, or for that matter could conceive if he came back to life, that which (and I say this with dumb amazement) a youth, a born and bred Dutchman, a miller's son, a smooth-faced boy, has done: joining in the figure of one man so many diverse particulars and expressing so many universals. Truly, my friend Rembrandt, all honor to you."

Still in his early twenties, Rembrandt began traveling to Amsterdam regularly to paint commissioned portraits for prominent clients. His breakthrough came with a group portrait for the Amsterdam Guild of Surgeons, *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Tulp*, completed in 1632. Through *chiaroscuro* and a skillful

rendering of faces and gestures, Rembrandt transformed a stiff, perennial portrait subject—the annual dissection was a festive occasion at the surgeons' guild—into a moment of subdued but intense drama. Much of the picture's power emanates from the meticulously realized cadaver, a recently executed criminal from Leiden whom Rembrandt may have known.



By now the artist was spending less time in Leiden than Amsterdam, having moved into the home of art dealer Hendrick Uylenburgh. It was the socially connected Uylenburgh who arranged many of Rembrandt's early portrait commissions, and who encouraged him to sign canvases with his first name only, both to imitate Leonardo and Michelangelo and to obscure his miller's name. Rembrandt was fast becoming the most sought-after portraitist in Amsterdam, and consequently one of the city's most eligible bachelors. In 1633, he got engaged to the art dealer's twenty-two-year-old cousin, Saskia.

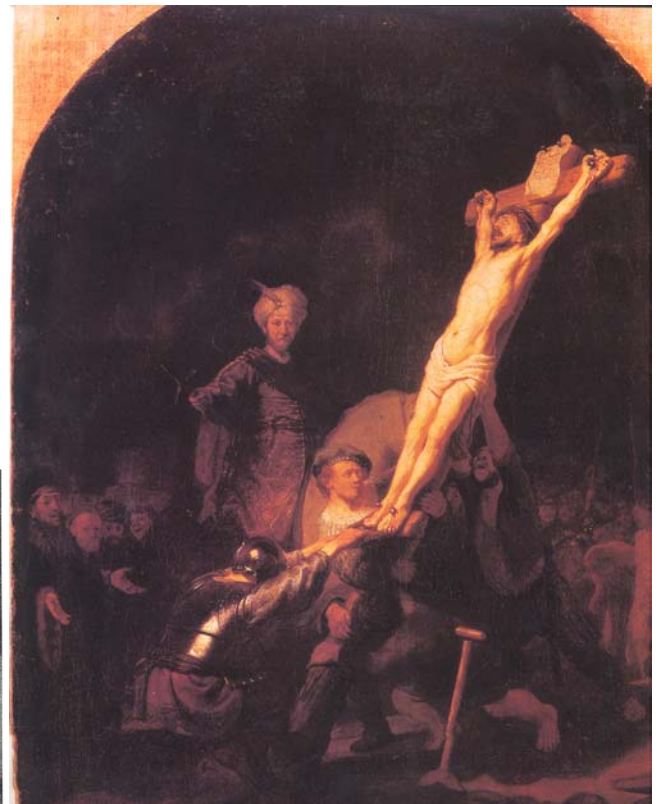
*In forty years of self-portraits, Rembrandt seemed to chronicle every stage of his inner development. But whether a painting like the 1661 Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul (previous page) reveals or conceals is difficult to say. The 1629 Self-Portrait (left) is pure youthful posing.*

Their betrothal marked the beginning of the happiest years of Rembrandt's life. She was a beautiful, fair-haired Frisian maiden from a wealthy and prominent family, quite a prize for a miller's son. He was on the brink of artistic greatness in a city where successful painters could gain acceptance into the highest circles of society. His self-portraits of the period reflect a self-satisfaction bordering on bravado. And he never tired of painting and sketching her: asleep, gazing into his eyes, seated on his lap, dressed as Queen Artemisia, Bathsheba, or the Goddess Flora. No other romance has generated so many outstanding portraits.

With Saskia's generous dowry the couple was well provided for, but like many newlyweds, their expenditures were sometimes extravagant. A seventeenth-century biographer records that Rembrandt was fond of attending auctions, "and here he acquired clothes that were old-fashioned and



disused as long as they struck him as bizarre and picturesque, and those, even though at times they were downright dirty, he hung on the walls of his studio among the beautiful curiosities which he also took pleasure in possessing—arrows, halberds, daggers, sabers, knives, and so on, and innumerable quantities of



**Does the 1635 *Self-Portrait with Saskia* (left) capture the fun-loving couple in hedonistic bliss? Or does it fit into a tradition of moralizing scenes, the Prodigal Son sinking into debauchery? He'd already cast himself as one of Christ's executioners in *The Raising of the Cross*. (above)**

exquisite drawings, engravings, and medals, and every other thing which he thought a painter might ever need." Saskia's family seems to have had other ideas about what a painter might need, and during a dispute over part of the family estate, a relative accused her of "squandering her parents' legacy through flaunting and ostentation." Rembrandt brought suit for libel, asserting that "through the grace of God we are richly provided with goods." He lost the case, but he was doing a bustling trade in portraits, and there seemed no end in sight.

In 1639, Rembrandt reached a high point in his career. The couple moved into an elegantly appointed merchant's house in the St. Anthonibreestraat, the same street where Lastman and Uylenburgh lived. Rembrandt occupied this house in the heart of Amsterdam's bustling art district for the next twenty years, and it was to be a major cause of his chronic financial difficulties. Though his work was in great demand when he bought the house, he did not have money for a down payment. He was forced to dun his old champion Constantijn Huygens over a series depicting Christ's Passion commissioned for a palace the Prince of Orange was building. Rembrandt had delivered only three of the five promised pictures, and then neglected the project for three years. One week after he signed the contract for his new house, he broke the long silence, writing to Huygens: "My Lord, Because of the great zeal and devotion which I exercised in executing well the two pictures ... they have been finished through studious application, so that I am now also disposed to deliver the same and so to afford pleasure to His Highness, for in these two pictures the greatest and most natural emotion has been expressed, which is also the main reason why they have taken so long to execute."

In fact, these paintings show every sign of being hastily dashed off. The panels—an *Entombment* and a *Resurrection*—were delivered before the paint had a chance to dry, and Rembrandt wasted no time in haranguing Huygens for his money. When the *Resurrection* was restored in 1755, the picture was in such atrocious condition that the restorer wrote on the back, "Rembrandt created me. P. H. Brinckmann brought me back to life." It was the last commission he received from the Stadholder.



*In 1640, he was counted among "the greatest artists of the century," hence the haughtiness of this Self-Portrait at Thirty-four.*

Rembrandt was developing a reputation for being difficult. "This painter was very extravagant in the style of his painting," wrote a seventeenth-century Italian critic, "and evolved in what may be called a wholly personal manner.... It became common knowledge that anyone wishing to be painted by him would have to sit for two or three months, and few were those who had the patience for it." He always kept several paintings in progress at the studio, reworking them compulsively until the impasto was "as thick as half a finger." Rembrandt increasingly ignored popular taste in his portraiture, shrugging off clients' complaints (including a poem from his erstwhile patron Huygens, entitled "Squibs on a Likeness of Jacques de Gheyn That Bears Absolutely No Resemblance to its Model"). He delivered some pictures in a seemingly unfinished state, others he kept for months on end.

"A painting is finished," he is reported to have said, "when the master feels it is finished."

Nowhere in seventeenth-century Europe were artists freer to express their individuality than in Holland. No academy or church dictated an official style, and the Dutch public had an insatiable appetite for paintings (even the lower middle class covered the walls of their homes with original works of art). When the private collector is a painter's chief source of support, he must make some concessions to popular taste or starve. Rembrandt was already an artist of international renown, and he commanded the princely sum of 500 guilders for a portrait. But he required a steady flow of work to support his extravagant lifestyle.

For the next three years he painted few portraits—not even of Saskia and himself—and turned his attention to other sources of income. It was not unusual at that time for Amsterdam artists to make money through all manner of side ventures, from teaching students to pimping for their nude models (the artists' district and the red-light district still overlap today). Rembrandt describes himself in two official documents

as a merchant, but he appears to have been an inept businessman. He made bad investments in overseas trade, and though records show that he managed to sell paintings by Rubens, Giorgione, and Palma Vecchio, he was keeping too many works and losing money. He began entering into shady arrangements with other dealers, dishonestly bidding works up for them at auction, or making illicit copies of engravings. In 1640, he received a commission for what has become his most famous painting, a portrait of a militia company that came to be known as *The Night Watch*. He worked on the monumental project feverishly, meanwhile allowing his studio of apprentices to produce works that bore his signature. This practice has become a connoisseur's nightmare, but was perfectly acceptable according to guild regulations. We do not know, however, if the master informed his clients—as he was supposed to—which pictures he had actually painted.

The reception of *The Night Watch* was less than ecstatic. (Though it was not, as legend had it, a total disaster; nor was it ever a night scene, just very dirty for much of its life.) The picture's ambitious composition and extreme *chiaroscuro* left the faces of some members of the company obscured. Rembrandt catches the troops at the moment they are being dismissed, leaving an unforgettable impression of their purposeful chaos, but the picture was probably more satisfying to the artist than to the patron.

When Rembrandt resumed his portraits of Saskia, they were less joyful. A sketch of his wife with a baby in her arms may have commemorated the child's death, for none of the couple's first three children survived more than a few weeks. Then there was the wrenching etching of Saskia ill—all rough cross-hatches and haggard cheeks. Late in 1641, Rembrandt's fourth child, Titus, was born. He lived longer than his siblings, but when he reached the age of nine months, Saskia, aged twenty-nine, died.

We don't know for sure the cause of her death, but its effect was clear. Rembrandt was devastated, and became increasingly bitter and withdrawn. When people wanted to visit his studio, he discouraged them, saying, "the smell of the paints would bother you." His painting, too, took on a moody, introspective quality. Public taste was shifting, and Rembrandt would never again be the toast of the town. But as his society portraits tailed off, he achieved some of his most startling and enduring work.

It was hard to work with no one to care for his infant son, however. He hired a wet nurse, Geertje Dix, "a little farm woman rather small of person but well made in appearance and plump of body." He sought relief from his grief by sleeping with her and presenting her with jewelry that had belonged to his wife. Saskia's will stipulated that if he remarried, her considerable inheritance would pass to Titus, so despite what he may have promised Geertje, he had no intention of marrying her. Some years later, younger Hendrickje Stoffels arrived in the center of Rembrandt's affections. Geertje moved out in 1648, but soon brought suit for breach of promise, producing as evidence a ring of Saskia's that Rembrandt had given her. The artist must have been ashamed, as he did not show up for trial on three separate occasions. The estranged couple finally agreed to an annual payment of 200 guilders, but when Geertje, unable to face Rembrandt, sent her brother to collect the first payment, the men conspired to gather testimony from Geertje's neighbors that she was living immorally. She was summarily committed to the Women's House of Correction in Gouda for twelve years. A friend of Geertje's is reported to have told Rembrandt she would get Geertje out. "He said he would not dare if he were her, and raising his finger to her he threatened: 'Go there and you'll be sorry.'" Geertje was released after five years, and again brought action against Rembrandt, but died before she could see it through.

Meanwhile, he and Hendrickje were themselves charged with living in sin. She was brought before the Calvinist church council and denied communion for "giving herself over to harlotry with Rembrandt the painter." Rembrandt had never officially been a member of any church, but in the chaste state of Holland, the charge hurt his reputation and reduced his opportunities for patronage. Had they married, the entire matter could have been cleared up, but Saskia's will made this financially impossible. Debts were mounting, and for the next few years he and Hendrickje devised various schemes to pay them off, including an auction of Rembrandt's possessions. Besides costumes and armor, his collection at that time included bamboo pipes, Venetian glass, death masks, classical statuary, and the works of Raphael, Mantegna, Giorgione (by his own attribution), Durer, Cranach, and Carracci. Titus managed to buy back the ebony-framed mirror his father used for self-portraits, but dropped it on the way home from the auction. All these sacrifices were in vain; Rembrandt declared insolvency and in 1660 moved his family from their grand dwelling to simple quarters on the other side of town.

One of the artist's last important commissions came to him only because a former student died before completing it. The new Town Hall was to be decorated with scenes from the revolt of the Batavians, under

the leader Julius Civilis, against the Romans. The Dutch saw this war as the precursor of their own recent victory over Spain. Rembrandt's *The Oath of Julius Civilis* was a precursor of much more; the picture was simply ahead of its time. Instead of the idealized patriotic scene his patrons expected, Rembrandt produced a chilling, primeval scene of grotesque faces and crossed swords. Slathering paint on with a palette knife, he mimicked the barbaric scene he was depicting. The impasto, two inches thick in places, takes on a life of its own; theorists of abstraction have made much of this work. Rembrandt's brutal tableau may be unbearably intense, but it is also historically accurate, down to Julius's empty left eye socket, which bores into the viewer's. The painting that nowadays haunts Stockholm's National Museum has been radically cut down. Rembrandt was forced to make it smaller so he could sell it, for the town fathers wanted no part of the picture. "If I want to give my mind diversion," the artist said, "it is not honor I seek, but freedom."

In Rembrandt's final year, financial pressures forced him to sell Saskia's grave. The plague took Hendrickje, and the two self-portraits he painted before he died depict a man indomitable but numb. For centuries since, critics have mocked him, praised him, built careers on his work. Critics come and go—the Rembrandt Research Project, too, shall pass—but Rembrandt endures: vexing, perplexing, and forever captivating.

### Mirror, Mirror

*Artists have always held a mirror up to nature, but Rembrandt was the first who dared hold a mirror up to himself. The mirror he used had a fine ebony frame, and must have cost at least fifteen guilders. (When his possessions were auctioned to stave off bankruptcy, his son bought it back for him, but it cracked when he was bringing it home.) Rembrandt liked to stand before the glass dressed in fantastic outfits—gorgets, chains, embroidered robes, plumed caps, silk turbans—bought on his*

*uncontrollable collecting sprees. The etched self-portraits on this page are among his most fanciful—less expensive to make and more spontaneous than his labored oil paintings. Rembrandt managed to escape service in Holland's Civil Guard, but here he wears armor and brandishes a sword. In others he fashions himself as beggar, Renaissance courtier (his bulbous nose slimmed down), saint, even artist. Mirrors were the most popular luxury for the middle class in seventeenth-century Holland, but Calvinist preachers denounced them as "tempters of devilish vanity." There is something romantically rebellious about this self-obsessed genius constantly staring at his own reflection. The pictures are so infused with feeling that we are sorely tempted to interpret them, but beware—they may conceal as much as they reveal. Sometimes he idealized himself, sometimes his eye was unremittingly realistic. This much is certain: while there were self-portraits before Rembrandt, they were always mired in the physical. The best of Rembrandt's self-portraits delve past the flesh to the core of the spirit.*

#### ROBERT KENNER

Rembrandt's first important sale was a self-portrait that ended up in the hands of King Charles I. Others went to the German emperor and the French court. As many times as he rendered his own face, no self-portraits turned up in the inventory of paintings at the end of his life.

