



REMBRANDT VAN RIJN (LEIDEN 1606-AMSTERDAM 1669)

**Britain's Love of Rembrandt.** Based on **Rembrandt's Light**, Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2 Oct 2019 - 2 Feb 2020 and the book **Rembrandt: Britain's Discovery of the Master**, which was based on an exhibition at the Scottish National Gallery which ended 14 October 2018. See *The Guardian* review

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/jul/05/rembrandt-britains-discovery-master-review>.

- This talk tells the story of Rembrandt's life at the same time as explaining how the British learnt to love Rembrandt over a 250 year period. Rembrandt's work is not shown chronologically in the order of creation but to explain how Rembrandt went from being unknown to the most sought after artist in England.
- In the second part I continue into the twentieth century and show how Rembrandt has continued to have an influence on modern artist.
- Rembrandt is one of the most famous and expertly researched visual artists in history. The number of painting he produced has been reduced from about 600 to 300 over recent years. His self-portraits were copied by his students as part of their

training and the number of authentic self-portraits has been reduced from about 90 to 40. There are some 2,000 drawings but some experts put the number of authentic drawings as low as about 75.

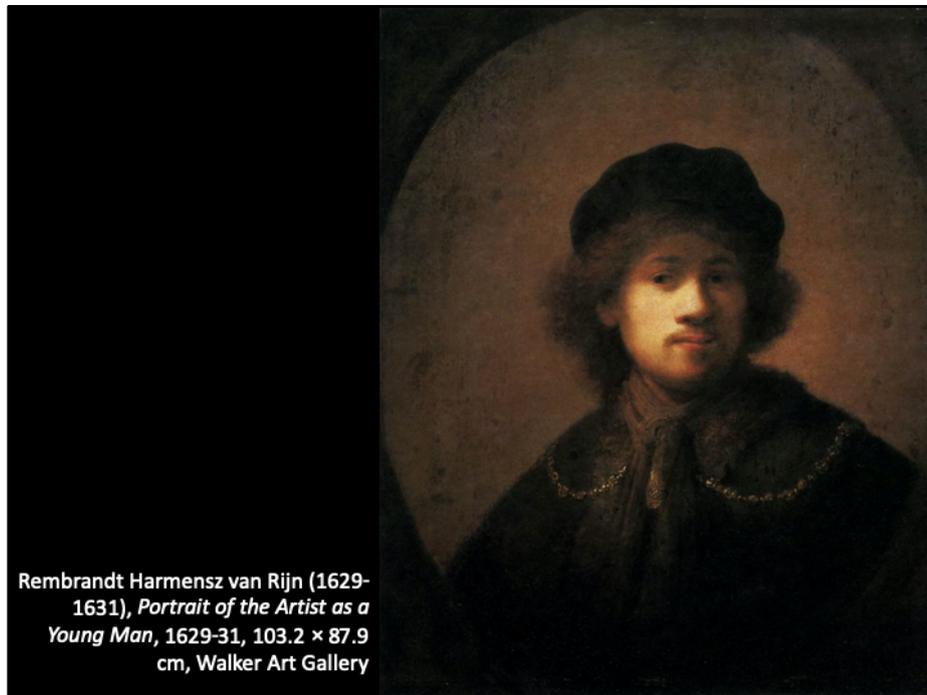
- The most significant characteristic of his work is chiaroscuro derived from Caravaggio and his Dutch followers. He often angled sitters so the ridge of the nose is the dividing line between the bright prominent nose and the dark shadow of the side of the face. His work is often lively and full of energy compared with his contemporaries and his deep compassion for mankind shines through. His drawing style has been compared with Chinese masters because of its formal clarity and vitality.
- His subject matter included portraits, landscapes and narrative painting often based on Bible stories. His style changed over the years from a smooth illusionistic representation to a rough treatment in which form was suggested by the texture of the paint surface. In Leiden, his paintings were small but rich in detail. When he moved to Amsterdam, he began to paint biblical scenes in high contrast and large format seeking to emulate Rubens. In the 1630s he painted a few landscapes and many etchings of landscapes. From the 1640s his work became more sombre possible because of his personal circumstances. In the late 1640s his work was very varied, and he used frontal lighting and saturated areas of colour, figures were placed parallel to the picture plane and his brushwork became freer, perhaps influenced by Venetian painting. In the 1650s colours became richer and brush strokes more pronounced. He rejected the fine, detailed work that was then fashionable perhaps under the influence of Titian. Contemporary accounts sometimes mention the coarseness of his work. His paintwork became thick, layered and apparently haphazard but the structure suggests the form.
- Rembrandt produced etchings from 1626 to 1660 when he was forced to sell his printing press and he is regarded as one of the masters of the art. It was through his prints that the British first fell in love with his work.

### **Bio:Rembrandt**

- **1606 Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn** was born in Leiden, the ninth child of a wealthy miller.
- **1620** enrolled at the University of Leiden although he was inclined towards painting and so was apprenticed to Swanenburgh for three years.
- **1624-25** started his own workshop and in 1627 started to accept students including Gerrit Dou. Rembrandt never left the Dutch Republic.
- **1629** he was discovered by Constantijn Huygens who obtained important commissions for him.
- **1631** moved to Amsterdam and became a successful portrait painter
- **1634** married Saskia van Uylenburgh his dealer's cousin. He joined the local guild of painters and took on more students including Ferdinand Bol.
- **1635** moved to a fashionable area and in **1639** to a prominent newly built house.

The mortgage of 13,000 guilders was to cause his later financial problems. He should have been able to easily pay off the mortgage, but his spending always kept pace with his income. In 1635 their son Rumbertus died aged two months and in 1639 their daughter Cornelia died aged just three weeks. In 1640 a second daughter called Cornelia died aged one month.

- **1641** a son Titus was born and lived to adulthood. In 1642 Saskia died shortly after his birth of tuberculosis. Geertje Dirckx was hired as Titus' caretaker and nurse and became Rembrandt's lover. She later charged Rembrandt with breach of promise and was awarded 200 guilders a year. For 12 years Rembrandt tried to have her committed.
- Later in the **1640s** Rembrandt began a relationship with the much younger Hendrickje Stoffels, who had been his maid. In 1654 they had a daughter, Cornelia, and she was charged with acting as a whore. They did not marry as Saskia's will left money to Titus which had to be paid if Rembrandt married.
- **1656** a court arrangement avoided bankruptcy and he had to sell his large art collection whose purchase had caused his financial problems. He did not raise as much as he hoped and had to sell his house and printing-press. The artists' guild introduced a new rule that artists in his position could not trade so Hendrickje and Titus set up a company and employed him.
- **1661** the new company was commissioned to produce a work for the city hall but it was rejected. Rembrandt was still fulfilling major commissions and when Cosimo III de' Medici came to Amsterdam he visited him.
- **1663** Hendrickje died and in **1668** Titus died leaving a baby daughter.
- **1669** Rembrandt died and was buried as a poor man.



Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1629-1631), *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 1629-31, 103.2 × 87.9 cm, Walker Art Gallery

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### **Rembrandt's Fame in Britain 1630-1900**

- Rembrandt spent all his life in the Dutch Republic but he became known throughout Europe in his lifetime. His reputation in Britain is however, poorly recorded. King Charles I (r. 1625-49) collected Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) and Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641) but seems to have taken little notice of Rembrandt although by chance he became the first collector to own a Rembrandt outside the Dutch Republic. This is one of the three in the Royal Collection recorded between 1637 and 1639 when a meticulous inventory was made. They were given to the King by Robert Kerr who visited the Netherlands in 1629.

### **Rembrandt's Life**

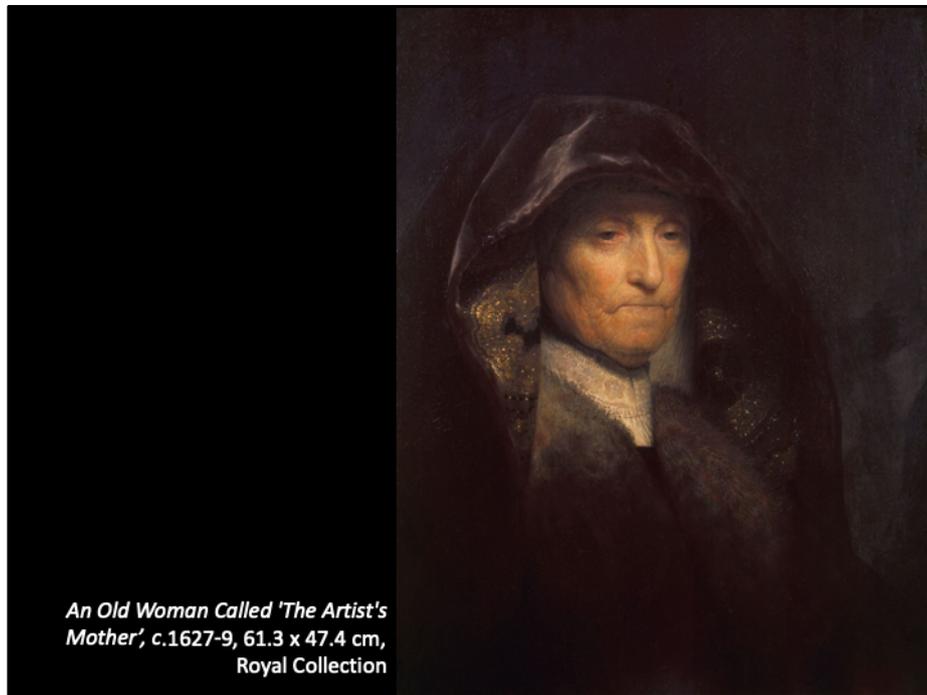
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### **The Portrait**

- Rembrandt used his early self-portraits to explore the effects of light and to experiment with facial gesture.
- The Walker Art Gallery's 'Self-portrait as a Young Man' is one of the best documented of Rembrandt's self-portraits. Although it is not dated we know fairly well when it was painted, between 1629-31, who first owned it and even under what circumstances and for whom it might have been commissioned. Rarely is there this amount of documented information for the other 80 or more self-portraits that Rembrandt produced in painted and print form over the course of his life.
- Rembrandt's earliest images of himself, produced in the late 1620s when he was still in Leiden, were small. They were often tiny etched prints in which he used his own features to practise varying facial expressions and gestures and capture different moods and characters. He would then insert these into the narrative history paintings that formed the core of his work at the time.
- Rembrandt realised that the essence of creating an action picture was to introduce reactions. His only recorded statement about art was that he sought in his work to create: "the greatest and most natural [e]motion".
- This self-portrait was the first painting by Rembrandt to enter a British collection. It was presented to Charles I in the early 1630s by one of his courtiers, Sir Robert Kerr, Earl of Ancrum. Sir Robert had acquired it after a diplomatic visit to The Hague in 1629, along with another painting by Rembrandt 'An old woman: 'The Artist's Mother'', which is still in the Royal Collection today.
- The painting remained in the palace at Whitehall until the sale of the Royal Collection after the king's execution in 1649.



*An Old Woman Called 'The Artist's Mother', c.1627-9, 61.3 x 47.4 cm, Royal Collection*

- This is a study of old age by the young aspiring painter. It was acquired by Sir Robert Kerr, Earl of Ancrum along with the previous painting and presented to Charles I.
- This was painted towards the end of his time in Leiden (c. 1629) just before he moved to Amsterdam. Note his control of the detail, the taut mouth, the prominent nose and the sunken eyes. The figure is wearing a deep purple hood with a fur mantle over a dark dress. The control of light as it falls across the face from the right is masterly.
- “Rembrandt often used his mother, Neeltgen Willensdr, as a model at the outset of his career both in paintings and prints, but not strictly in terms of conventional portraiture. ‘The Artist’s Mother’ falls into the category of studies of elderly people usually portrayed at bust or half-length and known as 'tronies' (a generic term for ‘face’). Such paintings move beyond the realistic imitation of old age to become exercises in imagination incorporating the use of costume and vivid lighting effects. As such, young artists undertook these paintings in order to establish their reputations and accordingly they were much sought after by collectors.” (Royal Collection website)

## References

<https://www.rct.uk/collection/405000/an-old-woman-called-the-artists-mother>



*The Three Crosses*, 1653, 37.7 × 43.6 cm, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

*The Three Crosses*, 1653, drypoint on vellum, 37.7 × 43.6 cm, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

- Two portraits of a British couple were painted by Rembrandt in 1634 and were brought back by them to Norfolk.
- In the mid-seventeenth century a collection of paintings including a Rembrandt was imported to Edinburgh.
- Another Rembrandt was purchased for £20 and is still at Kingston Lacy in Dorset but is now known to be a copy.
- Four drawings of English views are known but Rembrandt never visited England and so the authorship is doubted.
- Rembrandt's fame in England in the seventeenth century rests on his etchings. The diarist John Evelyn mentions the 'incomparable Rembrandt'.
- In 1700 Samuel Pepys, who had a large collection of etchings, had eight prints by or after Rembrandt. However, none of the prints are signed and Pepys seemed to be unaware of the artist.
- Hans Sloane, whose vast collection became the cornerstone of the British Museum in 1753 owned a number of Rembrandt prints. They came from the enormous

collection of William Courten whose had a collection of 10,000 prints in 1689. When it was sold it included the entire oeuvre of Rembrandt prints, '420 Figures'.

### **The Image**

- Drypoint leaves a every delicate line that is quickly worn down by the pressure of printing. Rembrandt therefore reworked the plate and this resulted in very different images. This is the only known version of this impression printed on vellum (calfskin) and although it does not absorb ink as well as paper this creates a blurred effect that adds its own atmosphere and drama.

### **The Bible Story**

- "Here the subject is the moment of Christ's death, with the 'good' thief to his right lit by heavenly light, which also illuminates the group below, including Christ's mother and the standing figure of St John. To the left, the centurion has dismounted from his horse and kneels before the cross: 'And it was about the sixth hour; and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst. And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said this, he gave up the ghost. Now when the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, "Certainly this was a righteous man." And all the people that came together to that site, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts and returned.' (Luke 23: 44-8)" (Fitzwilliam Museum website)



*Belshazzar's Feast*, c. 1636-38, 167.6 x 209.2 cm, National Gallery

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### **The Craze for Rembrandt**

- Towards the end of the seventeenth century there was an increasing demand for coloured Rembrandt pictures.
- The eighteenth century saw a constantly growing European art market centred on London. Rembrandt's reputation gradually rose out of a growing demand for Italian and to a lesser extent French art with leading artists Raphael (1483-1520), Titian (c. 1485/90-1576), Correggio (1489-1520) and Claude (1604/5-1682).
- In 1706 Roger de Piles's *The Art of Painting* was translated from French. In it he criticises Rembrandt's lack of interest in the ancients but praises his colouring, chiaroscuro and particularly his portraits for which British collectors would develop a lasting love.
- Rembrandt's drawings were the first love among collectors, especially artist collectors and it was not until the 1720s that the first paintings began to appear in Britain. These included *Self-portrait* 1669 (National Gallery), *The Circumcision* 1661 (National Gallery of Art, Washington), *Belshazzar's Feast* c. 1636-38 (National Gallery) and *Abraham's Sacrifice* 1635 (Hermitage, St Petersburg).
- *Belshazzar's Feast* was owned by the Earl of Derby at Knowsley Hall from 1736.

The painting was barely known and was not regarded as a masterpiece. When it was exhibited in 1857 a critic wrote "The whole picture, notwithstanding the boldness of the attitudes, is tame, and inadequate in execution". The public and critics preferred the grandeur ideas of works such as John Martin's *Belshazzar's Feast*. The assessment changed in the second half of the twentieth century and it was acquired by the National Gallery in 1964.

- Rembrandt was trying to establish himself as a painter of large history paintings and the techniques he used do not compare with his other works, for example, the range of pigments he used was wider than in his other works.

### **Rembrandt's Life**

- **1634** married Saskia van Uylenburgh his dealer's cousin. He joined the local guild of painters and took on more students including Ferdinand Bol.
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### **Background**

- The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar looted the Temple in Jerusalem and has stolen the sacred artefacts such as golden cups. His son Belshazzar used these cups for a great feast where the hand of God appeared and wrote the inscription on the wall prophesying the downfall of Belshazzar's reign. The text on the wall says "mene, mene, tekel, upharsin". Biblical scholars interpret this to mean "God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; your kingdom is given to the Medes and Persians"
- Rembrandt lived in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam and obtained the Hebrew characters from a book owned by a friend. He mistranscribed one of the characters and arranged them in right to left columns rather than right to left rows.



*A Woman in Bed (Sarah)*, c. 1647, 81.1 × 67.8 cm, National Gallery of Scotland

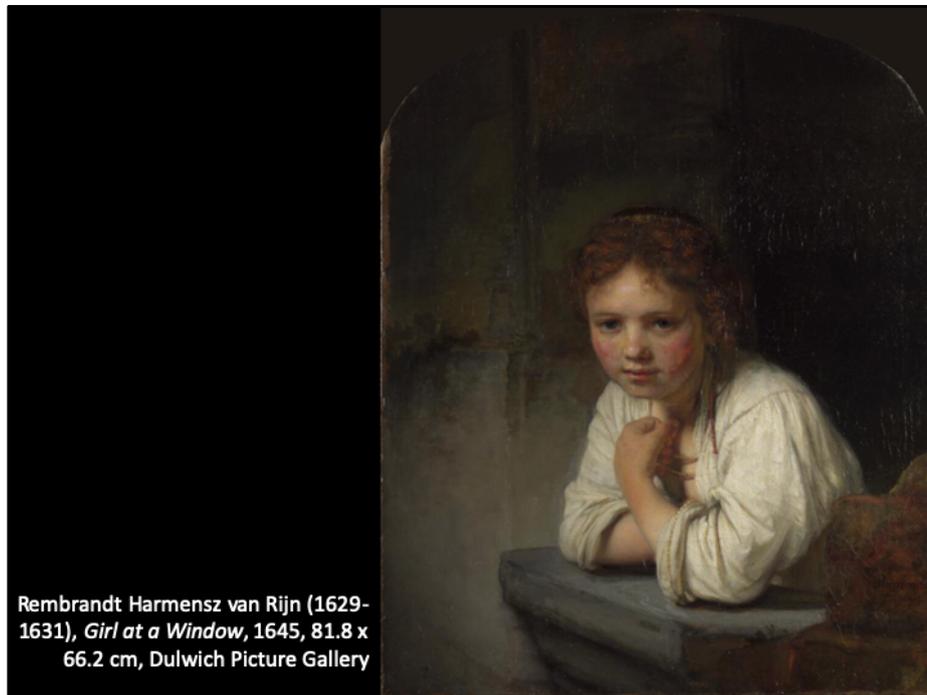
- By the middle of the eighteenth century a Rembrandt mania was in full swing particularly regarding his etchings. Printmakers found that mezzotint (whose invention is sometimes erroneously credited to Rembrandt) was particularly well suited to capturing his 'dark manner'.
- He became so popular that he became the subject of satire and there was a large market in fake Rembrandts. William Hogarth (1697-1764) criticized him 'Design'd and Etch'd in the ridiculous manner of Rembrandt'. One burlesque comedy play is about the corrupt art trade and an auctioneer who sells forged Rembrandts for ten guineas when five guineas was an enormous price for a print.
- Horace Walpole comments on the madness to have a Rembrandt print and that his 'scratches ... sell for thirty guineas'.
- By 1770 it was observed that 'genuine works of this master are rarely to be met with, and whenever they are to be purchased they afford incredible prices'.
- At this time British collectors bought *A Woman in Bed (Sarah)*, c. 1647 (National Gallery of Scotland) and *Girl at a Window* (next slide).

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### ***A Women in Bed (Sarah)***

- "The pulled-back curtain and the woman's pose make the painted image appear tantalisingly real. The illusion is enhanced by the strong lighting directed from the left and the contrasting deep shadows. While Rembrandt may have used one of his intimate circle as a model, the painting was not necessarily a portrait. The golden headdress, rich bedding and proximity to a painting by Rembrandt's teacher, Lastman, indicate that the subject was probably Sarah, wife of Tobias. According to the Old Testament Apocryphal Book of Tobit, Tobias successfully defeated a demon who had killed her seven previous husbands on their wedding nights. This may be Sarah willing Tobias to win." (National Gallery of Scotland website)



Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1629-1631), *Girl at a Window*, 1645, 81.8 x 66.2 cm, Dulwich Picture Gallery

- “Painted in 1645 when Rembrandt was 39, this painting falls somewhere between genre and portraiture. The girl’s identity remains uncertain; in the past she has been described as a courtesan, a Jewish bride or an historical or Biblical figure. It is more widely accepted that she is a servant girl; her rosy, tanned complexion along with her brown arms implies she worked outdoors. Leaning on a ledge, she stares directly out of the painting while fiddling with her necklace, either a gold chain or a cord, like that seen around the cuffs and along the seams of her loose chemise. She also wears a small headdress, possibly a type worn in North Holland, and her hair is tied back with red string.
- A frequently quoted account by the French art theorist and early owner of the work, Roger de Piles (1635-1709), claimed that Rembrandt put this painting in his window and passers-by mistook it for a real girl. While this story was not strictly true, it served as a general comment on Rembrandt's ability to create realistic portraits that could seduce his viewers. Such trompe l’oeil paintings, where the subject seemed to protrude out of the picture frame, became popular in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and Rembrandt continued to use and adapt this pose throughout his

career.

- The confident brushstrokes and impasto paint is typical of Rembrandt's style of the 1640s. During the recent conservation of this painting, the discoloured varnish was carefully removed, revealing a bold mixture of colours in the model's face. Rembrandt often applied his paint with palette knives as well as his fingers." (Dulwich Picture Gallery, website)

### **Rembrandt's Life**

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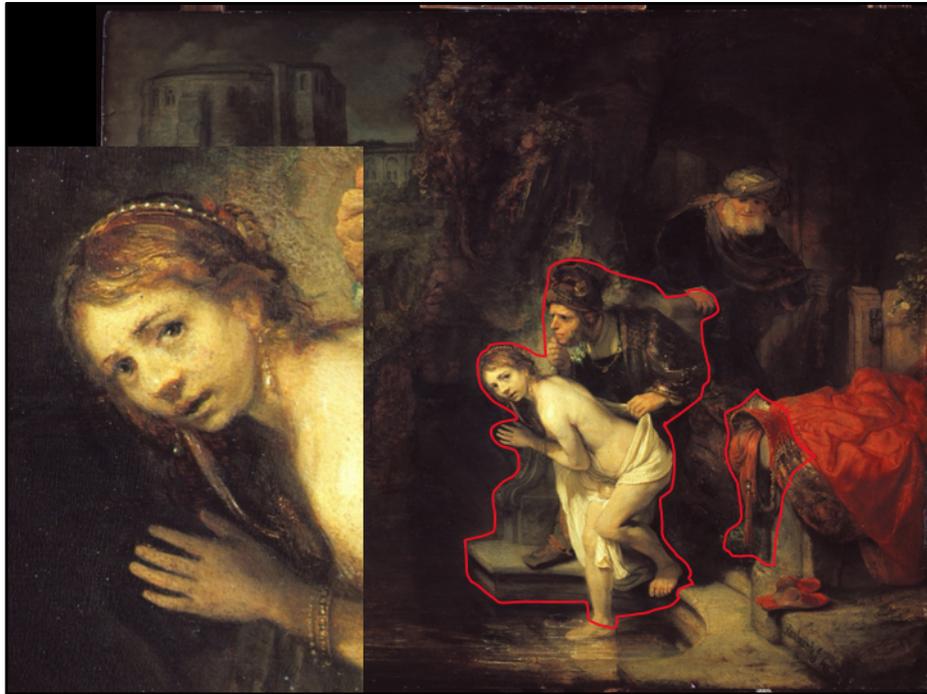


*The Shipbuilder and his Wife: Jan Rijcksen (1560/2-1637) and his Wife, Griet Jans, 1633, 113.8 x 169.8 cm, Royal Collection*

- By 1780 the interest in mezzotints of Rembrandt's paintings had peaked. Artists were inspired by Rembrandt's use of colouring and chiaroscuro in his paintings and the artist John Opie (1761-1807) was known as the 'English Rembrandt'.
- Above all it was the first president of the Royal Academy Joshua Reynolds who collected Rembrandt and was influenced by his technique although he was seldom mentioned in his lectures (the *Discourses*) and when he did it was as an example to avoid. When he visited the Netherlands he saw *The Night Watch* and described it as 'the worst of him I ever saw'.
- By the end of eighteenth century the market was flooded with fake Rembrandt's but it was the time of the French Revolution of major works of Rembrandt from distinguished collections were bought by British collectors. George IV (r.1820-30) became the first British monarch to actively collect works by Rembrandt. He bought *The Shipbuilder and His Wife* in 1814 for a staggering 5,000 guineas. Also purchased at this time were *The Mill*, the *Bridgewater Self-portrait* and *Titus at his Desk*.

*The Shipbuilder and His Wife*

- The pair were not identified until 1970. He was the master shipbuilder of the Dutch East India Company.



*Susanna and the Elders*, 1647, oil on panel, 76.6 × 92.8 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

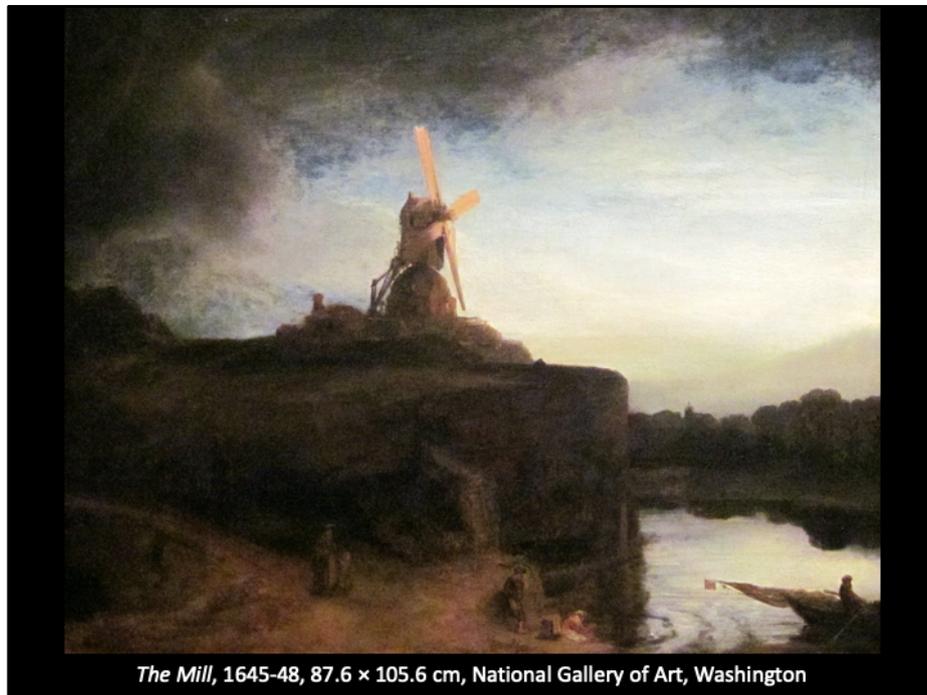
- *Susanna and the Elders* is a scene from the Bible that many painters have represented. Some artists show her as more compliant than others and she is sometimes shown completely naked. Rembrandt shows her partly draped and turning away from them and looking at us for help. One of the judges is threatening her and trying to remove her clothing.
- I have an enlargement of Susanna's face so that her expression can be seen more clearly as one of fear and desperation.
- Interestingly, X-ray analysis in 2015 showed the painting underwent extensive alterations. Pigments were also found that did not exist in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and some parts are not in Rembrandt's style. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century parts of the painting had been painted over, entire sections washed out using solvents and repainted. The culprit is believed to be Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), President of the Royal Academy, who collected Rembrandt. It is now known he frequently altered paintings in his possession and he owned this painting at the time. We have no ideas of his motivation, he obviously thought he was improving the painting. The areas marked are original Rembrandt.

### **The Story of Susanna from Daniel**

- A rich man called Jo'akim married a very beautiful woman called Susanna. Two judges frequently held law suits at Jo'akim's house and lusted after his wife. She frequently walked in her garden and one day they returned and hid in the garden. Susanna decided to bathe and asked her two maids to fetch oil and ointments and lock the garden gate. When they had gone the two elders came out of hiding and threatened her that if she did not have sex with them they would tell everyone they had seen her having sex with a young man and she would be executed. She refused to comply and the next day a trial was caused and she was found guilty based on their false testimony. A young man called Daniel, guided by God, saw she was innocent and called for a retrial. He separated the two judges and questioned them and they each gave a different account of the previous day. They were found guilty and executed and Susanna was seen to be innocent.

### **References**

- <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/x-ray-analysis-reveals-joshua-reynolds-repainted-rembrandt-masterpiece-273509>



*The Mill*, 1645-48, 87.6 × 105.6 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington

*The Mill*, 1645-48, 87.6 × 105.6 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington

- Major collectors continued to collect Rembrandt prints during the nineteenth century and it was not until the end of the century that a considerable number of Rembrandt paintings, drawings and prints were sold abroad.
- As the need to follow academic tradition became less important and its strict rules were relaxed **Rembrandt became universally accepted as a genius**. His **vulgar subject matter** and **strict adherence to nature** rather than the classical and Italian tradition became part of his legend as the 'gigantic but barbarous genius' (Henry Fuseli, 1802). William Hazlitt (1778-1830) claimed '**if ever there was a man of genius, he was one**' but some thought Rembrandt had '**burglarously entered the Temple of Fame by the window**' (John Opie).
- The Romantic period was a time when the solitary artistic genius was idealised and Rembrandt became an early example of the heroic genius. His life was dramatized and his work related to his personal circumstances rather than the social and cultural circumstances of the period. He became the subject of many paintings depicting dramatic scenes from his life.
- "*The Mill* is one of those few paintings that are significant not only because they are beautiful but also because they have **profoundly influenced the history of**

**taste.** As part of important 18th– and 19th–century collections, *The Mill* was well known to connoisseurs and artists who valued it as one of Rembrandt's greatest creations. The romantic aura of the scene, with the dramatic silhouette of the mill seen against the stormy sky, captured their imagination. Many stories and myths circulated about the painting, among them that this was a picture of Rembrandt's father's mill. Others saw the dark, threatening sky as a foreshadowing of Rembrandt's severe financial difficulties of the mid–1650s." (National Gallery of Art, Washington, website)

### **Provenance**

- by 1723 : Philippe d'Orléans (1674-1723), Paris
- Unknown date: inherited by Louis Philippe d'Orléans (1747-1793), Paris
- Unknown date: acquired by T.M. Slade, London
- Unknown date: acquired by William Smith, Norwich
- by 1824 : Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, 3rd Marquess of Lansdowne (1680-1863), Bowood Hall, Wiltshire
- 1863: inherited by Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, 4th Marquess of Lansdowne (1816-1866) (?)
- 1866 (?): inherited by Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, 5th Marquess of Lansdowne (1845-1927)
- 1911: purchased by Peter Arrell Brown Widener (1834-1915), Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania
- 1942: given to National Gallery of Art, Washington by Estate of Peter Arrell Brown Widener



*Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, 1644, oil on oak panel, 83.8 x 65.4 cm, National Gallery

*Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, 1644, oil on oak panel, 83.8 x 65.4 cm, National Gallery

- The National Gallery, London, was founded in 1824 following the purchase of John Julius Angerstein's collection of 38 paintings. This included two Rembrandts (one being *The Woman taken in Adultery* 1644) and the National Gallery acquired another thirteen before 1900. It now has twenty-six.
- The story is from the gospel of St. John, chapter 8. The Pharisees, attempting to outwit Christ, ask him if she should be stoned to death according to the law. He replies, "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone". The audience was confounded and the woman was freed and Christ's parting remark was "Go and sin no more".

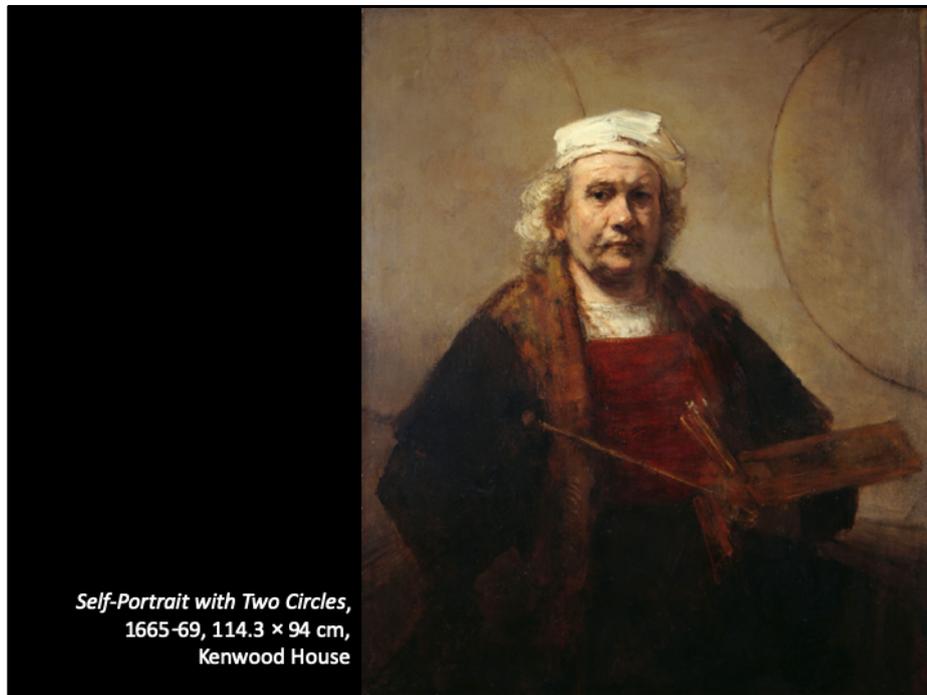


*Christ Preaching (The Hundred Guilder Print)*, c. 1646-1650, etching, drypoint and burin on paper, 28 cm × 39.4 cm, Rijksmuseum

Major exhibition 1898

- *The Hundred Guilder Print* is an etching by Rembrandt. The etching's popular name derives from the large sum of money supposedly once paid for an example. It is also called *Christ healing the sick*, *Christ with the Sick around Him*, *Receiving Little Children*, or *Christ preaching*, since the print depicts multiple events from Matthew 19, including Christ healing the sick, debating with scholars and calling on children to come to him.
- The rich young man mentioned in the chapter is leaving through the gateway on the right. The young man was rich and had followed all the commandments but Jesus said to him he must sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor. Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

- Rembrandt worked on the *Hundred Guilder Print* in stages throughout the 1640s, and it was the "critical work in the middle of his career", from which his final etching style began to emerge. He probably completed it in 1649. Although the print only survives in two states, the first very rare, evidence of much reworking can be seen underneath the final print and many drawings survive for elements of it.
- Wieseman describes the etching as a "technical tour de force, incorporating an enormous diversity of printmaking styles and techniques":
- The group of figures at the left side of the print, for example, is deftly indicated with a minimum of lightly bitten lines; in contrast, the evocative richness of the blacks and the depth of tone in the right half of the print represents Rembrandt's experimental competition with the newly discovered mezzotint technique



*Self-Portrait with Two Circles,*  
1665-69, 114.3 × 94 cm,  
Kenwood House

*Self-Portrait with Two Circles*, 1665-69, 114.3 × 94 cm, Kenwood House. A late self portrait by Rembrandt, from the period when he had lost most of his fortune.

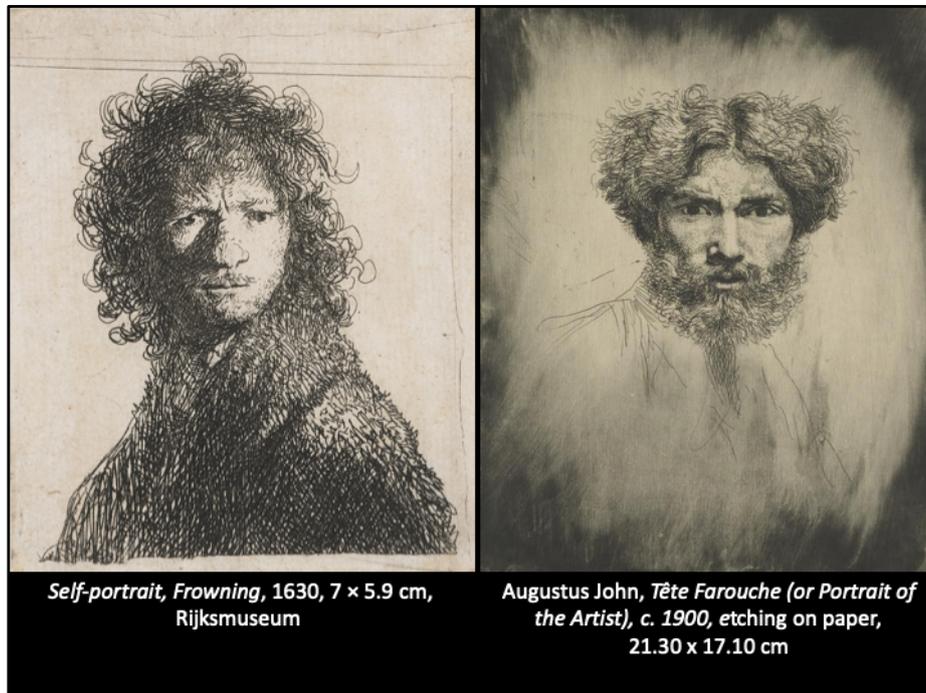
- I complete this summary of Rembrandt's history through British collecting with one of the world's greatest masterpieces now at Kenwood House in north London.
- In the portrait, Rembrandt has his hand in his pocket and holds his palette, brushes, and maulstick in his other hand. The canvas on which he is working is reduced to a sliver at the top right of the picture. He wears a tabbard, a fur-trimmed gown worn by many artists of the period, and a simple white lined cap painted with a handful of strokes of the brush. He appears confident of his ability and his legacy although at this stage he worked for his son Titus to escape his creditors. He has sold his house and even his wife's grave to pay them. His mistress, Hendrickje Stoffels died of the plague two years before. X-ray analysis shows that he originally appeared to be painting with his left hand and was holding the brushes and palette in his right. Rembrandt was not left handed so it seems he failed to reverse what he saw in the mirror, a strange mistake given that he painted over 40 self-portraits in his lifetime. In switching the brushes to the other hand he obscured his right hand completely and turned his body more full on creating a stronger composition and a more powerful self-image.

- The painting is notable for its monumentality and the enigmatic background consisting of a shallow space with the fragments of two circles. There have been many interpretations of the two circles. In 1836 when it was in the collection of the Marquess of Lansdowne in Berkeley Square the circles were described simply as geometric figures and as such they do strengthen the composition which is unusually wide for a Rembrandt portrait. In the original composition his left hand was holding a brush and was raised as if painting. This device completed the right side of the painting and meant the circle was not necessary to fill the space. Scholars have not been satisfied with this simple explanation and have suggested they are cabalistic signs representing the perfection of God. A more likely association was the well known story of how Giotto (1266/7-1337) provided the Pope proof of his artistic ability by drawing a perfect circle with a single sweep of his brush. This story is from Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Painters* (1550) and may have been a reference to the legend of how the classical painter Apelles used a perfect circle to demonstrate his artistic ability. Another interpretation is that it is an unfinished suggestion of a famous map of the world published in 1663 and it is therefore a reference to the universality of his genius.
- When Joshua Reynolds saw this painting in the Danoot Collection in Brussels in 1781 he noted the 'very unfinished manner' but by 1850 when the Director of the Royal Gallery in Berlin saw it in the Lansdowne collection he did not consider it unfinished but noted the 'careful treatment'. Unusually for a self-portrait the painting is not signed or dated which indicates it may be unfinished or did he leave off the signature to create a feeling of immediacy as if he were still painting the work. Or was it that he was so well known at this period that he didn't feel he needed to sign the work. He was a celebrity in Amsterdam and described as 'the wonder of the age'.
- *Self Portrait with Two Circles* is one of more than 40 self-portraits Rembrandt painted (as well as a similar number in other media) and one of a number of depictions in several media dating at least from 1629 that show him at work drawing, etching, or painting. He wears a fur-lined robe, beneath which is a red garment. On his head is a white hat, similar to that worn in several other late self-portraits.
- Unlike other late self-portraits, in *Self Portrait with Two Circles*, Rembrandt, with one hand on his hip, appears confrontational and even defiant. The impression is that of a master solemnly asserting his genius



## REMBRANDT'S INFLUENCE

- The 1890s were described by one art historian as the 'Rembrandt Decade'. Young artists such as Augustus John and William Orpen found the old masters as exciting, highly relevant **touchstones**.
- “**Diego Velázquez, Titian and Rembrandt van Rijn** were, at the turn of the century, regarded as highly relevant touchstones for young artists. There was about them an air of excitement and discovery, fuelled by major publications, exhibitions and the discovery of new works. The foundation of art magazines such as the *Studio* and the *Burlington Magazine*, allied to a rapidly expanding art market and **widespread insecurity over the direction of contemporary art ...**” (Tate website)



Self-portrait, *Frowning*, 1630, 7 × 5.9 cm, Rijksmuseum

Augustus John, *Tête Farouche (or Portrait of the Artist)*, c. 1900, etching on paper, 21.30 x 17.10 cm

Augustus John, *Tête Farouche (or Portrait of the Artist)*, c. 1900, etching on paper, 21.30 x 17.10 cm

Purchased 1949

Rembrandt (1606–1669), *Self-portrait, Frowning*, 1630, 7 × 5.9 cm, Rijksmuseum

### **Twentieth Century: Rembrandt and the Modern Era**

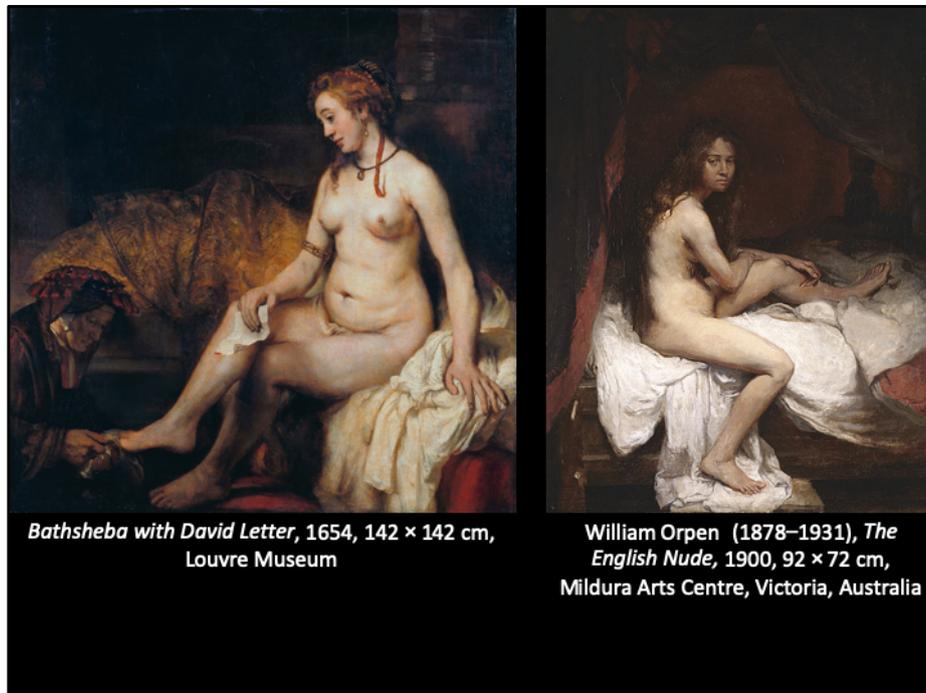
- In 1898 there was a major exhibition of Rembrandt's work in Amsterdam which showed 124 paintings and over 350 drawings. Augustus John travelled to Amsterdam with two fellow students at the Slade and he wrote, "As I bathed myself in the light of the Dutchman's genius, the scales of aesthetic romanticism fell from my eyes, disclosing a new and far more wonderful world". John seems to have been overwhelmed by the intense, interrogatory quality of Rembrandt's self-portraits. *Tête Farouche (or Portrait of the Artist)* is one of about ten self-portrait etchings by John.
- In 1899 the Royal Academy in London mounted the largest ever exhibition of Rembrandt's work with 102 paintings and over 100 drawings.



*The Company of Frans Banning Cocq and Willem van Ruytenburgh, known as the Night Watch, 1642, 379.5 × 453.5 cm, Rijksmuseum*

- *The Night Watch* and *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (1632, Mauritshuis, The Hague) were too fragile to travel but would have been seen by John in Amsterdam.
- This is the most famous painting of the Dutch Golden Age. It is famous for its enormous size, its use of dramatic light and shade (tenebrism) and the way in which Rembrandt has transformed what was conventionally a static group portrait into a dynamic scene of action. The company is moving out led by Captain Cocq and his lieutenant to his right. Our eye flows around the painting from the highlighted woman carrying a dead chicken to the standard bearer at the back left. The claws (*clauwen* in Dutch) of the dead chicken is a reference to *clauweniers* or arquebusiers (the infantrymen). The dead chicken also represents the defeated enemy and the yellow of the woman's dress signifies victory.
- The painting was originally covered in dark varnish which gave rise to its informal name.
- The painting has been attacked many times, the price of fame:

- 1911, a shoemaker slashed it because he could not find work. The thick varnish protected it.
- 1939, it was rolled up and stored in a cave for the duration of the war.
- 1975, a school teacher attacked it with a bread knife believing he was ordered to do it by God. He committed suicide the following year. The painting took four years to restore and some damage can still be seen close up.
- 1990, an escape psychiatric patient sprayed acid on the painting but guards quickly sprayed water on the painting which was protected by its thick varnish.
- 2019, a long and complex restoration has begun behind a special glass enclosure. The work is being livestreamed and the findings are discussed as the work progresses (search Operation Night Watch).



William Orpen (1878–1931), *The English Nude*, 1900, 92 × 72 cm, Mildura Arts Centre, Victoria, Australia

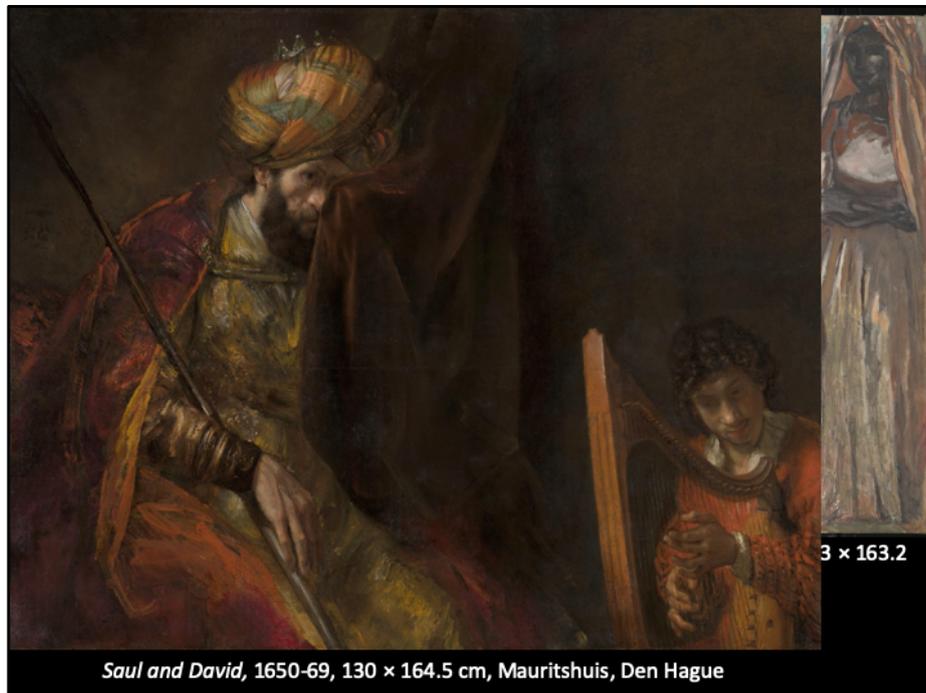
*Bathsheba with David Letter*, 1654, 142 × 142 cm, Louvre Museum

- Returning to the exhibition in 1899 at the Royal Academy.
- William Orpen was a friend of Augustus John and a fellow Slade student. He also fell under the spell of Rembrandt and painted this work ironically titled *The English Nude*. It is a wonderfully realistic portrait of his mistress whose pose is based on Rembrandt's *Bathsheba*, modelled by his mistress Hendricje Stoffels. Orpen had been engaged to the model Emily Scobel and never exhibited or sold this painting of her. She was a professional model at the Slade and she was the model for Orpen's *The Mirror* and *The Bedroom*. Like Rembrandt, Orpen has replaced the idealised Venus figure with an intimate depiction of a real person in a private, domestic setting but unlike Rembrandt he has not placed the figure in an allegorical setting. Orpen's biographer describes the encounter with Rembrandt as 'climatic' and that he '**instilled in him that sense of life, of people, of human drama and human feelings**'.
- The story of Bathsheba is told in the 2nd book of Samuel (11:2-27). One evening while walking along roof of his palace King David saw Bathsheba bathing and was

infatuated. She was the wife of Uriah the Hittite, who was away in the army. David commended her to attend him in his palace as a result of which she became pregnant. He then arranged for her husband to be sent into the heaviest fighting where he was killed. David then married Bathsheba and he was later punished by God for his adultery and murder. The painting shows the point where she has just read the letter and is expressing her feelings of regret, submission and anticipation.

### **Provenance of Rembrandt's Work**

- by 25 May 1811 : William Young Ottley (1771-1836), London
- 25 May 1811: purchased by Philips at the sale of the collection of William Young Ottley at Christie, London, lot no. 90, for 189 guineas (as '**Bathsheba though deficient in beauty, the Head of Bathsheba is not wanting in expression; she is just informed of the passion of David, and her countenance is clouded with the melancholy forebodings of its fatal consequences. For effect and colouring the merit of this picture, which is one of the Artist's most studied works, is superlative.**')
- 4 March 1837: purchased by Peacock, London, at the sale of the collection of William Young Ottley , lot no. 92, for 105 guineas (as 'Bathsheba seated upon some white drapery, a rich dress lying by her side - an attendant is drying her foot; a wonderful specimen of the power of this great master. A picture of the first consequence.')
- Comte Joseph Maison (Nicolas-Joseph Maison (1771-1840)?), Paris
- by 16 March 1843 : Paul Casimir-Perier (1812-1897), Paris
- 16 March 1843–17 March 1843: purchased by Auguste Casimir-Perier (1811-1876) or Paul Casimir-Perier at the sale of the collection of Paul-Casimir Périer at C.P.: Bonnefons, Paris, lot no. 35, for FRF 6,350 (as 'Susanne au bain. Toile, haut. 1 m. 42 cent., larg. 1 m. 40 cent. (cabinet de M. le comte Maison) (cabinet de M. P. Perier)')
- 1848: purchased by Dr. Louis La Caze (1798-1869), Paris, from Auguste or Paul Casimir-Perier
- 1869: bequeathed to the Louvre Museum, Paris, by Dr. Louis La Caze



Henryk Gotlib, *Rembrandt in Heaven*, c. 1948-58, 133.3 × 163.2 cm, Tate Modern, purchased 1980 from Mrs Janet Gotlib  
 Rembrandt or workshop (1606–1669), formerly attributed to Willem Drost, formerly attributed to Karel van der Pluym, *Saul and David*, 1650-69, 130 × 164.5 cm, Mauritshuis, Den Hague

- The painting was begun in 1948 when Gotlib thought he might be dying (the diagnosis was wrong). His wife explained “Henryk always liked to joke, and he liked to say that he was going to die and wanted to pay homage to Rembrandt before doing so. He always said it with a twinkle in his eyes and perhaps he was explaining or excusing the apparent strangeness of the picture. He sometimes called the painting “Homage to Rembrandt”.
- She added “When we first married, Henryk used to talk to me about the painters he most admired: Rembrandt, and Titian, El Greco, Vermeer, Giotto, Piero della Francesca and Cezanne... I remember how moved he was when he described to me Rembrandt's painting “Saul and David”, how Saul wipes away a tear from his eyes with the corner of a curtain.”



*A Woman Bathing in a Stream*, 1654,  
61.8 × 47 cm, National Gallery

Leon Kossoff, from *Rembrandt: A Woman Bathing in a Stream*, 1982

Leon Kossoff, from *Rembrandt: A Woman Bathing in a Stream*, 1982  
 Rembrandt, *A Woman Bathing in a Stream*, 1654, 61.8 × 47 cm, National Gallery

- In the 'Swinging Sixties' Rembrandt's work started to look old-fashioned, too earnest for the time. For many of the new breed of Pop Artist he was an irrelevant museum piece. However, in London abstraction and later conceptual art did not rule supreme and a group of figurative artists emerged in the 1950s which became known as the 'School of London'. For Francis Bacon, Lucien Freud, Leon Kossoff and Frank Auerbach Rembrandt was one of the undisputed giants. Freud never copied Rembrandt but Kossoff and Auerbach, who were close friends for over sixty years, have done so frequently over the decades.
- For Kossoff, one major formative moment was a visit aged nine to the National Gallery, where he saw Rembrandt's painting *A Woman Bathing in a Stream*. He said, **"I don't know what struck me about it because none of the other paintings in the National Gallery where I saw it interested me at all, but somehow that painting opened up a whole world to me—not a world of painting so much as a way of feeling about life that I hadn't experienced before."**
- Kossoff has commented: **'[M]y attitude to these works has always been to teach**

**myself to draw from them, and, by repeated visits, to try to understand why certain pictures have a transforming effect on my mind.'**



Frank Auerbach, *Study after Deposition by Rembrandt II*, 1961, 180.3 × 121.9 cm, private collection

Rembrandt, *The Lamentation Over the Dead Christ*, c. 1635, 31.9 × 26.7 cm, National Gallery

- Kossoff and Auerbach were both fanatical visitors to the National Gallery. They went so often that they were granted out-of-hours access so they could copy the works in peace. Auerbach copied the works of Hals, Titian (c. 1485/90-1576), Caravaggio (1571-1610), Georges Seurat (1859-1891) but above all Rembrandt. He went every day for a long time and copied the works until he could draw them as if they were his own. He defined Rembrandt's greatness as 'the absolute grandeur of the absolute ordinary'.
- Perhaps his most famous variation is this one. Auerbach's work is some six times taller than Rembrandt's. He painted a closer version first and then this further abstraction from the copy, so it is a copy of a copy. The work, intentionally, takes on the appearance of a London building site which he was also painting at the time.
- Auerbach said, "When I was young I felt like I was in the ring with them [the old Masters]. Now I just need their help ... Unless you try and do something in the

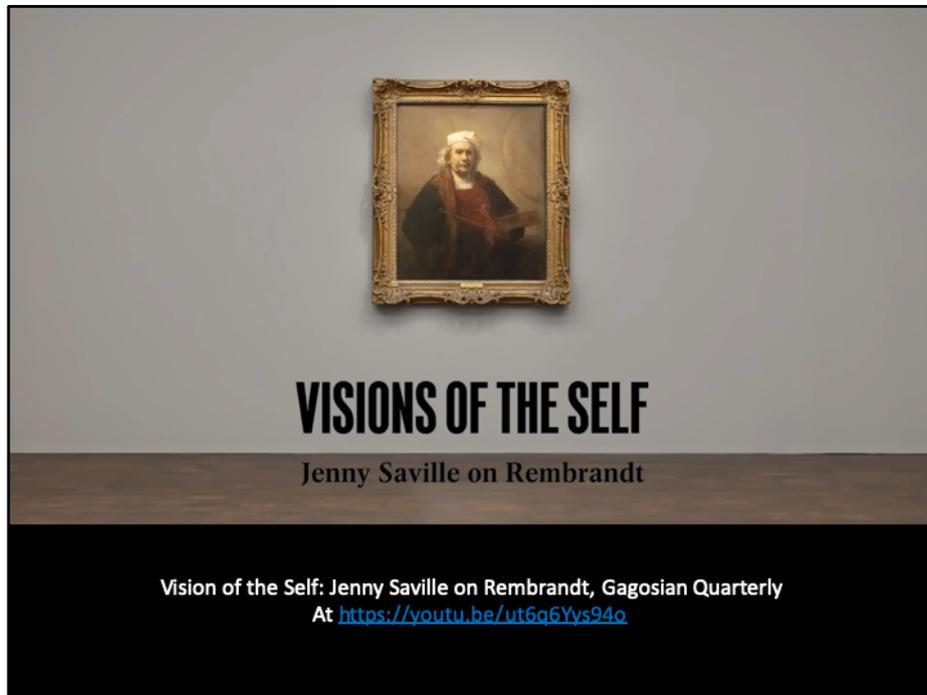
shadow of these great people then it's all pointless". In 2014 he was given the ultimate accolade of his work being hung alongside Rembrandt in the Rijksmuseum, the first living artist to receive such an honour.



Glenn Brown (b. 1966), *I Lost My Heart to a Starship Trooper*, 1996, 64.8 × 53.5 cm  
 Studio of Rembrandt, *A Boy in Fanciful Costume*, 1633, 21 × 17.7 cm, Wallace Collection

- Glenn Brown has painted, drawn and etched variants after Rembrandt since 1996. This is one of his earliest variants on Rembrandt. It is based on a tronie (a Dutch term for a single figure in head or half-length format). This type of painting was developed by Rembrandt and was often painted by his students at an advanced stage of their training. The models were often relatives and were posed in fanciful costumes. This model appears in other tronies painted by Rembrandt's studio. It used to be believed this was by Rembrandt but it is now thought to be by one of his students Govaert Flinck (1615-60) when he was working in Amsterdam in about 1636. There is a false Rembrandt signature and date (1633).
- Glenn Brown (b. 1966) was born in Northumberland and is known for appropriation of the work of other artists such as Velázquez, van Dyck, Rembrandt, Fragonard, Delacroix, Courbet, Renoir, van Gogh and Dalí. He starts with a reproduction and transforms the image by changing the colour, position, orientation, height and relationships. He has had numerous solo exhibition around the world and now lives and works in London and Suffolk. He was nominated for

the Turner Prize in 2000 but there was controversy and accusations of plagiarism as one of his works was closely based on a recent science-fiction illustration. The legal case was settled out of court.



- Jenny Saville (b. 1970) is one of the few artists of her generation who has looked at and been influenced by the work of Titian, Velázquez, Rubens and Rembrandt with a hint of irony. An important moment for her was as a teenager when her uncle took her to the Netherlands to study the work of Rembrandt.
- I would like to end with this short talk by Saville produced in 2019 for *Vision of the Self: Rembrandt and Now*. She talks about her new self-portrait inspired by Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait with Two Circles*. This video was produced for an exhibition at Gagosian London.