

Rembrandt Mariët Westermann



ART&IDEAS

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Cover illustration Detail from *The Nightwatch*,
1642 (see p.162)

Before the advent of photography, prints were the source of Rembrandt's fame. Outside Amsterdam and beyond the Netherlands, he was known through his hundreds of etchings. Reproducible, small and much cheaper than paintings, prints travelled lightly. Since the fifteenth century they had been subject to a vigorous international trade conducted by itinerant artists and dealers, by correspondence and at fairs. Like Dürer before him, Rembrandt participated avidly in this trade, building up an extensive collection of prints by the finest printmakers.

Evidence abounds of Rembrandt's early reputation as a printmaker. In the 1630s the French print publisher François Langlois (1588–1647) produced engraved copies of heads etched by Jan Gillisz van Vliet after Rembrandt's designs (see 29). Langlois' prints had a long circulation, reappearing in other series later in the century. Rembrandt's picturesque heads were equally well known in Italy, where by 1645 they influenced the graphic works of Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione (c.1610–63/65). The stock of the Flemish artist and dealer Cornelis de Wael (1579–1667), inventoried in Rome in 1667, included 134 etchings by Rembrandt. Don Antonio Ruffo, one of the rare collectors of Rembrandt's paintings outside the Netherlands, may have learned about him through his etchings. In a letter of 1660, Guercino enthusiastically agreed to paint a companion picture to Ruffo's *Aristotle* because he greatly admired Rembrandt's prints:

As for the half-length figure by Rembrandt that has come into your hands, it cannot be other than complete perfection, because I have seen various works of his in prints that have come to our region. They are very beautifully executed, engraved with good taste and done in a fine manner, so that one can assume that his work in colour is likewise of complete exquisiteness and perfection, and I sincerely esteem him as a virtuoso.

In 1669, even after a disagreement with Rembrandt about a painting he commissioned to accompany the *Aristotle*, Ruffo bought 189 of Rembrandt's prints.

167
Ecce Homo
(Christ
Presented to
the People)
(detail of 184)

Guercino's remarks highlight the publicizing function of Rembrandt's etchings in places where his paintings were not readily available. In his early career, his self-portrait etchings must have introduced the still little-known artist to a wide public, but it is equally clear that these self-portraits served ends beyond self-promotion. Through them, Rembrandt trained himself as an etcher on a small, inexpensive scale, studied nuances of light and shade, and perfected his expression of the human passions. These prints were his first successful efforts in portraiture and in engaging *tronies*, and as personal documents of his appearance around 1630 they became autobiographical mementos. In their varied functions, quirky handling and personal subject matter, and in the sense that they are variations on a theme, they preface Rembrandt's entire print production.

The print medium allowed artists to experiment. Because prints were rarely made on commission and could be produced in hundreds at modest cost, printmakers could afford to try out new ideas on a market that was wider and more anonymous than that for paintings. Yet Rembrandt's prints were even more radically novel than those of most artist-printmakers. His trial-and-error technique matched the innovative character of his storytelling, and the independence of prints within his artistic production was unusual. To understand the innovations of particular etchings, it is illuminating first to compare his general approach to prints with the practices and techniques of his contemporaries.

Unlike many painters, Rembrandt rarely engaged a professional printmaker or publisher to produce or market his prints. His etchings almost never reproduce his paintings or drawings, although such copying of inventions in other media, by the artists themselves or by hired hands, was standard practice in the workshops of such painters as Rubens and Abraham Bloemaert. It had been bread-and-butter business for large print publishers from Hieronymus Cock (1507/10–70), the publisher of Bruegel's first inventions, through Hendrick Goltzius, who ran a sophisticated print workshop in Haarlem around 1600, to Hendrick Hondius (1573–1650), a prolific print publisher in The Hague. However skilled reproductive printmakers might be, their primary

task was the accurate conveyance of the original design. For this reason reproductive printmakers favoured the technique of engraving, which produces clean lines that have a neutral look, as if the engraver had transcribed the artist's design without adding personal frills.

The engraver digs the design out of a copper plate with a burin, a sharply pointed steel bar. Ink is worked into the engraved lines, the smooth areas of the plate are wiped clean, a slightly moist piece of paper is placed on top of the plate, and the package is rolled through a press. In the printing, the paper is pressed onto the plate and the ink is transferred out of the engraved grooves onto the paper. In the resulting 'impression', the engraved design is necessarily reversed. The technique requires taut control of the burin as well as meticulous inking and wiping. At its best, it yields scintillatingly clear lines that swell and taper elegantly (see 9, 66, 129 and 160). Since engraving does not yield quick, fluid lines, however, it is less suitable for the reproduction of especially painterly works.

It was customary for each agent's role in the production and marketing of a print to be acknowledged in inscriptions. The designer or 'inventor' might be identified with the abbreviation *in.* or *inv.*, for the Latin *invenit*: he invented. Langlois scrupulously added Rembrandt's name with this designation to his prints after the artist's *tronies*. The actual engraver might be distinguished by *sc.* or *sculpsit*: he carved the design out of the plate. The publisher's role could be specified with *excudit*: 'he forged it', that is, produced it. The publisher had the plate printed, marketed and sold, and might even finance the entire work. Early in his career, Rembrandt occasionally had paintings reproduced in whole or in part. For *The Descent from the Cross* Uylenburgh acted as publisher (see 68), but his marketing of the print is an exception in Rembrandt's career. Rembrandt printed and sold most prints himself, and he kept most of his etched plates, reworking them later or pulling more impressions from a finished plate. Around 1500, when printmaking was still a young industry, the ease with which images could be copied had already forced artists and publishers to seek legal protection. Such litigation eventually led to the development of modern copyright legislation, but for Rembrandt and his peers it was

still necessary to make individual arrangements for each plate. While in 1633 he sought a 'privilege' for *The Descent from the Cross*, four years later he sold the plate for his *Abraham Dismissing Hagar and Ishmael* (168) to Samuel d'Orta, a Portuguese painter residing in Amsterdam. Worried about unauthorized sales of earlier impressions of the plate, D'Orta made Rembrandt testify that he would use the copies still in his possession only for his own 'curiosity', a contemporary expression for 'artistic interest'. Rembrandt kept most of his plates, although he eventually sold them to Clement de Jonghe (see 126), whose inventory of 1679 lists dozens. Rembrandt may have transferred the prints before his insolvency sales, for they do not appear in his 1656 inventory.

Rembrandt knew De Jonghe personally and may have sold his plates to the dealer so that he could retain access to them. Rembrandt approached printmaking as an art form in its own right. He must have dedicated almost as much time to it as he did to painting, frequently reworking his plates in various techniques, printing and reprinting them on different papers, and changing the application of the ink. Significantly, the early prints after Rembrandt's paintings are etchings, which have a quirkiest, more spontaneous look than the regularized engravings of the Rubens workshop. It is as if Rembrandt wanted the printed lines to transmit the textures of his paint surfaces, the wrinkled ugliness of Christ's dead body or of Judas' contorted face.

Although etching was the most suitable technique for this purpose, until well into the seventeenth century it was seen as a mere labour-saving substitute for engraving, because it is acid, rather than the hand-held burin, that bites the design into the copper. The etcher first coats the plate with a layer of acid-resistant resin, then uses a needle to draw a design through the resin. The coated plate is immersed in an acid that bites away the copper where it has been exposed by the needle; the resin-covered areas are not corroded. Once the design has been bitten deeply enough, the plate is removed from the acid bath and the resin taken off. The plate is then inked in the same manner as an engraving, and pulled through the press to transfer the design onto paper. The relative ease of the etching process was at first considered a disadvantage, since it loses some of the lucid elegance of engraving.

Etched lines look more uniformly thick, and they are less sharp because the acid corrosion gives them slightly ragged edges. Reproductive printmakers strove to mitigate the uneven look of etching by developing less pliable resins that required a stronger grip on the needle, and an etching tool that mimicked the burin's swell and taper. In a treatise published in 1645, the French etcher Abraham Bosse



168
*Abraham
Dismissing
Hagar and
Ishmael*,
1637.
Etching and
drypoint,
single state;
12.5 × 9.5 cm,
4 7/8 × 3 3/4 in.

(1602–76) argued that 'the etcher's main purpose is to counterfeit engraving'. His prints successfully imitate the regular line of engraving, and one of them shows the clear benefit of etching (169). Entitled *Engravers with the Burin and with Acid*, it contrasts the strenuous labour of the engraver with the comfort of the etcher, who manipulates his needle as if it were a quill pen.

Rembrandt's prints range from the deceptively simple to the intensely worked, but they never masquerade as engravings. From the beginning of his career, Rembrandt exploited the unruly potential of the etched line. At their freest, his etchings resemble printed drawings (see 131 and 170), and some were generated in studio drawing sessions (see 135). The 'spontaneity' of these sheets is highly contrived: the needle may be more flexible than the burin, but it does not move through the resinous ground with the ease of a pen. Rembrandt facilitated handling of the needle by developing softer grounds, but even so the confident lightness of *Six's Bridge* must have required meticulous care. Rembrandt may have aimed his freely drawn etchings at the



169
Abraham
Bosse,
*Engravers with
the Burin and
with Acid*,
1645.
Etching

170
*Sheet of Studies
with A Woman
Lying Ill in
Bed, Beggars
and
Picturesque
Heads*,
c.1639.
Etching,
single state;
15.1 × 13.6 cm,
6 × 5 3/8 in



burgeoning market for drawings that reveal artistic process and personality. This market was driven by connoisseurs such as Van de Cappelle, who collected Rembrandt's informal drawings of women and children, or Nicolaes Flinck, who acquired a set of his landscape studies. To such collectors, less was more: Keil claimed that 'one of his drawings, in which little, or nothing, was seen ... was sold at auction for thirty *scudi*', a price equal to that paid for finely finished paintings.

In the 1630s Rembrandt etched several prints of such apparently inconsequential subjects (170). Each combines studies of his favourite motifs – beggars, Saskia in bed, self-portraits, picturesque heads – and each resembles a random studio drawing (see 13 and 143). The individual

vignettes are finished to different degrees, and they are arranged in seemingly casual fashion, as Rembrandt turned the plate this way or that to begin a new sketch. Like his drawings of street and home life, these prints are intensely personal in subject and technique. They seem to claim that Rembrandt could turn the unassuming aspects of his life into art for a wide, anonymous audience eager for his latest work. They suggest, moreover, that Rembrandt's personal experiences were a direct source of his art. Rembrandt did not invent this notion – it is present in Dürer, Michelangelo, Titian and others – and he did not

articulate it as fully as Van Gogh or Toulouse-Lautrec were to do two centuries later. In most of his works, the theme in hand overrode his personal concerns, but these carefree, impromptu prints announce his pictorial insistence on the artist's presence in his works.

Rembrandt's most elaborate prints rival his innovations in paint. Admirers of prints had long argued the artistic parity of painting and printmaking. Writing of Dürer in 1528, the humanist scholar Erasmus claimed that the artist surpassed in black lines what Apelles had achieved in colours. Rembrandt's ambitions for his prints were

nourished by this tradition, but more specifically by the prints of Hercules Segers (1589/90–1633/8), a highly original landscape etcher. Segers etched fifty-four plates, and no two impressions taken from them are identical. He edited his plates incessantly, printing each major stage to yield different ‘states’ of the print (a state is a distinct phase of the plate recorded in one or more impressions). Having printed a state, Segers often changed the print into radically different states. He made different impressions of one state by printing them on various papers and cloth, by colouring the paper or by varying the colours of the ink. Occasionally he used more than one colour in the printing – a device



that seems logical to modern eyes accustomed to full-colour lithographs and photography, but that is difficult to control in etchings.

By these diverse processes, in which chance played a meaningful role, Segers individualized etchings that were already unprecedented in their technique. His mossy rocks, eroded valleys and fertile trees evoke landscapes of the mind. Bubbly and stringy textures suggest the selective application of resin ground and the direct use of acid on the unprotected plate. In his *Rocky Landscape* (171), an apparent biting mistake in the sky was left visible to create a rich atmospheric effect.

The granular appearance of this passage was probably the result of acid biting through an unexpectedly porous ground. Segers also used conventional techniques in novel ways. The squiggles that mimic the texture of stone in *Rocky Landscape* suggest that he drew loosely through a soft ground. He used stopping-out varnish to cover areas that had already been etched, and then returned the plate to the acid. The selective re-biting thickened lines and deepened shadows. Lastly, he softened etched lines with the drypoint technique, in which the previously etched plate is gone over with a needle. Drypoint produces an even scratchier line than etching, and it is prized for the irregular copper edge or ‘burr’ it leaves raised on one or both sides of the line. When inked and printed carefully, this burr prints as ‘bleeding’ areas of tone along the lines. Of all printmaking techniques in copper, it gives the softest, most painterly effect. Before Segers, printmakers tended to scrape off the burr to produce cleaner lines, but he recognized the technique’s pictorial potential, which Rembrandt eventually exploited to the full.

171
Hercules
Segers,
*Rocky
Landscape with
Church Tower
in the Distance*,
c.1620–38.
Etching,
first state,
in greyish
blue-green on
white paper;
12.0 × 19.2 cm,
4¾ × 7½ in

According to his inventory, Rembrandt owned eight paintings by Segers. Van Hoogstraeten wrote that Segers was ‘sure in his Design of landscapes and grounds, nice in attractive mountains and grottoes, and virtually pregnant with entire Provinces, which he delivered with immeasurable space, and showed wondrously in his Paintings and Prints’. He claimed that poverty drove Segers to print on his shirts and bed linen, so that ‘he even printed Paintings’. Segers’ prints (some of which are indeed on linen) undeniably have the individuality of paintings, rather than serving the function for which they had been invented: the cheap production of multiple, identical copies of a design.

Rembrandt did not quite share that aim (although he realized it in some cases), and did not emulate Segers’ colouristic experiments, but the imaginative character of his prints was directly indebted to Segers. Rembrandt apparently owned the plate of Segers’ *Landscape with Tobias and the Archangel Raphael* (172), which showed Tobit’s son travelling through a wild, dark landscape in search of a wife and a cure for his father’s blindness. Perhaps discerning parallels between the journeys of Tobias and the Holy Family, Rembrandt reworked the plate



172
Hercules
Segers,
*Landscape with
Tobias and the
Archangel
Raphael*,
1620s.
Etching,
drypoint and
engraving, first
and only state
by Segers;
21.1 × 28.3 cm,
8.4 × 11.1 in



173
Rembrandt
altered from
Hercules
Segers,
*Landscape with
the Flight into
Egypt*,
c.1650–2.
Etching,
drypoint and
engraving,
fourth state;
21.1 × 28.3 cm,
8.4 × 11.1 in

into a *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt* (173). He radically altered the right side of the image, replacing Tobias and the Archangel with smaller figures of the Holy Family and a donkey. Ghosts of the archangel's feathers enrich the foliage in the upper right corner. By leaving an ink residue known as surface tone on the plate in some printings, Rembrandt blended the Holy Family into the trees behind them.

Replicating Segers' variations of state, colour and texture, Rembrandt made six new states of the plate and printed impressions on vellum and Japanese paper. He varied his printing papers throughout his career, and these different supports can make impressions of a print look strikingly diverse. While bright white paper yields sharp lines and dramatic chiaroscuro, the shiny, off-white Japanese paper, which the Dutch imported through their trading post at Deshima, gives prints a warmer look. Its higher absorbency softens impressions because it lets lines 'bleed' slightly. The effect is even more pronounced in the vellum and light brown oatmeal papers that Rembrandt occasionally used.

The vigorous scraping and bold drypoint in the *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt* suggest that Rembrandt revised Segers' plate in the 1650s, when he developed similarly rough effects in his paintings and drawings (see 128 and 154). In the previous decade, he had begun to experiment more intensely with the themes and techniques of his prints, as *Six's Bridge* (see 131), *The Walker* (see 135) and *Conus Marmoreus* (see 150) show. Most memorable for its intimacy is *The Bed* (174), etched in 1646, which shows a young couple making love. The print has been seen as an expression of Rembrandt's longing for intimacy after Saskia's death, a desire answered temporarily by Geertge. The feathered beret on the near bedpost supports this idea, for Rembrandt sported such headgear in his self-portraits. Yet the illusion of direct observation was the result of much effort, and Rembrandt never fully resolved the composition. The nuanced shading that gives the room its privacy combines fine engraving and freer etching. Rembrandt softened facial features, hair and fabric with drypoint, and in entangling the couple's limbs he gave the woman three arms, never bothering to correct himself. Although the genre of the erotic print is almost as old as printmaking itself, and Rembrandt made

several late etchings that can be described as such, *The Bed* does not belong to this category. There is no nudity, no lingering on the female body, no promise of extravagant pleasure, no scandal in the setting. In *The Bed*, the viewer is very much at home. While many Dutch artists offered glimpses of home life, Rembrandt was probably the first to depict domestic lovemaking.

In the 1650s drypoint became increasingly responsible for the direct, spontaneous look of Rembrandt's prints. Early in the decade, he began to make prints in pure drypoint. The technique is well suited to describing wooded landscape, with deep shadows and dense foliage that is rarely perfectly still. The two states of *A Clump of Trees with a*



174
The Bed,
1646.
Etching,
drypoint and
engraving,
third state;
12.5 × 22.4 cm,
4¾ × 8¾ in

175
*A Clump of
Trees with
a Vista*,
1652.
Drypoint,
first state, with
surface tone;
15.6 × 21.1 cm,
6¼ × 8¼ in

176
*A Clump of
Trees with
a Vista*,
1652.
Drypoint,
second state;
12.4 × 21.1 cm,
4¾ × 8¼ in

Vista (175, 176) show how he worked up the drypoint from the slightest indications of a hut, fence and phantom tree to a densely foliated grove that dwarfs the human structures. Although the print's first state looks like a preliminary sketch, Rembrandt printed multiple impressions, presumably for sale. Its sketchiness may indicate that he made this state out of doors, in an echo of Gersaint's claim that he took etching plates on his walks. The idea is supported by the print's freshness and the simple drypoint technique. Delicate surface tone gives the impression of a moist, unstable atmosphere. In the second state, the velvet darkness to the left of the farm is pierced by a bright clearing. The irregular outlines of the trees, so different from the 'Venetian' foliage in Rembrandt's drawings, stand out brilliantly against the sky, especially in this impression on white paper without surface tone.



The virtuosity with which Rembrandt's domestic and landscape etchings turn mundane life into riveting art must have appealed to collectors. His biblical prints hold similar pleasures, and their technical accomplishment is matched by the sophistication of their interpretations. *The Hundred Guilder Print* is the most fascinating of these (177). Its traditional title, already current by the beginning of the eighteenth century, is a mark of the esteem in which it has always been held (in Rembrandt's time a hundred guilders could buy a



distinguished small painting). The print's intricate storytelling and unparalleled tonal range rank it with Rembrandt's most ambitious paintings. The undulating composition, selective lighting and copious variety of figures recall the impressive crowd control of *The Nightwatch* (see 103), and Rembrandt probably began the print while painting that commission. His extensive use of engraving and drypoint, however, suggests that he did not finish the second and last state for several years.

The Hundred Guilder Print conflates several episodes from Chapter 19 of St Matthew's Gospel. To the right Rembrandt presented Christ's healing of the sick in 'great crowds', and to the left he pictured Christ's injunction to 'suffer the Children to come unto me'. Christ beckons mothers and children with his right hand and raises his left in a gesture of blessing as well as preaching. The urgency of the sick is conveyed by the praying man, whose hands cast a shadow on Christ's tunic – a motif recalling the commanding shadow of Captain Frans Banning Cocq's hand (see 103). The sick emerge from the shade of a huge city gate, embodying his promise that 'many who are first will be last, and the last first'. The sceptics and the uncomprehending are fully exposed in the light. The Pharisees question Christ's words with the energy of the disciples in Leonardo's *Last Supper*. Closer to Christ, his disciples listen with concern as he tells them to let the children approach because 'theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. Just below the disciples, a young man in fine costume ponders Christ's words. He is the melancholy rich man of Christ's parable, for whom it is more difficult to enter the kingdom of Heaven than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. His predicament is figured by a camel that has just come through the gate.

177
The Hundred Guilder Print,
 c.1642–9.
 Etching,
 drypoint and
 engraving,
 first state,
 on Japanese
 paper;
 27.8 × 38.8 cm,
 11 × 15.4 in

In *The Hundred Guilder Print* Rembrandt reinvented a tradition of representing a sequential religious narrative in one picture. Instead of grouping different episodes around a central scene, however, as early Netherlandish painters did, he fused the vignettes in a plausible tableau that evokes the hope, anger, reflection and confusion that Christ's ministry must have caused. Each part of the story is so powerfully characterized that, a century and a half later, the print-maker Captain William Baillie (1723–1810) saw fit to cut the plate into different pieces for reprinting. With their everyday faces, Rembrandt's agitated, trusting, sad and sullen people stand for the whole spectrum of responses to Christ, not only in his lifetime but also in the seventeenth century. The metaphysical poet H F Waterloos, who owned Rembrandt's *Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalen* (see 110), understood the print's contemporary relevance in these terms:

Thus Rembrandt's needle draws God's Son from life
and places him amidst the sick, in droves:
So that the World, sixteen centuries on,
would see the miracles he wrought for all.
Here the sick are cured by Jesus' hand. And here the children
(True Divinity!) are blessed; admonished those who hold them back.
But woe! The Young Man mourns. The Pharisees sneer at
the Faith of holy men, the rays of Christ's divinity.

The poem tracks its author's experience of viewing the print and discovering the different stories that make up Christ's ministry on earth. Waterloos, a member of a Calvinist meditational group, demonstrates that his knowledge of the biblical source matches that of the artist: steeped in the Bible and in Protestant sensibility, he is the sort of viewer for whom this exegetical print was most rewarding.

The Hundred Guilder Print is a consummate example of Rembrandt's printmaking. It displays his command of three different techniques, and it flaunts the colouristic potential of the black-and-white print. By leaving the scene on the left barely defined while working up the sick to finely nuanced levels of black, Rembrandt demonstrated his own order of printmaking. He laid out the composition in etching, strengthened the shadows with the burin and then used the drypoint to develop atmosphere and texture. Houbraken was so startled by the range of finish in *The Hundred Guilder Print* that he cited it as an example of Rembrandt's unwillingness to finish his works properly, even though the print also showed that he was capable of doing so:

But it is to be lamented that, being fickle and easily driven to changes or other things, he finished many things only halfway, in his paintings and even more so in his etched prints, in which the completed parts give us an idea of all the beauty that we would have had from his hand, if he had finished everything to the same degree of the beginning, as can be seen particularly in the so-called hundred guilder print ...

Many collectors, however, have admired this print precisely for this sense of a work in progress. An early inscription on one impression claims that Rembrandt never sold the print but distributed it only to

178
Lucas van
Leyden,
Ecce Homo
(*Christ*
Presented to
the People),
1510.
Engraving;
28.6 × 45.2 cm,
11.4 × 17.8 in.



friends. His decision not to sign this ambitious print may reflect his intention to circulate it among connoisseur friends, as a masterpiece whose unmistakable style was its signature. Early examples of such grand collector's items include master engravings of similar size and format by Martin Schongauer (c.1450–91) and Lucas van Leyden. Like *The Hundred Guilder Print*, Schongauer's *Christ Carrying the Cross* and Lucas' *Ecce Homo* (178) narrate scenes from the life of Christ through dozens of figures. These virtuoso prints, well known to the collector Rembrandt, may have prompted him to make a masterpiece in their mould.

The profuse humanity and technical display of *The Hundred Guilder Print* also make it an exception among Rembrandt's late religious prints. In many of these, he condensed the narrative to a quiet interaction among few figures, in whose experiences the viewer is asked to participate. His technique is less demonstrative than in *The Hundred Guilder Print*, but it brilliantly serves his narrative inventions. In 1645 Rembrandt revisited Abraham's sacrifice by having the patriarch explain to Isaac the purpose of their journey (179). Father and son are seen in near profile, focused on each other, and their interaction fills most of the print. Young and trusting, Isaac has asked why there is no young animal for the sacrifice. Abraham presses his right hand to his heart and leans in insistently to state that 'God will provide himself with a young beast for the sacrifice.' Isaac's gently submissive attitude

as he steadies the wood for his pyre replicates his father's unconditional obedience to God, which Rembrandt signified by the upward gesture of Abraham's left hand. Like the sitters of Rembrandt's portrait etchings of the mid-1640s, Abraham and Isaac appear as thoughtful individuals. Isaac's face is softly clouded, Abraham's sharply drawn. Isaac's commanding presence contrasts tellingly to his spectacular but ultimately conventional facelessness in the earlier painting (see 78).

Abraham and Isaac prompts the viewer to feel compassion for the father, torn between obedience to his God and love of his son.



179
*Abraham
and Isaac*,
1645.
Etching and
engraving,
single state;
15.7 × 13 cm,
6 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 5 $\frac{1}{8}$ in

180
*Christ
Returning from
the Temple
with his
Parents*,
1654.
Etching and
drypoint,
single state;
9.5 × 14.4 cm,
3 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 5 $\frac{7}{8}$ in

Rembrandt's late prints of New Testament episodes similarly appeal to emotions rather than to intellectual understanding, in ways that are curiously reminiscent of traditional devotional paintings. While Catholic religious art presented the Christian mystery in an emotionally evocative fashion, Protestantism favoured storytelling and explanation over a direct appeal to sentiment. Compared with his earlier biblical etchings, most of Rembrandt's late biblical prints narrate little and explain less, but they are nonetheless compatible with a Protestant understanding of salvation. By exploring the personal

nature of the viewer's relationship to Christ, Rembrandt created new possibilities for devotional art in a predominantly Protestant culture. Christ figures with new prominence in Rembrandt's prints from the 1650s: there are touching, intimate images of the Adoration of the Shepherds (both in radiant light and in impenetrable darkness), the Circumcision in the Stable, the Holy Family travelling into Egypt, Jesus disputing with the doctors or preaching to an attentive crowd. And there is the great sequence of prints on the Passion of Christ and its aftermath, from Christ's lonely Agony in the Garden through his Crucifixion to his posthumous appearances to his followers.



In a print from 1654 on a rare theme (180), the twelve-year-old Jesus is seen returning to Nazareth after his precocious debate with the scribes in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41–51). After looking for him for three days, his parents had found him in the Temple. To Mary's wounded rebuke Jesus replied 'What made you search? Did you not know that I was bound to be in the house of my Father?' Rembrandt transformed this early revelation of Christ's divinity into a silent moment following the exchange between two worried parents and their adolescent son. The solemn, worn attitudes of Joseph and Mary register the uneasy blend of relief and concern. In the impressions on Japanese paper, the mellow paper and the rich drypoint burr enhance the tenderness of the small family drama.

Unlike most of Rembrandt's late prints, *Christ Returning from the Temple* appears in a single state. The four different states and the hugely varied impressions of *The Entombment* encourage the viewer to enter the Christian mystery on increasingly personal terms. The first state (181) gives a close view of the men lowering Christ into the tomb. To the left we make out a sorrowing Mary, a solemn Joseph of Arimathea and four other mourners. The bright light illuminating Christ's shrouded body emphasizes the physical work of the entombment; its source is a lantern obscured by the man seen from behind. The open, parallel line work, a loose version of the classic engraved

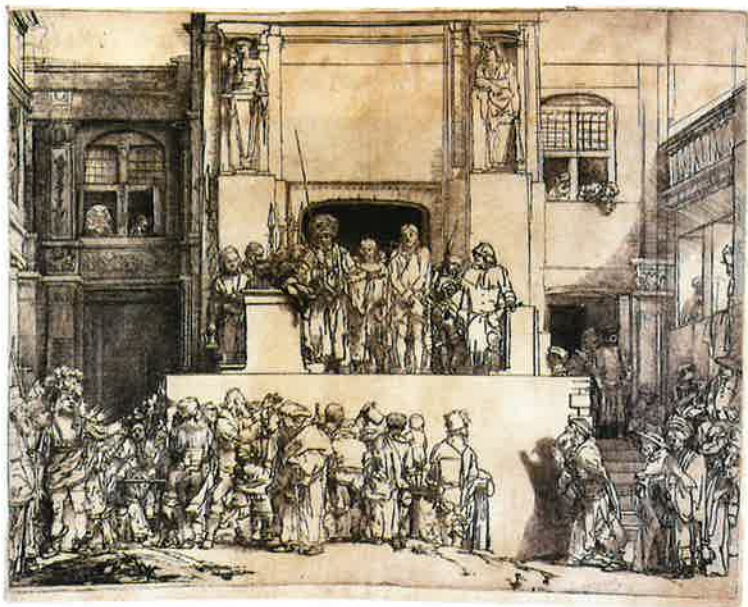


181
The Entombment,
c.1654,
Etching,
first state,
on Japanese
paper;
21.1 × 16.1 cm,
8¼ × 6⅜ in

182
The Entombment,
c.1654,
Etching,
drypoint and
engraving,
second state,
with surface
tone;
21.1 × 16.1 cm,
8¼ × 6⅜ in

line, gives this print the sense of a lucid witness account. Over the next three states, Rembrandt radically darkened it (182). In these states the white areas, including the spaces between the etched lines, were muted with the burin, and lightly etched areas were darkened with drypoint. As a result, the print draws the viewer into the cave to participate in mourning. The individual impressions of these states are highly dissimilar. The second and third states are printed on Japanese paper and on vellum, and the fourth exists only on white paper. Each impression has a distinctive pattern of inking and wiping. In some, a dense



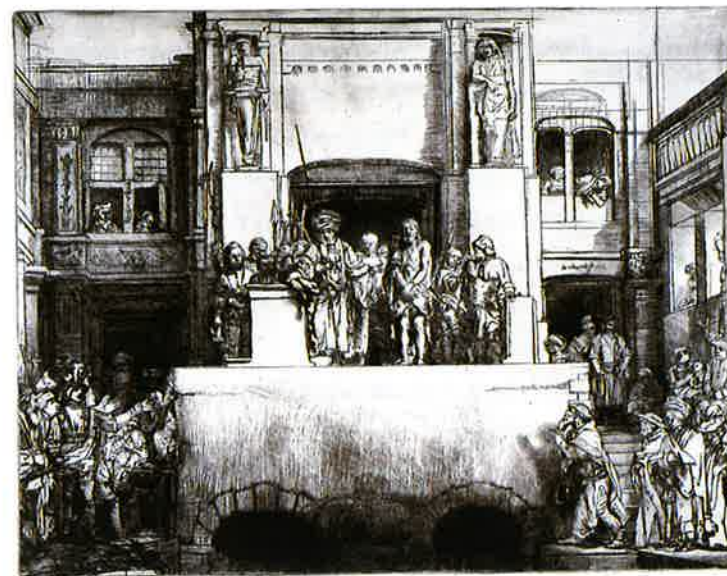


183
Ecce Homo
 (Christ
 Presented to
 the People),
 1655.
 Drypoint,
 fifth state;
 35.8 × 45.5 cm,
 14¹/₈ × 17³/₈ in

layer of surface tone spells pervasive doom; in others, tone has been wiped selectively to emphasize the body and face of Christ or the expressions of the mourners. The illumination of Christ's face ranges from deathly pallor to peaceful radiance. Although each impression of *The Entombment* sets a different tone, all fathom the event as approachable Christian mystery.

In his *Ecce Homo (Christ Presented to the People)* of 1655, Rembrandt fully developed the progressive narrative through different states, in the manner pioneered in *The Entombment*. The human variety in the early states of this drypoint (183) rivals that of *The Hundred Guilder Print*, and it is explicitly indebted to Lucas van Leyden's engraving of the theme (see 178). Rembrandt adopted Lucas' town setting and wild crowd, but by increasing the scale of the figures in relation to the architecture and by limiting the number of buildings he brought the scene of Pilate presenting Christ closer, implying the viewer's own complicity in Christ's death.

In a bright Mediterranean light, the Roman governor points out the man who will not defend himself. In response to the mob's 'Crucify! Crucify!', Pilate pleads on Christ's behalf, in words that will absolve him of responsibility: '*Ecce homo* [Behold the man] ... Take him and crucify



184
Ecce Homo
 (Christ
 Presented to
 the People),
 1655.
 Drypoint,
 eighth state,
 on Japanese
 paper;
 35.8 × 45.5 cm,
 14¹/₈ × 17³/₈ in

him yourselves; for my part I find no case against him' (John 19:5–6). The print subtly announces Pilate's eventual abdication of legal principle in the interest of crowd management. The shimmering drypoint evokes the scene's confusing flux: a worn, resigned Christ is surrounded by serious court officials, dutiful guards and a scowling Barabbas, soon to be released. Bystanders press in towards the tribunal or lean out of windows; mothers have dragged young children along to the spectacle. In Rembrandt's time executions were public events that demonstrated collective justice and also served as popular entertainment, and he cast Christ's tribunal in contemporary terms, basing the architecture on the building where criminals of Amsterdam were pilloried.

In the eighth state (184) Rembrandt burnished away most of the crowd, leaving only the group to the left of the stage and the people approaching from the right, still led by the man who casts a shadow onto the wall. The ghostly outlines of the throng in front of the stage remain visible above two gaping holes, dark ciphers of dread. A sculpted figure of an old man guards these entrances, resting his head on his hand in a gesture of melancholy (see 160) as though at the gateway to a subterranean realm. The removal of the distracting mob and the darkening of the stage force new concentration on Pilate's quandary, now shared by the viewer.

Several of Rembrandt's late Passion prints went through this development from detailed narrative to concentrated focus on the meaning of the event. Often, as in *The Entombment*, the involvement of Christ's followers becomes exemplary for the viewer's faith. It has been persuasively argued that the progression of states in the *Ecce Homo* from an outward witnessing to an inward understanding resembles the structure of Protestant metaphysical poetry, as written by John Donne in England and by Constantijn Huygens in the Netherlands. Rembrandt apparently knew this strand of religious writing, for his *Raising of the Cross* evokes its properties (see 65), as does *The Entombment*. An amateur writer of such meditations was Heiman Dullaert (1636–84), who studied painting with Rembrandt in the 1650s. His sonnet 'Christ Dying' gradually moves from a powerful imagination of Christ's suffering, through a plea to his readers for compassion, to the significance of Christ's death:

The comforter of all, expiring, wan,
The world's support, condemned to death and anguish;
A fatal darkness dims those eyes which languish
Like faint roses, deprived of dew and sun.

Oh world, heir of this abundant prize,
Angels, starry powers in your spheres,
Inhabitants of earth, have you no tears
While Jesus sinks his head, while your king dies?

Since he departs from life, I long for death:
But even as I wish an end to breath
A brimming stream of life o'erflows my soul.

Oh highest wonder! How can it be said
That strength can come from weakness' toll,
That life can die to save from death the dead?

The difference between the first and second states of Rembrandt's *Entombment* echoes Dullaert's movement from visceral empathy with Christ's torments to comprehension of their meaning. The comparison suggests that Rembrandt visualized a Protestant meditational process through which to grasp Christ's role. Imagining the physical suffering

sustained by Christ could be part of such meditation, but its ultimate goal was a reasoned, direct faith in the redemptive grace of his death. In this emphasis Protestant devotion continued to differ from Catholic religion, which encouraged the worshipper to re-experience God's sacrifice in a more physical sense, mediated through communion and its iconic representation in altarpieces. Unlike the great altarpieces of Rubens, which present the body of Christ as the original Eucharist, Rembrandt's late Passion prints do not put Christ's body at centre stage. They ask us to regard his face and to scrutinize the responses of those who loved him. These are real people, whose recognizably human pain is transmuted into quiet faith, rather than exalted denizens of heaven.

However well Rembrandt's print technique served his themes, it was admired for its own sake too. His tireless reworking of his plates and variation of techniques individualized his prints well beyond the contemporary norm. The different impressions of *The Entombment* virtually qualify as monoprints – unique, irreproducible products. These singular impressions were prototypes for modern artists such as Degas, who made the monoprint a specialized artistic genre. In 1686 Baldinucci, author of the first history of etching and engraving, acknowledged the idiosyncrasy of Rembrandt's prints. He included Rembrandt's biography as one of eighteen lives of the greatest graphic artists – an honour accorded to no Dutch contemporary. Curiously, even though Baldinucci believed that Rembrandt's true excellence lay in etching, he wrote primarily about his painting. His comments on Rembrandt's printmaking accurately describe its idiosyncrasy:

That in which this artist truly proved his worth was a most bizarre manner of etching, which he invented and was his and his alone, never used by others nor seen again, that is, with certain scrawls and scribbles, and irregular lines, and without outline, yet as a whole resulting in a deep chiaroscuro of great force, and a pictorial taste that was refined to the last line; he coloured the plate entirely black in some places, while in others leaving the white of the paper, and in keeping with the tone he wanted to give to the costumes of his figures, or to the foreground or the distance, he sometimes used very little shadow, and sometimes just a plain outline, without anything else.

Baldinucci claimed that Rembrandt was irrationally covetous of his own etchings and compensated for his low portrait prices by selling his prints. Their success presumably led him to consider his etchings underpriced, and to improve their value he bought up his prints from all over Europe at extravagant prices, once acquiring an impression of the *Raising of Lazarus* even though he still owned the plate. Although unverifiable, Baldinucci's account evokes Rembrandt's personal and artistic investment in prints.

Rembrandt's reported effort to collect his own etchings also suggests the desirability of their individual states and impressions for collectors. By the end of the seventeenth century, print connoisseurs had apparently started to collect 'the Complete Work of Rembrandt'. Several collectors each owned more than four hundred of his prints, perhaps as a result of seeking to acquire impressions of all states. Houbraken laughed at this practice, but he recognized that Rembrandt encouraged it to reap economic benefit:

This habit brought him great fame and no less financial advantage: especially the trick of minor change, or small and slight additions, which he brought into his prints, whereby he could sell them once again. Truly the desire at that time was so great, that people would not be considered true connoisseurs if they did not have the little Juno with and without the crown, the small Joseph with the white face and the brown face and other such things. Yes, the *Woman by the Stove*, though one of his least prints, each had to have with and without the white cap, and with and without the stove key.

Baldinucci and Houbraken implied that Rembrandt steered the collecting craze for his graphic *oeuvre*. Whatever Rembrandt's involvement in the run on his prints may have been, it is clear that he nourished his contacts with dedicated print collectors such as Six, who retained the plate for his portrait etching, and De Jonghe, whose own portrait etching exists in six different states.

Another dedicated collector, the pharmacist Abraham Francen, is the subject of one of Rembrandt's last portrait etchings, made around 1657 (185). Francen was friendly with Rembrandt, serving in legal capacities



185
*Abraham
Francen*,
c.1657-
Etching,
drypoint and
engraving,
fourth state,
with surface
tone, on
Japanese
paper;
15.2 × 20.8 cm,
6 × 8¹/₈ in

for him and for his family, and the portrait may well have been a gift. Revised through ten states, it represents the man in his private role as a connoisseur. Rembrandt adapted the effective composition of the Six portrait to an oblong format, placing Francen near a window that allows daylight to facilitate his study of a drawing. Like Six, he is defined by the breadth of his interests, signified by several paintings, a book, a skull (perhaps a reference to his medical trade) and a Chinese figurine. Although Francen is ostensibly near us, his facial features remain indistinct, suggesting rapt concentration. In the muted light and still atmosphere, enhanced in this impression by Japanese paper, Francen looks the part of the serious connoisseur for whom Rembrandt apparently intended his later prints.

Guercino recognized the ambition of Rembrandt's prints as collector's items when he praised them as the works of a *virtuoso*, a telling term. When Rubens described his reproductive printmaking operation, he stipulated that he wanted his engraver to imitate his designs perfectly and that he preferred 'to have the prints made in my presence by a well-intentioned youth rather than by some great *virtuosi*, who work according to their own caprice'. It was such virtuoso quirkiness that appealed to Guercino, Ruffo, Baldinucci and countless Dutch collectors of Rembrandt's prints.