

**WALL TEXTS**

# **REMBRANDT IN AMSTERDAM: CREATIVITY AND COMPETITION**

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**Exhibition Annex**

## **REMBRANDT IN AMSTERDAM**

Rembrandt – a name, a face, a brand established in Amsterdam between 1630 and 1655, and still famous to this day. It was during his years in Amsterdam that the young artist from the town of Leiden developed into the master we know him as today. He quickly made his signature his trademark: In 1633, “Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn” notably became simply “Rembrandt”. In the international commercial metropolis of Amsterdam, the artist moved in an inspiring environment that challenged and motivated him. The Amsterdam art market of the day was one of the largest and most competitive in Europe, with a wealth of talented artists each vying for commissions from the city’s wealthy residents. Unlike many of his competitors, Rembrandt didn’t specialise in a particular genre of painting. Instead, he responded to the great demand for pictures by creating a diverse portfolio of works. He specialised primarily in vivid portraits and dramatic history paintings, but he was also an expert at landscapes, still lifes and genre scenes – painted, etched or drawn. His students and apprentices also contributed significantly to spreading the reach of the “Rembrandt” brand. This exhibition presents the tremendous artistic diversity that collectors and art lovers in the Amsterdam of Rembrandt’s day were privileged to choose from.

## **AMSTERDAM – CAPITAL OF WORD TRADE**

The port city of Amsterdam experienced a spectacular economic boom in the 17th century. The ships of the Dutch East and West India Companies brought wares and luxury goods to the city from throughout the world. Amsterdam’s population grew quickly. Between 1580 and 1670 the city’s population grew from 30,000 to over 200,000 residents. The city’s Grachtengordel (Canal Belt) was developed with elegant homes for newly wealthy citizens. In the midst of the war-torn Europe of the day, Amsterdam offered a strong job market and a relatively peaceful coexistence between different religions. Until recently, this cultural and economic heyday of the

Dutch Republic was referred to as the “Golden Age”. But this euphemistic and now controversial term ignores the fact that wealth and power in international trade were also achieved through exploitation and slavery.

### **REMBRANDT AS COURT ARTIST?**

In 1632 Rembrandt was commissioned to paint a portrait of Amalia von Solms, the wife of the Dutch Stadtholder Frederik Hendrik. The painting was intended to complement an existing portrait of the Stadtholder on display at the court in The Hague, painted by Gerard van Honthorst, therefore requiring Rembrandt to employ the same strict profile pose and painted frame. But Rembrandt’s portrayal must have seemed too bourgeois for the tastes of the court. His reserved depiction of the princess was not as flattering as the elaborate splendour of the many Van Honthorst paintings she commissioned. Although Rembrandt was evidently unsuccessful as a court portraitist, his studio assistants adopted the profile pose for portraits and head studies that were sold on the free market.

### **THE NEW TOWN HALL AS CITIZENS’ PALACE**

When Amsterdam’s old town hall was destroyed by fire on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1652, the construction of its stately successor had already been underway for four years. Dedicated in 1655 at Dam Square, the building that stands today as the Royal Palace of Amsterdam was the city’s most important construction and public art project of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was designed to emphasize Amsterdam’s economic and political power. The most successful artists of the day were chosen to furnish the building, with Rembrandt’s former students Govaert Flinck and Ferdinand Bol selected to create monumental paintings for its most prestigious rooms. Rembrandt himself also contributed the painting *The Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis*, but the picture was removed shortly after it was installed for reasons that remain unclear today.

### **REMBRANDT BEFORE AMSTERDAM**

To round out his artistic education, Rembrandt had his first extended stay in Amsterdam in the winter of 1624/25, leaving his hometown of Leiden to study for six months under Pieter Lastman. Lastman was Amsterdam’s leading history painter in the 1620s, and he specialised in pictorial narratives from the Bible, ancient mythology and antiquity. Lastman dressed the figures in his stories in colourful costumes, luminous turbans and precious fabrics. Rembrandt took on this type of imagery in the small, meticulously detailed history paintings he created during his early years in

Leiden. When he relocated to Amsterdam, he ramped up the narrative drama using the powerful contrast of light and shade and intense depiction of emotion that would become the trademarks of his history paintings from then on.

### **FAMILIAR FACES**

Rembrandt's partners Saskia van Uylenburgh, Geertje Dircks and Hendrickje Stoffels frequently modelled for the artist in a variety of motifs. Rembrandt portrayed them in paintings and prints, drew them in intimate moments, or used their faces for female figures in his history paintings. Rembrandt had an especially intimate relationship with his wife Saskia, who passed away in 1642 at the age of 29 nine months after the birth of the couple's son, Titus. Saskia was a mayor's daughter from the northern province of Friesland and the cousin of art dealer Hendrick Uylenburgh, with whom Rembrandt worked closely in his early days in Amsterdam.

### **SELF-PORTRAIT AND ROLE PORTRAIT – THE ARTIST'S FACE AS TRADEMARK**

Over the four decades of his career, Rembrandt painted and etched more self-portraits than any other artist of his time. He posed leaning on one arm, like his famous role models Raphael and Titian in poses from the Italian Renaissance. He also lent his facial features to the studies of heads and facial expressions known as tronies. Rembrandt used these depictions of himself to ensure recognisability on the art market, making his own face a trademark of his art. His students and competitors repeated and varied Rembrandt's forms of self-portraiture, adopting comparable roles and poses. Tronies were available on the art market at affordable prices, so they helped to further extend the reach of the "Rembrandt" brand.

### **PRIDE AND STATUS – PORTRAITS FOR AMSTERDAM CITIZENS**

As a newcomer to Amsterdam, Rembrandt benefitted by teaming up with art dealer Hendrick Uylenburgh until 1634/35. Uylenburgh promoted the careers of a variety of artists, and provided Rembrandt with lucrative portrait assignments. For socially conscious urban citizens portraits were prestige objects. Rembrandt delighted his clients with his keen observational skills, quickly becoming the most in-demand portrait painter in the city. In the mid-1630s, Jacob Backer was a key rival. Backer too understood how to present Amsterdam's wealthy burghers in a lifelike, elegant manner. Portrait painting gave artists the opportunity to network with a prosperous clientele who were frequently interested in purchasing other pictures as well.

### TOP CHOICES FOR DISCERNING BUYERS

In the mid-1630s, flat lace collars made from several layers of reinforced linen replaced the aptly-named “millstone ruff” as the height of fashion. Style-conscious women customized their individual looks with accessories such as pearl jewellery or opulent handheld fans. Amsterdam’s elite citizens were spoiled for choice not only in terms of their wardrobe or how they presented themselves – the city’s art market was brimming with talented portrait painters. Each of these artists developed their own techniques for the most evocative portrayal of white lace and shimmering black satin. Aside from Rembrandt, artists including Jacob Backer, Govaert Flinck and Bartholomeus van der Helst helped meet the demand for the most meticulous, realistic depiction of these elegant fabrics.

### TWO BROTHERS – TWO PORTRAITISTS

The brothers Adriaen and Jacob Trip came from a wealthy Amsterdam merchant family that had amassed its fortune through international trade. Their parents’ generation had hired Rembrandt to paint their portraits, but the sons had different tastes. In 1644, Adriaen Trip took on a confident pose in a portrait by Jan Lievens. The artist had shared a studio in Leiden with Rembrandt, then worked in London and Antwerp. In 1644, he settled in Amsterdam and quickly gained success. Ten years later, the younger brother Jacob commissioned Bartholomeus van der Helst, who was the ideal choice in the 1650s for this kind of elegant portrait, posed in formal black before a landscape background.

### PORTRAITS OF COMMUNAL PRIDE

Wealthy burghers of Amsterdam assumed leadership positions in non-profit communal institutions such as the *Spinhuis*, the women’s penitentiary, or the *Leprozenhuis*, a health care facility for sufferers of infectious diseases. Numerous group portraits bear witness to the esteemed offices held by the “Regents”, both male and female, and by citizens who served in volunteer civic guard companies. While these pictures proudly parade the social commitment of the upper class, the actual occupants of charitable institutions were rarely regarded as worthy of depiction themselves. Rembrandt’s *Night Watch*, the most famous civic guard portrait, was painted for the *Kloveniersdoelen*, the assembly hall for the Musketeers’ company. Group portraits commissioned by public organizations were prestigious assignments for painters. Those who succeeded established contacts with powerful regent families and profited from further commissions.

### **A MATTER OF TASTE: OPTIONS FOR SELF-REPRESENTATION**

How would you have chosen to be portrayed back then? Amsterdam citizens could pick and choose from first-class artists and formats in a variety of price ranges, but only the wealthiest could afford a full-length, life-sized portrait. Nicolaes Eliasz Pickenoy was Amsterdam's leading portrait painter into the 1630s. He immortalised his clientele in dignified poses and created likenesses of the greatest elegance. As a younger competitor, Rembrandt offered a contrasting approach that relied on dynamic movement and natural vitality. His lively portrait of Andries de Graeff broke with convention and elevated portrait painting to a new level. But by the 1640s popular taste had changed. The next generation preferred the brighter painting style of Rembrandt's former assistant, *Govaert Flinck*.

### **THE PORTRAITS PRINT – STEPS TOWARD PERFECTION**

Rembrandt's etchings demonstrate his love of experimentation and his great narrative talent. Admirers of his prints commissioned him to create portrait etchings – among them the art collector Jan Six and the print dealer Clement de Jonghe, two of his most important supporters. De Jonghe acquired over 70 copper plates by Rembrandt and made prints from them to sell. Rembrandt's portrait of the print dealer was developed in several states. Collectors valued the unfinished proof impressions so much that Rembrandt sold small print runs of them as artworks in their own right, adding value to his print business. While most prints were inexpensive, some of Rembrandt's etchings sold for the same price as paintings.

### **CHOOSING A PORTRAITIST – BUT NOT REMBRANDT! // ARTISTIC COMPETITION ON PAPER**

Poet and playwright Joost van den Vondel was decidedly not one of Rembrandt's collectors and patrons. Vondel was an important figure in Amsterdam's cultural life, and he had numerous portraits made of himself, but none by Rembrandt. In his poems Vondel praised Sandrart, Lievens and Flinck. He preferred their brighter painting approach, a style that Rembrandt did not offer.

In his prints, Rembrandt sought to compete artistically with contemporaries and earlier artists whose works he collected. He perfected a unique blend of etching, engraving and drypoint and printed special impressions on Asian paper or even vellum. With his Hundred Guilder Print, Rembrandt produced an etching of extraordinary market value. He once traded an impression of this work for *The Plague among the Trojans (Il Morbetto)* – Raimondi's famous etching after Raphael.

### **ART MARKET AND ART CRITICISM**

Amsterdam's most important commercial hub was the Bourse or beurs, the stock exchange founded in 1611 in the city centre. In Job Adriaensz. Berckheyde's painting we can see merchants from all over the world bustling around the building's courtyard, where international goods and securities were traded. To the right of the entrance we see an art dealer's stand offering landscapes, genre scenes and still lifes for sale. At places like this and even in their own studios, artists were confronted with art critics. Rembrandt's opinion of contemporaries who marketed themselves as informed art critics is demonstrated in one satirical drawing: The artist at lower right unabashedly does his "business" while an art critic with donkey's ears – a symbol of stupidity – comments on a painting he is pointing at.

### **THE TRAGIC HERO – COMPETITION ON THE GRAND STAGE**

Beginning in 1635, Rembrandt returned to history painting as his specialty. Emotional depth and climactic moments of drama became a trademark of his pictorial narratives. In 1639 he wrote to Constantijn Huygens, secretary of Stadtholder Frederik Hendrik, explaining that his aim was to capture the greatest and most natural movement and emotion. In the same letter he offered a huge painting to Huygens as a gift, most likely *The Blinding of Samson*. This painting presents the most brutal moment of the biblical story as no other artist had done before, depicting Samson being blinded. Rembrandt took inspiration for the fallen tragic hero from Rubens and Van Dyck. Art connoisseurs of the time recognised these connections and appreciated the international competition that Rembrandt had now entered into, simultaneously setting new standards and creating inspiration for artists who would follow.

### **REAL OR IDEAL? STYLISTIC OPTIONS FOR STORYTELLING**

In *Diana Bathing with her Nymphs*, with the Stories of Actaeon and Callisto, Rembrandt has combined two narratives from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in a highly original way. While some of the women splash playfully in the water, the nymphs on the right have thrown the pregnant Callisto to the ground and are violently tearing off her clothes. Meanwhile, Actaeon has been secretly observing the goddess of the hunt and her entourage bathing. As punishment, Diana transforms Actaeon into a deer, as indicated by the antlers on his head. Rembrandt's composition is full of contrasts and vitality, and he gave the nymphs natural bodies and movements. This image could hardly have contrasted more with the classical portrayal of the scene painted by Jacob van Loo 20 years later, whose female characters conform to the

feminine ideal of beauty based on classical antiquity. Bright colours and balanced proportions were in demand in the 1650s, increasingly displacing Rembrandt's style, equal parts drastic and natural, from the market.

### **REMBRANDT OR NOT?**

Rembrandt's landscape drawings are actually always sketches drawn before the motif. The kind of finished composition we find here, with tiny people in a majestic "world landscape" of mountains, a river, city and countryside is found in only a few of his paintings. This and the signature, unusual in his drawings, led to the suspicion as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century that this drawing was a "forgery". More recent examinations however have produced arguments favouring the notion that it could in fact be an original. A close look at the range of details, simply drawn but vibrant, such as the travellers in the left foreground, reveals a level of drawing expertise not anticipated in a first glance at this surprising drawing.

### **LANDSCAPES – PLACES OF LONGING AND OBJECTS FOR SALE**

Around the year 1600, landscapes without a narrative from the Bible, mythology or history were a rarity. A mere 50 years later landscape was among the most popular subjects on the Amsterdam art market. Sunny Italian scenery, poetic fantasy landscapes or sweeping views across the Dutch flatlands provided relaxation and a change of scenery for people in urban environments. Hercules Segers and Philips Koninck specialised in this market segment, while Rembrandt remained primarily a figure painter. In the few landscape paintings and numerous drawings and prints he created beginning in the late 1630s, he renewed his interest in the dramatic, artfully seeking to capture the natural phenomena of light and weather.

### **ENIGMATIC HEROINES**

Rembrandt's circle brought to market numerous paintings featuring powerfully expressive female figures. Biblical and mythological heroines were clothed in fanciful costumes made of luxurious materials, reflecting a fascination for foreign cultures and materials. The artists took advantage of the availability of all kinds of foreign goods in Amsterdam to enliven their paintings. The jewels, silk fabrics, or seashells from faraway lands they depicted were available in Amsterdam as highly coveted import goods. The identification of the women represented is enigmatic not only for today's audiences: Art connoisseurs of the 17<sup>th</sup> century welcomed deliberate ambiguity in art as a catalyst for the imagination and a prompt for sociable discussion.

### **AN OLD TESTAMENT THEME AS BESTSELLER: ABRAHAM AND HAGAR**

The Amsterdam art market offered scenes from the Old Testament in every price range. Fighting for liberation from Spain in the Eighty Years' War, the Dutch often identified themselves with the Biblical Israelites as a new chosen people. Depictions of Abraham's expulsion of Hagar, a family drama beset with moral conflicts, were especially popular. Pieter Lastman's depiction of the story in 1612 proved widely influential, putting the focus on the emotionally charged interactions between the figures. Rembrandt's drawing after Lastman's painting precisely captured this quality. The lasting success of the composition was still on display 40 years later in the variation painted by Rembrandt's student Barent Fabritius. In contrast, Rembrandt's former employee Govaert Flinck innovatively presented the central figures in a half-length format.

### **IDEAL BECOMES REAL – THE ABDUCTION OF GANYMEDE**

The myth of Ganymede tells the story of the most beautiful boy on earth being kidnapped by the father of the gods, Jupiter, who transforms himself into an eagle, grabs up the youngster and carries him off to serve as a cupbearer to the gods. The most beautiful boy on earth? Rembrandt's Ganymede is the exact opposite. In monumental format he presents a chubby toddler, crying in fear and even wetting himself. The contrast to depictions of Ganymede common at the time could not have been greater. Copper etchings of an original motif by Michelangelo portraying Ganymede as an attractive, muscular young man were broadly popular. Ganymede's abduction was sometimes depicted to symbolize the ascent of the soul to heaven, especially the soul of a deceased child, but it is unclear whether this meaning can be applied to Rembrandt's painting. The bold immediacy of Rembrandt's lifelike portrayal remains strikingly unique. It would certainly have fuelled discussion among Amsterdam art lovers.

### **ANGELS: A TRADEMARK THEME IN REMBRANDT'S CIRCLE**

Rembrandt had a talent for reinventing popular themes. He passed this on to his students and encouraged them to come up with their own creative variations of his compositions. Rembrandt earned good money from the sales of works by his students and from the apprenticeship fees he charged them for his tutelage. Scenes featuring angelic messengers became bestsellers in his studio. We can also see the impact of the Rembrandt team's angelic depictions in the work by Jan Victors, who was not a Rembrandt student. Victors' adaption of Rembrandtesque themes and

motifs is a testament to the broad influence that “Rembrandt & Co.” had on the making and marketing of art in Amsterdam.

### **ITALIAN AMBIANCE OR HOMELY INTIMACY? // ABRAHAM’S SACRIFICE AS ARTISTIC CHALLENGE**

Amsterdam artists offered consumers an enormous range of appealing themes and styles. Motifs from Christ’s childhood were in great demand, and the artists portrayed them both in dark tones as well as featuring a luminous lustre with a bright palette. While Rembrandt’s former student Samuel van Hoogstraten took on the deep, chiaroscuro tone of his former teacher in the modest setting of his nativity portrayal, his contemporary Jan Baptist Weenix had spent time in Italy, and his depiction of the Holy Family is set in gleaming sunlight with classical architecture in the background.

Rembrandt also passed on his passion for drama and emotion to his successors. In depictions of the sacrifice of Isaac, they captured the heavenly messenger intervening at the last minute to prevent Abraham from sacrificing his son. The portrayal of dramatic turning points became something of a trademark for pictorial narratives in Rembrandt’s circle.

### **ARTFUL AMBIGUITY**

Part still life, part genre painting – Rembrandt’s *Girl with Dead Peacocks* holds a special place in his work. He was clearly fascinated by the colourful shading and structure of the birds’ shimmering plumage, but he resisted painting a simple still life, instead integrating the arrangement of birds within a scene of daily life. We also find a thoroughly lifelike scene in the depiction of a girl with a broom. The painting is inscribed with Rembrandt’s name, but its execution has recently been attributed to one of the master’s most talented students: Carel Fabritius. Fabritius used the earthy colours and atmospheric treatment of light so characteristic of his teacher’s work, creating a product of the “Rembrandt” brand. The different painting methods evident in the picture indicate that another artist must have completed it after Fabritius had left Amsterdam.

### **EVERYDAY WORLDS: NARRATIVE VARIETY**

The open market for genre paintings grew exponentially between 1630 and 1660. Scenes from daily life were appreciated as highly modern works of contemporary art. From festive groups of elegant people to gritty farm scenes, genre paintings

contrasted with traditional themes of religious history by being easy to understand, as well as witty and entertaining.

It was especially in his drawings and prints that Rembrandt captured observations from day-to-day life. Many artists, also from surrounding cities, specialised in genre painting, and their works put pressure on Amsterdam artists to compete. For Rembrandt, genre scenes were simply one of the many categories of pictures he marketed for sale.