

Rembrandt at Easter

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If you wander through any of the great museums exhibiting Rembrandt's art today, you can be forgiven if you aren't surprised by their variety: elegant portraits, drawings and etchings of everyday life, dramatic paintings of historical events, sweeping landscapes, well-known scenes from the Bible, and so forth. What else would you expect from one of history's greatest artists?

If you had wandered into Rembrandt's Amsterdam workshop some 350 years ago, however, you might have been somewhat puzzled. Much, of course, would have been familiar to you (at least if you were in the habit of visiting the studios of other artists). In one corner near a window, the artist might be seen, palette and brush in hand, concentrating on his latest painting (and quite possibly ignoring you). A few recent works might have adorned one wall; against another a large stack of paintings (apparently unsold) gathering dust; in the far corner a dozen or so just-printed etchings hanging from a thin cord so their ink could dry.

But if you had taken time to examine this hoard, two things might have puzzled you. The first would have been the large number of self-portraits from the artist's hand, showing the artist dressed in a wide variety of costumes and expressing a wide range of emotions. No wonder they are gathering dust, you might have thought; why would anyone pay to have Rembrandt's portrait on their wall instead of their own?

Something else almost certainly would have puzzled you, however. Many of the works were religious, portraying various scenes from the Bible. And again you would have concluded it was no wonder they too were gathering dust, for in seventeenth century Holland (and in other Protestant countries) few people were interested in having religiously-themed art on their walls. Why had the artist wasted his time and talents on such unmarketable material?

The Reformation, Art, and Rembrandt

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century not only ushered in significant changes in Europe's religious life, but influenced almost every other aspect of its culture. One of the most vivid examples is the transformation that took place in the visual arts. Post-Reformation artists (unlike their predecessors) no longer felt they had to limit themselves to religious themes, but began exploring a wide range of subjects.

For centuries the chief patron of the arts had been the Roman Catholic Church; art often was seen as the handmaiden of Catholic teaching and worship. This isn't to say that great art was never produced during this period, for it definitely was. But for most artists, the Church's patronage was essential, and that meant they concentrated on themes the Church deemed important – Madonna and child, the last judgment, the crucifixion, etc.

In general, however, the churches of the Reformation downplayed the role of the visual arts in worship, and artists in Protestant regions no longer could look to the Church for patronage. Instead they had to seek support elsewhere, often from

the aristocracy or the burgeoning mercantile class. As one scholar notes, “Thus for the first time in history, painters assumed the independent but precarious position in society that they now occupy.”¹

This meant artists in Protestant regions now were free to draw their inspiration from almost anywhere: ancient Greek or Roman myths, dramatic landscapes, incidents from everyday life, and so forth. And this is precisely what happened. Religious art faded into the background, replaced by works on virtually every subject imaginable.

Of the hundreds of artists who flourished during this so-called “Golden Age” of Baroque painting, none is better known – and deservedly so – than Rembrandt van Rijn. Born in the Dutch city of Leiden in 1606, Rembrandt’s parents (although of modest means) apparently were impressed enough with his intellectual abilities to enroll him in the city’s prestigious Latin School, the curriculum of which included classical languages and literature, as well as Bible and Christian doctrine. At the age of fourteen he graduated and was enrolled in Leiden University.

University life (and a probable career afterward in law or governmental service) must not have appealed to him, for he left after only a few months to become an artist. He first apprenticed himself to an established local painter, then moved to Amsterdam to study under a well-known Dutch master, returning to Leiden while not yet 20 to open his own studio. The venture was apparently successful, but in 1631 he returned to Amsterdam, where his marriage to the cousin of a prominent art dealer brought him into contact with numerous potential clients. Soon he became known for his impressive skills as a portrait painter, and his financial success and social position were assured.

The times could not have been better for someone in his position, for Holland was rapidly assuming its place as the foremost trading nation in Europe. As the Seventeenth Century progressed, hundreds of Dutch sailing ships (at least half of Europe’s trading fleet) crisscrossed most of the known world, bringing great wealth to its citizens and lucrative commissions to its artists, particularly those (like Rembrandt) specializing in portraits.

Rembrandt’s Biblical Art

It is, however, Rembrandt’s religious art that concerns us here. In spite of the uncertain market for religious art, Rembrandt – alone of his contemporaries – persisted in producing a large volume of paintings, etchings, and drawings based on the Bible. Willem Visser ‘t Hooft has calculated that almost one-fourth of his paintings and etchings and over one-third of his drawings were derived from the Bible.² Some were commissioned by the Dutch royal family, but for the most part, Rembrandt seems to have done them for his own satisfaction. Many probably ended up being auctioned for almost nothing when Rembrandt – notoriously inept in financial matters – was forced into bankruptcy.

While we think of Rembrandt mainly as a painter, in his own day he achieved equal fame for his etchings, which could be reproduced in quantity and usually were small enough to fit within the limited space of most Dutch houses. (Etching is a painstaking process in which a metal plate is covered with resin; the artist uses a sharp metal point to cut through the resin to the underlying metal. The plate is then immersed in acid to etch the design into the metal, and the plate can then be inked

to produce multiple copies.) Rembrandt's etchings ranged through almost the whole Bible and are remarkable in their detail and insight; one art historian terms him "the greatest etcher in the history of art."³ In his most famous etching, the so-called Hundred Guilder Print, Rembrandt surveyed the whole of Jesus' ministry in Matthew 19; he is said to have worked on it for ten years.

Why did Rembrandt devote so much time and energy to works derived from the Bible – especially since there was so little market for them? We can only guess; he left no diaries or journals, and few letters survive. But what is clear is that the Bible was important to him – so important that it determined a major part of his artistic output.

What was the source of his fascination with the Bible? One historian suggests it may have been his mother, but then somewhat unsympathetically adds, "Rembrandt's persistence in painting, drawing, and etching certain events in the Bible is one of the most individual obstinacies of his headstrong genius."⁴ Undoubtedly closer to the mark is Visser 't Hooft's assessment: "Rembrandt is the only great painter not only of the Netherlands but also of the whole world to deserve the name of a biblical painter, for he roams through the Bible from beginning to end, and gives us what he discovers.... One thing is certain: he lived with his Bible. He was in truth '*homo unius libri*' [a man of one book]."⁵ When he died only one book was listed in his estate's inventory: a Bible.

In his early years Rembrandt probably saw the Bible mainly as a sourcebook from which he could draw fresh ideas (much as a newly-minted preacher might scour it for next week's sermon). As time passed, however, Rembrandt found himself assailed by personal tragedy (including the deaths of his first wife and three of their four children), and his biblical works began reflecting a more profound understanding of the Bible's message. The goal of every serious artist is to cause us (or even force us) to see the world in ways we have not seen it before. To do this involves not only great technical skill, but the ability to observe his or her subject in great depth. Rembrandt's mature biblical works do exactly that. "As Rembrandt grew older his spirituality deepened and he no longer saw the Bible merely as a source for dramatic narrative.... [He] became more and more concerned with the inner reactions of the individuals he portrayed."⁶ John Durham concludes that eventually Rembrandt "read the Bible as a book about himself. He saw himself in its stories, and he saw those stories as real, the narrative accounts of real persons whose experiences were not that different from his own."⁷

Trial, Death, and Resurrection

In the course of his career Rembrandt explored virtually the entire Bible in his art (although he avoided some subjects popular in medieval art, such as the last judgment or the parable of the rich man and Lazarus). Some passages were favorites: he pictured the flight to Egypt nine times, the parable of the Good Samaritan fifteen times, and the story of Abraham thirty-one times.

Among his most moving works, however, are those related to Jesus' final days on earth: His trial, death, and resurrection. What can we learn from them? What insights might we gain from Rembrandt into events that have been central to the Christian faith throughout its history, and remain so today?

Through his art, I suggest, Rembrandt points us to *three great truths* concerning

those events.

The Humility of the Incarnation

The first great truth we grasp from Rembrandt's portrayal of Jesus' final days is *the humility of the incarnation*. Repeatedly Rembrandt – like artists before him – returned to the Bible's account of Jesus' birth. The announcement to Mary, Mary's visit to Elizabeth, the visit of the shepherds, the adoration of the magi, the presentation in the temple, the flight to Egypt, the childhood in Nazareth – in each of these Rembrandt not only sought to bring the very human drama of Jesus' birth to life, but to underline that here something utterly unique has taken place: God has become a man. Unlike many of his predecessors, however, Rembrandt did not idealize Jesus' birth or bestow bright halos on Mary and the babe; he was content to use light in more subtle ways, while making it clear that this infant was both human and divine.

The same was true in Rembrandt's numerous portrayals of Jesus' public ministry; in them we glimpse both Jesus' humanity and divinity. Through his art Rembrandt repeatedly confronts his viewers with the truth expressed in the ancient Nicene Creed: He who was "God of God; Light of Light; Very God of Very God" now had become "incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man." Rembrandt would have agreed with theologian Thomas Torrance's assertion that "everything in Christianity centers on the incarnation of the Son of God, an invasion of God among men and women in time."⁸

But what of Jesus' final days? The struggles in Gethsemane, the arrest, Peter's denial, Judas' betrayal, the scorn of the authorities, the mockery of the soldiers, Pilate's cowardice before the crowds, Jesus' collapse on the way to Calvary – each these Rembrandt vividly portrayed in all of their raw brutality – and in them Jesus' divine nature is virtually hidden. The artist seems to be asking his viewers a profound question: How could God allow His Son to submit to such unrelenting humiliation? Doesn't the weakness of those final days negate Jesus' divinity? Rembrandt's answer would have been a resounding "No" – because at the heart of those final events is a mystery we will never fully understand: the humility of the Incarnation. In reality those final days do not negate the truth of the Incarnation, but affirm it.

While Rembrandt expresses this humility in every work picturing Jesus' last days, perhaps none presents it more vividly than his print of Pilate's presentation of Jesus to the crowd. (See the selected bibliography for suggestions about websites and books where works mentioned in this article can be viewed.) Because of technical limitations Rembrandt was forced to rework the scene's metal plate several times. In its original version, his emphasis was on the raucous crowd, almost overwhelming the picture. In its final version, however, Rembrandt omitted most of the crowd; now our attention is almost solely on the prisoner, his hands bound, standing silently on the platform beside Pilate. In A. Hyatt Mayor's words, in this final version the artist "suddenly puts opera glasses to our eyes, pulls us, now forcibly involved, into the central drama"⁹

Here, indeed, is the humility of the Incarnation: Jesus fully took upon Himself our humanity, in all of its suffering and alienation. In the words of the Apostle Paul, this One who was God nevertheless "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant... and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!"¹⁰ In Visser 't Hooft's words, through his portrayal of Jesus' final days, Rembrandt shows us that

the mystery of Christ's incarnation "does not consist in the glorification of man, but in the complete abasement of God."¹¹ God has stooped this low for our salvation.

The Centrality of the Cross

The second great truth Rembrandt would have us grasp from Jesus' final days is *the centrality of the cross*. Centuries before Rembrandt, Christ's suffering on the cross had become a common theme in religious art. Rather than a passive crucifix, however, Rembrandt repeatedly presents us with the stark reality of the event itself. In multiple etchings and paintings we see soldiers standing guard, grieving disciples, mocking onlookers, arrogant officials. Regardless of their exact composition, almost always Rembrandt set these scenes against a backdrop of darkness, symbolizing the horror of what was taking place.

Two paintings in particular picture this, part of a series of paintings on Christ's Passion commissioned by Prince Frederick Henry of Orange. The first, *The Raising of the Cross*, depicts a group of men (including a helmeted Roman soldier) straining to lift the cross – to which Jesus has already been nailed – into a vertical position. Nearby is a spade, used to dig the hole into which the base of the cross will be set and ready to fill the hole and make the cross secure. In the shadows are groups of huddled onlookers, while supervising the scene is a haughty, richly-dressed official.

The second painting, entitled *Descent from the Cross*, portrays events several hours later, after Jesus' death. Gone are the mockers and soldiers; only Jesus' disciples remain, including several struggling to lower the limp body from the cross into a white shroud. Standing by the cross is another richly-dressed individual – not the haughty official of the first painting, but Joseph of Arimathea, waiting to escort the body to his own tomb.

What adds to the impact of these two paintings is that the artist has painted himself into both scenes. In the first, Rembrandt strains with the others to lift the cross into position. In the second, he stands on a ladder, gently helping to ease the lifeless body of Christ to the ground. In this way Rembrandt identifies himself as one of those who caused Jesus to be crucified, and identifies himself also as one who would be His disciple. This self-identity with Jesus in His crucifixion had been highlighted in a contemporary Dutch poem Rembrandt almost surely knew:

No, it was not the Jews who crucified,
Nor who betrayed you in the judgment place,
Nor who, Lord Jesus, spat in your face,
...
I am the one, O Lord, who brought you there,
I am the heavy cross you had to bear,
...
It was my sin, alas, it was for me.¹²

Rembrandt had no interest in trying to sort out the various theories of the atonement. For him it was enough to know that the cross must always be central, for through Christ's death, our salvation has been won.

The Victory of the Resurrection

Few artists have attempted to picture the actual moment of Jesus' resurrection;

who can possibly portray an event that runs counter to every category of human experience? Rembrandt was no exception; he attempted to portray it once early in his career and then seems to have given up.

But Rembrandt knew that Jesus' resurrection was at the heart of the Gospel narrative, and repeatedly he drew attention to its reality through his portrayals of Jesus' resurrection appearances. In one painting Jesus appears near the empty tomb to Mary Magdalene, who assumes Him to be the gardener (and with good reason since Rembrandt puts a spade in His hand). Another painting recreates the moment when Jesus reveals His wounds to doubting Thomas. A dramatic etching of a post-resurrection appearance to His disciples vividly catches their stunned incredulity – and worship.

But one post-resurrection event in particular repeatedly captured Rembrandt's imagination; he returned to it no less than eighteen times. It is Jesus' encounter with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). Among the most moving of his attempts to portray this is a painting from 1648, now in The Louvre, showing the moment when Jesus breaks bread with the two men and is recognized by them as the Risen Lord. On the road they shared their despair over His death; He in turn expounded the Old Testament's prophecies concerning the Messiah's sacrificial death and resurrection. Now as He breaks bread with them, their eyes are opened, and they realize Jesus is no longer dead, but alive. Out of defeat has come victory.

Why did Rembrandt focus on this particular post-resurrection appearance? We can only guess – but almost certainly one reason was because he saw Jesus not only as One who had been raised from the dead, but whose presence is constantly with us if we, like those men from Emmaus, will only welcome Him into our lives.

At the End

On October 4, 1669, Rembrandt died; four days later he was buried in the churchyard of Amsterdam's Westerkerk. In his studio an unfinished painting remained, perhaps still on his easel. It too recounted an incident from the Bible that had often fascinated him: the recognition of the infant Jesus as the Messiah by the aged Simeon (Luke 2:25-35). In the painting Mary hovers in the background, but the focus is on Simeon. Carefully he cradles the infant in his stiff, arthritic hands. His eyes are almost closed, and his mouth is slightly open as he quietly intones his words of praise: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation..."¹³

As his death approached, this was Rembrandt's hope, just as it has been the Church's hope through the ages — and still is ours today.

Notes

1 Robert Wallace, *The World of Rembrandt, 1606 – 1669* (New York: Time-Life Library of Art, 1968), 22.

2 Willem A. Visser 't Hooft, *Rembrandt and the Gospel* (New York: Meridian Books, Inc.), 20

3 Wallace, 41.

4 A. Hyatt Mayor, *Rembrandt and the Bible* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), 5.

5 Visser 't Hooft, 22, 30.

6 Wallace, 40, 112.

7 John I. Durham, *The Biblical Rembrandt: Human Painter in a Landscape of Faith* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2004), 64-65.

8 Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (IVP Academic, Downers Grove, Illinois, 2008), 8.

9 Mayor, 36.

10 Philippians 2:7, 8.

11 Visser 't Hooft, 115.

12 Quoted in Shelley Perlove and Larry Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith: Church and Temple in the Dutch Golden Age* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 288. Cf. the medieval hymn attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux and still in many hymnals, *O Sacred Head, Now Wounded*.

13 Luke 2:29-30.

Selected Bibliography

Various websites include images of many of Rembrandt's major works, including www.rembrandtpainting.net and www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/rembrandt/. The article on Rembrandt in www.wikipedia.org also includes a number of images. Numerous books survey Rembrandt's life and work. The following focus especially on Rembrandt as a biblical artist.

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