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A STUDY IN THE ARTISTIC  
UNDERSTANDING AND INTERPRETATION  
OF TRUTH  
AS SEEN IN REMBRANDT

By

JAMES ROBERT OSBORNE  
A.B., Greenville College

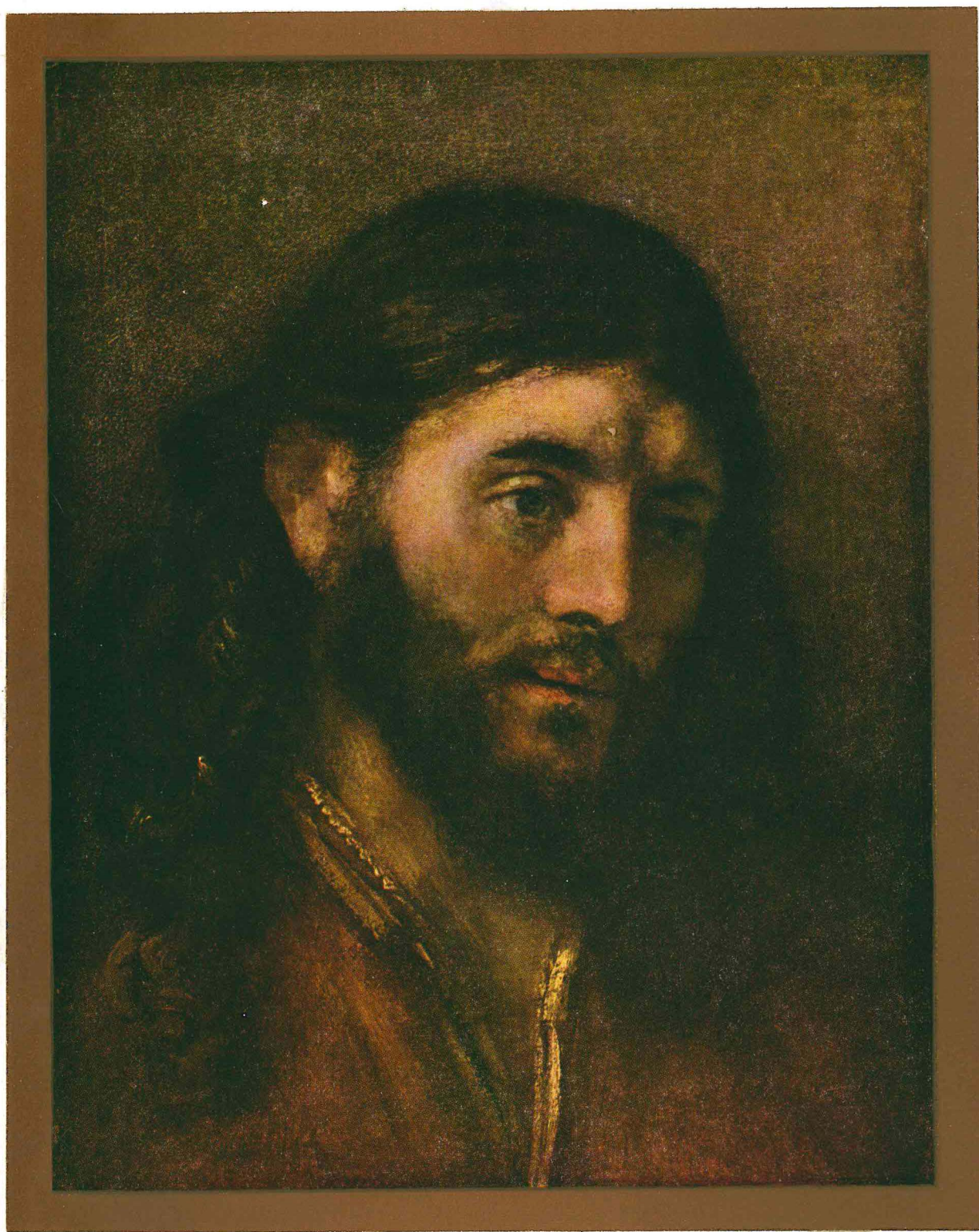
A THESIS

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HEAD OF CHRIST. About 1660. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### INTRODUCTION

	Page
A. THE PROBLEM OF THE THESIS . . . . .	i
1. The Problem Stated . . . . .	i
2. The Importance of the Problem . . . . .	ii
3. The Problem Delimited . . . . .	iii
B. THE MODE OF PROCEDURE . . . . .	iii
C. THE SOURCE OF DATA . . . . .	iv

### CHAPTER I

#### REMBRANDT A GENIUS IN PAINTING

A. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
B. ESSENTIAL SENSITIVITY . . . . .	3
1. Rembrandt's Special Sensitivity to Painting . . . . .	3
a. Early Skill in Drawing . . . . .	3
b. Master Technician in Painting . . . . .	5
2. Rembrandt's Especially Sensitive to Intuitions that Grasp Ultimate Truth . . . . .	8
a. Sensitivity Continually Rejuvenated . . . . .	9
b. The Present in the Light of Eternity . . . . .	10
C. ESSENTIAL INTEGRITY . . . . .	12
1. Rembrandt Possessed the Primacy of Individuality ..	12
2. Rembrandt's Simplicity a Mark of Truthful Painting . . . . .	14
3. Rembrandt Eliminated the Didactic Element . . . . .	17
4. Rembrandt Chose the Greatest Truths in Painting ..	17
D. ESSENTIAL SPIRITUALITY . . . . .	18
1. Rembrandt Possessed an Emotion Essentially Religious . . . . .	18
2. Rembrandt Completely Identified with the Subject ..	19
3. Rembrandt Possessed Prophetic Imagination . . . . .	23
E. CONCLUSION . . . . .	26

June 7, 1948

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## CHAPTER II

### CONCEPTIONS OF ULTIMATE TRUTH REFLECTED IN REMBRANDT PAINTING

	Page
A. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	27
B. ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT . . . . .	28
1. Rembrandt's Moral and Aesthetic Natures . . . . .	28
2. Hyperaesthesia . . . . .	29
3. Analogy to the Child . . . . .	31
C. REMBRANDT'S BELIEF IN A THEOS . . . . .	34
1. Belief Gained in the Non-rational . . . . .	34
2. Creature-feeling . . . . .	38
3. Mysterium Tremendum . . . . .	39
a. Tremendum . . . . .	40
b. Mysterium . . . . .	41
4. Fascinans . . . . .	42
D. REMBRANDT'S BELIEF IN THE INCARNATION . . . . .	43
1. Annunciation, Nativity and Youth . . . . .	46
2. Christ the God-man . . . . .	48
a. As Preacher . . . . .	48
b. As Healer . . . . .	51
c. His Death and Crucifixion . . . . .	52
E. REMBRANDT'S BELIEF IN THE RESURRECTION . . . . .	54
1. Christ's Appearance at Emmaus . . . . .	55
2. The Ascension . . . . .	57
F. CONCLUSION . . . . .	58

## CHAPTER III

### REMBRANDT IN THE LIGHT OF HIS AGE

A. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	60
B. PHILOSOPHY OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY IN HOLLAND . . . . .	61
1. Descartes . . . . .	62
2. Spinoza . . . . .	63
3. Rembrandt's Contradiction of Rationalism . . . . .	65

	Page
C. THEOLOGY OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY . . . . .	66
1. Theological Controversies . . . . .	66
2. Rembrandt the Non-Churchman . . . . .	68
D. CONCLUSION . . . . .	70

#### CHAPTER IV

##### THE FULFILLMENT OF ART AS ACHIEVED BY REMBRANDT

A. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	74
B. ART AND MORALS : . . . .	74
1. Art of Morality . . . . .	75
2. Morality of Art . . . . .	78
C. PURGATIVE EFFECT OF ART . . . . .	78
1. Release from Peripheral Living . . . . .	79
2. Expression of a New Spirit . . . . .	80
D. IMMORTALITY OF ART . . . . .	81
1. Great Art is Inexhaustible . . . . .	81
2. Great Art Partakes of an Immortal Spirit . . . . .	82
E. CONCLUSION . . . . .	83

#### CHAPTER V

##### GENERAL SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

A. RESTATEMENT OF PROBLEM . . . . .	85
B. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS . . . . .	85
C. CONCLUSIONS . . . . .	90
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	92

**LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS**

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

HEAD OF CHRIST . . . . .	Frontispiece
MAN WITH A BEARD . . . . .	Facing Page 1
<u>Detail of</u> MAN WITH A MAGNIFYING GLASS . . . . .	Facing Page 1
SUPPER AT EMMAUS . . . . .	Facing Page 11
<u>Detail of</u> JAN SIX (Not Used) . . . . .	Facing Page 16
CHRIST HEALING THE SICK ("THE HUNDRED GUILDER PRINT")	Facing Page 16
<u>Detail of</u> MAN AT A DESK, WEARING A CROSS AND CHAIN (Not Used) . . . . .	Facing Page 20
THE THREE TREES . . . . .	Facing Page 20
THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON . . . . .	Facing Page 33
STORMY LANDSCAPE . . . . .	Facing Page 39
LANDSCAPE WITH A STONE BRIDGE . . . . .	Facing Page 39
TIMOTHY AND HIS GRANDMOTHER . . . . .	Facing Page 44
ST PAUL . . . . .	Facing Page 45
AN ANGEL APPEARING TO ST. MATTHEW . . . . .	Facing Page 46
AN ANGEL APPEARING TO THE SHEPHERDS . . . . .	Facing Page 46
<u>Detail of</u> CHRIST SEATED, DISPUTING WITH THE DOCTORS . . . . .	Facing Page 47
THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE . . . . .	Facing Page 47
ST JOHN THE BAPTIST PREACHING . . . . .	Facing Page 48
<u>Detail of</u> LANDSCAPE WITH SPORTSMAN AND DOGS (Not Used) . . . . .	Facing Page 49
CHRIST PREACHING . . . . .	Facing Page 49
THE RAISING OF LAZARUS . . . . .	Facing Page 51
<u>Detail of</u> CHRIST PRESENTED TO THE PEOPLE . . . . .	Facing Page 52
CHRIST PRESENTED TO THE PEOPLE . . . . .	Facing Page 52
CHRIST AT THE COLUMN . . . . .	Facing Page 52
<u>Detail of</u> CHRIST PREACHING . . . . .	Facing Page 53
THE THREE CROSSES . . . . .	Facing Page 53
THE DESCENT FROM THE CROSS . . . . .	Facing Page 54
THE ASCENSION . . . . .	Facing Page 57
OLD WOMAN CUTTING HER NAILS . . . . .	Facing Page 82



## INTRODUCTION

## INTRODUCTION

### A. The Problem of the Thesis

#### 1. The Problem Stated.

To a greater, or less degree in the history of the Christian Church there has been an emphasis upon art in its various forms as a medium of conveying truth. The genesis of Christian art in the catacombs had a great task to perform during the trials and persecutions, which was greater than that of merely appealing to the senses. Its task was to strengthen the faith of those who must meet death. Preceding the Reformation, the church was the patron saint of art. At a time when men were largely illiterate and without books art became their Bible. A man could take his friend to the cathedral and through architecture, sculpture, and paintings he could say: "This is my Christ".

After the Reformation began with Luther, there came an emphasis in the church that denied art the service it had rendered as hand-maid to religion. The distrust of art brought by Puritanism has been healed and today a much saner appreciation and place has been given to the expression of truth via the visual arts. The Puritans held the belief that there were interests dearer than the

interests of Art. The interests of Truth were dearer".<sup>1</sup> Here was the denial of the right of Art to express in a very meaningful way that very truth they held dear. A dichotomy between truth or religion and the expression of it thru art is harmful to man. The two can be true yoke-fellows and have proven to be thus since.

The purpose of this thesis is to evaluate art as a vehicle for the expression of truth. The facets of this general contention that art is a most important and necessary medium for the expression of truth, is to be fortified by a study of the life and work of Rembrandt, an artist in particular. Relation of the artist and art of painting to the understanding and interpretation of truth shall be clarified.

## 2. The Importance of the Problem.

The importance of clarifying thought regarding the legitimate use of art is tremendous. There must be an affirmation of the theory that to express truth through an artistic medium is not a hindrance but a help to the purpose of religion. There still remains a Puritan reluctance to grant art the status it has earned and deserves in its contribution to the sum - total of truth.

The nature of truth must be clarified making it clear that

. . . . .

1. Crouch, S., Puritanism and Art, Introduction, p. xiii.

art is saying something that the philosophers, scientists, and theologians cannot tell us. Realizing this society or the church can come again to the great works of art, especially painting, and receive their message that transcends the products of reason by the metaphysician. Art and religion should be thought of as one for their goals are the same. The chief end of works of art is to raise man to a higher grasp of life's realities and to bring him into the presence of the Infinite in which atmosphere life's fullness shall be realized. The insight of the artist will intensify and fortify living in this present world.

### 3. The Problem Delimited.

The word "Art" is extensive in meaning. This thesis shall be concerned only with the art of painting, etching and drawing, which is in a larger category -- the visual arts. This is not a study of the entire field of painting with its great number of artists but shall be limited to the great Dutch genius, Rembrandt. From a particular study of this man, principles shall be arrived at that apply to the whole realm of art in its grasp of truth.

#### B. Mode of Procedure

The logical procedure in this thesis is first to justify the use of Rembrandt as a representative painter. That he is a genius -- one of the great geniuses of painting-must be set forth. To deter-



mine and evaluate Rembrandt in his understanding and transmission of truth will involve a psychological approach in a study of his art to determine his concepts of ultimate reality. To determine and discuss the value of art in reaching its goal will involve a discussion of the philosophy of aesthetics. The century of Rembrandt's life shall be studied to understand his background and the efforts in that age in Holland to reach truth via philosophy and theology. Rembrandt shall then be studied in the light of art's highest attainments or achievements to determine additional values in artistic works. The thesis shall have a summary and conclusion chapter.

#### C. Source of Data

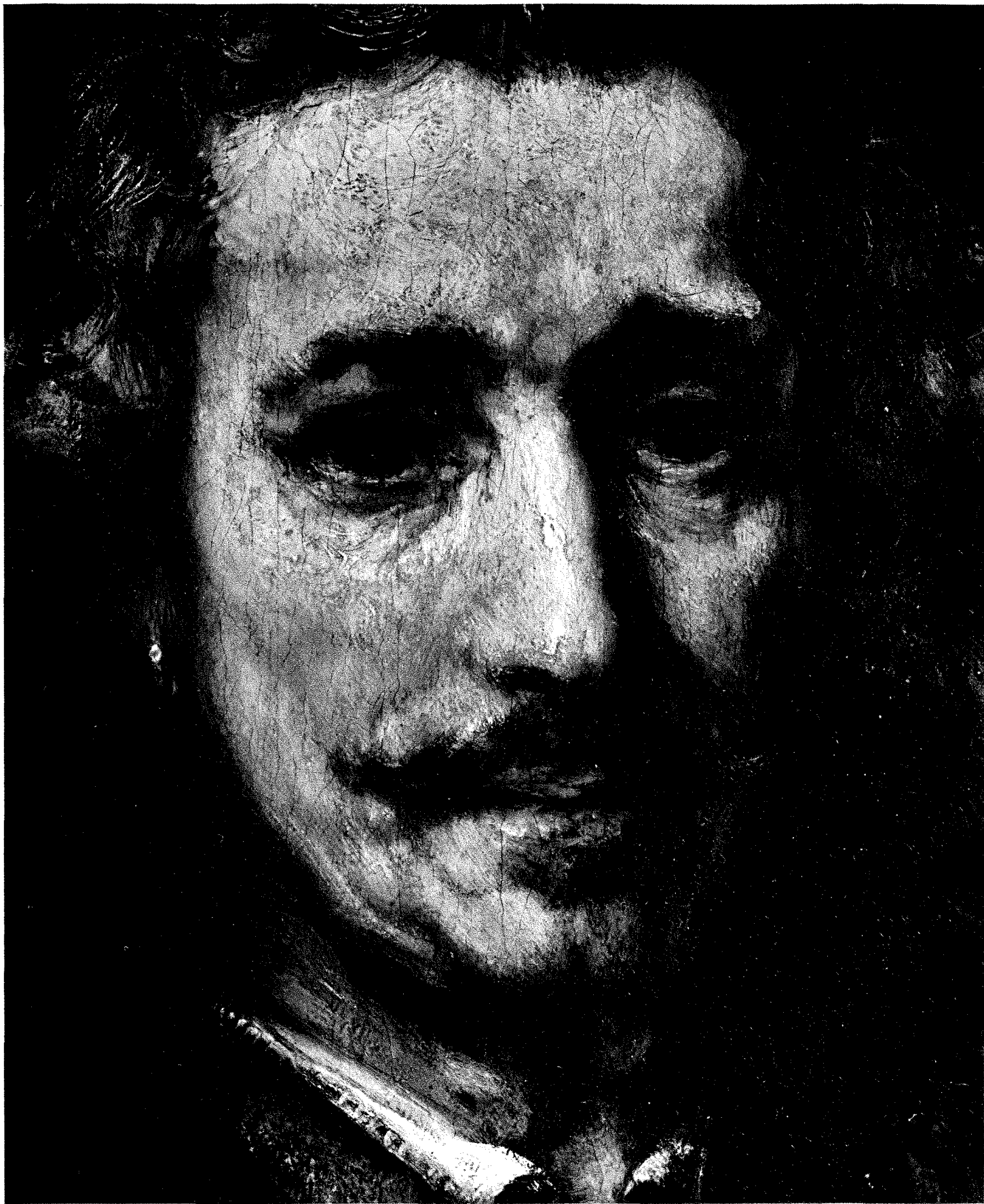
Although still incomplete, the known facts of Rembrandt's life have been published many times. A thorough mastery of these facts is most necessary for an understanding of his works. Extremely important is a study of the best reproductions of his work and whenever possible a study of originals shall be made. New York City is ideal for this with its many exhibitions containing original paintings, drawings, and etchings by Rembrandt. Also special lectures on art are given periodically at the Art Museums.

Material shall be gained from texts on the principles of art, its function and purpose. Likewise this thesis shall make use of

the great contribution that psychology offers in understanding artistic creativity and the response to that creativity. Lastly and most important must be a thorough search of philosophy to seek an answer to the problem and clarify issues.

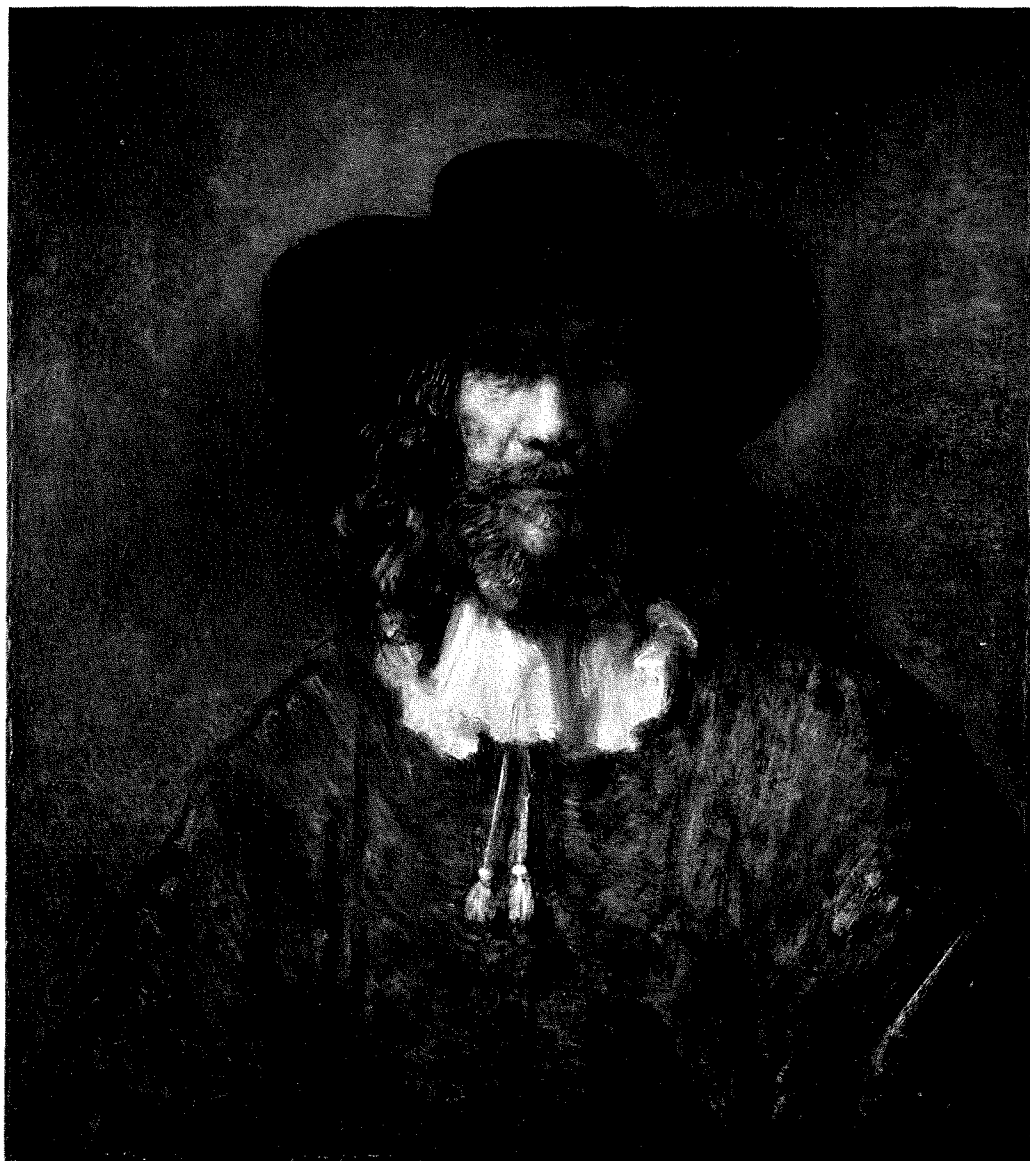
CHAPTER I

REMBRANDT A GENIUS IN PAINTING



28. Detail of MAN WITH A MAGNIFYING GLASS. Actual size.





29. MAN WITH A BEARD.  $28\frac{7}{8}$  x  $25\frac{1}{4}$  inches. Dated 1665.

The eyes and the mouth are the supremely significant features of the human face. In Rembrandt's portraits the eye is the center wherein life, in its infinity of aspect, is most manifest. Not only was his fidelity absolute, but there is a certain mysterious limpidity of gaze that reveals the soul of the sitter. A "Rembrandt" does not give up its beauties to the casual observer -- it takes time to know it, but once known, it is yours forever.

-- Emile Michel

It is the creating of the commonplace with the feeling of the sublime that gives to art its true power.

-- F. J. Millet

## CHAPTER I

### REMBRANDT, A GENIUS IN PAINTING

#### A. Introduction

There is a need today to come to an understanding of the contribution of painting to our living, our grasp of truth. To do this one must study those who have produced truly great art. That can be the only basis upon which an evaluation can be made of art's importance. What are the marks of a genius and how can we determine when we have been in the presence of a great master? Gentile has stated that genius is something quite different from intelligence or cleverness, for neither of these words signify

a special function of the spirit but only a high degree of efficiency in the unity of its functions. Genius belongs to those who deserve the most lasting and most honourable name of poet. For they, as the Greek word signifies, are the creators who enrich the human world with new forms, which so intertwine and identify themselves with the old that they renew the aspect and value of the whole. Such may be called the creators of the spiritual world in which we live.<sup>1</sup>

Gentile is saying that the work of the Genius is his transformation<sup>of</sup> the work-a-day world of nature about him into something infinite.

The result of genius or the highest art

. . . . .

1. Gentile, The Philosophy of Art, p. 268.

cannot but confer some of its own intrinsic virtue, if only by lifting man out of his mood of narrow human exigencies and anxieties to the serene plane of enlightenment. It has no specific sermons to preach, but summons to a state of grace.<sup>1</sup>

High or great art is not meant to be primarily didactic or moralistic in its effect, saying to man what he must or must not do or be, but great art unconsciously vitalizes, energizes, or elevates man to a higher plane of living or appreciation of the basic realities of life.

This accomplishment of the painter is to be tested by the response to his painting. But it can be competently stated that there is no particular style, approach, concept, manner of realization that can authoritatively be said to achieve the highest aesthetic result in painting pictures.<sup>2</sup> But essential requirements must exist in the artist himself. An evaluation must be made of the genius of Rembrandt, as of any other artist who hopes to realize the greatest aesthetic result, by applying the requirements of essential spirituality, integrity, and sensitivity. These qualities must exist to produce the genius who can elevate man to a new plane of enlightenment.

. . . . .

1. Guggenheimer, R., Sight and Insight, P. 151.

2. cf. Ibid, p. 215.



## B. Essential Sensitivity

### 1. Rembrandt's special sensitivity to painting

It becomes evident to the growing individual that he has special sensitivity to communication which corresponds to his peculiar abilities. We do not expect or require Handel to express himself in poetry when he excelled in expression through music, nor do we think it uncommon for Shelley to use only the medium of poetry for setting forth his truth by slighting the use of music. Every creative person is relatively insensitive to communication that does not harmonize with his medium of expression. Just so it is essential to intuitive genius that there be the absolute requisite of sensitivity and spontaneous creativity in accord with his highest abilities.<sup>1</sup>

It was obvious from his earliest years that Rembrandt Van Rijn was not to follow in the steps of his father, the owner of a mill. But all in this Dutch family expected the youngest of four brothers to be distinguished in a profession. Arnold Houbraken (1680 - 1719), states in his life of Rembrandt, that

his parents were anxious that he should learn Latin and become a learned man, so they sent him to school at Leyden. But his peculiar inclination towards drawing caused them to alter their decision; and as a re-

. . . . .

1. cf. Guggenheimer, op. cit., p. 62.

sult they sent him, in order to acquire the elements of art, to Jakob Izakzen Van Zwanenberg.<sup>1</sup>

Houbraken, living but a short time after Rembrandt's death, gives a reliable account of Rembrandt based on anecdotal tradition. But other commentaries on his life indicate that young Rembrandt, fourteen years old, did not consult the books assigned to him; his teacher reported back to the miller that their son used his time in drawing, as father Harmen Gerritszoon had well observed, often having seen Rembrandt finger-painting in the dust of the mill floor. In school, books had bored the young artist, and throughout his life did not attract him with the exception of those of a technical nature that would benefit his art.

Rembrandt was apprenticed to Jacob Van Swanenborg for some three years and quickly showed that he was a greater artist than his teacher. He then studied six months under the leading Dutch artist Peter Lastman in Amsterdam, but because of differences of opinion, he returned to the mill to study by himself. Here the young artist strove to perfect his theory of the primary effect of light and dark upon painting. He had observed the interplay of shadow and strong sunlight in the interior of the mill; he experimented by painting objects with varying degrees of light to catch its subtle effects; he painted his own face in every conceivable

. . . . .

1. Borenius, T., Rembrandt: Selected Paintings, p. 23.

mood to perfect his technique. Many neighbors came and sat for portraits but this ceased when the portraits were anything but flattering. Nevertheless the experience was a conditioning force in the perfection of his extremely individualistic artistry.

For the development of this thesis Rembrandt must be evaluated as a technician. To produce a genius there must be more than just spontaneity of the creative urge. This urge must be expressed through a technique which is many times realized through long and arduous practice till it is perfected and becomes natural.

Gentile makes a distinction between technique and art, making the former belong to the realm of thought

but of thought which returns to feeling and depends on feeling and so is guided and animated by feeling. Thus it has been truly said (by Benedetto Croce) that technique is a pre-condition of art, in the sense that the artist must be possessed of it and master it with confidence, so as to be untrammelled in the expression of his feeling and indeed assisted as it were by a road already cleared and levelled, already mapped out for all who wish to follow it to the goal.<sup>1</sup>

So technique becomes as a pen and the ability to write which helps the artist objectify his feelings or thoughts. Technique in great art should not be the goal, but is in reality a pre-condition of great art. Andrea Del Sarto has been called the "Faultless Painter" because of his flawless technique but his painting lacks the inspiration

. . . . .

1. Gentile, op. cit., p. 240.

and warmth of Raphael who was not as great a technician as Del Sarto. Yet Rembrandt's artistic execution was, J. C. Van Dyke states, in considering the entire history of art he would nominate Rembrandt as one of the three greatest in mastering technique.<sup>1</sup>

Rembrandt's fame spread and when he set up a studio in an abandoned warehouse in Amsterdam, a group of young men were anxious to become his pupils. However, try as they might, the mastery of chiaroscuro eluded them. The Dutch have produced but one great master. An extant letter which Giovanni Francesco Barbieri wrote to Don Antonio Ruffo replying to a request that he copy a painting of Rembrandt's on commission is an interesting commentary on Rembrandt. He commends Rembrandt's execution in painting and states that "indeed I sincerely hold him to be a great virtuoso." The fame of Rembrandt had spread to Italy and was copied. Guercino had nothing but praise and admiration for Rembrandt's work.<sup>2</sup>

In 1900 the magazine "Masters in Art" dedicated its June number to Rembrandt. The editor of this magazine gathered together the best analysis in condensed form of the artist. Eugene Fromentin is regarded as having given the "most illuminating, the most penetrating, criticism upon Rembrandt" that had at that time appeared."<sup>3</sup>

. . . . .

1. Van Dyke, J. C., Meaning of Pictures, p. 129.
2. cf. Berenius, T., op. cit. p. 15.
3. Masters in Art, p. 23.

For Fromentin the use of chiaroscuro by Rembrandt is of great importance in expressing himself. It is worthwhile to quote an extended passage on this technique Rembrandt strove to perfect.

Suppose then, that in despair of classifying him as merely a master of chiaroscuro, in despair of stretching the word to make it contain the whole truth about him, in despair of finding a ready-made term in the vocabulary, we should invent one, and call him a 'luminarist' coining this barbarous word to signify a man who could conceive light outside of recognized laws, who would attach to it an extraordinary meaning, who would make great sacrifices to it. If such is its signification, Rembrandt is at once defined and judged, for it expresses an idea, a rare eulogium, and a criticism. The whole career of Rembrandt the dreamer turns round this troublesome objective point-to paint only by the help of light, to draw only with light. He has proved that light exists in itself, independent of exterior form and of coloring, and that it can, by the force and variety of its usage, the power of its effects, the number, the depth and the subtlety of the ideas which it may be made to express, become the principle of a new art. Life he perceives in a dream, as an accent of another world, which renders real life almost cold and makes it seem pale, and his ideal, as in a dream, pursued with closed eyes, is light, - the nimbus around objects, phosphorescence on a black ground. It is fugitive, uncertain, formed of imperceptible lineaments, all ready to disappear before they are fixed, ephemeral, and dazzling. To arrest the vision, place it upon canvas, give it form and relief, preserve its fragile texture, give it brilliancy, and let the result be strong, masculine, and substantial painting, as real as any other, which would resist contact with Rubens, Titian, Veronese, Giorgione, Van Dyke - this is what Rembrandt the 'luminarist' attempted. Did he accomplish it? The judgment of the world is there to say. When this dreamer of light used it appropriately, when he used it to express what no other painter in the world has expressed, when, in a word, he accosts with his dark lantern the world of the marvelous, of conscience, the ideal, then he has no peer, because he has no equal in the art of showing the invisible.<sup>1</sup>

. . . . .

1. Masters In Art, p. 25.

About 1650, or the latter part of his life, Rembrandt's accomplished form of expression was perfected.

Aesthetically speaking his career represents one great crescendo, so that all may claim that the latest Rembrandts are the finest of all. His characters now get increasingly heroic, and his design acquires a quality of reposeful and monumental majesty - there is but little endeavor on his part at this stage to achieve the 'greatest and most natural animation' that had been his ideal previously.<sup>1</sup>

That perfected technique made Rembrandt one of the artists whom succeeding painters have most frequently studied.

## 2. Rembrandt's special sensitivity to intuitions that grasp ultimate truth

As previously stated, sensitivity, or the urge to create is the basic requisite of an artist. Technique is but the language that is a pre-condition to expression and when the expression is made the technique is cancelled by the actual form. A man acts as he fundamentally is, so technique as language or action becomes a part of the artist, bone of his bone, to express essentially what that man is. It becomes an unconscious act, unrestrained and uninhibited in the total expression of himself.

But as to essential sensitivity, the grace of spontaneity - every artist possesses it. To him there would be a continual influx of impressions, of intuitions, that go beyond the reason and reside in pure feeling. At this point it is important to observe that the

. . . . .

1. Ibid., p. 19.

highest grasp of truth is not done purely in the realm of the intellect. There have been many apostles of the thought that one comes to ultimate reality, to the essence of the real, by use of intuition. Reason in search for fundamental truth comes to its limitation, from which point the mind leaps on and intuitively grasps ultimate reality and treats it as an established fact. To do this is to truly live!

This philosophy of intuition is not without support among many able philosophers. Plato first conceived of objects existing before the subject realizes them. For him knowledge was innate. But since Plato this idea has been questioned and the theory put forth that man by free will and reflection of an active mind comes to a sudden grasp of that which is beyond reason. When this spontaneous inspiration comes, it "masters the artist's soul and seems to drive him beside himself in a kind of fine frenzy."<sup>1</sup> And this sensitivity that leads to creativity must be continually rejuvenated if the spirit is to live:

F. H. Bradley, in *Appearance and Reality*, gives special point to this truth in the province of philosophy. 'All of us, I presume, more or less, are led beyond the region of ordinary facts', writes Bradley apropos of persons who pursue the study of ultimate truth. 'Some in one way and some in others, we seem to touch and have communion with what is beyond the visible world which both supports and humbles, both chastens and transports us. And with certain persons, the intellectual effort to understand

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1. Gentile, op. cit., p. 130.

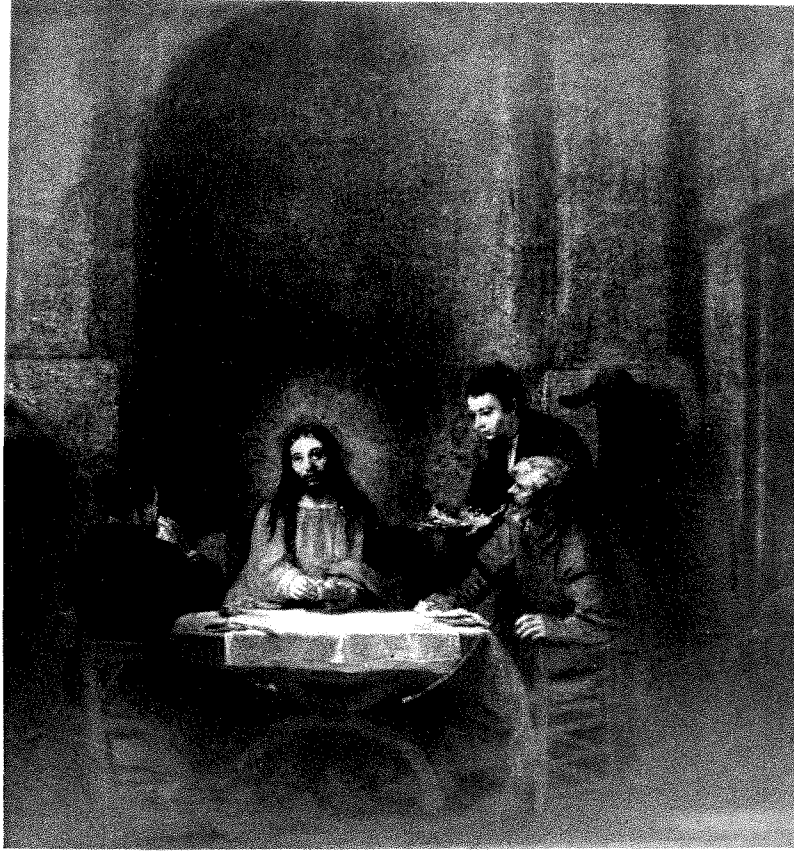
the universe is a principal way of thus experiencing the Deity.'<sup>1</sup>

This same sensitiveness to the realm beyond the reason has the quality of seeing the present moment in the light of its greater whole or context. That is, philosophy is continually reminding us that all things are changing in the world of objects that are visible. And this great insight of the artist sees this divisible moment of time in the light of its past or its whole. Henri Bergson has done much in the philosophy of intuition and has used painting to illustrate it. In art the creative genius sees that moment that he has frozen for us in the light of its past and future and in so doing creates what is called a "plastic quality." The artist is sensitive to this greater context and in response to a painting the observer can recapitulate the universal which the particular has captured. In other words the present moment in time is meaningful only as seen in the light of eternity. This is very important to grasp if society is to get the highest amount in aesthetic response to a painting. To illustrate this think of a very simple act -- a smile -- and it could be painted as such and all that could be seen is a smile in its completed form. But a great artist would so paint a completed smile in a "plastic" quality that one can intuitively perceive the whole smile with its separate stages. Such an example is seen very clearly in Leonardo's "Mona Lisa." He

. . . . .

1. Quoted by Guggenheimer, op. cit., p. 55.





SUPPER AT EMMAUS.

has captured the whole act in one particular view. Even so, great art in its particularity shows a sensitiveness to the whole or the eternal.

Rembrandt set forth excellently this tremendous insight into truth. Though he painted very obvious national scenery with its Dutch customs and habits, yet there is that present which brings it into the realm of universality. Every age, if it is truly to live, must realize its relationship to eternity. Hence to all peoples, Rembrandt seems modern and is appreciated and will be responded to as long as men realize and cherish their tie with the spiritual realities. There is that about a "Rembrandt" that is beyond our comprehension as infinity itself is incomprehensible, but which by intuition is accepted as though substantiated by logic. Look at the face of the Christ in the "Supper at Emmaus." The face is that of a poor emaciated Jew, but in its deep pity and concern for wretched benighted humanity, that face is elevated into the form of the eternal - the Divine Son of God. When we let the face penetrate into our consciousness we gasp even as the two travellers, realizing we are in the presence of a yearning that is more than human - an infinite compassion for us. That face has perhaps become the great universal face of the Messiah. In this painting we can easily recapitulate the past experience of the walk up to the grasping of the glorious truth on the part of the travellers that

He is alive, and which moves on into the future - into eternity -  
He lives!

### C. Essential Integrity

#### 1. Primacy of individuality in expressing truth

\* "Great art is produced by men who feel acutely and nobly, and it is in some sort an expression of this personal feeling."<sup>1</sup> Ruskin has stated a great truth in stressing the personal or individual expression of truth. The artist who is original is saved from being uninteresting or uncreative. He has to give no thought to being original or creative, for that he is, and in being personal he does not have to, under any sense of obligation, defend his particular expression.

Very enlightening is the testimony of Joachim Von Sandrart (1675), a student of Rembrandt's whose short Biography of Rembrandt has just been made available in English by Phaidon Press. Sandrart states that Rembrandt never visited Italy where the "Antique" and the "Theory of Art" may be studied:

In consequence, he remained ever faithful to the convention adopted by him, and did not hesitate to oppose and contradict our rules of art - such as anatomy and the proportions of the human body - perspective and the usefulness of classical statues, Raphael's drawing and judicious pictorial disposition, and the academies which are so particularly necessary for our profession. In

. . . . .

1. Quoted by J. C. Van Dyke, Principles of Art, P. 290.

doing so, he alleged that one should be guided only by nature and by no other rules; and according, as circumstances demanded, he approved in a picture light and shade and the outlines of objects, even if in contradiction with the simple fact of the horizon, as long as in his opinion they were successful and opposite.<sup>1</sup>

However, the research of Prof. T. Borenius shows that Rembrandt did have works of great masters before him, and, mainly Italian. But Borenius states that Rembrandt, like Rubens, does not give us copies but free translations; in comparing the translations with the originals the individual character of Rembrandt's art is brought out very clearly.<sup>2</sup> Although it may be established that he studied other paintings, his own expression of form and interpretation prevailed.

This very fact of the individual exercising the right to interpret his subject as he chose, ultimately brought Rembrandt to bankruptcy. He could have made a very lucrative business from portrait painting in the most important city of Amsterdam had he painted people who would pay large sums, the way they wanted to be portrayed. But the artist had principles and would persist in painting people as he saw them in their real character. His clients did not appreciate this, especially in the painting of Captain Banning Cocq's company where Rembrandt composed a symbolic picture, rather than paint a group picture of the city's most important citizens. A consistency so necessary to great art governed Rembrandt

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1. Borenius, op. cit., p. 21.

2. cf. Ibid. p. 8.

that although he had changes of fortune he must be true to the ideal set by his own choosing. To break faith with his principles would be to deceive himself for his work; his art was his very life.

## 2. Simplicity a mark of truthful painting

Frank Norris has written a very enlightening essay on the simplicity of art in which he describes himself in an art dealer's shop bargaining for a soup ladle. He states that he went through a world of soup ladles - ladles with gilded bowls, with embossed handles, with chased arabesques, but none were to his taste. Then the salesman brought out a plain, unadorned silver ladle which was to his liking, but double the price of the others. The salesman gave the reason: in highly ornamented ware the flaws of the material are covered up. This brought forth the observation of Norris:

And there, if you please, is a conclusive comment upon the whole business - a final basis of comparison of all things whether commercial or artistic; the bare dignity of the unadorned that may stand before the world all unashamed, panoplied rather than clothed in the consciousness of perfection. We of this latter day, we painters and poets and writer - artists - must labour with all the wits of us, all the strength of us, and with all that we have of ingenuity and perseverance to attain simplicity.<sup>1</sup>

In Rembrandt there is great simplicity of execution, the more impressive because of his very simple themes, exhibiting a single truth as he saw it and felt it.

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1. Taylor, W., Essays of the Past and Present, p. 383.

The whole matter of simplicity, complexity, and organic unity in the finished work of art is of utmost importance. Greene comes to our help in understanding this by stating that there must be an intermediate

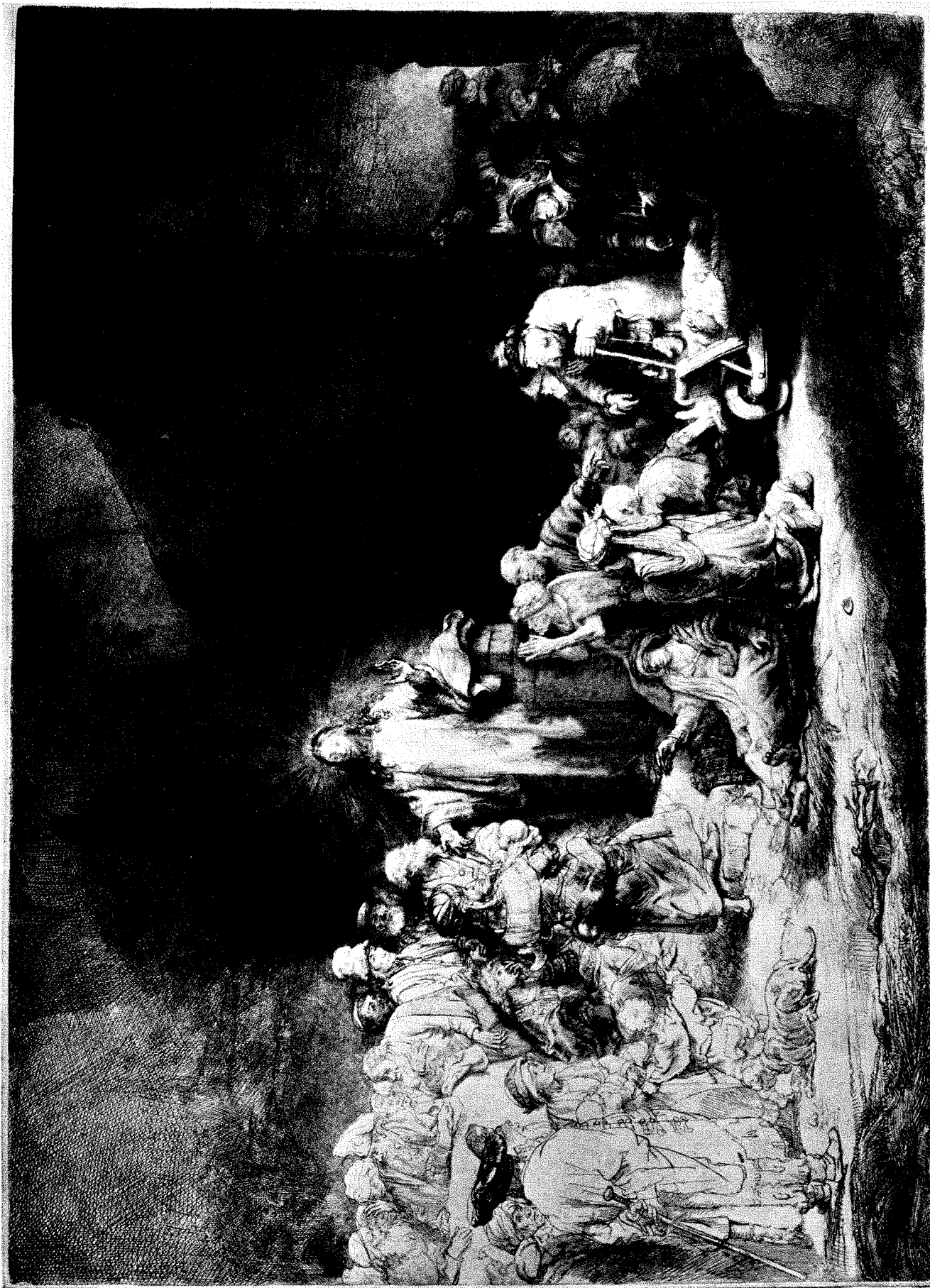
between the extremes of tiresome simplicity and bewildering and confusing complexity ... a certain kind of unity can, no doubt, be attained by mere technical proficiency and obedience to canons. But such unity is sure to lack artistic vitality and to differ qualitatively from that type of artistic unity which the sensitive artist seeks to create and which the sensitive critic prizes. Unity of this type is the product of 'original genius.' 1

So he goes on to say that for a painting to have vital unity it must be a "fusion or synthesis of simplicity and complexity." 2

We can conclude our discussion by saying that simplicity refers to the total effect that is created by the organization of its parts, no matter how "numerous and diverse or few and homogeneous" 3 but that each part contributes to the whole. And complexity is not the multiplicity of parts "but rather artistic inexhaustibleness" 4 or the great painting must be "the 'simplicity' of artistic unity of effect and the 'complexity' of artistic subtlety and richness." 5

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1. Greene, The Arts and the Art of Criticism, p. 402.
2. Ibid., p. 403.
3. Ibid., p. 403.
4. Ibid., p. 403.
5. Ibid., p. 403.



CHRIST HEALING THE SICK or "THE HUNDRED GUILDER PRINT" About 1649.

55. "THE HUNDRED GUILDER PRINT" (H. 236<sup>u</sup>). 10<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 15<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches.  
Presumably finished about 1649, when Rembrandt was forty-three.

In Rembrandt there is great simplicity of execution - relegating every part in relation to its other parts to create an organic whole. Look at the etching "The Hundred Guilder Piece." Each of the many parts, figures complete, yet in many variations not put there for their own particular effect but well organized to create an organic whole - one simple truth of the innate suffering of humanity uniting itself to Christ for its surcease or its wholeness. The variety here never becomes tiresome, the artistic vitality created by tendencies to sheer simplicity and sheer complexity produces the great aliveness and yet a marvelous relaxidness. How wonderful the balance in the "Supper at Emmaus". How simple in its total effect and yet so rich as to be inexhaustible. This picture will continually be recalling itself to the mind, speaking its message. For every age the element of sorrow shall be calling for its solution. The picture cannot be comprehended fully but continually haunts one and invites to a greater appreciation of it. The more we look the greater we apprehend the spirit it radiates from its great simplicity and how this reveals the artist himself striving by all means for that one simple effect, painting not for others but for the satisfaction of his own grasp, his simple intuition of a great truth that never dies but is always awaiting to be more fully displayed.



### 3. Rembrandt did not aim to teach but express himself

Very obvious in Rembrandt is the absence of the didactic element. He was not teaching but all he required was merely the freedom to develop in harmony with his means of expression - to give you himself - that which consummates all of his painting. He is not a preacher setting forth morals but he is calling us to a higher state of sensitiveness to the fundamentally real. To this end he had a great sense of integrity and would not compromise.

Ruskin makes clear that great art can not and was not meant to be a teacher for it is pre-eminently and finally the expression of the spirits of great men; so that the only wholesome teaching is that which simply endeavors to fix those characters of nobleness in the pupil's mind.<sup>1</sup> Low art is that which attempts at morality and teaching but great art by its spirit tends to lift man to a greater sense of security in grasping the real values of life.

### 4. Rembrandt chose the greatest truths in painting

Ruskin in stating his qualifications for genius and high art places great importance on the fact that greatness depends on the sum of truth - "the largest possible quantity of truth in the most perfect possible harmony."<sup>2</sup> All artists must choose the force with which they will paint a given object excluding incidental truths,

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1. Ruskin, J., Modern Painters, Vol. III, p. 43.

2. Ibid., p. 35.

but giving attention first to the most important and then subordinate truth consistent with this great single truth.

Ruskin uses Rembrandt as an example of the artist that accomplishes this by careful use of chiaroscuro when he sacrifices the light and color of five-sixths of the picture to focus exact lighting quality on his single truth or portion of the picture, "and what picturesque and forcible expression is dependent upon it, with magnificent skill and subtlety."<sup>1</sup>

#### D. Essential Spirituality

##### 1. Great art springs from an emotion essentially religious

In a study of art the deduction must be made that its greatest products have stemmed from a religious impulse. In the meagre belongings of Rembrandt at his death was a well used copy of the Bible. Biographers tell us that his mother spent much time reading from the Scriptures and saturating her young son's mind with its great stories. The portraits of this wonderful, exemplary mother avidly reading her Bible or with it in her lap appear many times. Most certainly this great book held the source of unending themes which Rembrandt created with his own force of interpretation.

To further these spiritual themes, Rembrandt moved into the Ghetto of Amsterdam. It is reported that he untiringly painted all

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1. Ruskin, op. cit., p. 35.

sorts of Jews in all of the emotions which they would reflect in order that he might realistically catch the emotional aspects of the Bible scenes he was to paint. The great experiences of his life were interpreted by the painting of parallel Scriptural events. At the time of his marriage he painted the nuptial feast of Samson. When his first baby died he painted Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. In the happy period of his life when Titus was born and Saskia was alive, he painted numerous "Holy Families".

The emotions which moved his innermost being were the only things which he expressed upon the canvas. He does not seem to think that anyone is listening to him, but only speaks with himself; he is anxious, not to be understood by others but only to express his moods and feelings. No painter, but a human being speaks to us. What he created and how he created it can only be understood by regarding his works as a commentary upon his life.<sup>1</sup>

2. Rembrandt completely identified himself with his subject

This identification of personal experience with spiritual scenes must be explored. Basically Rembrandt's complete identification of himself with that which he paints - his object - is an attempt to understand the higher values of life. The great artist so unites himself with that which he paints that he becomes part of that object:

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1. Muther, R., History of Painting, Vol. II, p. 594.



THE THREE TREES. 1643.

49. THE THREE TREES (H. 205).  $8\frac{1}{8} \times 10\frac{15}{16}$  inches. Done in 1643, when Rembrandt was thirty-seven.

For the uniquely distinguishing feature of aesthetic experience is exactly the fact that no such distinction of self and object exists in it, since it is aesthetic in a degree in which organism and environment cooperate to institute an experience in which the two are so fully integrated that each disappears.<sup>1</sup>

Rembrandt lived in his art; it was his life. After Saskia's death he found solace in long walks in the country, and in projecting himself into nature. The result of those walks is a wonderful etching of "The Three Trees" which manifests the shadow of the Infinite in Nature. This communion was his surcease.

Emerson somewhere says that to paint a tree, one must have been a tree. So with Rembrandt, his compositions seem to grow out of complete oneness with his subjects, and at their best this growth is concurrent with the artist's complete realization of the technical structure, which incloses the idea in a perfect unity.<sup>2</sup>

Rembrandt so became one with his subject that he perceived the real nature - the character or soul - the spiritual nature of that subject and transmitted it to his canvas. One does not see voluptuous physical beauty, as in a "Rubens", but perception of character. This is the difference between sight, perceiving the exterior, and insight or that quality of seeing within, which the great artist reproduces. This is the very soul of truth. This quality of spiritual insight produces life enhancement! Would that all could be as sensitive to this world of reality as Rembrandt is trying to depict

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1. Dewey, J., Art as Experience, p. 249.
2. Hind, Rembrandt, p.

it for us. Again it must be repeated that the greatest and highest art is to so see the present moment of time and space in the light of eternity - that person is truly spiritual. Intellect and logic are superceded by this emotional grasping of ultimate truth and reality that shall bring life enhancement to man.

The work of art, like everything spiritual, must be of infinite and therefore of immortal worth. So its infinity which is the infinity of feeling, cannot be an illusion, like that of a man who dreams he is master of the world and wakes to find himself in a garret or with his feet in the stocks.<sup>1</sup>

In identifying himself so completely with life in Amsterdam, Rembrandt caught the great realization that suffering and sorrow were basic to life. That was the very fabric out of which life was made and which gave force and action. No artist before or since interpreted so sympathetically this great theme; the same which moved our Lord to such great compassion. Depression and despondency settled down upon Rembrandt when he was only forty years of age at which time Saskia died. Most certainly his latter years were in harmony with that which he perceived to be the case of the Jews in the Ghetto, the beggars so numerous in the city, and other poor souls struggling for health and self-esteem in self-preservation. After Titus and Hendrickje Stoffels had died, Rembrandt lived on for thirteen months. These two had previously managed his affairs while

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1. Gentile, op. cit., p. 208.

Rembrandt moved in the realm of his art. One can only conjecture what occurred in these months when he was entirely alone. From his latter years, as has been stated previously, came his great paintings that show deep understanding of sorrow and sadness.

Oscar Wilde has given us a very penetrating insight into life after he had suffered ridicule, humiliation and a year's imprisonment. In "De Profundis" he observes:

Clergymen and people who use phrases without wisdom sometimes talk of suffering as a mystery. It is really a revelation. One discerns things one never discerned before. One approaches the whole of history from a different standpoint. What one had felt dimly through instinct, about art, is intellectually and emotionally realized with perfect clearness of vision and absolute intensity of apprehension. I see now that sorrow, being the intensity of apprehension, I see now that sorrow, being the supreme emotion of which man is capable, is at once the type and test of great art.<sup>1</sup>

Then from this analysis of art he turns to speak of Jesus whom he considered the world's greatest artist because his aesthetic senses were most attuned to the sorrow of the world:

I see a far more intimate and immediate connection between the true life of Christ and the true life of the artist; ... Nor is it merely that we can discern in Christ that close union of personality with perfection which forms the real distinction between the classical and romantic movement in life, but the very basis of his nature was the same as that of the nature of the artist - an intense and flamelike imagination.

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1. Wilde, Oscar, "De Profundis", p.p. 36.-37.

He realized in the entire sphere of human relations that imaginative sympathy which in the sphere of art is the sole secret of creation. He understood the leprosy of the leper, the darkness of the blind, the fierce misery of those who live for pleasure, the strange poverty of the rich.<sup>1</sup>

What pathos, sorrow and suffering we see spread on the canvas and in the etchings of Rembrandt. We can see in the etching "Hundred Guilder Piece" that the artist realized long ago this truth that Oscar Wilde has stated. Christ the great Healer is the physician for the ills of humanity. How wonderfully Rembrandt has set forth those that are in pain. Notice their eyes! And how those eyes are turned toward the Christ.

### 3. Rembrandt Possessed Prophetic Imagination

One observation is evident when studying Rembrandt's paintings. They represent both space and time, yet in the treatment of historical events they transcend the spacial-temporal having been painted in the medium of Dutch customs of the Seventeenth Century. Consider the etching "Christ Healing the Sick" or "The Supper at Emmaus" denoting a past event that is cast into the mould of Amsterdam life. Also the crucifixion scenes and the painting the "Ascension" transcend space and time to become living realities in the mind of Rembrandt. In the "Ascension" one immediately senses that this scene is a future fact yet a present reality toward which man is reaching.

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1. Ibid., pp. 50 - 52.



This in essence is the prophetic imagination.

G. W. Knight has made a keen observation explaining the prophetic insight. To illustrate his meaning Knight uses the mental process of the chess player, who at a point in the game with still many possible moves left has a simultaneous insight of the end of the game, perceiving either a defeat or a mate. "Lines of force" unfold themselves which he intuitively grasps and which he could substantiate move by move if he took the time to think them through. In other words he sees the end and acts at the present in the light of his conviction of the end. He has in his insight transcended time and space! "It is reported that Mozart saw, or heard, a complete work as a single whole unfurled to his immediate awareness before setting it down in the time-sequence of composition."<sup>1</sup> These factors are prophetic as that is in essence the vision of the prophet who sees the end and in the light of a strong conviction of what shall happen speaks in the present. And the prophet rejects all that would hinder the goal, a future reality from being realized.

This is an important distinction, for "intuition" or "imagination" is not a "laborious and faulty process usually employed by unskilful workmen, but is a conscious 'rejection' of effects incompatible with the creative ideal in the soul, or unconscious mind, or imaginative intuition."<sup>2</sup> The prophetic imagination is not made up

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1. Knight, G. W., The Christian Renaissance, p. 7.

2. Ibid., p. 17.

as a synthesis of ideas but it has to reject those forces that would disrupt the "sight" of the ideal. Knight makes the marvelous application in the light of this that Christ is the great "chess-expert playing with the white pieces against the black forces of death."<sup>1</sup> In other words, Christ having an insight into the fulfillment of time - a complete victory over sin through the Cross gave Himself to the poor, the sorrowing, the sin destroyed souls, thereby rejecting the forces of evil.

Rembrandt had an insight into the meaning of life and its fulfillment. So he associated with the poor, the decrepit, never failing to give us the unlovely or its suffering knowing that all sin and sorrow will be healed at the feet of the Christ. To the prophet the glorious future becomes a dynamic for the present. The "lines of force" or imaginative intuitions are directed toward final victory. "All great work, in literature or life, is prophetic, and exists not in the past from which it arises but in the future to which it helps to create."<sup>2</sup> The future becomes implicit in the present, and the present becomes lost in the future.

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1. Ibid., p. 21.

2. Knight, Op. cit., p. 7.

### E. Conclusion

From the criteria that we have used, Rembrandt emerges as one of the greatest of painters, and in some aspects exceeded by none. He was an accomplished technician, "possessed of a clear mind, a vigorous hand, and infallible logic; indeed in every quality the very opposite of the romantic genius to whom the admiration of the world has been almost entirely given."<sup>1</sup> This mastery of technique, extremely individualistic, was not an end in itself but became the means of expressing a great spiritual insight into nature.

In prodigal measure Rembrandt possessed the insight of the great poets, their intense awareness and their power to communicate these intuitive perceptions. His theme was the innate nobility of ailing and suffering humanity, people whom he understands perhaps better than they do themselves, for he paints not their faces but the 'concentrated history of the soul which Shakespeare alone saw with an equally prodigious lucidity.'<sup>2</sup>

Rembrandt had no other purpose than to express himself in that which he saw and felt. So well did he perceive the ultimate in "interpretative sympathy" and "poetic imagination" that it has been stated that to some people there is a communication with Rembrandt's characters and conceptions that is a "kind of religion."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Formentin, E., Masters in Art, p. 23.
2. Shoolman, R. and Slatkin, C., The Enjoyment of Art in America.,  
p. 435.
3. Borenius, op. cit., p. 20.

## CHAPTER II

### CONCEPTIONS OF ULTIMATE TRUTH REFLECTED IN REMBRANDT PAINTING

As when a painter, pouring on a face  
Divinely, through all hindrance, finds the man  
Behind it, and so paints him that his face,  
The shape and color of a mind and life,  
Lives for his children, ever at its best and fullest.

-- Tennyson - "Lancelot & Elaine"

Art is the external manifestation of the idea, the  
revelation of the invisable reality through the senses.

-- W. S. Lilly

## CHAPTER II

CONCEPTIONS OF ULTIMATE TRUTH  
REFLECTED IN REMBRANDT'S PAINTINGS

## A. Introduction

An artist paints that which he feels and feels that which he paints. This has been set forth in the first chapter. Therefore, in observing an artist's paintings one sees his spiritual intuitions or his innate beliefs expressed. Especially is this true of the artist Rembrandt, who would not paint to please the taste of his age. To paint in conformity to the desires of others made a Rubens rich. Very important to a psychologist in determining Rembrandt's belief through a study of his paintings is the unpopularity of Rembrandt in his later years. With the fullest development of the artist's technique and expression Rembrandt was forgotten and lived in obscurity. And in the very last years the picture of Rembrandt painting or drawing for his daily meals is touching. At this time he lived most in the realm of art. His whole soul went into it. Only at his easel was Rembrandt a commanding personality - and then to himself. In these shadowy days the great themes that had impressed themselves indelibly on his young mind while his mother read from the Bible, were filled with emotional interest and vivid reality in mystical shades of brightness and darkness. A well worn Bible was among the few books left to be disposed of. The Master, the Saviour, lonely and

misinterpreted by his age, yet with great compassion looks at us from the oil and scratches of the pen of a likewise lonely and unappreciated artist. As with so many great men, out of extremity came deep spiritual insight. His last works were his best.

To understand the artist and his profound grasp of the ultimately real, lest they appear irreconcilable to his moral life, the artistic temperament must be studied. Understanding this there is a greater appreciation of the faith reflected by the products of the aesthetic nature. Following the discussion of the complexity of artistic nature there shall be set forth Rembrandt's belief in a Theos, the Incarnate Son, who moves through life on earth to a great and glorious Resurrection.

#### B. Artistic Temperament

Those who study Rembrandt are confused by the disparity between his questionable moral living and the deeply spiritual or Christian art that he produced. After the death of a beloved wife, Saskia, Hendrickje Stoffels, Rembrandt's young housekeeper, took the place of a wife and mother to young Titus. Hendrickje, a member of the Mennonite Church was called before the church elders and publicly reproved for living in concubinage with Rembrandt the painter and ordered to mend her ways.<sup>1</sup> Rembrandt had as little regard for his personal appearance as he had for the marriage laws. Rembrandt's early biogra-

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1. Craven, Thomas, Men of Art, p. 270.

phers complained about his appearance in garb that showed where the painter had wiped his brushes. He could have acquired great wealth had he not misused it and finally became bankrupt. Rembrandt seemed to live in two realms, the mundane or everyday world to which he was ill-adapted, and the realm of the spirit where he existed with his dreams, where his idealism became a reality and where he demonstrated that the only art worth painting is that which looks within and transfigures man into a spiritual being by showing his great range of emotions.<sup>1</sup>

Rembrandt was a dual personality, as were so many of the great artists, possessing an aesthetic nature that perceived great truths yet which exist apart from a religious nature that expressed itself in actual religious living. In Fra Angelico there is the combining of the two. And yet in Rembrandt we sense that such would not have provided us with the great artist we have. He was not a monk in a cloister separated from the complex entanglements of life, but one who deeply felt and entered sympathetically into the sorrow of man. And by doing so he lifted man to a plane where in all his sorrows he can sense the presence of the Almighty, and the healing Son of God.

To appreciate and understand sympathetically the artistic temperament, psychology has studied the workings of the mind and the

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1. cf. Ibid., p. 275.



emotions of the poet-artist. All artists are poets. They are men filled with a creative urge asking only the privilege to show their grasp of life to those who have a blurred vision of a shortened sight. The artist wishes us to feel with our senses his particular sensitivity to the problems of life. Guggenheimer speaks of the artistic nature as "constructive abnormality."<sup>1</sup> This should not be thought of as an abnormality that classifies one for an institution for the mentally unbalanced, but a natural normal sensitivity or sense response developed to a greater degree than found in a normal individual.

Sight and Insight recount many of the hyperaesthetic acts of great men of genius:

To a Van Gogh the aesthetic drive operated like incessant electrical shock; he represents to an extreme degree the experience of all creative artists. Aesthetically he was so pure, so released from all spiritual frustration and repression, that every instant of seeing was fraught with intense experience of beauty. His vision was perpetually bursting with spontaneity.<sup>2</sup>

To those who rise to such heights there must naturally be descents into great experiences of morbidity and melancholy. Genius bears its consequences. Mantogazza wrote:

This great gift, this rare privilege of genius, brings in its train a morbid reaction to the smallest trouble from without, the slightest breeze, the faintest breath of the dog-days, becomes for these sensitive persons the rumpled rose-petal which will not let the unfortunate sylabrite sleep.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Guggenheimer, op. cit., p. 69.
2. Guggenheimer, op. cit., p. 69.
3. Ibid., p. 106.

In no way must there be a confusion of thought as regards these periodic dips into melancholia and despondency or to actions that would be considered unharmonious with a sensitiveness to the Holy or grasping with belief, great truths, and an essential spiritual appreciation of truth. This is illustrated by the Hebrews in their deliverance from "the house of bondage" and their subsequent wilderness wanderings. They rose to a great sense of belief in the Almighty (Ex. 14:31-15:21) and expressed it emotionally with great fervor, yet they fell quickly into despondency and murmurings (Ex. 15:23-24) and in an individual poetic character, one of the most sensitive to beauty and goodness the world has ever had, David, whom God called a perfect man and who "danced" before the Lord, there is inconsistency. In beautiful, inspired Psalms David revealed his deeply spiritual nature suffused with emotion yet he likewise gives his great plea for forgiveness because of sin and sense of separation from the high ideals that are his (Psa. 51). The human is expressing itself in the numinous experience. This throws great light on Rembrandt. The shadows of his life did not disfigure or distort his grasp and feeling for the Infinite, but in all probability drove him into greater oneness with the One who knows the innermost spirit - the great Artist.

Another view of this seeming inconsistency can be understood by the likeness of the artist to the child. The infant of a few

months old cannot distinguish between the objects that come into his realm of living as being separate or apart from his own being. The baby caresses a smooth object in pure delight and that object is simply accepted as a part of its own being. The baby tries to embrace all things and draw them into its orbit of being. Maturity brings the sense of separation. The great artist is that person who still approaches his world with the naivete of childishness and feels the intense thrill of complete identification with a world that is a part of himself.<sup>1</sup> And like the child reacts only against that which disrupts a sense of support or security, the artist seeks that which gives the sense of security.

Now to carry the analogy further. As the child grows, the self establishes a region that is the non-self. As we grow older the ego keeps eliminating objects from its own reality. Likewise the artist finds it hard to separate from his own reality those things that are attracted to him because of his own special sensitivity. The world to which he is sensitive and the ego constructs, is the real world and all outside that does not have the equal meaning or relevance to living. So, as the baby does not think of the things extraneous to its world of pure delight in objects as being consistent or non-consistent to that world, so the artist does not see the relevancy of

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1. cf. Guggenheimer, op. cit., p. 127.



THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON. About 1669. Leningrad,  
Hermitage

moral living in the world outside of his intense sensitivity of the real for him. To Rembrandt, negligence of personal care, taking no heed for the needs of the home, incurring a large indebtedness, or living with Hendrickje Stoffels would not infringe upon his artistic world. His moral living would not be thought of as being inconsistent with his great philosophy of life - the innate sorrow and suffering of the world uniting itself with the Christ.

However, as Rembrandt aged his self-portraits show a softening of the features corresponding to the difference in general subject matter. Contrast his "Self-portrait" at the age of about twenty-eight in the year 1634, the year he married Saskia and painted "The Artist with His Wife Saskia" and his "Self-portrait" painted in the year 1659, and his general subject matter at this time.<sup>1</sup> Nudes painted in earlier years are not repeated later. A sharp conversion experience with personal testimony cannot be claimed for Rembrandt as for Fra Angelico. Rather Rembrandt seems to hold the hope that in this life belief in the Christ and uniting oneself in suffering with Him is our privilege.

Of significance is one of the last paintings that came from the brush of the artist and in it is an indication of Rembrandt's reflection on his life. "The Return of the Prodigal Son" was painted

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1. See, Rembrandt Selected Paintings, plates 6, 9 and 31.

about 1669 or the year of his death. Does this not present the thought that he was now coming home after a far journey, having engaged in riotous living? Perhaps he was conscious that his life and living had not matched the great insight into truth he possessed and now as the Prodigal he returns to the Father's house where he feels there shall be love and compassion awaiting him. The hands of the Father are particularly well done as they draw the repenting son to his bosom. The Prodigal is dressed as Rembrandt must have been in these days, with no income or no one to care for him. And the old painter must have been conscious that he had been successful financially, yet now it was all gone. Had he squandered it foolishly in trying to raise the dignity of his profession - paying exorbitant prices for paintings to encourage poor artists? Yes, but the Father would forgive and receive and love him.

#### C. Belief in a Theos

##### 1. Belief gained in the non-rational

Dr. Rudolf Otto in his monumental work, "The Idea of the Holy", has given us a great treatise upon the understanding of the basis for a rational experience of the Holy by going into the non-rational experience, constructing terms that express this area of consciousness that is so tremendously important. In the sub-conscious or the non-rational we sense or "feel" the presence of the supreme Reality.

Dr. Otto makes clear the realm of the rational in its approach to the Holy that expresses itself in concepts. This is the casting of God in forms that are the products of reason. These concepts "can be grasped by the intellect, they can be analyzed by thought; they even admit of definition. By this method we affirm our belief in a theistic religion supported by the rational."<sup>1</sup> And this is in no way disparaged.

However, we are warned in The Idea of the Holy that the concept that "the essence of deity can be given completely and exhaustively in such 'rational' attributions" "is" "a wrong and one-sided interpretation of religion."<sup>2</sup> But beyond this region there is the "non-rational", the "feeling" element that must not be neglected. This non-rational element is that which is beyond the meaning of the rational; it cannot be comprehended or expressed in a concept; it remains inexpressible.

The "numen", by which Dr. Otto means more than just "goodness" produces the category in the mind which he calls the "numinous". This state is irreducible to any other and cannot be wholly isolated or explained. The individual may be conscious of the preceding states or experiences that form a foundation for it. So it follows that this

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1. Otto, The Idea of the Holy, p. 2.
2. Ibid., p. 7.

state of the numinous experience "cannot, strictly speaking, be taught, it can only be evoked, awakened in the mind; as everything that comes 'of the spirit' must be awakened."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Otto has analyzed the Scripture to find therein the evidence of the non-rational which is in essence a feeling which lies behind the emotional experience expressed through the medium of the written word. To the writer it is reasonable that to a greater extent than in the written word is the expression of the non-rational through a medium that transmits the emotional content of the author or in this case the painter on his canvas. This emotional content in painting is very evident today in paintings by Van Gogh, Cezanne, and Picasso and others who attempt to transmit pure feeling. And the painting stirs up directly the emotions while the emotional experience of the Hebrews must be transmitted through words that depend upon accurate translations if the reader is to get the intended meaning. The value of a painting speaks directly and is unchangeable for differing countries and ages.

Let a great artist speak on the relative values of different mediums of expression. Leonardo Da Vinci, a master of literature, sculpture, and painting, evaluates them thus:

The eye, which is called the window of the soul, is the chief means whereby the understanding may most fully and abundantly appreciate the infinite works

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1. Otto, op. cit. p. 7.



of nature, and the ear is the second, inasmuch as it acquires its importance from the fact that it hears the things which the eye has seen ... Although the poet has as wide a choice of subjects as the painter, his creations fail to afford as much satisfaction to mankind as do painting, for while poetry attempts to represent forms, actions, and scenes with words, the painter employs the exact images of these forms in order to reproduce them. Consider, then, which is more fundamental to men, the name of man or his image? The name changes with change of country; the form is unchanged except by death. There is no doubt that the painting, which is by far the more useful and beautiful, will give the greater pleasure. Inscribe in any place the name of God and set opposite to it His image, you will see which will be in greater reverence.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly Leonardo is saying in this dissertation that painting transmits directly his ideas - the very form of them. So painting becomes a frozen emotion for all to respond to. And "painting can express a greater variety of determinate aspects of man's inner life than can the abstract art."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Dr. Otto's principles should be all the more meaningful when applied to painting as a medium of expression.

In coming to the paintings of Rembrandt, as all art, we must let them speak for themselves attempting to impose no rules or laws by which to grasp their message but rather letting the artist's sensitivity which he has reproduced on the canvas stimulate our senses as Rembrandt himself was. One can sympathetically feel a "Rembrandt" very easily. Rembrandt did not mean to teach, but merely set down

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1. Curtis and Greenslet, The Practical Cogitator, p. 449-450.
2. Green, T., op. cit., p. 95.

his reaction and feelings to his world and into which the critic can enter through a feeling - response to his very penetrating insight. His numinous experience must be evoked and awakened in us. ✓

## 2. Creature Feeling

"Art is a momentary liberation" is the statement of Schopenhauer.<sup>1</sup> We are told that Leonardo in working on "The Last Supper" would on some days paint but a stroke and leave the scaffold and then another day would find him painting furiously as he was moved by inspiration. Rembrandt, painting in his own unique style, found freedom when he had lost popularity and painted solely as he was moved to paint. No conformity to convention or public demand hampered the feelings that he has given us. His painting is not an intuition of feeling but feeling itself. Giovanni Gentile clarifies this point that art correctly understood is feeling.<sup>2</sup>

The first element of the "numinous" experience is creature feeling. The painting, "Landscape with a Stone Bridge", and "Stormy Landscape" depict this very plainly. In the first painting named notice the two figures in the boat and the single person approaching the bridge. The figures are stooped as they proceed to their tasks. Surrounded by the presence of great awe-inspiring

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1. Quoted by Ribot, T., The Psychology of the Emotions, p. 330.
2. Gentile, op. cit., p. 201 - 205.



STORMY LANDSCAPE. About 1638. Berlin, Kaiser Friedrich Museum



LANDSCAPE WITH A STONE BRIDGE. About 1638. Amsterdam, Ryksmuseum

might there is the note of self-abasement into nothingness. Man is almost lost from view. Gradually we notice their bent figures and feel as they that as we strive to comprehend the incomprehensible we are humbled. And one quickly senses that the whole future of these men depends upon the character of the Creator, the force that has made and sustains the world about them. There is no self-importance or self-sufficiency on the part of the creatures here. Also in the "Stormy Landscape" men are barely distinguishable. They are lost in the shadows cast by the Presence of the great Spirit, which is partially revealed and mysteriously hidden from us, yet whom we consciously feel ever present. This One we know yet cannot express. And because of this One outside the self there arises a feeling of dependence and self-depreciation. There is more than just a feeling of mere dependence but the whole future depends upon Him who is Light and shines into our darkness.

### 3. *Mysterium Tremendum*

Here a term is employed that is negative signifying something which is "hidden and esoteric" but by it an attempt is made to denote something "absolutely and intensely positive."<sup>1</sup> The adjective *tremendum* must first be understood.

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1. Otto. op. cit., p.

## a. Tremendum

When man truly senses the presence of God there is produced a positive element, 'quale', 'awe', or 'tremor'. This comes upon a person and effects him in various ways. Yet only to that one who has experienced the great sense of thrill in the presence of nature will this discussion be intelligible. How wonderfully these landscapes speak to us, thrilling and silencing us in the presence of God. The darkness contains God. In the "Stormy Landscape" the indefinite, and indistinct darkness gives us a sense of the impending *ὀργή* or wrath of God. Before it we are awe-struck and then closely following we have the sense of the overpoweringness of this tremendous force.

Keep looking at these Rembrandts and the sense of the Holy One will manifest itself, providing the critic has a philosophy of life that will include such an experience. John Ruskin has described his impressions in youth when he approached nature.

There was a continual perception of Sanctity in the whole of nature, from the slightest thing to the vastest, an instinctive awe, mixed with delight and indefinable thrill, such as we imagine to indicate the presence of a disembodied spirit. I could only feel this perfectly when I was alone, and then it would make me shiver from head to foot with joy and fear of it ---- I cannot in the least describe the feeling, but I do not think this is my fault, nor that of the English language, for I am afraid no feeling is describable.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Modern Painters, Popular Edition, Vol. III, p. 309 quoted by Otto, op. cit., p. 221.

Rembrandt has frozen this thrill and exaultation through the medium of painting.

b. *Mysterium*

The truly mysterious is that which is beyond our grasp. By this word Dr. Otto refers to that which is the "wholly other". From the feelings discussed in the meaning of *tremendum* one is impressed that there is that which is apart and separate from the self. In art the effect is created by the 'magical' element which becomes the numinous itself.<sup>1</sup> Otto points out that the Chinese landscape painting during its classical period under the Sung and Tang dynasties perhaps portrays the presence of the numinous better than any other art. Many writers compare Rembrandt with Chinese artists.<sup>2</sup> These effects of mystery or magic are produced by a fine mixture of darkness and light in varying amounts. The 'magical' or 'mysterious' is an indirect way of achieving the presence of the numinous. There is in these landscapes two means for directly representing the presence of a Theos besides that of Darkness. First the element of silence is impressive. No sound is heard and in the presence of so masterful a concept of the magnitude of nature one would be hushed or instinctively speak in low tones. The men in the boat are going about their task quietly lest they disturb the perfect harmony of stillness as if God were in His

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1. Otto, p.

2. Cf. Guggenheimer, op. cit., p. 159.

holy temple and all the earth was keeping silent before Him. Feeling the very close presence of God man always becomes hushed or still. Notice the automatic effect a great cathedral has even upon children as well as adults. Secondly, there is a strong numinous effect gained by the 'voidness'. One has a great sense of infinity when looking at the "Stormy Landscape". The horizon melts into the heavens. This is, "as it were, the sublime in the horizontal."<sup>1</sup> For 'void' is, like Darkness and Silence, a negation, but a negation that does away with every 'this' and 'here' in order that the 'wholly other' may become actual.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4. Fascinans

The great and terribleness, the mysterious, do not express all of the content of the numinous experience. There is an additional element that attracts. Awesomeness has a drawing power and this is clearly felt in the two landscapes being studied. The natural desire is to remain in this atmosphere and have it repeated and even to become identified with it. It is that feeling that brings worship and calls man again and again into the cathedral. Devotion is stimulated in nature with the Creator present. Fullness and richness of life come from these grand moments that one wishes would become an existing state.

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1. Otto, op. cit., p. 71.

2. Cf. Ibid., p. 72.

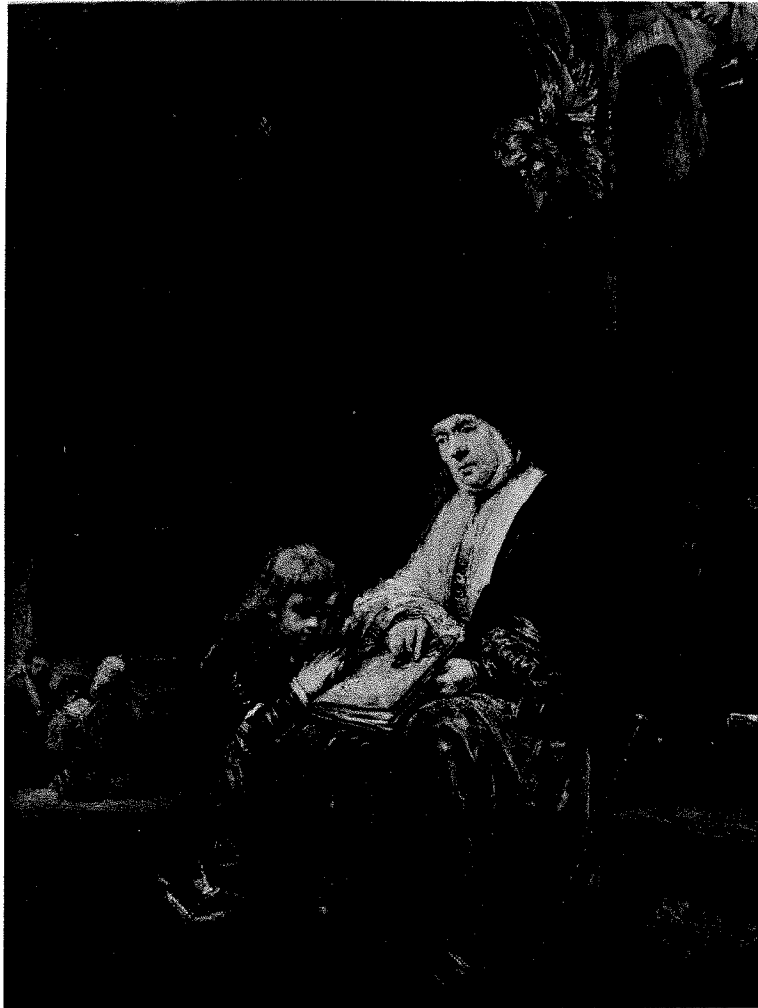
All the factors necessary for the complete numinous experience are presented by Rembrandt. These concepts existing in the non-rational must quickly be rationalized by the personality or the self. Creature-feeling rationalizes and the mind exclaims "My God, My God!" *Mysterium tremendum* with the sense of awe and fear is voiced, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts Heaven and Earth are full of Thy Glory", and the fascinans become the expression of a devotional love to the Creator.

#### D. Belief in the Incarnation

The consciousness of Christ as the Incarnate Son, that He was truly human and Divine, living among men, will inevitably, with a deep understanding, bring Christ into vital relationship to our daily living. The fabric of a philosophy of life must contain the meaning of Christ to the self and to society. Profound intuitions must have a spiritual content as related to our Lord. This historical event can be approached and accepted rationally, yet it cannot be proven. Rather by faith or spiritual intuitions we feel the necessary reality and live in the light of that knowledge. Christ walks amongst us in compassion and healing as well as being the risen Christ giving us the hope of the resurrection. That this <sup>is</sup> true of Rembrandt is most evident.

Rembrandt caught and expressed the consciousness of Christ as being both human and divine. This feeling content of his painting





TIMOTHY AND HIS GRANDMOTHER. 1648. London, Earl of  
Ellesmere

makes the reality of Christ an inescapable conclusion. Providing we permit it and have a philosophy of life that will permit it the consciousness of the divine possessing the human in Christ expressed in vital relation to humanity will evoke and awaken itself in us.

The great bulk of Rembrandt's painting, etching, and drawing centers in the life of Christ. If Rembrandt had thought of Christ only as a myth, on a par with other myths of religious cults, then he would have done equally as many paintings on pagan subjects that offer a wide variety of subject matter very attractive to the painter. But in Christ Rembrandt beheld a subject that was of deep and profound interest because of the Christ's great insight into character to perceive the inner-spirit and then because of His very nature to ally Himself to the great needs He perceived. Here is the greatest personality that ever lived and which the artist could not exhaust but was ever awaiting a fresh interpretation as that nature came into relation to the life and experiences of the artist. The innate truth of reality of the Scriptures must have impressed the man who could so realistically present them in meaningful context. And when Rembrandt was old, the time when a man rethinks his position to verify his beliefs the reality of the entire life of Christ was tenderly recorded for all to observe.

As Rembrandt aged he must have reflected many times upon the scene of his own youth kneeling at the feet of his mother as she



ST. PAUL. About 1657. Philadelphia, Joseph Widener

read from the pages of the Bible. The stories acutely impressed this boy artist. The mature Rembrandt found a parallel to his own boyhood experience and painted "Timothy and His Grandmother." Observe the childlike fascination of Timothy's belief in the reality of that which Lois has taught him. Interestingly the portion read which caught the interest of the child has brought deep meditation on the part of the grandmother. What a tribute to Rembrandt's mother who has been painted many times by a loving son and generally she holds a beloved copy of the Bible. Lois is holding a pair of black rimmed glasses which Rembrandt's mother also used. Here in youth was the planting of a source for later profound spiritual intuitions.

There is no doubt that Rembrandt believed in inspired Scripture which is a necessary prerequisite for belief in the truth of the account of Christ's life. He has left us two paintings, one of "St. Paul" painted about 1657 and "An Angel Dictating to St. Matthew" in 1661, which was but eight years before death. St. Paul presents a great character study. Notice especially the eyes reflecting a man in meditation and of deep spiritual perception. His thoughts are inspired. His pen is in hand ready to record the thoughts of God. Inspiration is of another mode in the painting of St. Matthew. The voice of God comes to the listening ears of the saintly Apostle from the Titus-faced angel. Yet these thoughts must come through the



AN ANGEL DICTATING TO ST. MATTHEW. 1661. Paris, Louvre



THE ANGEL APPEARING TO THE SHEPHERDS. About 1634.

reflective and evaluating mind of the Apostle. The scenes and words of the Master come back with great meaning and reverence as he covers his quickened heart. The Scriptures must be wonderfully precious to one who holds such tender thoughts.

#### 1. Annunciation, Nativity, and Youth

A great number of paintings, etchings, and drawings are concerned with the annunciation, nativity and youth of Christ all attesting to the extraordinary character of the happenings. The etching, "The Angel Appearing to the Shepherds" is very dramatic, overflowing with emotional content as it appealed to the mind and emotions of Rembrandt. He is faithful to the Lukan account (2:8-14) by presenting the panic and fear caused by the sudden appearance of heavenly beings in resplendent light. The whole scene, in a setting of contemporary Dutch life, is suddenly flooded with bright heavenly light that has stampeded the cattle and sheep. The men show extreme fear, one fleeing into the night, before he knows the cause, another amazed at the phenomenon, a third has fallen to his knees and beholds the spectacle in awe and wonder. From the realm of darkness and disorder one sees the real order of peace and joy with the background of Supreme Light. As is characteristic of Rembrandt here heaven is brought so very close to earth. Into a world that is dark and sorrowful is coming the light of the life of the Christ. This painting represents something more than the rational accepting of the

reflective and evaluating mind of the Apostle. The scenes and words of the Master come back with great meaning and reverence as he covers his quickened heart. The Scriptures must be wonderfully precious to one who holds such tender thoughts.

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69. THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE, in the dark manner (H. 279). Actual size.  
Presumably done about 1654, when Rembrandt was forty-eight.

fact that it historically happened but it is a feeling - response to the reality of truth. This is faith.

The nativity of Christ is always presented in very realistic surroundings true to its scriptural description with a great deal of love and affection shown by the Jewish mother. In all the scenes of the "Holy Family" that Rembrandt did there is the sense that Christ came of humble stock and is worshipped by the poor shepherds of that day. The concept that we do have of the adoration of the magi casts them quite as common men humbly worshipping though richly dressed.<sup>1</sup> Appropriately, this painting hangs at Buckingham Palace. In the baby-Christ presented by Rembrandt the observer does not sense the conception, as in Raphael's "Sistine Madonna", that the Christ as a baby is destined to become the great Messiah or is any theological doctrine placed upon the new-born child. The baby is divine yet obviously has no self-consciousness of being divine. In an etching "The Presentation in the Temple" the baby in the arms of the aged Simeon has a radiance proceeding from within. And from the etchings of the boy-Christ we do not sense that Jesus has self-consciousness of Divinity but is obviously an extraordinary young person, especially as he confounds the doctors in the temple.

The happiest period in Rembrandt's life is reflected in the "Holy Family with Angels." Painted in 1645, Saskia was still alive

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1. See Rembrandt, Selected Paintings, plate



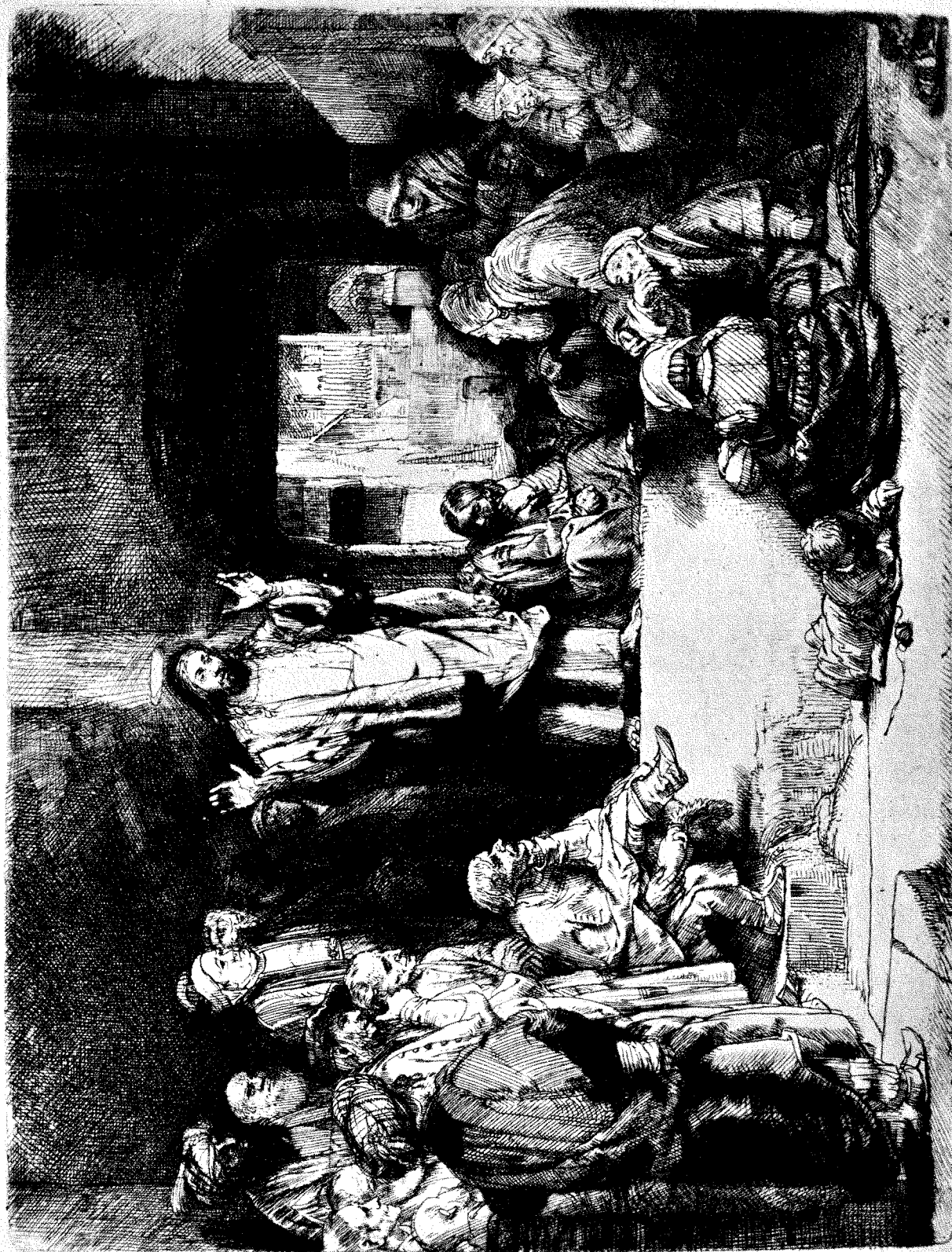
ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST PREACHING. About 1636. Berlin,  
Kaiser, Friedrich Museum

and Titus was a healthy growing child. Mary's resemblance to Saskia is obvious. The child Jesus asleep is being tenderly observed by visiting Cherubs who are descending quietly so as not to disturb the Christ. In this Dutch home the Great Messiah will have a normal life. Joseph works contentedly in the background, the chips from his wood-working falling into the fire which casts a warm tone over the whole scene. The painting represents a satisfied and happy Rembrandt whose happiness was soon to be disrupted by the death of Saskia.

## 2. Christ the God-man

In the man-Christ we observe the full recognition of Christ's complete consciousness of his divinity and His unique mission in life. That He had a revolutionary message we can be assured. The forecasting of this is seen in the reaction to the preaching of John the Baptist. There is a great deal of bewilderment and some disputation as this man preaches in the barren wilderness. His message is being questioned and challenged. The listeners seem not to be heeding John's eloquent speaking. They have come out of curiosity and some regard him pitiously; some listen thoughtfully yet not quite convinced. John is indeed a light shining in the darkness of their world as he forecasts that greater Light.

In the small etching "Christ Preaching" the cataclysmic message of John is proclaimed to the World. His message speaks of things



61. CHRIST PREACHING ("LA PETITE TOMBE") (H. 256). Actual size.

Presumably done about 1652, when Rembrandt was forty-six.

above this lowly group's drab and hopeless existence. The heavenly realities Christ describes may well be the Beatitudes. How persuasive the message which cannot be understood apart from the Messenger! The message is effective because He who speaks is essentially that message. The different expression of each person indicates Christ has spoken directly to all. Study these faces in the individuality created by the scratches of a pen. Psychologically Rembrandt has made an easy entry into the intimate ideas and ideals that he has. We feel we are a part of this small group. The healing and miracle working Christ is strongly emphasized. No more tender scene is given us by Rembrandt than that of "Christ Healing the Sick", better known as "The Hundred Guilder Print". Here the essence of Christ's Deity is indescribable but so easily felt and powerfully emphasized in the gestures and facial expressions. Rather than the Italian halo set rakishly on the head we see a divine radiance proceeding from within. Notice the effect of the high dark shadow in the wall that forms an arch above the head of Christ. This allows for the unimpeded expansion or projection of Christ's personality. The deep shadows produce the sense of gloom and suffering into which the radiance of the Son of God shines. Christ, a Portugese Jew, divides two groups. Those on the left of Christ reveal intense pain and suffering in their bent and crippled bodies. But with it there is a deep prayer and worship of the Christ who is the great Healer.

Continue to study the eyes of the men on Christ's right. The eyes are a means of insight into the various personalities present.

There are quizzical, critical, scheming, unbelieving, curious, thoughtful, and some devotional, believing hopeful people. How easily Rembrandt has portrayed character for us by a few scratches of the pen. Look at the man at the lower extreme left hand side of the picture with his back to you and a cane held in his hand. Even though you do not see his face you intuit his entire personality. The picture is alive. There are perhaps no more plastic figures in all art than that of the dog and baby.

A few outlines, apparently careless and indeterminate but actually set down with masterly knowledge of their structural value; lights merging into deepening shadows -- and a form has its being.<sup>1</sup>

Over the whole scene, Christ looks with a wide-eyed expression of unearthly compassion on this group. With the left hand, he seems to be lifting up the sufferers in healing power and to those on the right, his hand seems to be persuading, attempting to draw them into the number of those who believe. Here is Rembrandt's great theme pictorialized -- the innate suffering of humanity that can find its surcease in the Christ! How strong the sense of creature-feeling is evident here in these people whose complete dependence and whose whole future depends upon the character of the Son of God. There is a magical mystical quality about Him who is the "wholly-other" and

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1. Craven, Men of Art, p. 269



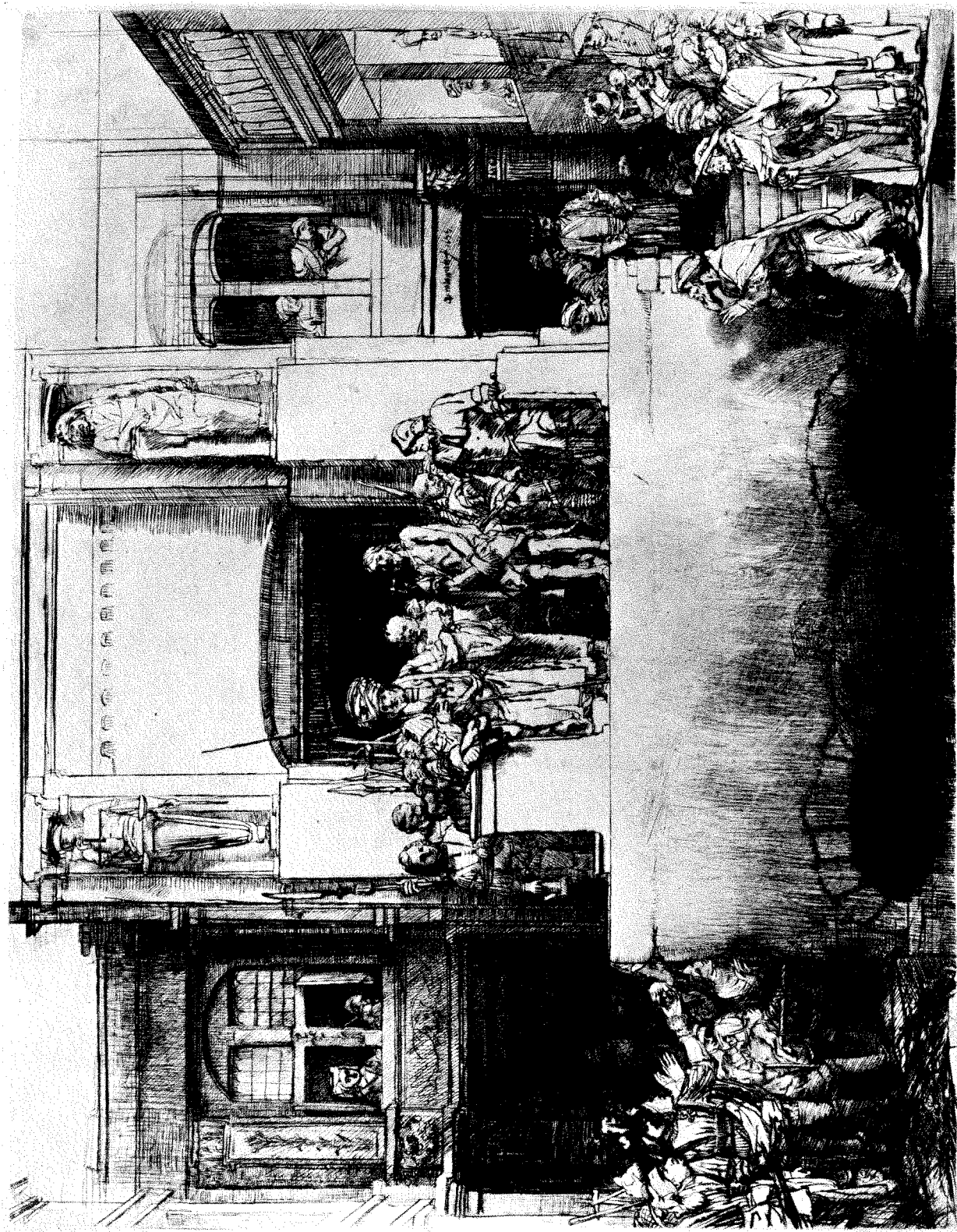
THE RAISING OF LAZARUS. About 1642



yet at the same time this Other one produces a great drawing power and men are drawn irresistibly to Him in rapt fascination. There is present the complete experience of the numinous!

In all of Rembrandt's great paintings we must see the added grace that was his because of personal suffering and sorrow. His intuitive grasp of the Ultimately real was shadowed by life's dark-nesses. The world is in great debt to those creative artists who have turned their own misfortune into lasting memorials that raise man to a new understanding of trial and trouble.

The miracle-working Christ is included in Rembrandt's belief. With hand outstretched, He calls forth Lazarus from the tomb. Lazarus has a bewildered expression as he experiences a returning from the realm of death. Martha and Mary express differing attitudes toward this miracle. Mary has her hands raised in utter amazement. She had wished the Saviour had been there to keep her brother from dying -- and now he is alive. Martha who had had faith looks on from behind the Master, her hands raised in joy and thanksgiving. She had never expected so great a miracle. Some Jews looking on believe; others are hardened in disbelief. Christ has that same mystical, "other worldly" look of Godly compassion and complete understanding. He seems really not to be exerting an effort. Would He who spoke worlds into existence, who created life, be perplexed in restoring life? Miracles are no mystery to the Christ -- we see



74. CHRIST PRESENTED TO THE PEOPLE (H. 271<sup>viii</sup>). Seventh state. 13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 17<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches.

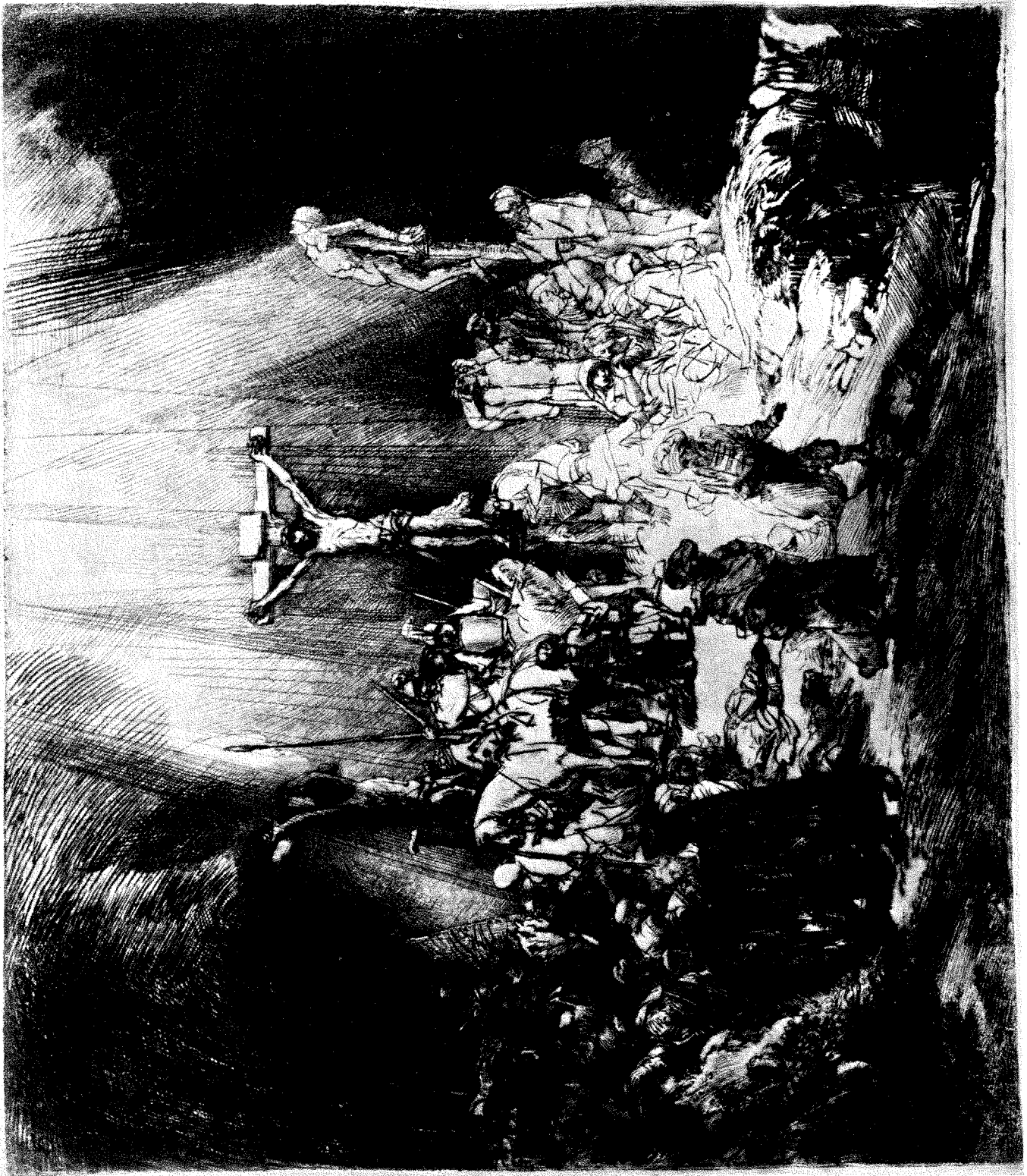


CHRIST AT THE COLUMN. About 1655. Cologne, Museum

Him who is the Resurrection and the Life.

In Christ, Rembrandt was conscious of a person who was more than a man, or a moral influence -- an example; He was more than can be grasped by the reason. Here was one that is beyond what the reason can comprehend, but must be accepted by evidence of his mighty works and His sympathetic insight into human life. This is the character of the Real as He walked among mankind displaying the person of the eternal.

Rembrandt has given us some very impressive scenes depicting his concepts of the crucifixion, death, and entombment. In all the scenes one cannot escape the realization that Christ died as a man in every respect human. In the etching "Christ Presented to the People" Christ does not have the high arch above his head as in the "Hundred Guilder Print". Neither does Christ have a radiance proceeding from his head. Rather he is barely distinguishable from those about him. Justice, the figure above the portal, has been blindfolded, while on the other side of the door a figure representing unrestricted or brute force looks on the scene -- a bit of symbolism that is in harmony with the scriptural account. "Christ at the Column" is not at first recognizable as a "Rembrandt" in its form of the Christ. It is by the use of Chiaroscuro that we know this to be a Rembrandt. Christ appears rather young which is the result of an emaciated, strain-racked body, showing the effect of intense mental concern. The body



63. THE THREE CROSSES (H. 270<sup>u</sup>). Second state. 15<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 17<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches.  
Done in 1653, when Rembrandt was forty-seven.

THE THREE CROSSES. Second state. 1653.

has withered as a leaf torn from its life-giving tree. How could the body escape being greatly affected by the magnitude of these days of both physical and mental suffering? Had not Rembrandt observed a change in his wan body so clearly visible in the many self-portraits. Christ in this scourging scene is prematurely aged. The emotional content in this painting is strong; we can very easily sympathize with the bruised and bleeding body. Certainly the Divine in Christ could not die, only the human in the Incarnation could cease living.

The emotional content of Rembrandt's crucifixion scenes is consistently strong, but does not do injustice or over-emphasize what must have happened at that time. We have noticed the realism of Rembrandt's painting which would demand the same treatment here. The etching "The Crucifixion" shows Christ's body being quite pulled apart in the abdominal region - which must have been the case. The Cross is always very crude. Mary, Christ's mother, is generally represented as having fainted in the presence of the torture that her son is experiencing. What mother would not do likewise as she beheld such an ignominious death of her son? This realism is evident again in the very sagging thoroughly dead body of the Christ in "The Descent From the Cross" where Christ, in great love and tender care is being removed from the cross. Again notice Mary being assisted by the Apostle John, her hands still in a slightly clutched



THE DESCENT FROM THE CROSS. 1634. Leningrad, Hermitage

position signifying her agony and torment before fainting. In other descent scenes Mary has been laid on the ground completely overcome as if a part of her very self had died. Compare this with Ruben's Crucifixion scenes where Mary is in a very posed position distractedly entering into the suffering of Christ. For Rubens, Mary is another form to demonstrate his technique in painting. But in Rembrandt we are not conscious of anything except a passionate desire to express the utter reality of the tremendous scenes he keenly visualized. By the time of the procession to the tomb and the placing of the body there Mary has recovered enough to retain consciousness though supported by the "Beloved Disciple".

#### E. Belief in the Resurrection

Rembrandt's belief in the crucifixion and death is climaxed by a strong conviction of the earthly appearances to Mary Magdalene near the tomb and to the Disciples gathered together in Jerusalem. But the experience of the two forlorn and dejected travelers to Emmaus who entertained the risen Saviour captured the interest of Rembrandt with great force. There are a great number of drawings, etchings, and paintings on this theme to study. Various stages in the recognition of the guest at supper to the transfiguration from their sight was recorded by Rembrandt. One drawing is very dramatic with only a very brilliant flash of light remaining over the chair



where Christ had been sitting. The reality of the appearance and miraculous disappearance of the Christ had been well visualized in Rembrandt's mind. The historical Jesus has become a contemporary event for the seventeenth century Dutchman.

#### 1. Christ's Appearance at Emmaus

In the Louvre hangs "The Supper at Emmaus", judged by many to be Rembrandt's best painting. As with all great art it defies complete comprehension, but must always be approached anew for one to find new meanings. Fromentin has written a great evaluation of the figure of Christ in the painting.

What painter has not given us his conception of Christ? From Leonardo, Raphael, and Titian, to Van Dyke, Holben, Rubens, and Van Eyck, how they have not deified, humanized, and transfigured him, told the story of his passion and of his death, related the events of his life, and conceived the glories of his apotheosis? But has he ever been imagined like this? In Pilgrim's garb, pale, emaciated, breaking bread as on the evening of the Last Supper, the traces of torture still on the blackened lips, the great, dark, gentle eyes widely opened and raised towards heaven, the halo, a sort of phosphorescent light, enveloping him in an indefinable glory, and on his face the inexplicable look of a living, breathing human being who has passed through death! The bearing so impossible to describe, and assuredly impossible to copy, the intense feeling of the face, where the features are undefined and where the expression is given by the movement of the lips and by the look, -- these things, inspired one knows not whence and produced one knows not how, are all priceless. No art recalls them, no one before Rembrandt, no one after him, has expressed them.

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#### 1. Masters in Art, June 1900, p. 23 - 24.

It can confidently be said that no one a half-century since has written an equal to this interpretation by Rembrandt of the Resurrected Christ. It is difficult when thinking of Christ after viewing this picture not to think of Him as other than this misty, dreamy, sensitive and over-all deeply compassionate Christ. How plastic Rembrandt has made this picture. He has frozen a moment in the Emmaus story yet the whole story can be recapitulated. Certainly Christ is but reflecting the puzzled misunderstanding of the two travelers as they talked on their way here, and now He shows an unmistakable infinite compassion on poor misunderstanding humanity which should have realized that the grave could not hold the Son of God! As one looks even as these two, he is amazed and astonished to realize that Christ is alive and that He is alive forevermore!

Rembrandt, now lonely (for Saskia had died when he was barely forty) misunderstood, and unappreciated, found this theme appealing. He could unite himself with the Christ who was experiencing the same. Fromentin has said that chiaroscuro under Rembrandt's hand is

Misty, veiled, discreet, it lends a charm to half-hidden things, invites curiosity, adds an attraction to moral beauty, and finally, partakes of sentiment, of emotion, of the uncertain, the indefinite, of the dream and the ideal, yet - we have not solved the mystery, nor quite lifted the veil which hides the supreme greatness of Rembrandt



*THE ASCENSION*

the dreamer, the idealist, the painter of Christ  
at Emmaus.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly the complete uniting of Rembrandt's own feelings with the truth of this scene at Emmaus, with an intense emotional reaction to its reality would be a great impetus to such an immortal spiritual intuition that is communicated to us. This is the very purpose of the Scriptures fulfilled by setting forth truths that are accepted and woven into the very fabric of life and living.

## 2. The Ascension

The great yearning of humanity is expressed in Rembrandt's 'Ascension' painting. An historical event presenting a future hope for man becomes a present desire for Rembrandt. As pointed out before, through careful use of strong light and strong dark this painting brings heaven very close to earth where men dwell in shadows in comparison to the brightness of the heavenly world. We see the Mediator, the Pure Christ, the Light that has been in the world ascending to the realm of Supreme and unending Light where night shall be no more. How that theme brings out the best in Rembrandt's mode of expression! See how man beholds heavenly realities in awe and wonder yet would embrace this state! Recall the etching of "The Angel Appearing to the Shepherds". Together with the

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1. Masters in Art, op. cit., p. 24.

"Ascension" so similar in execution we have the coming and returning of the Christ. The human glorified Christ returns to that realm of heavenly glory from which He came. As Christ ascends, the Spirit, symbolized by a dove, waits to greet Him or to be sent down to earth to lead and guide men, bringing to remembrance the ways of Christ, and finally to bring mankind to be with the Christ eternally. Rembrandt must have whole-heartedly believed in the great hope of man to have imagined and painted such a glorious coming reality. His moral living inconsistent with this? His moral short-comings did not mar nor destroy the bright hope here expressed. Oh if we only knew the intuitive hopes of men that lie behind and beyond their everyday living!

#### F. Conclusion

Rembrandt, with the grace of insight and sensitivity of a great artist carefully evaluated his sense-response to that which passed beyond the reason of man in interpreting the Presence of God exhibited in the earth. Consistently his personal integrity led him to a very realistic, not overly emphasized emotional presentation of the person and great events concerning the Divine-human Christ. We sense a truly 'living' interpretation that leaves its impress indelibly stamped upon our minds so that unconsciously when we think of Christ and His acts we think in terms of Rembrandt's conceptions.

That Rembrandt read and knew the Bible very thoroughly as few

painters did is evidenced by some of the unusual themes that impressed him. He brought to life Simeon with Christ's presentation in the temple, Phillip's baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch and the angel strengthening the Christ in the Garden. There was a parallel between His youth experiences and Timothy. Also the unusual number of drawings, etchings, and paintings of the "Supper at Emmaus" bespeaks its undeniable truthfulness in Rembrandt's mind. The Scripture with its fascinating stories were more than themes for a painter to recreate and supply a market. No, Rembrandt painted because he felt and wished to communicate those ideas for he had no demanding clients dictating to him. His work was the expression of his soul. He had an innate conviction that Christ was divine, the Son of God, who came from Him, yet returned to Him after a human life, death and resurrection.

CHAPTER III

REMBRANDT IN THE LIGHT OF HIS AGE

Without the great Arts, that speak to his  
sense of beauty, man seems to me a poor,  
naked, shivering creature.

— Emerson



## CHAPTER III

## REMBRANDT IN THE LIGHT OF HIS AGE

## A. Introduction

To understand Rembrandt and to evaluate properly his contribution to the sum total of truth, he must be seen in relation to the tremendous philosophical quest for truth and the theological views vigorously set forth in the seventeenth century.

In a mighty national uprising in the latter part of the sixteenth century Holland threw off the yoke of Spain and the shackles of the Roman Catholic Church. In the seventeenth century this honest hard-working nation expressed itself as a young republic by declaring freedom of religion. "Every citizen 'should be accorded freedom of worship and no one should be molested on account of his belief,'<sup>1</sup> The chill of despotism had been cast off and in its place the common man asserted himself. The legislative power was not in the hands of the masses, but the ruling powers did not pass a law that the common man would not tolerate. Freedom of speech was granted to all and the power of argument supplanted the use of force. Tolerance and right of opinion were the rule. As domination of church and state was cast off the Dutch mind developed and a

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1. Landsberger, Rembrandt, The Jews and the Bible, p. 14 - 15.

golden era in art and science was ushered in. Curiosity and interest spread in all directions coupled with a love for this peaceful country. Genre painting flourished so that a very complete picture of Dutch life in every phase of quiet domesticity is preserved.

After the dogmatic creed of Catholicism had been cast off, philosophy expressed itself in the rationalist movement started by Descartes and which found a climax in Spinoza. With revolutionary intellectual ideas the philosophers lived unmolested. Likewise there was no social ostracism for differing religious belief. This new republic attracted among remaining Catholics the Mennonites, Anabaptists, Lollards, Lutherans, and the reigning theology of Calvinism. Dutch art asserted its loyalty to Protestantism with great fervor. This atmosphere was ideal for the individualism and non-conformity of Rembrandt. A fuller investigation into these two avenues which search after truth, that of philosophy and then of theology, will bring a greater appreciation of Rembrandt.

#### B. Philosophy of the Seventeenth Century in Holland

In this age of freedom of speech and religion there were two philosophers of Rembrandt's own time that resided in Amsterdam and it is quite probable that he knew them. Descartes, born in 1596 died in 1650 while his follower, Spinoza, born in 1632 and died in 1677,

but eight years after Rembrandt's death. How differently these men arrived at truth -- the philosopher and the artist -- is to be seen in a brief treatment of what these two men, the founder of modern philosophy and then his successor the greatest mind that philosophy has produced in its modern era as well as "the great Jew of modern times."<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. Descartes

Descartes was a French philosopher who spent his last twenty years in Amsterdam. He was dissatisfied with knowledge in the early part of the seventeenth century. Mathematics was the only study that was well developed. He decided to abandon the method prevalent, that of quoting authorities, but to apply mathematical principles to the grasping of truth. Descartes began his "philosophical thinking by resolving to clear his memory of all acquired ideas, 'to erase from the tablet of his memory everything that youth and observation had copied there.'<sup>2</sup> He then applied "Methodical doubt", or the process of rejecting everything that was open to doubt until he could discover something indubitable. He doubted even the evidences of his senses. Through this process he came to the position that he could not doubt that he as a self-conscious individual doubted, and

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1. Durant, W., The Story of Philosophy, p. 164.
2. Morgan, An Introduction to Philosophy, p. 238.

formulated the famous statement as a conclusion, "I think, therefore I am."

Descartes believed that all the processes in nature are due wholly to the action of purely mechanical principles. The body for him was a machine; it is self-acting. The idea that the body was animated by a "vital-principle", or "soul" cannot be held according to this philosopher. In other words, reason can comprehend all things. "If a person knows all the laws of physics and chemistry, he then knows all there is to know about life and living things.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Spinoza

In no other country of Europe could the great thinker Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza have shown to an after world the spectacle of an independent scholar who, bound by no religious obligations, lived for truth alone.<sup>2</sup>

Spinoza was influenced by Descartes' ideas on "substance" and when he propounded the thought that God

... might have a body — the world of matter; that angels might be hallucinations; that the soul might be merely life; and that the Old Testament said nothing of immortality,<sup>3</sup>

the Jewish community pronounced the major Ban of excommunication upon him. Following this Spinoza lived with Christians but did not accept their teaching.

Spinoza had definite ideas on the relation of mind to understanding of Scriptures. Miracle stories were used by the Apostles

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1. Ibid., p. 83.

2. Williams, The Historian's History of the World, Vol. XIII, p. 582.

3. Durant, op. cit., p. 167, 168.

as were parables to teach truths, which was necessary for the common man to understand.

Interpreted on this principle, the Bible, says Spinoza, contains nothing contrary to reason. But interpreted literally, it is full of errors, contradictions and obvious impossibilities -- as that the Pentateuch was written by Moses.<sup>1</sup>

In other words everything must be comprehensible by the reason with no room left for the miraculous, the incomprehensible.

Spinoza did not accept the divinity of Christ, but thought of him as the greatest of men.

The eternal wisdom of God ... has shown itself forth in all things, but chiefly in the mind of man, and most of all in Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Spinoza was the first great pantheist stating that "God is the immanent, and not the extraneous, cause of all things. I say, All is in God; all lives and moves in God."<sup>3</sup> This is a world of determinism not of design.

Neither intellect nor will pertains to the nature of God: in the usual sense in which these human qualities are attributed to the Deity; but rather the will of God is the sum of all causes and all laws, and the intellect of God is the sum of all mind.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ibid., p. 180.
2. Epistle 21, quoted by Durant, op. cit., p. 181.
3. Ibid., p. 189.
4. Ibid., p. 192.

Descartes' mechanistic attitudes are reflected in Spinoza's ideas concerning human beings. In *Tractatus Theologico-Politico* he wrote:

I will write about human beings as though I were concerned with lines and planes and solids. I have labored carefully not to mock, lament or execrate, but to understand human actions; and to this end I have looked upon passions ... not as vices of human nature, but as properties just as pertinent to it as are heat, cold, storm, thunder, and the like to the nature of the atmosphere.<sup>1</sup>

Spinoza taught that mind and body are attributes of one and the same substance. There are thoughts, ideas, feelings, volitions, but there is no soul or ego or spiritual substance to which they can be said to belong.

### 3. Rembrandt's Contradiction of Rationalism.

From the preceding chapter in which Rembrandt's beliefs were set forth, it is evident that he contradicted the philosophy of this century. Undeniably Rembrandt realized there was more in nature than the reason could comprehend -- the very incomprehensible nature of God is reflected in the landscapes which were studied. The process of "methodical doubt" and applying of mathematic principles to man is foreign to Rembrandt. Christ stands out as a great paradox to our finite minds. His very being and His great miraculous works, that were of necessity true to have a meaningful universe,

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1. Quoted by Durant, op. cit., p. 192.

was a conviction to the artist. The good Infinite is that one that did appear as the finite and thereby experiencing humanity gave man a hope that transcends the boundaries of this life.

The common became the gateway through which Rembrandt perceived the uncommon -- the very spirit of man. Resident within the human being is that very sense of the presence of the inexplicable -- that which must live forever. These things Rembrandt perceived by insight -- that which saw beyond the exterior and which was sharpened by an innate acceptance of Scripture as truth and which, as he matured, but re-emphasized his youthful experiences. In looking at the etching "Christ Healing the Sick", the observer is compelled to cry out this must be so -- here is the one that gives meaning to life that makes sorrow and suffering bearable and some day all shall be redeemed. Man is more than machine. He has a free will and makes his own choices. He may believe or disbelieve. On the other hand Spinoza could not make allowances for free will in man. Spinoza compared that which man feels as free will to a stone thinking which means that all is determined.<sup>1</sup>

### C. Theology of the Seventeenth Century

#### 1. Theological Controversies

In the very year that Rembrandt was born, 1606, a notable

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1. Durant, op. cit., p. 196.

event in the history of theology took place at the University of Leyden between two of its professors, Francis Gomaris and Jacobus Arminius. Gomaris took the position of Calvin against Arminius on an endless debate over predestination and grace. The debate between the two men was taken up by opposing members in political rule who had no interest in theology but used it as a means to prosecute each other. Maurice, young prince, was on the side of the Calvinists, and in 1618 the Council of Dort very partially determined doctrine that was to be held orthodox.

God has pre-ordained, by an eternal and immutable decree, before the creation of the world, upon whom he will bestow the free gift of his grace; that the atonement of Christ, though sufficient for all the world, is efficacious only for the elect; that conversion is not effected by any effort of man, but by the free grace of God given to those only whom he has chosen from all eternity; and that it is impossible for the elect to fall away from this grace.<sup>1</sup>

Against this predetermined outcome Arminius and his group stated that:

(1) Election was conditional upon, and inseparable from Divine foreknowledge of those who would believe and persist to the end. (2) Christ died for all the people, and not only for the elect, but not all men accepted this atonement. Hence believers only received the actual benefit. (3) Man was not totally depraved and could therefore co-operate with God in the spiritual regeneration. (4) God's grace was not irresistible for the elect, and withheld from the reprobate. (5) Against the Calvinistic doctrine of "once in grace, always in grace", Arminius emphasized the possibility of a lapse from grace.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Williams, op. cit., Vol. XIII, p. 563.

2. Qualben, History of the Christian Church, p. 351.



The Remonstrants, as the Arminians were called, were really representing the spirit of the Dutch Republic which stood for freedom of thought against the domineering thought of Calvinism, the most popular religion of that period. These great debates did not help the cause of religion and may well have provoked the statement of Spinoza:

I have often wondered that persons who make boasts of professing the Christian religion - namely, love, joy, peace, temperance, and charity to all men - should quarrel with such rancorous animosity, and display daily toward one another such bitter hatred, that this, rather than virtues which they profess, is the readiest criterion of their faith.<sup>1</sup>

But in the midst of this debate Protestantism thrived, expressing itself in a number of denominations. The Lutherans and Anabaptists had public worship while Catholics and Jews had their private worship. The translation of the State Bible at the end of the sixteenth century was a great help to the Protestant minded young Republic.

## 2. Rembrandt the Non-Churchman

It is certain that Rembrandt was a Protestant. He showed contempt for tradition by first conceiving the truth in his own soul and then recreating it. What others had thought and done meant nothing to him. Roman Catholicism would not have permitted the free-

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1. Durant, op. cit., p. 181.

dom that Rembrandt enjoyed. Likewise his whole background of Bible reading in youth, followed by Bible study, denied Catholicism. Though undeniably Protestant he cannot be placed within any of the then-functioning denominations. Some have tried to make a Mennonite of Rembrandt because Hendrickje Stoeffel belonged to that group. But as Hind observes, Rembrandt was mentioned only in the first of the four times Hendrickje was summoned before the board of elders.<sup>1</sup> It is reported that Hendrickje appeared before the elders, pleaded guilty to their accusations and declared, "I would rather go to Hell with Rembrandt Harmens than play a harp in Heaven, surrounded by such as you."<sup>2</sup>

Rembrandt's emphasis on certain themes that stress the love of God as in the Prodigal Son, the "Christ at Emmaus", "Christ Healing the Sick", the "Raising of Lazarus", and his omission of the judgment of wrath of God, never painting a "Last Judgment", would place him outside the Calvinist Church. Rembrandt's was a warm-hearted Christ who made no distinction among those who came to Him and whom some believed and some by their own choosing, by their free will, chose to disbelieve. Note the "Christ Healing the Sick". The message and healing hand of Christ came to all who would have faith.

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1. Hind, op. cit., p. 7
2. Hubbard, Little Journeys to the Homes of the Great, Vol. 4, p. 76.

One of Rembrandt's friends was the great Jewish Rabbi, Manasseh ben Israel, who was the teacher of Spinoza. Through close contact with the Amsterdam Jews Rembrandt learned much about Hebraic worship as demonstrated in his paintings. But Rembrandt was thoroughly Christian. In Christian beliefs he was "latitudinarian in his views; lax, if you will, in his habits of life, but perhaps the more lovable for all that."<sup>1</sup> One cannot be too harsh on Rembrandt for not joining a church or group that was engaged in such bitter controversy as to provoke such a condemning statement from Spinoza. And what could have been taught Rembrandt that would have improved his concept of the Christ? Rembrandt has proven that a great artist can grow in the environs of Protestantism. An interesting and revealing study could be made by comparing Rembrandt and a Roman Catholic artist such as Rubens.

#### D. Conclusion

Rembrandt could well be called the "Rebel" as he stood outside the precinct of the church yet expressing the message it should have and also representing an approach to truth that was so opposite to the outstanding efforts of the philosophers. In this young democracy Rembrandt was at home. He was one of the common folk who had the privilege of becoming recognized and developing according to his own

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1. Hind, op. cit., p. 7.

desires.

In this chapter the great value of the artistic approach to truth has been set forth. In the seventeenth century where man's mind was loosed from the bounds of dogmatism and allowed to have free and unmolested research and expression, Rembrandt's art became the restraining hand that held philosophy and theology to the historic body of truth -- the tradition of true Christianity. Rembrandt had something significant to say to this age if they would but listen. Here was an approach to truth based directly upon familiarity with Scripture from youth. He had permitted its truths to be stamped indelibly upon his mind and then his intuitive grasp of truth displayed itself in a practical warm-hearted way -- so contrastive to the bickering and debate on highly technical points of theology which on the whole is meaningless to the common man. The common man is practical and in his religion he is concerned with the world of emotional reality which is the object of art.

And how wonderfully through the ages the art of Rembrandt as well as of other great artists has stood unchanged amid the differing philosophies and theologies. The rationalist philosophy of this period stating that all Scripture must be reasonable, that is, comprehended by reason leaving no room for the supernatural, can be compared to the extreme Biblical criticism that arose later and is but dying out today. In the face of this continual denial of the

authenticity of Scripture is the testimony of art that the Biblical account is true -- that it must be so is the artist's emotional statement, making the Bible real, and practical. Today there is a need for sensitizing society to the message of the great religious artist, a message that springs from a deep spiritual synthesis of the ultimately real.

Some of the world's noblest spirits, endowed with genius of the highest order, have spoken to their fellowmen via their pigment brushed upon canvas. And it is high time that we make an effort to bring this, and indeed all the arts, nearer to the multitude of people who would love them if they could but know them.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter has but emphasized that truth or

reality itself is infinitely various and complex in character, certain aspects of it lend themselves far better to apprehension and interpretation in and through a given medium than any other.<sup>2</sup>

To make the rationalist philosopher consistent he must be a thoroughgoing scientist and approach reality through scientific medium.

Descartes approached man as if he were a machine and Spinoza would study him by applying geometry but one does not thus comprehend the entirety of man. To say that a man has certain mechanical responses to a stated stimuli or that he is a certain content of solids does not express the love, joy, happiness, sorrow -- the spirit of man which is most important.

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1. Guggenheimer, op. cit., p. 90.
2. Greene, op. cit., p. 438 - 439.

Sense-perception must be supplemented by sense response. Likewise theology often concerned with deadening debates and useless controversies should be concerned with man's problems in a practical way. The conclusion follows that there is a necessity for art to make its contribution for a greater understanding of man and the whole of truth.

CHAPTER IV

THE FULFILLMENT OF ART AS ACHIEVED

BY REMBRANDT

So great the passion in the human heart  
Has ever been to hold all beauty fast;  
To know the truth, and set that truth apart  
From falsehood that has blurred and stained the past --  
Men set their canvases in solitude  
To paint the true, the beautiful, the good.

Great frescoes, dimmed by centuries, remain  
To stir the heart, and blur the eyes with tears,  
So much of sacred ecstasy and pain  
Have been recorded for all future years --  
Christ lives again, within an holy hush:  
The highest tribute of an artist's brush.

-- Grace Noll Crowell



## CHAPTER IV

THE FULFILLMENT OF ART  
AS ACHIEVED BY REMBRANDT

## A. Introduction

Throughout this study the freedom to express the artist himself has been claimed for Rembrandt. But beyond this he must have had a desire that through his art the world or his immediate society would grasp his philosophy of life. This is the right of every artist and every person no matter what medium he uses to express himself.

As has been pointed out in the third chapter, art is a legitimate attempt to grasp truth. Reality itself is many-sided and complex and so can be apprehended and interpreted through various media. All of these means attempt to grasp truth for its own sake as it will then register it in the mind of man. But what is the aim of art in presenting its emotional or feeling response to truth, and how well do Rembrandt and his creations fulfill that purpose?

## B. Art and Morals

Sometimes we can perceive what a thing is positively by showing what it is not. No discussion of art is complete without stating its relation to morals. "No question about art arouses more passionate and persistent controversy than that of its relations to morals."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Gentile, op. cit., p. 310.

This relationship would be involved because man is intensely interested in morality. The problem is whether or not the artist consciously has a pre-thought to the utility of his painting or whether he is conscious of its utilitarian value as a teaching device while painting. So first it must be determined whether there is an art of morality.

Greene with others state quite positively that great art is not meant to be the preacher. "Great art is not moralistic. Its primary function is not to preach or to inculcate specific moral doctrines."<sup>1</sup> Van Dyke supplements this thought:

Morality is a matter of political or ethical science and has only a passive bearing on the arts. It must not be transgressed. Painting need not preach, but it must listen to and respect moral truth. There must of necessity be a morality of art, but there cannot be an art of morality. Painting is not necessarily a vehicle for the conveyance of ethical doctrines, for the very good reason that there are other vehicles that can convey them better.<sup>2</sup>

Greene agrees in this opinion that "the more profound the artist, meanwhile, the more profoundly moral will be his interpretation of human experience."<sup>3</sup>

Gentile has explained very well why art in essence cannot be created with a utility of morality in mind. First it must be understood that the artist in creating reality recreates himself, be-

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1. Greene, op. cit., p. 460.
2. Van Dyke, Principles of Art, p. 190.
3. Greene, op. cit., p. 460.

cause concrete reason

is the unity of intellect and will, for it is the dialectical unity of subject (the artist) and object (the object painted) of a subject which is identical with the object because it creates it and so creates itself. And in creating its object it knows it, and in creating itself it knows itself in the object. And since it knows itself as the object it creates, it is not mere apprehension but creative activity, and therefore practical. It is freedom and active will.<sup>1</sup>

So the artist, the subject where self-consciousness begins, becomes action, since the whole person is put into the synthesis. This synthesis is a spiritual synthesis as the artist in so becoming the object forgets himself, and is able to think of nothing except "the infinite world into which he has thrown himself."<sup>2</sup> Now following this idea Gentile states that

utility is the very essence of a thing which is not a person but serves a person's purpose. If utility is to be predicated of the spirit, then, to make such predication possible the spirit must be de-spiritualized and materialized."<sup>3</sup>

The artist in thinking of utility becomes insincere. Then it follows that

either then art rejects this predicate of utility or, if we make art into something that serves a purpose other than itself, we shall find on consideration that this art will lack the character belonging to every form and aspect of the spiritual life.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Gentile, op. cit., p. 318.
2. Ibid., p. 318.
3. Ibid., p. 326.
4. Ibid., p. 326.

This can well be illustrated in Rembrandt as opposed to an art that does make morality its end. In Rembrandt's canvases the critic sees the artist himself, how he felt and saw things. The observer is not even conscious of technique but rather the canvas lives and the message could be understood regardless of the age or regardless of our national background. The "Christ Healing the Sick" is a living, moving idea, which Rembrandt so became that one is unconsciously raised to a higher grasp of ultimate reality. No symbolism is needed to reveal its message. There is no consciousness of an attempt to establish a moral code. In contrast study "The Tree of Life"<sup>1</sup> by Burne-Jones. Immediately it is evident that he is teaching a lesson. To understand this painting there must be an intellectual approach. The symbolism must be explained before its message can be grasped. It is inert, seemingly dead, compared to the highly emotional, aliveness of Rembrandt's "Christ Healing the Sick" or "Supper at Emmaus". Burne-Jones has painted with a motive other than the purpose of stimulating a sense-response to that which he felt and saw. If the goal of art is to be moralistic, can it do better than the teacher or preacher? Such a painting soon exhausts its message while a "Rembrandt" can be viewed endless times with new insights and rekindled emotions received.

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1. See Baily, Art and Character, Plate No. 312.

Rembrandt did his greatest work when he had been released from popularity and found self-expression in obscurity. Even in his pre-secluded period he was most successful when he contradicted his commissioners' wishes and painted as he felt and saw the subject. His painting must be his very soul.

It must be emphasized again that art, though not moralistic, is moral. The greatest art has always been inspired by religion or the consciousness of the infinite in the things of earth. This is most certainly true of Rembrandt. Even when "Rembrandt paints a Dutch wench and calls her 'Diana', he unconsciously illustrates the difference between the naked and the nude".<sup>1</sup> There is a need today for a moral fervor in our sensitive men. A morality of art, yes; an art of morality, no.

#### C. Purgative Effect of Art

Tragedy portrayed has always been thought of as having a purgative effect since the time of Aristotle.<sup>2</sup> He recognized that the individual observing the drama experienced a release from the sense of pain or tragedy. Today it is accepted that a feeling content is present in such a drama that gives vent to our own feelings bringing a sense of relief. Today that same release is realized in the arts, especially those which have a high content of subjectivity. Hamlet in his great soliloquies is a good example. Unconsciously

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1. Hubbard, op. cit., p. 69.

2. Gentile, op. cit., p. 295.

his thoughts and actions become ours. There is an

inherent pain of thought, from which there would be no rest but for the anodyne of art. When a circle of thought is concluded and closed with the seal of feeling, the thinking subject erects himself aloft in his infinity and liberty. Then man feels the joy of life and the pride of power. In this return of the subject to himself is the purgation of all poetry and of all art.<sup>1</sup>

There is a consolation resident in art. In the hard realities of living and the struggles through which life leads art acts as a refuge and escape. Man never seems to arrive, he is always on an endless journey which leads the self away from his own self-consciousness. Gentile states that art is that force that can break "the experience whose web encloses us on every side" by its "pure subjective feeling" which calls man back to his self-consciousness, "where everything is gathered up and concentrated at a single point - the creative subject."<sup>2</sup> Then the self feels its unity with infinity!

One important aspect of art is its close unity with religion. Here are found the noblest themes and ideas with which man can entertain his mind. Art has the blessed privilege of carrying an emotional interpretation of it. Religion in essence must effect the emotions and art is essentially a frozen emotion. Religion, subject to entanglement in dogma, needs art as its handmaid to express the simplicity of religious experience and to readily adapt itself to changing

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1. Ibid., p. 300.

2. Ibid., p. 302.

customs and societies. Art keeps religion from becoming stereotyped. And dogmas filled with intellectual concepts theologically spun need an essentially emotional interpretation. "Art remains an undogmatic religion. You are invited to feel an emotion, not to acquiesce in a theory."<sup>1</sup>

In Rembrandt's satisfying creations we are called back to realities. Unconsciously we are called to our own inner realities as we observed how deeply he probed character and in their suffering we are strengthened as we realize too that suffering shall ultimately be annihilated by the Christ. In Him there is hope. It cannot be denied that Rembrandt's best years were given to the portrayal of soul-inspiring and invigorating themes. Oh to see the Christ as he saw Him -- and strangely his concepts do become ours. With a "Rembrandt" picture before us to sensitize us continually to the fundamental realities of life we are lifted out of our peripheral living and can sense release from meaningless existence.

Albert Edward Bailey treats at length the need of transformation of personality and society and the relation of art to it.<sup>2</sup> Some instances may be found where art, through its profound precepts has stirred someone to a complete transformation of personality. Rather the aim of art is to raise man subconsciously to a higher plane

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1. Bell, op. cit., p. 281.

2. Bailey, A. E., Art and Character, p. 69.

of enlightenment whereby the spirit then realizes the fruits -- forgiveness, patience, loyalty, burden-bearing, self-sacrifice, and integrity which Bailey has stated in the fruit of transformation.<sup>1</sup>

#### D. The Immortality of Art

An outstanding characteristic of "The Supper at Emmaus" or "The Hundred Guilder Print" is that one can return to it again and again always with new discovery yet the work never seems to be fully or wholly comprehended. As infinity itself, these great creations with many other pieces defy a complete knowledge and keep suggesting themselves to the mind continually of which we never tire. In the second edition of "The Arts and the Arts of Criticism" the author states:

The only part of the book which I could perhaps amplify is the account of artistic greatness ... Greatness might it seems to me now, be described helpfully in terms of the concept of inexhaustibility. One of the characteristics of truly great art in any medium is the fact that the most sensitive and informed critic can return to it again and again and always find in it formal relationships not previously observed, insights, perspectives and evaluations not previously noted or comprehended. A great work of art is thus, as it were, a perpetual challenge to fresh discovery, a continuing stimulus to growth, an inexhaustible source of refreshment and delight.<sup>2</sup>

One persistent truth gathered from Rembrandt is his conception of immortality. Men think about it and only by philosophic

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1. Ibid., p. 94 - 108.
2. Greene, op. cit., p. XIII.





5. Rembrandt (1606 – 1669) *Old Woman Cutting Her Nails*  
Dated 1648. Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913

speculation is it doubted. In the spirit of man it is held as fact, yet man desires to substantiate his intuitions by finding it crystallized. Rembrandt is an avenue into the presence of the Infinite and Eternal to truths that are beyond space and time. Yet all works of art are mortal and will perish. But

it is immortal in the feeling that gives it life. In all works of art the feeling is everything; it is the form in which the subject matter is absorbed and transformed.<sup>1</sup> What is immortal in each work of art is the soul that animates it and every other; the soul from which all beauty flows and which is the life of art.<sup>2</sup>

In Rembrandt there is a vision of humanity that perceives mankind in its very essence. The Greeks and Italians knew man and life in their most correct and highest paths, the healthy flower that blossoms in the light; Rembrandt saw far back to the source, all that goes down and moulds in the shadows; the obscure paupers, the Jews of Amsterdam, the deformed and stunted, the begrimed suffering populace of a large city and a bad climate, the crooked, the bald head of the old decrepid artisan, faces with the paleness of ill-health, all the mass of humanity alive with evil passions and hideous miseries which multiply in our civilization like worms in a rotten tree.<sup>3</sup>

Rembrandt perceived personality - the life of man and in it the very form of immortality in all its aspects as seen in the earth. Study the painting, "Old Woman Cutting Her Nails" a common act in preparation for the coming sabbath day yet this common act becomes by the treatment of Rembrandt as representative of preparation for eternity.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Greene, op. cit., p. XIII.
2. Gentile, op. cit., p. 352.
3. Taine, in Wilson, op. cit., p. 603.
4. Cf. Shoolman and Slatkin, op. cit., p. 435.

This is a deathless art that though the paintings themselves be destroyed the immortality of which it partakes of lives on and can never perish.

#### E. Conclusion

Of Rembrandt's art it can be said that he did not devitalize his contribution to the world by making it moralistic. Yet in its depth of perception his profound thoughts are deeply moral. Instinctively through his grace of the reality of life in its fundamental meaning we are unconsciously lifted to a higher plane of life enhancement. There is no feeling that Rembrandt is the teacher or preacher directly saying this is the way but he has gained the spiritual synthesis that strengthen man to see the fullness of reality. Our surface living before a Rembrandt is released as he calls us back to our center of reality -- our own creative personalities.

This summary can well be concluded in Taine's evaluation of Rembrandt:

Once started on this road (of perceiving true reality in humanity) He was able to understand the religion of sorrow, the true Christianity, to interpret the Bible as a Lollard would have done, to find again the eternal Christ. He himself as a result was capable of feeling pity; in contrast with his conservative and aristocratic contemporaries, he was of the people; at least he is the most human of them all; his sympathies, more broad embrace nature in its entirety; no ugliness was repugnant to him and no appearance of joy or nobility hid from him the reality that lay beneath. Thus, untrammelled and guided by his fine sensibility, his interpretation of humanity

not only includes the general frame-work and the abstract type which suffices for classical art, but also the peculiarities and depth of the individual, the infinite complexity and indefinable traits of the moral character, all this moving picture which concentrates in a human face in a single moment the life history of the soul, and which has been seen clearly by only one other man -- Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup>

In Rembrandt there is an experience of sense-response which is the firm, immoveable foundation of our very being. This feeling bears up the whole world of reality and

sometimes urges us to go to the great works of art as to a fount of life; but always it bids us look into our own hearts, to remind ourselves how the round world is so sure that it cannot be moved.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Taine, in Wilson, op. cit., p. 605.
2. Gentile, op. cit., p. 377.

## CHAPTER V

### GENERAL SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

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## A. Restatement of the Problem

Man is continually in search of truth. Reality is extremely complex and various in essence and so can be apprehended through different approaches. Man pays great homage to the findings of science and theology. The problem arises as to whether these mediums of investigation totally exhaust the quantity of truth. Then the further problem presented is the value of the artistic response to the real and its emotional presentation. Art's contribution to the sum total of truth must be considered and evaluated. To solve this problem a study in the understanding and interpretation of truth through the life and work of Rembrandt has been made.

## B. Summary of Findings

The result of genius cannot but confer some of its own intrinsic virtue, by lifting man to a higher plane of life enhancement. Therefore, chapter one dealt mainly with the qualities existent in the artist himself to produce the highest aesthetic result. Essential sensitivity, essential integrity, and essential spirituality are necessary prerequisites for the artist-genius. In all three aspects Rembrandt proved himself a genius of the highest order.

Rembrandt possessed a developed creative sensitivity which, having originated in his youth, expressed itself through a technique perfected through long and arduous practice. His technique became the pre-condition of the thought or feeling itself that Rembrandt had experienced. As time passed, with practice and experimentation, his greatest period of natural expression exhibiting deep spiritual synthesis came toward the end of his life when he had lost popularity and lived alone. Art was his very soul.

In keeping with the great artist, Rembrandt was especially sensitive to intuitions that grasp ultimate truth. The mind from a foundation of rational knowledge leaps on and grasps that which is beyond reason, the incomprehensible, and treats it as fact. This keen sensitivity, continually rejuvenated, sees the present moment of time in the light of its past and future context. Through the present Rembrandt grasped the eternal.

Rembrandt, as was characteristic of the Dutch people, possessed a great sense of integrity. An essential trait, which every great artist must have, individuality, Rembrandt possessed to an extreme degree. Through this non-imitative quality he was continually producing a personal expression of truth that was his very own and executed through a style to which he was ever faithful. He developed his theory that one should be constant only to nature. His execution was always of great simplicity, a mark of truthful painting. He

achieved an artistic unity that was a means between the extremes of tiresome simplicity and bewildering and confusing complexity - an artistic subtlety and richness. The etching "Christ Healing the Sick" exemplifies this wonderfully. In creating these great profound spiritual syntheses Rembrandt did not stoop to produce a teaching medium but by presenting the greatest truths, his own ideas expressed in paintings unconsciously raise man to a higher plane of life-enhancement.

The exhibition of essential spirituality climaxes chapter one. From Rembrandt's life and from a study of his works there is a basic sensitivity to emotions that are essentially religious - originating in youth with a spiritual mother. His paintings show an association of his personal experience with parallel Biblical scenes and themes. His painting is the result of a complete identification of himself becoming one with the truth that he interpreted. In so doing, Rembrandt realized that suffering and sorrow are basic factors of life. Like the prophet, Rembrandt had keen insight into the real character of man and a firm persuasion of the great truths, whether past or future, and transcended space-time relationships to make them a present reality. The present was lost in the future and the future was implicit in the present. Rembrandt's great theme was the innate sorrow and suffering of the world finding its surcease in the reality of a living Christ. To some people Rembrandt's characters and con-



ceptions became a kind of religion.

Chapter two was concerned with determining the conceptions of ultimate truth as reflected in Rembrandt's paintings. Before his beliefs were set forth, the problem of the disparity between the aesthetic grasp of truth and the concomitant immoral living was considered. This is difficult to harmonize and Rembrandt would have been more effective had the two been consistent. An analogy was drawn between the child and the artist since both identify themselves in pure delight with the world of reality to which they are sensitive. No thought enters their minds that a consistency should exist between moral living and that realm which is grasped through the non-rational. Using as a basis the psychological approach set forth by Dr. Rudolf Otto in The Idea of the Holy, we studied a great number of Rembrandt's etchings and paintings to determine his innate beliefs. Rembrandt believed in a Theos; the elements for the numinous experience are present in the two landscapes studied. His paintings show an intrinsic belief that the Scriptures were inspired and that they are living and vital for man. He accepted the whole life of Christ as a miraculous fact and interpreted The Bible with the utmost fidelity to its realistic and emotional values.

Chapter three examined the Seventeenth Century in Holland which was noteworthy for philosophical and theological inquiry. As an

artist Rembrandt stood apart from these activities and made a significant contribution to the new Republic of Holland. The rationalism of Descartes and Spinoza sought to explain man by applying scientific principles to him. But the emotional nature of man was left unappreciated except for Rembrandt's art. The theological controversies between Arminius and Gomarus, the advocate of Calvinism, were bitter and long drawn out. The debates and church councils reflected a spirit quite opposed to the fruits of the spirit that should have been flowing from those so engaged. Meanwhile, Rembrandt, a non-churchman, was portraying the true Divine Christ, warm-hearted and compassionate to all men, healing their broken bodies and spirits while holding out a hope of a future life with Him. Art through Rembrandt was a correction and check upon theology and philosophy.

The fulfillment of art's great purposes was exemplified in Rembrandt's paintings. The fourth chapter claimed a profound moral art for Rembrandt but not an art of morality. His art has a purgative effect as it breaks through the experiences that surround man like a web and calls him back to self-consciousness, the center of creativity. Through a new sensitivity and feeling of unity with the infinite the personality is unconsciously strengthened. The height of art's privilege in attainment is embodied in Rembrandt works as it partakes of an immortal spirit. Here the sense of the incompre-

hensible can be approached innumerable times always finding new relationships that bring a greater knowledge of truth. This art shall never die but shall continually refresh the spirit of man. Although forgotten and misunderstood by his age, a "Rembrandt" is now considered priceless and that it most certainly is.

### C. Conclusions

From the findings of this study the inevitable conclusion is that the artist has the right to interpret truth and that art makes a profound contribution to the understanding of it. Painting comprehends and sets forth an emotional or sense-response that is of great value to mankind. Because of art's permanent pictorialization of truth it is universal and timeless as it transcends country and period. And as such it stands irrevocable to man's changing theologies. It checks the divergent trends in Biblical criticism and disbelief by its memorable belief in the inspired Scriptures and testimony to the immortality of Biblical truth.

There is a great need today for society to grasp the profound message of great moral art that springs from deep spiritual synthesis. The church needs to rediscover the values of the great artistry and accord it the place it deserves. There is also a crying need for art today to serve as the handmaid of religion. "Art is the concrete expression of some of God's thoughts, as they are suggested to us in

things that are made."<sup>1</sup> It is therefore indispensable that man in his effort to understand the universe and the ultimately real, must come to art and let it speak its truths to him.

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1. Hoffman, The Sphere of Religion, p. 255.

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