

OEK DE JONG

## THERE YOU HANG, YOU STUPID GIRL!

In April 1664 the eighteen year old Elsje Christiaens, born in Jutland, arrived in Amsterdam looking for work. She found a room on the Damrak, close to the harbour. Two weeks later she still had found no work. On 27 April she was beaten by the owner of the room with a broom stick because she was unable to pay the rent, the woman threatening to seize her possessions. Elsje grabbed a hatchet and struck out. The woman fell into a cellar and died instantly. On 1 May the girl was condemned to death by the Amsterdam magistrates, who pronounced the executioner should bury the hatchet she had committed the murder with in her brains before strangling her. This duly took place on Dam square. After the execution her body was taken to the Volewijk, the gallows-field on the other side of the IJ (the inlet of the Zuiderzee on which Amsterdam was situated) and hung from a pole to rot. The hatchet was left beside her head.

A few days later, Rembrandt, 57 years old, crossed over the IJ to the gallows-field. He rarely drew events in the city, but that day he made two drawings of Elsje Christiaens. Even these straight-forward drawings, purely visual records, demonstrate one of his greatest qualities: his feeling for drama and his ability to evoke that drama in a single figure.

Rembrandt began with the drawing in which we see the girl directly from the front. After this, when he had become more accustomed to the presence of the dead, he drew her from the side, in profile, seeing that this way he could create a much more dramatic effect. This second drawing is the more detailed and the freest of the two. Now he dared approach more closely. In its accurate registering of the contraption in which the girl has been hung this second version is virtually a technical drawing, with all the details of ropes and knots. You look more closely as a result. At the same time, you can feel the weight of the dead body and the terrible loneliness of this end. Rembrandt drew her sympathetically, with an intimacy and also with an eye for her goofiness – there you hang, you stupid girl!

### The rough paintings

In 1631, when he was twenty five years old, Rembrandt moved to Amsterdam. The city was a boom town. The majority of the population were immigrants. After the fall of Antwerp in 1585, thousands of Flemings had arrived in the city from the Southern Netherlands, there was an influx of Portuguese Jews and there were groups of Scandinavians and many Germans. The first, second and third extensions of the city had already occurred when Rembrandt arrived, but he was to participate in the fourth. Within fifty years, Amsterdam changed from a provincial town to a thriving cosmopolitan city, with trading connections spanning the entire globe. When the hatches of a ship that had just returned from the East Indian spice run were opened in the harbour, the scent of pepper wafted over the city. You sometimes see a bag of peppercorns in still

lives from that time: pepper was the new gold.

In Amsterdam Rembrandt not only sought commissions, but also fame and status. In 1633 the miller's son married the mayor of Leeuwarden's daughter, Saskia van Uylenburgh. He began signing his paintings with his first name – only the great masters of the Renaissance had done that: Michelangelo, Rafaël, Leonardo and Titian. While still young he was already an amazingly good portrait painter and exploited this gift to the full. Through portrait commissions he gained access to the society of the old patrician families who governed the city and also to that of the *nouveaux riches* – to which he himself would presently belong.



Elsje Christiaens  
hanging from the gallows,  
1664, drawing.

In those days, the lifelikeness of the painted subject was an important criterion when it came to judging a painting. For us, there is something naïve - banal even – in this attitude, but it befitted a young nation and a bourgeois class that had not so long ago cut itself from a crude and primitive existence. What was desired from a painting was that it should astonish and, of course, the owner wanted to astonish others with it. The ability of the Dutch painters to paint such deceptive illusions of real life was a kind of invention, like Stevin's machines or Leeghwater's draining of the great lakes, Van Leeuwenhoek's microscope or the flute, a new type of ship that could transport relatively large cargoes with a small crew.

'Wunderkind' Rembrandt very quickly mastered the technique of illusionistic painting. It is fascinating to look closely at the portrait of Maria Trip in the Rijksmuseum, a work from 1639, and see how he achieved his effects. The reflected light on the nose, for instance, done with white, gives the skin a slightly greasy shine and make the nose itself come forward. The moisture of the eye that begins to gleam as a result of a few small, expertly placed strokes of white, so that the whole eye seems full of life. When he came to the very expensive lace collar, he first painted it white and then introduced the pattern of black and gray which causes this white to change into lace. Toward the bottom of the



Elsje Christiaens  
from the side,  
1664, drawing.

canvas, the painter does something stunning with the expensive fan that Maria Trip holds in her hand: the handle seems to merge from the canvas. How many visitors to Maria Trip's canal house have bent forward to look more closely at this fan, amazed at the deceptive illusion of reality?

As well as the precise style with which he knew to amaze so many commissioning patrons and to flatter so many vanities, Rembrandt also deployed another style – the so-called 'rough' style. In the precise style the forms were imitated, whereas in the rough style they were suggested. Imitation has always something deadly about it. Rembrandt must have been aware of this, for at a certain moment he committed himself, hook, line and sinker, to the rough style and it was by taking that route that

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, ROBERT LEHMAN COLLECTION, 1975 (1975.1.803).  
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he developed into a grand master. The rough style became his trademark.

His portrait of Jan Six from 1654 is therefore more interesting than that of Maria Trip. The wealthy Amsterdam patrician, art collector and dilettant in the world of letters seems to be on the point of going out: he is pulling on his gloves, his red cloak is already hanging from one shoulder and in a moment he will pull it on. What makes the portrait of Jan Six more interesting than that of Maria Trip is the staging of his presence. But also, indeed most of all, by the vitality lent to it by the 'rough' paintwork. Brilliantly painted passages have something thrilling about them, and in the Six portrait such passages are to be found in abundance. Rembrandt's brushwork here is breath-taking – free, fast and accurate. The golden braids on the red cloak are indicated each by a single broad brush stroke, the gold buttons simply by dabs. Most of all, I love the way the white cuffs are painted at the

wrists: viscous, creamy and frothy.

## Old Testament

The stories from the Old and New Testaments are the most important source for Rembrandt's art and gave rise to hundreds of paintings, etchings and drawings. From 1637 he was able to draw from the Authorized Dutch Translation, which was completed in that year. Rembrandt borrowed also where necessary from the *Antiquities of the Jews* by Flavius Josephus, the 1st century Jewish historian, a book that provides a great deal of background to the world of the Old Testament. In general, Rembrandt was not a great reader. The famous 1656 inventory of his house, drawn up for the purpose of selling his possessions, only lists about twenty books.

Rembrandt's fascination with biblical stories must have begun during his childhood. These mythical and fairytale-like stories from a mysterious Oriental world must have been read or told to him. Stories never make so deep an impression as they do in your childhood, even though you only half understand them, and Rembrandt's exceptional ability to visualize stories was certainly stimulated by the stories from the bible. These stories stimulate the imagination not only because they are colourful stories from another world but also because they are often so succinctly told. Absalom, for example, fleeing from the enemy on a mule, becomes entangled in the branches of a tree by his long hair and is subsequently killed – the story is told in a few sentences. It is the tantalizing conciseness of the story that stirs the imagination. Precisely because no details are given, you begin to supply details yourself: the way Absalom hung there, sweating and winded, how the branches groaned and swayed under his weight, how he struggled to free himself, all the while desperately looking around for the enemy. You can already see Rembrandt's painting before you: Absalom in the middle, his body painted in an contorted, baroque twist, the mule disappearing into the distance on the left and to the right, in the middle distance, the approaching enemy with their swords and spears.

## Visual images

What did these biblical stories mean to Rembrandt? In the first place, of course, they were material for visual images, scenes for a composition in which he must ensure that the story would be as powerful and as expressive as possible. He was someone who thought in scenes. Besides that, these stories provided him with a world of the imagination that he continued to build throughout his life, a world that became completely his own, immediately recognisable universe.

The biblical stories would also have had the same significance for Rembrandt – as lessons in living – that they had for his contemporaries. Some subjects held his interest for a long time: for example, he portrayed the prodigal son as many as five times. But his greatest preoccupation was with the life of Jesus, which he worked through, scene by scene, in visual images. Rembrandt's Jesus is immediately recognisable: simple and good-natured, not particularly athetically built nor specially handsome, but a thin, even rather scraggy figure. Rembrandt loved the poor and humble.

It is an intriguing question as to what was



Simeon in the temple with the Christ-child, c. 1661, canvas.

Rembrandt's own position in a time when religion permeated the whole of life. The preachers dictated morality and on their deathbed they passed on the patriarchal blessing in imitation of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Rembrandt did certainly not belong to the 'preciezen' – the strict Calvinists, the fundamentalists who were everywhere. After Saskia's death he lived for more than twenty years in extramarital relationships, first with Geertje Dirckx, later with Hendrickje Stoffels – a serious offence in the eyes of strict Calvinists. In 1654, Hendrickje was called to account by the church council because she was living 'in sin' with Rembrandt – pregnant moreover – and was denied holy communion. The painter himself could not be punished: he was no member of the church.

Rembrandt had his own relations with divinity. His vision deepened through concentrating on the wisdom of the bible stories and through life itself. His past painting, left unfinished on the easel, is an intimate, quiet image of Simeon with the Christ-child in the temple, the old Simeon who would not die before he had seen 'the son of God'.

## Parvenu

There are, in fact, two Rembrandts: the extrovert and the introvert. The extrovert is the miller's son who wants to prove himself, the man of the grand house in the Breestraat, the luxurious lifestyle of a parvenu, the enormous art collection, dozens of pupils, such spectacular pieces as *or Belshazzar's Feast*, the man of steadily mounting debts and increasing loans, a boaster and a naïve person who lived beyond his means and almost willingly ruined himself. The introvert Rembrandt is the man of the dozens of self-portraits, intended for sale it is true, but still the portraits of someone who time and again studied himself in the mirror and recorded himself growing old. The introvert is also the wanderer, the man who loves the peasant's cottage among the trees, the remote and hidden spot. He is also the painter of sensual and dreamy women. It is the introspective Rembrandt of *the Jewish Bride*.



RIJKSMUSEUM, AMSTERDAM



COLLECTION SIX, AMSTERDAM

above:  
Portrait of Maria Trip  
1639, panel.

below:  
Portrait of Jan Six  
1654, oil on canvas.



It was the introvert who crossed the IJ to draw the dead Elsje Christiaens.

Rembrandt is not at his best when he yields to the pathos of the Baroque, the grand gesture, the big emotion. Then he is aping the style that could best be left to the Flemish and the Italians. He is at his best when he moves in an intimate world, or works in an intimate medium – when etching or drawing. Self-portraits, portraits, half-figures, scenes with single figures – these are his best paintings. *The Nightwatch* is a tour de force, but it is the girl running into the light who is undisputably the eye-catcher of that colossal canvas. She is a demonstration of Rembrandt's hankering for an intimate world. Amongst all the clamor and to-do of the men parading with their banners and their lances and muskets there had to be something that had his heart in it, and she was it.

As soon as Rembrandt surrenders himself to the intimate and the introvert, the dreamy and the contemplative, he produces universal images, scenes with a significance which is not bound to a specific era. Think of the brilliant Bathseba in the Louvre. A naked woman holding a letter in her hand, deep in thought, and a kneeling old maid servant washing her feet. One need not know that the letter is from a King David, that this king is behaving wickedly, that he will have her husband killed so that he can get her. One need know none of this. The letter is enough.

*The Return of the Prodigal Son* in the Hermitage, a masterpiece from Rembrandt's later years, is another painting that transcends the seventeenth century. Of course it has a more powerful effect when you know the story and when you know that the figure on the right is the jealous elder son who cannot forgive his father that he forgives the younger son for everything – the younger son who did everything to make himself impossible. But the painting is much stronger than the story, in part because of the quite unusual composition.

We see the returning son with his shaven head and filthy feet from the back. He is just a couple of steps ahead of us. At first you turn your attention to the young man who has fallen to his knees. You identify with him and as a result you are part of the drama. The father and the son are depicted by Rembrandt as a unity, that point where the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven are momentarily one – for otherwise there is no forgiveness. The large compassionate hands of the father clasp his son's back. The kneeling son presses his sorrowful face, like a dog, against the father's legs. No further 'gesture'.

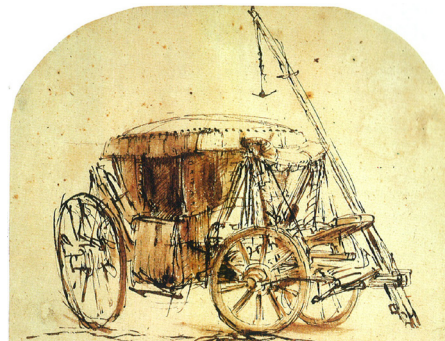
## Old coach

For me, Rembrandt's etchings and drawings are just as important as his paintings. In fact, if a gun were put to my head and I were forced to choose, I would probably go for the etchings and the drawings. I find the graphic work the most timeless and vital part of his oeuvre. Because most of them were not produced to commission, Rembrandt had more freedom with them.

The painter was also a fanatical drawer. He did these drawings not for sale but for himself. They constituted an archive of images, just as the thousands of drawings and prints that he had bought in sales, graphic works by such old master as Mantegna, Michelangelo, Lucas van Leyden and

Albrecht Dürer. They were a kind of note-taking. In 1699, a French collector called them his 'pensées'.

One enters into Rembrandt's personal world far more through the drawings and etchings than via his paintings. Women and children from his immediate surroundings – the seascape painter Jan van de Capelle bought as many as hundred and fifty drawings of women and children from Rembrandt's bankrupt estate. Rembrandt was also a keen hiker and drew countless landscapes from the countryside



around Amsterdam. To escape the city from his house on the Breestraat took only a few minutes' walk via the Anthoniespoort. Lions, pigs, birds of paradise, beggars, people listening, nude models, a woman cooking pancakes on the street, a boy hanging on a rope over a pulley, a child snatching an old man's hat from his head, a man clumsily trying to feed a baby, a portrait of a man by Titian that he came across at a dealer's place, copies of Indian miniatures he had bought at a sale, a coach, a shell, self-portraits, portraits of friends, a pregnant Saskia in bed, his son Titus, a couple making love and of course hundreds of scenes from the bible, often more striking, more immediate, and more spontaneously rendered than is possible in painting.

Why is it that even a drawing of a coach like that, a coach he no doubt came across parked somewhere, why is it something so wonderful? Because you see how he was looking, how he was seeking through drawing to find out how the coach is constructed. And while your eyes glide over the drawing you are in contact with his hand, with its energy and spontaneity. You see how he was able to invest even a simple coach with a vital presence through his mysterious vision. You begin to love the thing.

If you set beside this study of a coach one of Rembrandt's virtuoso drawings, you find yourself in the regions of the sublime. With a few lines of the reed pen and a few sweeps of the brush, a sleeping woman is evoked, the weight of her body and the atmosphere that surrounds it. A drawing like this is like a musical improvisation, a solo by John Coltrane, a passage from the Goldberg variations or an exciting rally in a match between two tennis masters in slow motion. With such a drawing you are exactly where you want to be. You take pleasure in it, just as you took pleasure in the way Rembrandt conjured the cuffs of Jan Six by something called paint.

[Translated from the Dutch by Murray Pearson]

THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON

COLLECTION FRITS LUGT, INSTITUT NÉERLANDAIS, PARIS

THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON

above:  
A coach,  
c.1655, drawing

below:  
Shah Jahan,  
c.1656, drawing

below:  
Sleeping woman,  
c.1655-56, drawing