THE MUSEUM'S REMBRANDTS

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In January, 1942, the Museum set aside its measures of protection against war damage to put on a handsome exhibition of Rembrandt paintings, drawings, and prints in its own collection and boasted at the time that there were nine more paintings which could have been shown. In his article in the Bulletin Mr. Ivins reviewed the sources from which we received these works, a summary which may well be quoted: "A most remarkable fact about the Museum’s Rembrandts is that so very few of them have been purchased by the Museum itself. All the paintings, and most of the prints and drawings, have been given to the Museum by its friends. With very few exceptions these gifts were made by residents of New York. It would be difficult to find more impressive evidence of the pride that the citizens of New York have taken in their city and of their desire to endow and enrich its cultural life. For the sake of the record it is fitting that the names of these most generous donors should here be listed: Benjamin Altman, Ellen Bullard, Theodore M. Davis, Mr. and Mrs. Isaac D. Fletcher, George Coe Graves, Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, Harold K. Hochschild, Jesse Howard, Jr., Archer M. Huntington in memory of Collis Potter Huntington, Mrs. Frederic Kammerer, David Keppel, Albert E. McVitty, Henry G. Marquand, William R. Valentiner, William K. Vanderbilt, Henry Walters, and Felix M. Warburg and his family." Another remarkable fact is that the three intervening years have added the names of two more donors to the list—Jules S. Bache and Mrs. Francis Neilson.

For most people Rembrandt is a painter of portraits; the substantial men and women of seventeenth-century Holland live for us today in canvas after canvas; the artist himself is seen growing from a downy-cheeked youth to a sad old man, and his family and connections are pictured in many costumes and guises. The earliest of the Museum’s paintings, dated 1632, are of the Burgomaster of Delft, Christian Paul van Beresteijn, and his spouse Volker, a richly dressed and rather stuffy pair. The van Beresteijn family treasured these likenesses of their ancestors for two hundred and fifty years, until in 1884 they were acquired by Mr. Havemeyer. Other paintings of the thirties are the charming Lady with a Fan, given by Mrs. Francis Neilson in 1943, and the vigorous Old Woman in an Armchair, of the Altman collection. The portrait of Herman Doomer, dated 1640, is also called The Gilder. He is said to have been a frame maker in Amsterdam and one can guess that the painting was done in payment for some of the carved and gilded frames which are such a necessary expense to portrait painters. Another pair, more likeable than the first, are known simply as an Admiral and his wife.

With the Portrait of a Man given by Henry G. Marquand we have the first of those hauntingly introspective human documents in the painting of which Rembrandt was unrivaled. The Young Man (called The Auctioneer), the Portrait of the Artist at the age of fifty-four, the Man with a Magnifying Glass, and the Man with a Beard follow along in the fifties and sixties with evidence of the same powerful insight. The artist was more kindly in his treatment of women at this time; Hendrickje Stoffels, the housekeeper and friend of his old age, broods lovingly in her warm cloak, and the Lady with a Pink is illumined by a soft glow. In all the Museum owns twenty-one paintings which may be called out-and-out portraits.

Between these portraits and the subject paintings which form an important part of Rembrandt’s work, there is a group of familiar figures who by their exotic clothes have been made to represent classical deities, saints, and picturesque foreign types. A wrinkled old man who strongly resembles Rembrandt’s father is decked out in marvelous silk scarves and a bulbous turban and is labeled The Noble Slav;
Saskia poses in unlikely, ornate armor as Bellona; another woman, possibly Hendrickje, is lovely in a creamy white dress and flowered hat as Flora; a mysterious turbaned woman, probably by Rembrandt, is called The Sibyl; and to many the majestic Old Woman Cutting Her Nails suggests Atropos with her shears.

Bible stories, particularly the life of Jesus, had a great hold on the artist’s imagination. His subjects range from high priests in lofty temples to the simple carpenter’s shop where Mary cradled her Child. Since we are able to reproduce in color on the cover the Head of Christ, we may be permitted to discuss this picture in some detail. Through the years the figure of Christ had changed from a noble-browed impersonal actor in a drama to the understanding, kindly friend seen in Rembrandt’s late works. The Museum has two of these paintings of Christ, the head referred to above
and the Bache Christ with a Pilgrim’s Staff.

The development of the artist’s later conception of Christ is seen first in the Louvre’s great Supper at Emmaus, dated 1648. Two small heads, front view, one in the Detroit Institute of Arts, the other in the Bredius Collection, also belong to this time. Then come four small three-quarter-view heads and some half-lengths which W. R. Valentiner now dates in the same period. There is, however, a progression in the artist’s idea of Christ which Valentiner does not allow for, and we prefer to abide by Bode’s dating, which puts these sympathetic interpretations in the second half of the sixteen-fifties. In these paintings the artist developed a Christ of great physical beauty within the Jewish type. In 1661 Rembrandt experimented with a blond Christ, as seen in the Bache half-length, and with an idealized Italian type in the Risen Christ in the Aschaffenburg Museum.
The Museum's Head of Christ, though included by Valentiner in the four small heads mentioned above, is actually not one of them. The canvas has been cut down and mounted on another canvas, two inches longer at the bottom and a half inch larger on the other three sides. Furthermore, the scale of the head is larger, its measurements being within the range of other full-size Rembrandt portraits. An interesting parallel exists in the collection of Lord Melchett in London. (It is illustrated by Valentiner in his Rembrandt: Wiedergefundene Gemälde, 1923, p. 95, as then belonging to van Diemen.) The Melchett head and ours are on exactly the same scale, they are inclined in the same way, and the neck of the tunic is also the same. The London figure, however, is carried down to the waist, showing the back of the left hand. While admitting that the judgment of paintings from reproductions alone is risky, we cannot resist the speculation that Lord Melchett's painting was copied from
ours when ours had its original dimensions. Although the features in the Melchett example are the same, the self-confidence and spiritual liveliness of our head are there replaced by an expression of dull anxiety, an aspect uncharacteristic of Rembrandt.

Finally, a superb example of Rembrandt’s subject painting is to be found in the Altman collection. The Old Testament story of King David looking down from his palace roof and observing the lovely Bathsheba at her toilet has been represented as a scene of rich beauty. The wife of Uriah sits beside the stone steps of a pool, attended by an old woman who gives her a pedicure and a negro woman who combs out her golden hair. Her blond body gleams pale against oriental rugs and the dark shadows of trees. A peacock and vessels of gold and silver heighten the sense of luxury. David is hardly visible in the gloom of the night and the thought of him does not intrude on the mood of the picture.