REMBRANDT

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Change of fashion is as inevitable in art as it is in women’s clothes—and also quite as desirable. But it has its drawbacks. In the effort of each new generation to prove its vitality, fashion brings out the best of what is popular in a school of painting, but it also gives undue importance to much that is mediocre. As our eyes get used to a certain type of painting, they seem to exclude others; and so some of the work of great men of the past is forgotten because it does not seem to fit into contemporary surroundings.

In our own times, we have seen the Impressionists recognized and given the place which is their due next to the great painters of the past, but simultaneously we have witnessed an inflation in taste which has brought out many of their second-rate works. Sold at absurdly high prices, these are to be seen everywhere in exhibitions, museums, and private collections. It will not be long before they join the cast-offs of other fashionable enthusiasms in the cellars and attics. This is only just and natural. But there is another aspect of the matter which is much more serious. We have become accustomed to the bright colors and simple lines of modern art; and consequently, it has become difficult for us to look at “dark” paintings. We have also become used to seeing—or being shocked into seeing—stylization, distortion, and abstraction. The majority of modern paintings impart their message with a certain immediacy. With few exceptions they are not intended to hold our attention for a long time. The painters of the past whose works repay study, and are increasingly rewarding as they are better known, seem to many of us unnecessarily complex and old-fashioned.

These modern habits of looking have even dulled the appreciation of a painter of the stature of Rembrandt. Even among his professed admirers, there is a certain amount of lip service; and all too often he seems—for some strange reason—to be considered as part of the taste of the Victorian era. The current exhibition offers a timely opportunity to look again at what fashion is inclined to obscure. No painter is better able to hold his own with the giants of all ages. None is better qualified to remind a generation that threatens to become completely dehumanized of the eternal value and beauty of simple, basic human feelings.

The Museum’s collection of paintings by Rembrandt is the largest outside of Europe. Although lacking great examples of his landscapes and figure compositions, it contains admirable portraits from every period of his development, and Rembrandt’s portraits are the best key to the understanding of the particular thrill, the peculiar enjoyment that is derived only from him and not from the work of any other artist. The study of the human face fascinated him more than anything else in nature. The great majority of his works are portraits, and at least one tenth of these—a statistically minded art historian has counted them—are self-portraits.

What is the predominant quality of Rembrandt’s portraiture? What is the explanation of the impression his portraits make on us? Rembrandt’s approach to all his subjects is, it seems to me, warm, tender, simple, and human. But what he conveys is not material. It has to do with those aspects of the human character which are intangible, which are felt by sympathy and sensitivity rather than seen. They are implied by expression rather than made explicit in the shape of a forehead, chin, or nose. They are most apparent on the faces of old people, whom Rembrandt so often chose as models. Perhaps this sensitivity to the spiritual side of human nature is best expressed in his treatment of the female nude, for instance, in the great Bathsheba in the
Louvre, in which, painting a middle-aged woman's body with complete realism, he somehow made it glow with such tenderness that it becomes as beautiful as any classic goddess.

When the visitor to Holland walks along the streets of the Hague or Amsterdam, he sees people who remind him of those painted by Hals, Vermeer, or Terborch; but he looks in vain for anyone resembling a Rembrandt. Yet if he studies the heads in Rembrandt's portraits more carefully, concentrating on features and structure, he realizes that these also are of the same race. They are different because Rembrandt was interested, not in their external appearance, but in their character.

Each head impresses us very directly with its own personality. The Man with the Magnifying Glass is serious and thoughtful. The Lady with a Pink is full of tenderness and sadness. The flower suggests that this is a wedding portrait, yet her expression of dreamy melancholy, of regret mixed with understanding, seems more suggestive of an anniversary. Both of these portraits evoke emotions which we feel and understand deep inside ourselves. They create an atmosphere of intimacy but, at the same time, of solitude and uneasiness. We feel that we understand the sitter, and yet there is something that escapes us and leaves us with a sense of anxiety. This strange enigmatic quality is in all Rembrandt's portraits, even early examples like the Old Woman in an Armchair and the two members of the Van Beresteijn family. Leonardo also gave his portraits a mysterious quality but more deliberately, as if to provoke us. The Mona Lisa is a siren. Rembrandt's women make us reflect on the infinite richness of human personality in a manner that is comparable to Shakespeare.

The most important of the means Rembrandt uses to achieve his characterization is the extraordinary power of expression which he puts into the eyes of his models. As we look at his portraits we are inevitably drawn to the eyes. Whether they are looking at us or not they hold our attention with a curious kind of fascination unique in painting. Perhaps the closest approach to their effect can be seen in the grave portraits from Fayyum, painted more than fifteen hundred years before Rembrandt was born.

Their special quality can be best explained by comparison with the work of other great portrait painters, Holbein, Frans Hals, or Velazquez. In a head painted by one of these, the eyes look out of the picture at us. The message they carry about the personality of the sitter is direct and immediate. In Rembrandt's work the eyes seem rather to watch us and think. They not only convey the mood of the model; they also make us aware of his inner life, of thoughts and feelings we know he has but which are beyond our grasp. They draw us into the picture; but the more we look at them, the more difficult it becomes to define the feeling they give us. They gradually create a strange atmosphere of suspense, of listening for something quite outside the limits of the canvas.

It has been said that it was only in his more mature years that Rembrandt looked "behind the mask" of his models. But surely this sense of inner life expressed through the eyes is present in his work from the very beginning: in the Noble Slav or the Old Woman in an Armchair, both painted while he was still in his twenties. How effectively he reveals the strong and sensual character that lies behind the homely and awkward appearance of the young Lady with a Fan, also from this early period. In his youthful self-portraits one feels that he is struggling to find a way of expressing these inner qualities of the personality. The eyes peering from the depths of the shadow cast by the hat in the Old Man with a Beard can also be seen in some of the earliest of these. How this effect is produced technically—with the brush—it is impossible to say. Many copyists can reproduce a Rembrandt portrait to perfection in every other respect, but I have never seen one who has caught this strange, hypnotic power of the eyes.

Rembrandt's portraits command our attention also by the simplicity and the unity of their pictorial organization. He subordinates everything in the picture to one purpose: the expression of his feeling about the person.
his early works he conveyed this with accessories—oriental costumes, weapons, old books—as in the exaggerated, almost comical Saskia as Bellona. As he grew older, he gradually gave them up.

His development in this respect can be followed by observing his treatment of hands. In the early portraits they play a secondary but an important supporting role. They are carried out in as much detail as the face. They help to tell us about the life of the Old Woman in an Armchair. The way they con-
trast with the face of the Lady with a Fan is
terribly revealing. Then, gradually, they are
more and more subordinated to the head. In
the Auctioneer they are painted more broadly
than the face. In the Lady with a Pink they
have become shadowy, ghostlike. They are
transparently painted, loosely drawn, so much
so that they are difficult to understand unless
looked at in relation to the face, where all the
meaning of the picture is concentrated.

Rembrandt's use of light and shade is a
vital element in achieving the unity of his
pictures. In general, he uses shadows to sub-
ordinate elements that might disturb this
unity; but he does not, like Caravaggio and
his school, simply black them out. He creates
an area of half light in which some parts are
understandable to the eye and others are
lost in mysterious darkness—for instance, the
strange head in the background of the Auc-
tioneer, which our eyes strain to see but can-
not quite make out.

It is in his landscapes that Rembrandt uses
shadow most effectively, and in the paintings
that combine landscape with human action
that it is most expressive. The contrast of the
realism of his human figures with the com-
pletely imaginative treatment of the back-
ground is one of the important elements of the
strangely suggestive atmosphere that is charac-
teristic of his works. The dark and threaten-
ing sky in Bathsheba, for instance, seems to
foretell the tragic events which followed this
poetic beginning.

Rembrandt is essentially a painter's painter.
He defined form in terms of color and light
rather than by volume, as Michelangelo, es-
sentially a sculptor painter, did, or in terms of
line, like Botticelli, who was a draughtsman
painter. But, as he painted, he constantly drew
with his brush, and the strokes follow the
basic structure of the form he put on his
canvas. His early brushwork is meticulous and
precise, as in the oval Head of a Young
Woman or the Van Beresteijn portraits. Grad-
ually, he simplified his method. Each stroke
became increasingly significant until at the
end he expressed himself with a supreme
economy of technical means. His late brush-
work has at the same time a complete sureness
and an effortless freedom that have never been
surpassed by any painter. Good examples of it
can be seen in the Old Man with a Beard and
the Portrait of Lairesse. His early studies
show that he was working towards this free-
dom when still a young man. In the Portrait
of Saskia as Bellona, painted when he was
only twenty-seven, the vigorous handling of
the shield is similar to what he was to do
many years later.

In Rembrandt's paintings the surface is al-
ways rich and varied, so much so that it has a
sensual appeal of its own. In his youth it is
sometimes rather hard, but it soon takes on
life and excitement. Lights are applied over
the darker tones by thick and powerful strokes
in a logical but infinitely varied method.
Sometimes the paint curls up at the end of
a stroke, keeping the exact imprint of the
hairs of the brush, so that we almost feel as
if Rembrandt's hand had left that spot only a
moment before.

Recent cleaning of a number of the Mu-
seum's paintings by removing varnish that was
either discolored by age or tinted to give the
golden glow fashionable in the last century
has revealed Rembrandt's true strength and
daring as a colorist. In his youthful paintings
his palette is dominated by cold colors; even
the flesh tones are cool, as in the two Van
Beresteijn portraits and the Bellona. It is in-
teresting to imagine the changes which clean-
ing will bring to the Noble Slav, the color
harmony of which is completely changed by
yellow varnish. The turban and scarf will be
a cold, greenish white, and the background
will also be a much cooler grey. The golden
cloak will, of course, keep its present tonality,
and the resulting contrast with the back-
ground will make the figure stand out and ap-
pear even more imposing than it does today.

Gradually, as Rembrandt grew older, his
colors became predominantly warm until, at
the end, some of his pictures, like the Christ
with a Pilgrim's Staff or the Old Man with a
Beard, are almost monochrome brown. The
range of colors he used was always astonish-

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The Toilet of Bathsheba after the Bath, painted by Rembrandt in 1643. Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913
range is infinitely rich. With a minimum of colors he uses the maximum of technical means to an extent equaled by few other painters. Most fascinating are the touches of vivid color which he puts on as final accents in the Hendrickje Stoffels and the Self-Portrait.

Like every truly great artist, Rembrandt grew steadily in stature. His drawing and brushwork became increasingly simple and incisive. In the portraits painted at the end of his
Gerard de Lairesse (1641-1711), by Rembrandt. Dated 1665. Lent by Robert Lehman
life his sympathetic understanding of human personality became even more profound. Few painters have reached such a perfect balance between technique and feeling. At the end of the seventeenth century, Robert de Piles, the French painter and diplomat, characterized Rembrandt in a sentence, the simplicity and clarity of which it would be difficult to improve upon and which I am sure would have pleased the artist himself: "Rembrandt doit la connaissance de son art à la bonté de son esprit et à ses reflexions."
Saskia and Rumbartus, drawing by Rembrandt. Lent by The Pierpont Morgan Library
Christ Preaching (la petite Tombe), etching by Rembrandt. About 1652. Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929
Dr. Faustus, etching by Rembrandt. Gift of Felix M. Warburg and His Family, 1941