

Rembrandt is a name to remember. Not just because he was a great artist of the 17th century, but because behind his art lies a spiritual journey. Numerous artists since the Renaissance have represented biblical themes, but Rembrandt stands among the select few who have combined those

Rembrandt: The spiritual journey of an artist

by
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themes with a spiritual yearning innate to the human heart. As David gave expression in poetic form to God's saving and sustaining grace in the midst of intense suffering, Rembrandt left for history a profound portrait of his spiritual struggles in the form of timeless art.

The eighth child of a financially successful miller, Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) was born in the university city of Leiden, not far from Amsterdam in the Netherlands. His mother, a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, raised him to be a devout Calvinist Protestant. This devotion was reinforced between the ages of seven and fourteen when Rembrandt attended Latin School, with its heavy emphasis on religious studies.

By age 14, Rembrandt showed that his primary interest was art. Unlike many contemporary, aspiring artists in Europe, he showed little interest in classical modes and refused to make the customary trip to Italy. Instead, he enrolled at the University of Leiden, and after a

brief attendance he dropped out of formal education. For the next three years, he studied art under Jacob Isaacszoon van Swanenburgh, a specialist in rendering architecture and scenes of hell. He then went to Amsterdam to study under Pieter Lastman, a painter of history, through whom he probably became familiar with the art of the Italian painter Caravaggio.

In Amsterdam, Rembrandt's status as an artist continued to rise due to his command of portraiture. Complex group portraits such as *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (a public dissection of an executed criminal) of 1632 brought him national prominence and a great fortune. Such was his reputation as a portrait artist that he received more commissions than he could complete, leading him to establish a workshop of more than 50 pupils.

Early in his career, Rembrandt demonstrated what would become a lifelong love of drawing and painting biblical subjects. His initial religious works (such as *The Blinding of Samson*, 1636), often appeared to have been made to appeal to the avid tastes for violence or sensuality of the high baroque. The overtly dramatic presentation reflected an influence of Caravaggio's *tenebrism* (painting in a dark manner with strong directional lighting), combined with the spiraling forms and emphatic diagonal line movements of the Flemish master Peter Paul Rubens.

In 1634, Rembrandt married Saskia van Uylenburgh, the daughter of a wealthy burgomaster. She brought Rembrandt a large dowry. The couple had four children, and the family lived in a fashionable townhouse in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam, where the artist had many friends and continued to be acknowledged as the city's pre-eminent painter.

Beginning in 1635, Rembrandt was hit with an almost unbelievable sequence of tragic happenings. The next seven years saw the death of three of his infant children, his mother, his favorite sister-in-law, and finally his wife in 1642. In addition to these personal tragedies, his professional life also took a heavy blow. His popularity as an artist began to wane. After painting his masterpiece *The Night Watch* (the formation of a company of Dutch militia under the command of Captain Banning Cocq) in 1642, his work found less acceptance in a Dutch society that largely favored elegant genre or splendid landscape paintings.

By now, Rembrandt found himself in financial difficulties. One particular burden was hard to bear both financially and emotionally. Geertghe Dirck, his son's nurse for seven years, sued him for a breach of promise. Despite his denial that he ever promised to marry her, the court ordered Rembrandt to pay her 200 guilders a year in support.

Although these crises apparently resulted in periods of depression and introspection, by the mid-1640s the artist emerged wiser and more determined. His art was less melodramatic and more restrained, with an undercurrent of mystery as seen in the 1648 painting, *Supper at Emmaus*. Rembrandt's increasing interest in religious themes may have been in part the result of his affinity for the Mennonites. Even though there is little evidence to support that he actually became a Mennonite, he shared their beliefs in the sole authority of the Bible and the power of silent prayer.

Rembrandt's genius was in art, but not in management. Through mismanagement and his insatiable interest in art (he owned works of Michelangelo, Raphael, and Dürer) and Eastern rarities purchased at auction, he was forced into bankruptcy in 1656. By 1660, he had to sell off his home and his prized collection of art, costumes, and assorted items that had often served as props in his art. For the next 10 years of his life, Rembrandt saw himself as an outcast of Amsterdam and witnessed the tragedy of the death of his second wife Hendrickje Stoffels and his son Titus by the first marriage. In 1669, at the age of 63, the great artist died alone of an undertermined illness.

Rembrandt's legacy

What survived Rembrandt? On a personal level, one daughter by his second wife, with one child having died earlier. In art, an outstanding legacy of more than 600 paintings, 1,400 drawings, and at least 30 etching plates. But it is perhaps in the philosophy behind his art that Rembrandt left a most profound bequest: He showed that life may have its depths of despair and heights of hope and contentment, and yet as an artist he could provide the archetype of deep spiritual courage. Rather than becoming bitter over numerous incredibly sad circumstances, he became a man of resolute faith, strength, and tenderness. His works of art, particularly the later ones, reflected a



Christ Healing the Sick (1642).

Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Mrs. Horatio Greenough. Christ in memory of Horatio Greenough. Curtis.

basic spiritual philosophy that may be defined in six major thrusts:

1. A reverence for life. Arising out of a core belief that all things descend from God and are not to be scorned, he had a reverence for life in its totality. All humans were worthy of his esteem, even beggars and outcasts. Unlike the detached observer, Rembrandt identified with the dispossessed and demonstrated a sincere sympathy for the afflicted.

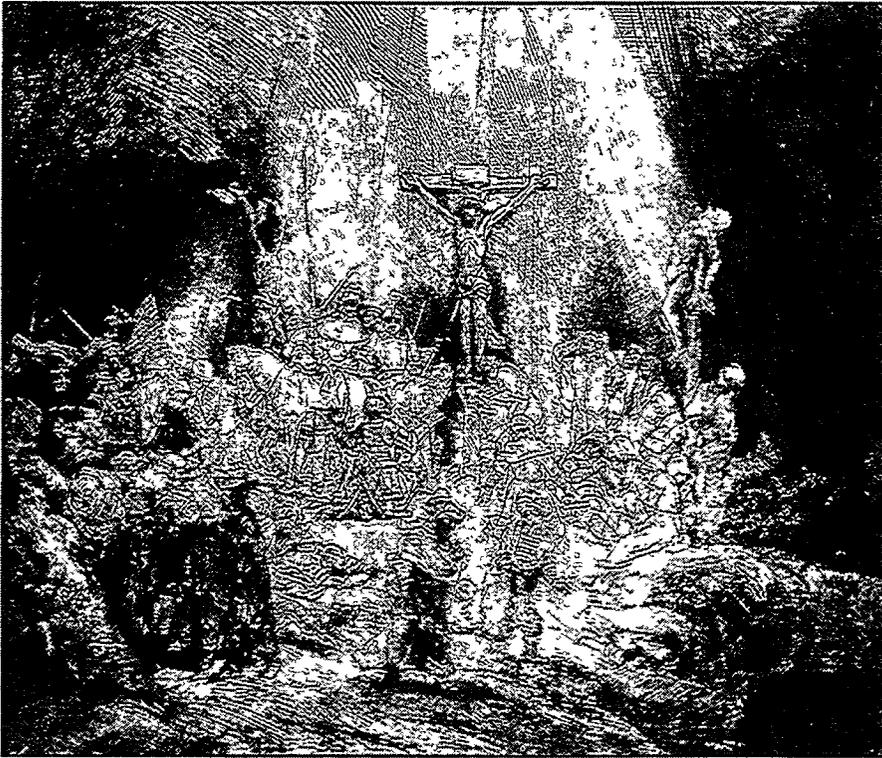
This basic tenet of Rembrandt's belief system is seen in his *Christ Healing the Sick* (1642), sometimes known as the *Hundred Guilder Print*. According to a poem of his contemporary Hendrick Waterloos, on the back of an impression, the etching (a print made from a copper plate) illustrates the nineteenth chapter of Matthew in its entirety. In the foreground and the right are the great multitudes following Jesus, wanting to be healed. To the left are the Pharisees set to provoke Him. Between them and Jesus' rebuking disciples are the little children seeking His embrace and blessings. Close scrutiny reveals a camel entering an archway as a counterpoint to the rich young ruler who negates his yearning for Christ with a desire to maintain his earthly wealth. As the focal point to the composition, Jesus literally radiates acceptance and compassion as He invites the little children to come to Him while healing those so desperately believing in His transforming

touch. Here was the quintessential 17th century expression of Christ as the Son of Man.

2. A loving and compassionate God. In so personifying Jesus, Rembrandt went beyond his Calvinist upbringing; he refused to present a stern and overpowering God. Instead, his was the loving and forgiving Jesus. Similar to the Mennonites, who made no class distinctions between members, he depicted Christ as one who blessed the "poor in spirit" and as the serene teacher and healer rather than as the implacable God of Calvin.

Rembrandt's portrayal of Christ differed also with those typically seen in the Roman Catholic artistic tradition. Unlike many Catholic renditions, which coupled Christ's divinity with the notion of the Church Triumphant by portraying Him as distant and fearsome, Rembrandt revealed the humble Nazarene—not aloof, not at all intimidating. For him, Christ was love incarnate, ministering to all classes and empathizing deeply with their infirmities, Himself having known suffering and pain.

3. Humanization of biblical themes. The artist's humanization of the scene also demonstrated itself in his choice of models, unconventional for the time in which he worked. For Rembrandt, it was inconceivable to depict biblical characters in a Greco-



The Three Crosses (1653).

Roman or Nordic mold. His models came from the Jewish community of Amsterdam, many of whom were refugees from Portugal and Spain. Thus, his apostles and saints were ordinary people, worn and impoverished, whose distinction was not of the physical but of the spiritual.

4. The focus of the cross. Central to Rembrandt's Christianity was his belief that the entire Bible is meant to lead us to the cross. He was convinced, however, that this essential message must be interpreted in human terms. For him, "the Scripture was the beginning chapter of a narrative of man's situation, a dramatic and continuing narrative in which Rembrandt saw himself and his contemporaries as vital participants."²¹

A consummate expression of all he sensed about God and humanity—suffering, forbearance, love, and acceptance—is *The Three Crosses*, a drypoint (an etching done with a heavy needle) dated 1653. Christ is pictured on the cross flanked by the two thieves. Between the crosses are grouped Jesus' friends and family, with the customary representation of a grieving Mary. To the left, at the foot of the impenitent thief, are mounted Roman soldiers and the kneeling centu-

rior who acknowledges Christ as God's Son. At the far left are onlookers, some sorrowful, others in vigorous discussion. Except for the stark illumination of Jesus as the center of the composition, the rest of the scene is so dark as to be overwhelming. The incredible range of physical, emotional, and social forces in this print seems to say that all humanity, including the artist-himself, share in the guilt of Christ's agony and death.

The depth of Rembrandt's emotive crucifixion is all the more remarkable when one considers the religious and artistic milieu in which he lived—a Dutch culture steeped in Calvinism and therefore eschewing art that in any way denoted the iconic.

5. Religion of everyday life.

Rembrandt's acute spiritual vision was not exclusive to biblical subjects. Like many Protestants, he brought religion out of the confines of church ceremony and dogma into the realm of daily life. Distinctions between past and present, sacred and secular, became less and less distinct for him and others in Calvinist Holland. With Rembrandt, the human presence went beyond mere externals to embody a deeper, more contemplative facet. What

he sought through subtle modulations of light and shadow to portray in his oils of family and friends so often lost in their own thoughts was "simply the quality—secret, otherworldly, spiritual, meditative... which Christ tried to touch in the hearts of men."²²

6. Divine strength for the human journey. This capturing of the intangible *essence* of the human applied especially to the artist's numerous self-portraits. Continuing a Northern European tradition of artists documenting their changing appearances, Rembrandt provided an even greater visual autobiography chronicling virtually every year of his career. The profusion of self-portraits (more than 90) would seem to suggest that Rembrandt was egocentric and obsessed with his own visage. Not at all: These works were seldom if ever images of narcissism. Rather, they penetrated the artist's changing emotional states and his repeated self-assessment relative to his Creator. *Self-Portrait* (1669) culminated the life of a man who had passed from a face once youthful and filled with buoyant optimism to a visage of weariness and quiet dignity. Like all humankind, he too was ultimately weak and vulnerable; yet there remained something inherently noble in this final self-characterization. Though ravaged by care and anxiety, he demonstrated an indomitable spirit as a greater revelation of the human capacity to survive the cruelties of life when strengthened by God's infinite love and power.

While Rembrandt's works have typically given us an intimate glimpse into one's relationship to God and one's fellow human beings in a specific time and place, they have also managed to touch something in virtually all of us. His art, at once personal and yet paradoxically timeless, describes "not only his pilgrimage but also that of all humanity toward a final peace with this world and with God."²³

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Notes and References

1. Robert Wallace, *The World of Rembrandt: 1606-1669* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1968), p. 168.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 7.