

EXHIBITS

## Rembrandt: The Painter's Drama

*'Classical artistic composition must express a valid idea which is not explicitly stated in the composition itself, which is transmitted to the audience, not as an explicit statement, but rather, as a prescience of a well-defined quality and significance.'*

—Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr.

Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) lived through a period of intense upheaval in Europe, including the genocidal Thirty Years' War and its resolution in the watershed Treaty of Westphalia. Throughout all of it, Rembrandt spoke through his art for the highest qualities of mankind. For Rembrandt saw in the crisis of his time, the opportunity to create a new renaissance, in the arts, in the sciences, and in human relations.

We know that Rembrandt, like his younger contemporary Leibniz, believed in the goodness of mankind, and was optimistic about the future. How do we know this? Rembrandt left no treatises or written evidence of his philosophical views. But he gave us his many paintings, prints, and drawings, which speak to us with such power and clarity, as to leave no doubt.

The Boston Museum of Fine Arts exhibition, "Rembrandt's Journey," provided a rare opportunity to discover, or re-discover, the exceptional power of Rembrandt's work to engage, challenge, and inspire; an opportunity to walk through a significant portion of the artist's life

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**'Rembrandt's Journey:  
Painter-Draftsman-Etcher'**

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Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
Oct. 26, 2003-Jan. 18, 2004

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Art Institute of Chicago  
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work, and to witness his development unfold through the various media he employed—drawing, etching, engraving, and painting—in more than 200 works.

Rembrandt is the painter who most passionately expresses the ideas of the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, which ended more than a century of bloody religious warfare. From 1566 to 1648, Rembrandt's own Netherlands fought a con-

tinuous struggle for its independence from Hapsburg Spain. It has been estimated that, in just the final 30 years of European warfare, between 7 and 8 million people died—approximately one-third the total population living within the Hapsburg Empire.

The Treaty of Westphalia called on all parties to put the nightmare of war behind them, to look to the future by forgiving their enemies and putting the "advantage of the other" before the desire for revenge. Rembrandt's close friend, the Czech (Moravian) humanist John Amos Comenius (1592-1670), who had taken refuge in Amsterdam, was one of the figures whose philosophical and political writings provided the basis for the Westphalia Peace.

It is precisely this spirit of *agapē* that emanates from Rembrandt's work, ever more powerfully as he matures.



Rembrandt van Rijn, "Christ Preaching" ("The Hundred Guilder Print"), 1643-49.

## Rembrandt's Amsterdam

Rembrandt's Amsterdam was a city of great wealth, and a center of science, culture, and learning, which saw its population quadruple, from 50,000 to 200,000, in the 50 years between 1600 and 1650. Among the world-transforming developments which took place during Rembrandt's lifetime, was the establishment of European settlements in the New World, including the voyage of the Mayflower in 1620, which included citizens of the Dutch Republic.

During the same period, when Rembrandt was growing to maturity, the revolutionary works of Shakespeare (d. 1616) began to reach the continent in translation. By 1604, *Romeo and Juliet* appeared in German; in 1621, *The Tragedy of Titus Andronicus* was translated into Dutch; a few years later, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, and *Hamlet* were printed in German; in 1654, the *Taming of the Shrew* appeared in Dutch. And, while it is well known that Rembrandt, unlike many of his fellow artists, never travelled to Italy, there is evidence that he was in Shakespeare's London: he drew the gates of the city in the early 1640's, and may have accompanied his close friend, the rabbi and teacher of Spinoza, Menasseh ben Israel, on a trip to England to convince Oliver Cromwell to open the country to Jewish immigration.

Then, there were the visits to Rembrandt's Netherlands in the 1630's by Shakespeare's "student" John Milton (1608-1668), in which he met and befriended Dutch republicans such as Hugo Grotius, discussing their writings and those of Shakespeare. Milton's first idea for *Paradise Lost* is thought to have come from the young Grotius's polemical republican drama, *Der Stadtholder*.

Was Rembrandt familiar with Shakespeare's dramas and poetry? Although we do not know, even a brief survey of his works reveals the striking fact that Rembrandt conceived of his compositions as staged dramas—from the selection of subjects, to the placement of the figures ("actors"), the light-



Rembrandt van Rijn,  
"Adam and Eve," 1638.

atmospheric effects, especially around the face of Christ, whose image is rendered without definite contours. This creates both a sense of mobility, and of ambiguity—manifesting the movement of the mind—wherein we can discover for ourselves the nature of Christ.

The figure of Jesus is set against a stark background; a large, dark form rises above him, protectively, and emphasizes his central role; the other actors are riveted to his words, his presence, so that he becomes the organizing principle of the drama. The scene, chosen for its dramatic potential,

is from the Gospel of Matthew: "And great multitudes followed him; and he healed them there." At the right, a crowd enters through the city gate: they are the sick, the crippled, the aged, who seek his help. To the left are the Pharisees—the religious fundamentalists, who demand to know Christ's "position" on "single issues," like divorce (Matthew 19:3-12). In front of the Pharisees, two mothers approach him, offering their children for his blessing; as Peter, at Jesus's right hand, tries to hold them back, Christ reproaches him, for "of such is the kingdom of Heaven" (Matt. 19:13-15).

### 'Christ Preaching'

Rembrandt's dramatic skills are in full play in his masterpiece "Christ Preaching" (1648) (also known as the "Hundred Guilder Print"), etched the year of the Treaty of Westphalia, where the composition appears as an enormous proscenium stage setting. Christ is placed slightly off-center; the suggested imbalance conveys the idea of change, motion—of something about to happen. He is illuminated by a strong light from the left, coming from outside the space of the picture; but light also emanates from within the figure of Christ himself. It is by this light that we can read the expressions (and hence thoughts) portrayed on the faces of those immediately surrounding him, and in the motions of the "supporting cast" gathered to listen to his sermon. To make the action come alive, Rembrandt not only uses *chiaroscuro*—the contrast of light and dark to create depth and drama—but also adopts Leonardo da Vinci's *sfumato*, the softening of edges to reflect

tial, is from the Gospel of Matthew: "And great multitudes followed him; and he healed them there." At the right, a crowd enters through the city gate: they are the sick, the crippled, the aged, who seek his help. To the left are the Pharisees—the religious fundamentalists, who demand to know Christ's "position" on "single issues," like divorce (Matthew 19:3-12). In front of the Pharisees, two mothers approach him, offering their children for his blessing; as Peter, at Jesus's right hand, tries to hold them back, Christ reproaches him, for "of such is the kingdom of Heaven" (Matt. 19:13-15).

Between the two mothers, a youth is seated deep in thought; he seems to be pondering his very existence. This must be the rich young man, who came to Christ seeking eternal life, but rejected the advice to sell his earthly possessions and help the poor. This identification is reinforced by the entry of a barely visible camel through the gate, reminding us of Christ's admonition that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter heaven (Matt. 19:16-24).

Overall, this staging of Matthew's

Rembrandt van Rijn,  
"Self-Portrait," 1629.

19th verse reflects its conclusion, that "many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first." Rembrandt brilliantly depicts this idea metaphorically, by presenting the poor and disadvantaged with more precise definition, and greater substance, than the rich and powerful.

Is this not the idea of the Treaty of Westphalia, which was signed the very year Rembrandt made his print?

#### 'Adam and Eve': Real People

In Rembrandt's etching "Adam and Eve" (1638), the stage curtain (in the form of a large tree trunk at the right of the picture) is drawn back, and our attention is drawn to the two figures lit dramatically from the back and left; so that, at first, we don't notice the huge winged serpent clinging to the tree trunk. Rembrandt has made the familiar story entirely his own. Rembrandt's couple are often compared to Albrecht Dürer's famous engraving "The Fall of Man (Adam and Eve)" (1504), which Rembrandt undoubtedly knew well (he was an avid collector, and owned many of Dürer's prints). But, whereas Dürer followed tradition by depicting Adam and Eve as paragons of physical beauty, Rembrandt's pair is anything but. They are earthy, almost primitive—indeed, barely human, in the higher, spiritual sense. This quality is reinforced by the moment of the story Rembrandt has selected to illustrate. The pair are caught at the instant of temptation, just before committing the sin which brings about the Fall of man and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Eve peers at Adam with a wily expression, as he reaches for the apple she is holding. Adam is clearly the weaker figure, and this is borne out by the stance of each—he is slightly off-



Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

balance, one foot resting insecurely on a rock, as the other seems to slide forward toward Eve, while she rests firmly on two feet at the center of the composition. Four hands dance around the guilty apple; Adam's hand, in shadow, hovers above, about to grasp it. Suddenly, we notice the serpent hanging from the tree above them, dangling another apple from his mouth.

On the lower right-hand side, Rembrandt includes another animal of the Garden, a scarcely visible elephant, a symbol of piety and temperance—qualities which are being violated by the leading players in the drama, but also, by the forces who have turned all Europe into a field of carnage.

#### Self-Portraits

Rembrandt's sense of drama is present in his

Rembrandt van Rijn,  
"Self-Portrait Leaning  
on a Sill," 1639.



Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

celebrated self-portraits as well. No other artist reproduced his own image so many times—50-60 paintings, dozens of drawings, engravings, and etchings—over such an extended period of time. These critical self-examinations can be thought of as Rembrandt's autobiography.

The MFA exhibit offers an abundance of these studies, in every media, beginning with some of the earliest drawings and etchings, dating from 1628-30, when Rembrandt was a struggling young artist in Leyden. These show us a youthful and awkward Rembrandt, using his own face to experiment in portraying various expressions and moods, at a time when he could not afford to pay a model to sit for him. Later, Rembrandt would return again and again to his own visage, as if to document for posterity his development as a human being and an artist.

A self-portrait from 1629 [SEE inside back cover, this issue], when he was about 23 years old, already reveals the genius Rembrandt was becoming. In this youthful work, he has already begun to employ the dramatic use of light and shadow, which gives his expression a sense of ambiguity, the

sense that an idea is forming in the mind that lies behind his eyes.

Constantijn Huyghens, the powerful secretary to the Prince of Orange, himself a poet, musician, and art dealer, “discovered” Rembrandt in Leyden, and became his early patron, securing fat commissions at court for the young artist. In an unpublished autobiography written 1629-31, Huyghens (whose son Christiaan, a scientist and pioneer in optics and the science of light, was a teacher and collaborator of the great Leibniz) wrote about Rembrandt’s 1629 painting “Judas Returning the Thirty Pieces of Silver”:

“All [the expressiveness of Rembrandt’s ‘despairing Judas’] I compare with all the beauty that has been produced throughout the ages. This is what I would have those naive beings know, who claim (and I have rebuked them for it before) that nothing created or expressed in words today has not been expressed or created in the past. I maintain that it did not occur to Protogenes, Apelles, or Parrhasios [ancient Greek painters—BJ], nor could it occur to them, were they to return to earth, that a youth, a Dutchman, a beardless miller, could put so much into one human figure and depict it all.”

Looking at this early self-portrait, it is easy to see why Huyghens was so affected. Here we see the young artist, already displaying those paradoxical qualities of self-confidence and self-



Rembrandt van Rijn, “Self-Portrait,” 1659.

Rembrandt to the greatest of the Classical Greek painters.<sup>1</sup>

A decade later, Rembrandt, at age 33, gave us an etching of himself costumed as a Renaissance courtier, the “Self-Portrait Leaning on a Stone Sill” (1639). He had just moved to Amsterdam and tasted his first real success, having sold several paintings to the Stadholder (Governor) Frederik Hendrik. This self-portrait is an expression of supreme self-confidence, in which the young artist has drawn himself with reference to the most celebrated Renaissance

doubt: it’s there in the eyes—one in shadow, one half in light; the wispy lightness of the feather in his cap, contrasted with the oversized, substantial torso, giving the youthful face weight and solidity; the serious expression, against the fanciful costume. These paradoxical juxtapositions, reinforced by the *chiaroscuro* and blurring of outlines (*sfumato*), create an ambiguous quality of action caught in mid-motion, the hallmark of a Classical composition. No wonder, then, that Huyghens compared

sance painters; for, in the year this work was executed, two famous Italian portraits were on display in Amsterdam: Raphael’s “Baldassare Castiglione” (c. 1514), and Titian’s “Ariosto” (c. 1510). Rembrandt cedes nothing to these two icons of the Renaissance. In fact, he lampoons the corrupt Titian, by borrowing his window-ledge stage, but flipping the image; and, where Titian hides half his subject’s face in a menacing shadow, Rembrandt—like Raphael’s Castiglione—looks directly out at the viewer. Rembrandt was present at the purchase of this Raphael portrait, and made a copy of it, noting the price (an astonishing 3,500 guilders). He may not have been aware that the Portuguese agent who purchased the painting was acting on behalf of Cardinal Richelieu for Louis XIII, King of France.

In 1659, Rembrandt, now aged 53, painted what may well be his greatest self-portrait [SEE inside back cover, this issue]. What is only suggested in the earlier works, is now fully realized. Having mastered all technical issues, he is free to focus his full concentration on revealing the inner qualities of the personality. Compare the three self-portraits. In 1629, the artist is just begin-



Titian, “Ariosto,” c. 1510.



Raphael Sanzio, “Baldassare Castiglione,” c. 1514.



ning to discover himself; his face is divided between light and dark, signifying something unfinished, just emerging. In 1639, he confronts us fearlessly; but he is still impressed with his own success, and costumes himself accordingly. By 1659, however, Rembrandt gazes out at us from eyes which are truly windows to the soul. This is a painting which must be seen “in person” (it was loaned from the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., where it is usually on display), in order to appreciate its astonishing truthfulness. There is no “prettifying” here. Rembrandt piles on the paint, to catch every line, every wrinkle, every physical imperfection that life has stamped on his face. What is left is the mind itself, seen through the eyes. A harsh light illuminates the visage, which is set against a dark background. There is nowhere to hide from the penetrating glance.

Clearly, Rembrandt has given us, through the medium of his self-portraits—if viewed only briefly through these three—the longest-running play in history!

### Between Canvas and Sculpture

No review would be complete without mentioning two of his other portraits,



Rembrandt van Rijn, “Titus at his Desk,” 1655.

those of “Flora” (1654) [SEE inside back cover, this issue] and “Titus” (1655). As with the National Gallery “Self-Portrait,” reproductions can not convey the reality of these paintings. By the mid-1650’s, Rembrandt was a fully mature master. His paintings had become something between canvas and sculpture. It was noted during his lifetime that Rembrandt used an *impasto* so thick, that it took on sculptural qualities; the texture and modeling of the paint became a means of reflecting light and casting shadows, in the same way relief does in sculpture.

The allusion to Classical sculpture is reinforced in the painting of Flora, who, although a Roman goddess, is wearing a white chemise, which, with its simple vertical folds, suggest a Classical Greek statue. Her body faces front, while her head and arms are turned, creating precisely the kind of tension between stillness and mobility that marks great Classical sculpture. A quintessentially Rembrandt touch is found in the goddess’s hands, which are those of a simple working woman. And her poignant expression, conveyed through her eyes and the set of her mouth, reveals that this is not a goddess at all, but a real woman, who has been given a costume to wear for her part in Rembrandt’s drama.

In “Titus,” we see the great artist addressing his posterity. The portrait shows Rembrandt’s son at age 14, on the verge of manhood, and perhaps contemplating his future. We cannot tell



Rembrandt van Rijn, “Flora,” 1654.

whether the sheaf of papers, which extends into our space, is for writing or drawing, but Titus’s pensive expression suggests a depth of character we associate with his father. Up close, we are once again struck by the painting’s tactile qualities. Rembrandt has used a buildup of paint to sculpt the sheaf of paper, so it both catches the strong light, and reflects it back onto Titus’s face. As Titus looks into the future, we can share both his fears, and hopes for what is to come.

—Bonnie James

1. In an unpublished manuscript, “Rembrandt and Comenius Against Rubens: The Light of *Agapē*” (June 2001), Karel Vereycken notes that Constantijn Huyghens (who was also an avid admirer of the Hapsburg-owned Counter-Reformation painter Peter Paul Rubens) became a thorn in Rembrandt’s side: “Rembrandt, at one point, got so irritated with Huyghens’ shortsightedness, that he offered him a large painting, called ‘Samson Blinded by the Philistines,’ painted ‘à la Rubens,’ [i.e., in Rubens’ violent style—BJ], which shows Roman soldiers gouging out Samson’s eyes with a stick. Did Rembrandt suggest,” asks Vereycken, “that his Republic (the strong giant) and its representatives, were blinded by their own philistinism?”