

REMBRANDT VAN RIJN, WHO ARE YOU ?

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There were twenty-five of us youngsters in a class on the history of Western painting illustrated with slides. I was seventeen when I encountered Rembrandt's series of self portraits for the first time. Captured with surgical precision, a prodigious panoply of emotions were paraded before us: curiosity, certainty, pride, irony, concern, melancholy, sorrow, defiance, peace, irony, resignation... and an unfathomable feeling that went beyond resignation. It was the self portraits dating from the ten final years of Rembrandt's life that struck me the most: an unforgiving gaze that captures every line and wrinkle, that does not hesitate to explore what seems like an infinite sadness. A message, a four hundred year old desperation, a cry that no longer even expects a response.

I decided then and there that one day I would write something on the meaning of these self portraits. But I also thought that I would need to live for as long as Rembrandt himself before I could dare attempt it. Today, that moment has finally come.

The Question

Of all the great painters, Rembrandt has unquestionably portrayed himself more often than any other. He may even be the most prolific of all in this respect in the entire history of art. In less than fifty years of artistic production, he produced more than a hundred self-portraits – the equivalent of ten percent of his production¹! By contrast, his famous contemporary Peter Paul Rubens left only four self-portraits.² Even other painters known for their self-portraits, like Degas and Van Gogh, pale in comparison with, respectively, just a fifth or a tenth of what the Dutch master produced.

The question I had asked myself as a young man remains the same: why?

What can explain why an artist like Rembrandt should have made himself sit down in front of a mirror every six months on average and observe himself with an unrelenting intensity long enough for him to patiently portray himself? For an oil painting this process would have taken several days on end... What can explain this investment unparalleled among other painters; this patience and this lifelong persistence?

One cannot hope to find clarification in Rembrandt's own life. Although the information that has come down to us about Rembrandt's life and work is quite detailed compared with other painters of that period, none of his contemporaries speak about the anomaly of the frequency and relative importance of these self-portraits. In fact, only two self-portraits are mentioned in writing throughout the whole of his life, proportionately far fewer than his works in other genres.³ However, Rembrandt did not keep these paintings for himself: the memorable inventory of his personal bankruptcy in 1656 does not mention any at all...

1 Today, according to the strictest criteria of authenticity, there are at least fifty self-portraits of Rembrandt in oils and thirty-six engravings on the same theme. To these can be added the portraits of himself that he incorporated into historical and religious pictures in which, in principle, he had no reason to be included was unable to resist portraying himself as a "visitor" in certain scenes. This does not include the many pictures that have disappeared over the years. For example, as recently as the early 20th century, Cornelis Hofstede de Groot refers to a number of Rembrandt's works, including some self-portraits, no trace of which can be found today. And Jakob Rosenberg estimates that at least a third of Rembrandt's works have disappeared.

In the latest generation of researchers, most research on Rembrandt focused on issues of authenticity. From the point of view of this article, whether the conclusion was that a work was an original Rembrandt or a copy of a self-portrait by one of his pupils is not critical, given that a copy aimed to reproduce the same emotion in Rembrandt as the original.

2 If one leaves aside three other painting by Rubens in which he portrays himself in the company of other members of his family.

3 The first Rembrandt self-portrait mentioned in contemporary records is that given in 1629 by Stadtholder Frederic Hendrick to Lord Ancram, an English lord who in turn presented it to King Charles I of England four years later. The second self-portrait is one mentioned in a public sale in Amsterdam in 1657. For details, see Christopher Wright, *Rembrandt: Self-Portraits* (London: Fraser, 1982) p. 129.

Any question of narcissism can also be dismissed. Rembrandt was not a handsome man. He knew this and he painted himself as he was. A narcissist would not have been able to observe and accept the gradual thickening of his features, the skin collapsing a little more each year, the body gradually deteriorating. One can even trace the progress of the syphilis gnawing away at him and which, from 1655, made his scrofulous nose red and swollen...

So, why did Rembrandt paint himself so many times and in this way?

There are two opposing schools of thought on this matter. I shall call them the “introspectives” and the “anti-Romantics”. The first school is fittingly represented by figures such as Jakob Rosenberg and H.P. Chapman; the second by Ernst van de Wetering, H.J. Raupp and L. De Vries.

We shall begin by looking briefly at the theories put forward by each school and will show – as is so often the case in disagreements between different schools – that each is right in what it claims to be true but wrong in what it denies.

The Introspectives

Rosenberg states:

“If it were possible to bring together all the master’s self portraits in a single exhibition, we would be surprised by the lack of repetition in the arrangements and expressions, and by the continuity of the interest and intensity of the psychological content. The breadth of Rembrandt’s emotional life and the diversity of his moods would become apparent in such an exhibition. The visitor could not help but be impressed by the ceaseless and unsparing observation reflected in these paintings, which show a gradual change from outward description and characterisation to the most penetrating self-analysis and self-contemplation... Rembrandt seems to have felt that he had to know himself if he wished to penetrate the problem of man’s inner life. The phenomenon of the soul fascinated him both in terms of his own personality and that of others.”⁴

Similarly, the text on the cover of a more recent study by Chapman announces:

“Fascinating proof that Rembrandt’s self portraits are a process of constructing an identity: they represent a conscious and increasingly exhaustive pursuit of an individual identity in the truly modern sense of the word.”⁵

⁴ Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: Life and Work* (London: Phaidon Press, 1982) p. 37.

⁵ H.J. Chapman, *Rembrandt’s Self-Portraits: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Identity* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press) 1990 cover text.

In other words, the frequency and number of Rembrandt's self-portraits can be explained by an inner quest, a systematic introspection to which Rembrandt increasingly devoted himself throughout his life.

The Anti-Romantics

The main criticism levelled against the introspectives by the anti-Romantics is that their interpretation is quite simply anachronistic. The concepts of introspection and the search for identity were alien to 17th century thought. They emerged a century later, during the Romantic period. In some ways, one had in fact to wait until the discovery of psychoanalysis and the 20th century for the importance of our inner life to be understood. Therefore, it would not have been possible for a 17th-century observer to have engaged in processes that would not be known until a few centuries later.

For example, van de Wetering states that "Since the end of the 18th century, our perception of the individual is fundamentally different from that which existed in Rembrandt's century ... Over the course of history, there were several transformations in the way individuals were perceived. The best known example is obviously the Renaissance, which is typically described as a period of change in which human beings took centre stage as the measure of all things. A no less important upheaval took place in the Romantic period with the emergence of the "sentimental man"⁶ – a being for whom individuality is shaped by the emotional and personal experience of real life. In analyses of this period one finds the characteristics of a "new" kind of man emerging ... A more refined kind of personal reflection develops, first in literature; then, thanks to the discoveries of psychology, it pervades our lives to the point where we can no longer imagine how our personal experience of life functioned before the Romantic period. It is this unconscious image of the Romantic being that has indelibly permeated the way in which the phenomenon of Rembrandt's self-portraits has been interpreted.⁷

In Raupp's study on the self-portraits, a specific and conscious effort has been made to get rid of this Romantic distortion of how people saw themselves in Rembrandt's age: the perception of personality depended on the teachings of a humanist and Christian ethics, the theory of the temperaments and astrology.⁸ Personality was also seen through a filter of stereotypical models inherited from Antiquity, such as those described by Plutarch and Cornelius Nepos.

6 The German expression is *Gefühlsmensch* for which there is no exact translation.

7 Ernst van de Wetering, "Die mehrfache Funktion von Rembrandts Selbstporträts" in: Christopher White and Quentin Buvelot, *Rembrandts Selbstbildnisse* (Stuttgart: Belser Verlag, 1999) p. 18.

8 H. J. Raupp, *Selbstbildnisse und Künstlerporträts von Lucas van Leyden bis Anton Raphael Mengs* (Braunschweig: Herzog Anton Ulrich's Museum, 1980) p. 7.

From this he concludes that “Rembrandt did not sit down in front of the mirror with questions and doubts, but with a conscious, carefully planned programme.”⁹

Van der Wetering puts forward three “programmes” of this kind that would explain the whole of Rembrandt’s self-portraiture: firstly, the *tronies* market in Holland itself; secondly the market in Europe in general for portraits of *uomini famosi* (famous men); and lastly sample works, pictures whose purpose it was to demonstrate particular techniques. Let’s consider each of these.



Tronies

During the golden age of Dutch painting, the word *tronie* – derived from the old French *troigne* – referred to representations of social stereotypes, for example the typical “soldier”, “peasant” or “beggar”. The person depicted was not important in himself, what mattered was capturing the characteristics of the particular stereotype. There was a well established commercial market for these pictures in Holland during that period. Also, they were important as tools for training pupils in artists’ studios. It was therefore quite possible that an artist would choose himself as the model for a *tronie* without any ulterior motive or any kind of introspection. Some writers, like De Vries, claim that almost all Rembrandt’s self portraits can be explained in this way.¹⁰

It is clear that many of his self portraits – especially the engravings he produced as a young man – would have fulfilled this function perfectly. This would explain why Rembrandt dressed up in oriental style or decked himself out in military armour. But one of the significant and original aspects of Rembrandt’s work is the frequency with which he depicted not only social stereotypes but also produced *tronies* displaying specific emotions such as “dread”, “anger”, “mockery” and “pain”, as illustrated above.

⁹ *Ibidem* p. 8.

¹⁰ L. de Vries, “Tronies and other Single Figured Netherlandish Paintings”, *Leids Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 9, 1989, pp. 185-202.

ii. ‘Self Portrait’, *Wide-Eyed*, 1630. Etching and burin, 51 × 46 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet, inv. no. RP-P-08-697°. iii. ‘Self Portrait’ with *Angry Expression*, 1630. Etching, 75 × 77 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet, inv. no. RP-P-1961-978 (II). iv. ‘Self Portrait’, *Smiling*, 1630. Etching, 50 × 44 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet, inv. no. RP-P-1961-1181(III). v. ‘Self Portrait’, *Open-mouthed*, 1630. Etching, 81 × 72 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet, inv. no. RP-P-1961-979(II).

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Uomini Famosi

A second type of programme targeted Europe's market for collections of paintings of famous men. As this tradition first began in Italy – the prototype being the famous collection of self portraits of *uomini famosi* accumulated by the Medici family in the Uffizi gallery – this particular market is referred to by its Italian name.



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But the royal collections of France and England also bear witness to an interest in this type of painting. It is interesting to note that one of the two self portraits mentioned in writing during Rembrandt's lifetime was in fact the one which ended up in the royal collection of Charles I.

The theory of a snowball effect has even been put forward: the better known a painter, the greater the demand for his self portraits. If one accepts such a correlation between a painter's reputation and the demand for his self portraits, it would explain the volume of self portraits Rembrandt produced. And indeed, even in his youth, Rembrandt's reputation had spread well beyond the borders of his native Holland.

Technique samples

The third possible explanation for the frequency of Rembrandt's self portraits is their use as demonstrations of exceptional techniques. Rembrandt was well known during his lifetime as a technical innovator in both engraving and painting. These innovations were often well received but there were also critics who described them as "bizarre".¹¹ The use of irregular lines in en-

¹¹ For example, the Italian art critic Baldinucci described Rembrandt's engraving technique as "*una bizzarissima maniera*", see F. Baldinucci, *Cominciamento e progresso dell'arte dell'intagliare in rame, colle vite de' piu eccellenti Maestri della stessa Professione* (Florence, 1686).

gravings and “*impasto*” in oil paintings are two typical examples of techniques often used by Rembrandt but which were unusual at the time. The argument for the use of self portraits to demonstrate technique is that with self portraiture there was no client for the artist to satisfy, except himself, and that he could therefore allow himself to experiment more freely. As with the *tronies*, the importance lies not with the person portrayed but, in this case, in technique alone.

To summarise: the group I have called the anti-Romantics, believe that the volume and nature of Rembrandt’s self portraiture can be explained by these three types of “programme” or a combination of them. To look for any other motivation on the painter’s part would therefore be pointless and anachronistic.

Who is right?

At first sight, the two theories presented here appear incompatible. Either Rembrandt portrayed himself with the aim of discovering his inner self and was several centuries ahead of his time, or he was simply following the stereotypical artistic “programmes” of the period and his originality lies only in his technique.

As we have already said, we would in fact suggest that both schools of thought are correct in what they propose but wrong in what they deny. If one looks carefully at the whole of Rembrandt’s self portraiture in the light of other contemporary examples of these three “programmes”, one comes to the conclusion that some of these works – perhaps the majority of those produced before 1642/1650 – can be reasonably explained as belonging to these “programmes”. But in every case – and even as a whole – they can only explain a part of what Rembrandt left behind in terms of self portraiture. Another more subtle reason is therefore needed to explain this phenomenon, particularly in the case of the works produced after 1650.

The limitations of the anti-Romantic argument

It is clear that certain engravings and self portraits in which Rembrandt disguises himself as an oriental or a soldier, or in which he exhibits theatrical emotion, can legitimately be identified as *tronies*. But to conclude that all his self portraits can be explained in this way would be to push the argument way too far. To justify it, De Vries claims that Rembrandt’s contemporaries did not know what the artist looked like and that consequently any self portrait would be seen as a *tronie*. However, documents of the period indicate that by as early as 1639, Rembrandt’s appearance was familiar to a wide audience, especially through his engravings.¹² Moreover, to consider the Vienna self portrait of 1655, the Frick self portrait of 1658 and the 1669 self por-

¹² W.L. Strauss and M. van der Meulen (editors), *The Rembrandt Documents* (New York: Abaris Books, 1979), Document number 1639/11.

trait in the National Gallery in London (see illustrations below) as *tronies* would be to misrepresent the genre entirely.

It is also clear that certain self portraits are of the kind that could form part of a collection of *uomini famosi* and this is shown to be true as several of them have in fact ended up in such collections. The Medici family acquired not one but two Rembrandt self portraits, including the one that is thought to have been purchased by Cosimo de' Medici (1642-1723) after his visit to Rembrandt's house in December 1667. Similarly, the French and English royal collections each contained at least one Rembrandt self portrait.

However, to claim that commercial demand for this genre of painting was the reason for the large number of Rembrandt self portraits does not hold true.

In 1657, the period in which Rembrandt was living in Amsterdam, several of his works appeared in a public sale held in the city¹³ including a self portrait and an "historical" piece. The historical work sold for ten times the price of the self portrait. So one cannot pretend that Rembrandt was unaware that his self portraits were not as "commercial" as his other works. And yet no fewer than fourteen self portraits were painted after this public sale. And this in spite of the fact that this was a period when Rembrandt's financial situation was more pressing than ever... Which suggests that a reason other than commercial demand must have driven him to paint himself so frequently.

Lastly, there are indeed a number of self portraits in which Rembrandt's technical virtuosity was pushed to the limits and which would have been good candidates for technique samples. However, for each self portrait with these qualities, there are another three or four in which the technique was not as elaborate as in other canvases of the same period.

To summarise, for each of the "programmes" suggested by the anti-Romantics, one has to conclude with a "yes, but...". Yes, some of the self portraits can be explained in this way, but certainly not all. So something else must have inspired and warranted the creation of this unprecedented series of paintings and engravings.

A possible explanation

The theory that we would like to put forward is that Rembrandt's self portraits can be explained by his interest in the visual exploration of the emotions, an interest that continued throughout his life. In the beginning it took the form of *tronies* which depicted the more theatrical emotions already mentioned, such as anger, surprise and pain. But gradually he strove to depict more subtle emotions, emotions that were visually less obvious and demonstrative,

¹³ Public sale of 27 June 1657 of the property of Johannes de Renialme, which included under lot 302 a portrait of Rembrandt wearing the costume of an ancient.

such as self confidence, sadness, concern, detachment and resignation. This was a gradual development because, among other things, Rembrandt was persistently subject to these particular emotions in his personal life. Thus, the point of at least some of his self portraits was to “visually take stock” of his emotions from time to time. And the result was that in practice Rembrandt produced what might be called an “emotional journal”, particularly during the second half of his life.

So how do we respond to the criticism of anachronism that such an interpretation would elicit from the anti-Romantics?

Response to the criticism of anachronism

There are two stages in our response to this criticism: firstly, is it conceivable that a 17th-century Dutch painter could produce a “journal” and secondly, and more controversial still, an “emotional journal”?

A “journal”?

The concept of a journal in which one records important events in one’s life or a journey, dates back a very long time. We have examples that go back to the Middle Ages. Some, like the diary of Samuel Pepys in England, have become reference works of their period. Educated people also made use of such journals in Holland’s golden age. The personal records kept by Constantin Huyghens, personal advisor to the Prince of Orange, which contain the first appraisal of the young Rembrandt, are one example that is always cited in any writing about the painter.

Some of these documents were even designed for publication from the outset; this was true of the Essays of Montaigne which cover the period from 1580 to 1588. And Montaigne did not hesitate to use the metaphor of painting to describe his work: “I paint myself... I myself am the subject of this book.”

Rembrandt himself was clearly not of a literary mind. He had decided at the age of sixteen, when he left the university of Leiden, that his means of expression would not be words but images, and he remained faithful to this choice for the rest of his life. The few documents of Rembrandt’s that have come down to us are business letters with nothing original about them and reveal nothing of his feelings. In contrast, he was recognised throughout his life as one of the great masters of the image and in particular of images revealing the life of the emotions.

An “emotional journal”?

Romanticism and psychoanalysis may have invented the verbal manipulation of emotions and man’s identification with this verbal description, but they certainly did not invent the emotions themselves. We now know that it is in the limbic part of the brain that emotions are born; this is

a pre-verbal area that we have in common with all mammals. In other words, emotions are older than the human race itself. What the Romantics and psychoanalysis contributed was therefore simply the ability to recount significant stories that explain, define or rationalize these emotions.

An emotion can be described as inclining one to an action. For example, anger can incline one to punish someone, whereas gratitude predisposes us to respond positively to a future request from the person in question. Emotion precedes thought and action. The nature of the emotions is fundamentally different from that of introspection which, by definition, is a mental process.

The scientific approach advocates giving rationality the controlling power and to distrust and reject as “irrational” any emotion that escapes this control. This could easily lead to hyper-rationality, an idea dating back to Parmenides according to which reason alone is appropriate for the apprehension of reality. However, one rarely escapes from the field of the emotions. Even hyper-rationality itself can be seen as an emotion that seeks to repress all other emotions. This is why the scientific approach suffers from inherent difficulty in grasping the nuances between feelings in the ever-changing sea of emotions in which we are unconsciously and almost continuously swimming.

Romanticism, followed by psychology, has made it possible for us to make progress over the course of the last few centuries in the verbal description of emotions, introspection and the exploration of the unconscious. More recent discoveries still have provided us with important insights into the biological processes that accompany the emotions and communicate them in the human body and between human beings.¹⁴ However, even today, in the 21st century, we have to recognise that we still know remarkably little about the emotions themselves.

Therefore, we can see Rembrandt not as a Romantic before his time, but as a *visual explorer of the emotions*. Indeed, Rembrandt was already recognised by his contemporaries for his ability to visually depict the emotions of the subjects he painted. More importantly still, he was himself particularly proud of his skill in this respect. He felt himself capable – and these are his own words – of depicting “de meeste ende die naetueeelste beweeghgelickheit” (the most powerful and natural emotion).¹⁵

It is interesting to note that musicians tried the same thing, by using sound. For example, Couperin wrote pieces for harpsichord that were not only intended to describe social stereotypes like *The Reapers* or *The Spinner*, but also to portray specific emotions in pieces with titles such as *La Séduisante* (*The Alluring One*), *La Dangereuse* (*The Dangerous One*), *La Badine* (*The Playful One*), etc.

¹⁴ See, for example, on the emotion of love, Thomas Lewis, M.D., Fari Amini, M.D., and Richard Lannon, M.D., *A General Theory of Love* (New York: Random House, 2000).

¹⁵ W.L. Strauss and M. van der Meulen (editors), *The Rembrandt Documents* (New York, 1979) Document number 1639/2

Rembrandt, like Couperin, had chosen a path parallel to the one that would later be followed by the Romantic writers, a path perhaps leading in the same direction but which, because it used different means, could never produce the same result.

The anti-Romantics were right to say that it was not until the late 18th century that the Romantics would find the words and conceive the stories to support and express the emotions. And that it was not until the 19th century, with the advent of Freud and Jung, that the quest would begin for the unconscious sources of these emotions. And, finally, it would not be until the 20th and 21st centuries that the biological mechanisms that come into play would be explored.

But there was nothing to prevent the genius of Rembrandt from observing the effects of these emotions on his face and from painting them as he saw them. There is nothing impossible or anachronistic about such an approach.

Rembrandt as a visual explorer of the emotions

One of the great unifying elements of Rembrandt's entire oeuvre is without doubt his interest in the visual representation of emotion. Even his masterful handling of light and colour can be seen as a tool placed at the service of this objective. But here we shall limit ourselves to addressing the impact this interest had on his self portraits, and in particular on the manner in which he chose to portray himself in this part of his oeuvre.

Firstly, it should be said that a large part of the *tronies* Rembrandt produced during the early period of his life were manifestly visual explorations of emotion. The examples of *tronies* already mentioned display a range of emotions but share the common characteristic of theatricality, as we have already said, including dread, anger and pain. These were useful emotions for, among other things, historical paintings, which were a speciality of Lastman, Rembrandt's first master. In the 17th century, historical pieces were considered to be the "top of the range" genre in art. They also provided useful exercises for the many apprentices who came to learn their trade under Rembrandt.

What gradually changed in Rembrandt's self portraits during the second half of his life was the *type* of emotions he chose to explore visually – confidence, sadness, concern, detachment and resignation – less theatrical perhaps but none the less powerful for that.

To illustrate this theory, let us look at a few examples of this development.

A few pages from Rembrandt's "Emotional Journal"

For each self portrait we will give the year it was produced and will try to determine the dominant emotion portrayed. We shall also provide a few biographical details corresponding to the period in question.

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1634. *Self-esteem*. Rembrandt was confident in himself and his technique. He had been living in Amsterdam for three years and had become the city's most fashionable portrait painter. On average he produced one portrait a month, which is remarkable given that he was also producing works in other genres. More important still, he had recently married Saskia van Uylenbroeck who was from a higher social class than his own, and it was a marriage of love. This was a happy time with a certain carefree air about it.



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1640. *Pride with a touch of defiance*. Rembrandt portrays himself dressed in rich garments in a pose inspired by the great Italian masters. He now enjoyed an international reputation.¹⁶ Saskia was pregnant for the third time. Rembrandt believed he was a financial success. He had recently bought the house in Breestraat – which, much later, would become known as “Rembrandt’s house” – for the considerable sum of 13,000 guilders. He would soon receive a commission for the most important painting of his career, which would become known as *The Night Watch*.

16 For example, an English visitor who describes the highly active artistic environment of Amsterdam in 1640 mentions only one of its artists: Rembrandt. See D.M. Field, *Rembrandt* (Hoo, Kent: Grange Books, 2003) p. 210

vii. *Self Portrait*, 1634. Panel, 58.3 × 47.4 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, inv. no. 810 viii. Anonymous artist after Rembrandt? *Portrait of Rembrandt*, c. 1640. Canvas, 92.3 × 76.4 cm. Woburn Abbey, Bedfordshire, By kind permission of the Marquess of Tavistock and the Trustees of the Bedford Estates



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1655. *Disappointment, Pain, Concern*. Rembrandt is dressed in his usual winter frock coat with a red woollen jerkin which was normally hidden under other clothing. His gaze reveals a new fearfulness, almost a cry for help but which has nothing theatrical about it. Everything seemed to be conspiring against him. In the period up to May 1654 he had not managed to work normally at home for over a year because his neighbour Daniel Pinto was having major building work done on his house and this produced a lot of plaster dust, making it impossible for Rembrandt to dry paintings in his studio.¹⁷ And this could only have aggravated his already serious money problems. In July 1654, Hendrickje Stoffels, Rembrandt's second great love, was condemned by the Reformed Congregation for "prostituting herself with the painter Rembrandt". In 1656, Rembrandt became bankrupt and witnessed the humiliating inventory-taking and sale of all his property.



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1669. *Resignation*. The time of reckoning had come and it was merciless. All those close to him had died, one after another, including his only son Titus. Rembrandt was alone and still without money. He now lived in a rented house in a poor quarter of the city. He was

¹⁷ Steven Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) pp. 3-10.

considered, even in his own city, a has-been. His health was faltering and he would die only a few months later.

Conclusion

Several novels have been written about Rembrandt. They vary in quality and each is written from a different perspective. The best is that written by Sylvie Matton which gives a voice to Hendrickje Stoffels, Rembrandt's maid and mistress after the death of his wife.¹⁸ In another it is his son Titus who speaks.¹⁹ The latter publications, which is now impossible to find, adopts the somewhat unusual perspective of the Jewish influence on Rembrandt's life.²⁰ None, however, gives Rembrandt the opportunity to speak about how he saw himself, that is to say, through his self portraits. These novels always speak the language of the viewer, the language of the present. In this sense, Rembrandt has succeeded where the writers of the Romantic period have failed because their words have aged, having lost their meaning little by little over the generations.

One of the masterpieces of 20th-century French novel writing is without doubt Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*. My hope is that one day a comparable talent will turn their hand to writing Rembrandt's emotional journal. The raw material is there and has been waiting patiently for four centuries to stir the imagination of one of the observers of Rembrandt's work and respond to the question "Rembrandt, who are you?". Yet perhaps it would be better to abandon this idea and accept that the images that Rembrandt has left us are more powerful and more deeply moving than any words – no matter how beautiful – that might be written about them ...

¹⁸ Sylvie Matton, *Moi, la Putain de Rembrandt* (Paris: Plon, 1998)

¹⁹ Bert Natter, *Rembrandt Mijn Vader: Verteld door Titus van Rijn* (Amsterdam: Thomas Rap, 2005)

²⁰ Raoul Mourgues, *Rembrandt Kabbaliste: Le Manuscrit de Rembrandt* (Paris: La Presse Française et Étrangère, 1948).

ii. Rembrandt, *The Nightwatch* (detail), 1650. Panel, 66.8 x 85.5 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum