

## A BRIEF OUTLINE OF REMBRANDT'S LIFE.

**Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn (1606-1669)** has become a part of global education, and has gained a prestige similar to products such as Coca Cola or Shell: almost every human being would know his name. In the Netherlands, we are proud of his reputation. Not so much for the constant beauty in all of his work, but rather for his never-ending stimulation through his oeuvre to keep us focused on discovering the many facets of our own character. Small though as we are as a country, in the person of Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) we even have a number two in the world's top ten list. The content of both masters' artistic output does indeed tell a lot about the character of the Dutch. And to the ingredients of the down-to-earth Dutchman, we can add a colourful lining with the world's largest export trade of tulip bulbs.

In short, it seems that 'Art' is an expression of a society's culture at a given time in history. And it has been said that a 'genius' is formed in the whirling flow of this world. Only, it is much later in history that we realize the vision of these timeless talents. Therefore, I would like to add the fundamental difference between them and us, namely that a genius runs faster, ahead of his time, whereas we can hardly keep up with his development, even to the point when we are no longer able to understand him. It takes generations to realize that, long ago, a painter such as Rembrandt discovered the heart of the matter; that which is essentially human. In his case, it certainly is a profound bonding with the human soul and its sensitivities. Or, in other words: he was able to look deep into any person's soul, and illustrate in visual images what he experienced, without the inhibitions of time. In a way, his oeuvre became 'timeless'.

This to me seems the reason why other great masters such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Albrecht Dürer, Johannes Vermeer, William Turner, Picasso, and Jackson Pollock also demand our full attention. Such a group of exceptional master painters has always been and always will be, the focal point to any new development in society. Rembrandt's friend and intellectual Constantijn Huygens wrote in his diaries: "not even Apelles (one of the very first Greek painters) would have imagined what a young fellow, a Dutchman, the son of a miller, a beardless man, could muster and express". Huygens obviously had a visionary opinion then.

Rembrandt was born the ninth of ten children from the 'practical' marriage between a miller's son and a baker's daughter. Both had married in 1589 at the age of 21. When Rembrandt was born in Leiden in 1606, his parents were 38 years of age, rather old to present standards.

The Northern Dutch Provinces were engaged in the Eighty Years' War (1568-1648) with Spain. Prince William of Orange had been murdered in 1586, and the historical siege of Leiden had taken place in 1574. In addition, one of Holland's most important events would take place in 1602, when the V.O.C. (United East-Indian Company) was founded in Amsterdam, our first 'limited multi-national' company, later to be followed by giants such as Shell, Unilever, and Phillips. The trade of our Golden Age secured our roots, and supported the export from the Netherlands of the vast production of paintings. Rembrandt himself never travelled abroad, although he did passionately collect art and antiques from every culture. He spent liberally, and became known as 'the Grand Seigneur'. Still, you could say that he was the prototype of a purely Dutch product.

Rembrandt attended Prep school, and then called the Latin school, which would enable him to go to Leiden University, but he never did. He preferred pursuing the arts, with a preference for painting and, between the ages

of 13 to 16, did an apprenticeship with two important painters (Jacob van Swanenburgh and Pieter Lastman). Already at the age of 17, he started out on his own in Leiden. He remained there until 1631, and then moved to Amsterdam. Here, one could earn more income with the painting of historical subjects. However, to support his lifestyle, Rembrandt would still have to supplement his income with the production of portraits for the nobility. He entered into a business relationship with the art dealer Hendrick Uylenburgh, and in 1632 he received his first important painting commission, *'The Anatomy Lesson of Professor Tulp'*. In 1634 he married Uylenburgh's cousin Saskia, who came from Friesland.

Together, they had two sons and two daughters. Only Titus, born in 1641, survived. Meanwhile, Rembrandt created the *'Night Watch'*, a painting completed in 1642. In that same year, his wife Saskia died and a nanny, Geertje Dircks, entered his household to help him bring up the infant Titus. Although Geertje claimed that Rembrandt had promised to marry her, they never did and in 1649 she was hospitalised in a psychiatric clinic. At the same time he completes *'The Hundred Guilder Print'*.

Another nanny, Hendrickje Stoffels, took her place. She did not marry Rembrandt either, but yet in 1654, they did have an illegitimate daughter Cornelia.

In the same year and with a substantial mortgage, Rembrandt became the owner of the present 'Rembrandt house' in the St. Antoniebreestraat, but three years later was forced to sell the house and all of its belongings. He moved his family to the Rozengracht in the Jordaan, still a folkloristic part of today's Amsterdam. Around 1660 Hendrickje and Titus acquired the rights to all of Rembrandt's work.

Critics of his time called Rembrandt 'a miser'. This was well illustrated by an anecdote of a practical joke on the part of his students. They painted gold coins on the floor of his studio, which the money-devouring master regularly tried to pick up from the floor!

Hendrickje died in 1663, and his son Titus married in February 1668, only to die six months later, barely 27 years old. His wife was pregnant at the time, and in March 1669 Rembrandt became the godfather to his first and only grandchild, Titia. Unfortunately, he did not enjoy his grandparental role for long, because half a year later Rembrandt himself died and was buried in the Westerkerk, near his house. One month after his death, still in 1669, his daughter-in-law also passed away.

With such a sad family history, it is no miracle that Rembrandt had to deal with much grief and sadness. However, he was able to bend his life's struggle into a positive and artistic stimulation of his oeuvre, thus nurturing his gifted talent. In my opinion, this constant search for creativity must have been his personal therapy.

In the bourgeois society of 17<sup>th</sup> century Holland, the Church and the aristocracy slowly disappeared as the sole commissioners of the arts. And Rembrandt had difficulty in identifying himself with the new upper classes of society. This group was particularly keen on still-lives and landscapes to adorn their homes with. He himself had been mainly trained as a history painter, and felt this to be his main artistic asset. Period portraits were only executed out of necessity, for money. But even when he landed a contract for a historical painting, the demands of these commissions rarely matched Rembrandt's ambitions.

**Hardly any other painter in history has painted so many self-portraits**, in which he painstakingly studied every facial expression over and over again. The self-portraits gave a mirror image of Rembrandt's own spirit and soul.

After his death, Rembrandt drifted into obscurity. The fashion of the day favoured a polished sensual form of art and artistry, in clear and bright colours. The art of Rembrandt was seen as being too coarse, too unfinished, and not sufficiently sublime. It was only during the Rococo period in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the arts were experienced as being bittersweet, that the need for a less contrived and a more earthly approach caused a revival of Rembrandt's work.

And it was not until 1852, that a monument for Rembrandt was finally erected. It can still be seen in the Rembrandt Square in Amsterdam. At the time, there were suggestions that this monument was being erected for the honour and glory of the nation itself rather than for Rembrandt. In any case, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, **Rembrandt has been frequently called 'the Shakespeare of Painting'**.

At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, over 1000 paintings had been authenticated as being genuine Rembrandts. And in 1906, one of the art historians joked: "please do not discover any more Rembrandts, but bring Rembrandt to us, Oh Lord". By 1935, his oeuvre had been gradually reduced to 630 works. And in the 1960's, experts selectively put the total at between 400 and 500 paintings.

Finally, in 1969, the Rembrandt Research Project (RRP) was launched. This group, made up of international art historians and a technical staff, is still actively searching for clues in order to stylistically and technically evaluate all of the Rembrandts and their attributions. In all, they may not even go beyond 300 'authentic' Rembrandt paintings.

Sensational to the general public as part of this grand-scale investigation was undoubtedly the rejection of the famous so-called 'Polish Rider' in the Frick Museum in New York, and the 'Man with the Golden Helmet' in the Berlin Museum. From the start, the RRP was also being seen as controversial. Apart from the loss of valuable capital and prestige, the criticism being directed at this team of experts may have some validity. According to other art historians, their starting points are stylistically too narrow, too qualitative and most of all too scientific.

The differences of opinion and the approach underline the complexity of reaching the essence of what can be considered the 'real' Rembrandt, eventually most probably reduced to ten percent of the cases. And to give you an idea of this complex research project, the handwriting experts of the Forensic Laboratory in the Netherlands some years ago were convinced that sixty percent of the 'genuine' Rembrandt paintings carried a 'false' signature.

Rembrandt had many students (perhaps as many as forty or fifty), who were also participating in the production of a 'real' Rembrandt. Novices were not accepted. Competent pupils needed to have been educated in this profession, and pay a tuition fee to the tune of 'one hundred guilders' per annum.

To ensure everybody's focus, Rembrandt fitted the attic of his studio with partitions. You could hear, but not see one another. On one occasion, this working space concept yielded one of the few examples of his coarse humour. Behind a partition, Rembrandt overheard a student say to his model "...now we are just like Adam and Eve in Paradise, both in the nude...". And Rembrandt shouted: "... and just because you are naked, I will throw you out of Paradise...!", after which he disciplined the naughty rascal and perhaps ordered him to start drawing ginger jars!

A student did not enter his Studio to simply develop his own personality, but to learn and dream Rembrandt's own method. **"Conscientiously apply what you have learned, and during this process, you might discover the secrets and nuances of this fine profession"** is what Rembrandt used to preach.