

A BRIEF HISTORY OF REMBRANDT'S COPPERPLATES

In the spring of 1993, almost eighty of Rembrandt's original copper plates were sold on the London art market. The French print publisher Pierre-Francois Basan had put this collection together in the late 18th century, and it was now being individually sold from the estate of the American collector Robert Lee Humber. Humber himself had acquired the plates in 1938, and had never made much of an effort to publicize this addition to his collection. Only in 1956 were they exhibited at the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh (USA). They had been locked away into the obscurity of a bank vault ever since Humber died in 1970.

As a result of various investigations to find out what had happened to Rembrandt's oeuvre of copperplates, it turned out, for example, that after Rembrandt's death at least 150 of his plates were in circulation, from which prints were still being made.

In the 17th century, there was a flourishing market in used copperplates. They passed from one publisher to another and were reprinted until demand for the subject matter was exhausted. Rembrandt generally used new, so-called 'cold-hammered' copperplates for his etchings. The fact that these plates were harder than the rolled plates of today, made it possible to obtain some 40-50 good impressions from each plate. Their thickness was usually 1 millimetre. The dry point gave a stronger and more durable burr. Rembrandt often made radical changes in a plate, and deleted passages by burnishing these scenes, some of which are still faintly visible. Sometimes, he cut off pieces to re-use them for another creation.

Rembrandt occasionally sold plates to his patrons, such as the one of 'Abraham casts out Hagar and Ishmael' (B.30), and the portrait of Jan Six (1618-1700; B.285). At the time of his bankruptcy, there is no mention of any Rembrandt etching plates. One of the reasons could be that they were exempted or 'technically' owned by his printers, which at least gave him the opportunity to keep using the tools of his trade and means of support, and still earn from their turnover and commission 'indirectly'. The best-known seventeenth century print dealer Clement de Jonghe (1624-1677) seemed to have owned many of the Rembrandt plates. In any event, a good number of his plates were in different hands after Rembrandt had died. It was customary for print dealers to add their address to them, especially after the artist's death. Posthumously, Claes Claesz. Visscher published his Rembrandt plates in the form of a booklet.

Even during the 17th and 18th centuries, connoisseurs knew the true value of fine impressions or rare and early states, meanwhile warning about copies and reworked plates. Also, collectors considered impressions on oriental paper highly desirable.

During the second half of the 18th century, the demand for Rembrandt prints was high. This resulted in many copies and imitations in the Rembrandt taste. In 1751, the growing demand led to the publication of the very first 'oeuvre catalogue' of Rembrandt etchings by the Parisian art dealer E.F.Gersaint (ca.1696-1750). One of the most praised characteristics of Rembrandt's etchings was the subtle way in which he managed to achieve such a high tonality. Later reprints hardly ever show such surface tone, for the simple reason that they had been reworked merely to repair the wear and tear of printing. The fact that Rembrandt had left various plates only half-finished was

seen as a mystery. Some of these plates were finished during the 18th century by other engravers, using f.i. the mezzotint technique, as with the Amsterdam publisher Pierre Fouquet Jr. (1729-1800).

In 1775, Captain William Baillie restored the 'Hundred Guilder' plate with care and perception. He had acquired this plate from the Bostonian mezzotint engraver John Greenwood (1727-92), who had bought it in Holland shortly before. After printing some 100 impressions, Baillie cut up the plate in order to guarantee the exclusiveness of the original and complete print.

The whereabouts of the remaining Rembrandt plates during the 18th century remains a mystery. However, in the 1769 auction of Pieter de Haen's (1723-1766) estate, some 75 original Rembrandt plates turned up. In the 17th century, many of them had belonged to the print dealer Clement de Jonghe.

The Amsterdam art dealer Pierre Fouquet Jr. bought them. Shortly afterwards, they came into the possession of the Parisian writer, art critic and engraver Claude Watelet (1718-1786). He very much admired the chiaroscuro effects in Rembrandt's graphic oeuvre, and amassed a total of 83 Rembrandt plates.

In 1786, they were in turn bought by Pierre-François Basan (1723-1797), who had already gained an international reputation. His stock consisted of almost 5000 copperplates by old and modern masters. In 1789, he published a special 'receuil' devoted to Rembrandt, with an index list according to Gersaint's catalogue raisonné (Paris, 1744). A publication of this kind supports the more scientific approach to gaining historical knowledge not only of the actual work, but also of the artist himself and the period or school in which he was active. This meant that Basan's impressions have a different value, and merely became reproductions of the originals – original illustrations of the etchings of Rembrandt.

Later, in 1807 and 1809, his son Henry-Louis published this receuil again, but on rather inferior paper and of lower quality. In about 1810, the Parisian publisher Auguste Jean (who died in 1820) reworked the Basan plates, and in addition published a 'receuil', just as his widow did after 1820. Only after 1846, when the publisher and engraver Auguste Bernard acquired the plates from the estate of Jean's widow, were the impressions no longer sold in the familiar album format. Practically speaking, it was by now extremely difficult to obtain good impressions from the sometimes reworked plates.

In 1906, Rembrandt's commemorative year, *L'Artiste* (a French journal) attempted to plan a series of reprints from the by then faded and inferior plates. Luckily, this idea was abandoned. It would not have been good publicity for the late master Rembrandt himself.

Bernard eventually sold the almost 85 plates to Alvin-Beaumont. Apart from a small number of expensively printed portfolios of 'restrikes', and some individual impressions from the plates taken by the Canadian etcher Donald Shaw MacLaughlin (1876-1938), all of these existing plates were finally inked and varnished in 1916. They were placed in costly green leather mounts with their titles gilded, and in French, and set in ten large black frames.

Shortly before, a thorough investigation by the engraver A.C. Coppier (1867-1938) into their authenticity had revealed that many of the plates had actually survived almost untouched, different from the historic reputation by which we were led to believe that the plates had been heavily reworked during the centuries.

In 1921, the plates came to Amsterdam for an exhibition in the Palace of Industry. Afterwards, Alvin-Beaumont deposited them in the Rijksmuseum for seven years, but they were never purchased by the museum. In 1930, the plates were for sale and shown in New York. In 1937, the British Museum tried to negotiate a purchase, but at 600.000 French francs the asking price was too high.

It was not until 1938 that the collection of plates was sold for half that price to the American Robert Lee Humber, who placed them on loan in The North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh.

After Humber's death in 1970, the plates were kept in a bank vault until released for individual sale in 1993 through the London dealers Artemis. Since then, it has become clear that the plates were in good condition, and Rembrandt's original lines were well preserved.

Until well into the nineteenth century, the plates were regarded as a commodity by the various printers and publishers to meet the demand for Rembrandt's graphic work.

Today, the plates are generally valued as works of art in their own right.

*“What you do
when you don't have to,
determines what you will be
when you can't help it...!”*



Hello future... here we come...!

“A room filled with art, is a room of thoughts and emotions.”