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The Dutch Golden Age

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What's So Great About Rembrandt?



Judas Returning the Thirty Pieces of Silver

You've probably heard the name Rembrandt before. You probably know that Rembrandt is considered one of the greatest painters, ever. You even may have seen a painting by Rembrandt in a museum. But have you ever wondered, What's so great about Rembrandt? At first glance, many of his works seem shadowy and dark, and his subjects, unattractive. However, take a closer look. You will notice that while his subjects are often shrouded in darkness, their features are usually bathed in brilliant light – as if he dipped

his brush in sunlight instead of paint. And if you look even closer, you'll realize that Rembrandt's goal wasn't to capture beauty, but to penetrate the soul of his subjects and portray their innermost emotions with such clarity and intensity that we viewers are drawn into the world of the painting. This is why Rembrandt is deemed great: not only could he perfectly render a physical object, he could also effortlessly depict something as intangible as human nature.

Early Life of the Artist

Rembrandt van Rijn was wasn't born into an artistic family. His father was a miller and his mother, the daughter of a baker. They lived in Leiden, the Netherlands, where Rembrandt was born on July 15, 1606. As a child Rembrandt went to a prestigious local school, and at age 14, he attended Leiden University. But Rembrandt knew that his true love was painting. He left university after a few months and became the apprentice of Jacob van Swanenburgh, a local artist, who taught him the fundamentals of painting.

Rembrandt learned everything he could from van Swanenburgh in three years. Hungry for more knowledge, he moved to Amsterdam to apprentice with Pieter Lastman, a celebrated artist known for painting biblical and historical scenes. Lastman taught Rembrandt how to use light and shading for dramatic effect, a technique called *chiaroscuro* that Rembrandt would master so thoroughly, it became a defining characteristic of his work. Six months later, Rembrandt returned to Leiden.

Rembrandt, the Novice

Upon his return in 1625, Rembrandt set up a studio with another young artist, Jan Lievens. For years, the pair worked for hours every day, painting Biblical



Rembrandt Self-Portrait, 1630

Discussion or Essay Questions

Rembrandt's work had several defining characteristics, including the use of *chiaroscuro* and realistic portrayals of events and people. Go to <http://www.rembrandtpainting.net> and look up some of the Rembrandt paintings and etchings mentioned in this article. In your opinion, which work has the best use of *chiaroscuro* (light and dark shading)? Which seems the most realistic? Write a short essay about which Rembrandt painting, etching, or drawing you liked best and explain why. If you didn't like any of them, write an essay explaining why.

Try to paint or draw a portrait of yourself. If you could paint or draw a perfect self-portrait, what qualities about yourself or emotions would you want the painting or drawing to capture?

Though Rembrandt is arguably the most famous Dutch painter from the seventeenth century, there were many other talented artists from the period, including Johannes Vermeer, Gerrit Dou, and Pieter de Hooch. Either go to the library or search online for images of works by these other artists. Pretend that you are a seventeenth century Amsterdamer looking for a painter to make artwork for your home. Which artist would you choose to work for you and why?





The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp

scenes and portraits, making etchings, and copying the works of other well-known artists of the time, especially Peter Paul Rubens, a famous Flemish painter. During this period Rembrandt also began make self-portraits. In these works, we see Rembrandt in various moods – from angry to surprised to celebratory to pensive. Over his lifetime, Rembrandt made more than ninety self-portraits.

Rembrandt probably made these self-portraits for several reasons. First, as a struggling artist, they allowed him to practice his technique without paying for a professional model. Second, they allowed him to experiment painting different facial expressions and moods, something he couldn't have readily done with a paying client. Third, the self-portraits were a way of capturing his state of mind at a particular point in

time. Just as we might write down our thoughts about ourselves in a diary; Rembrandt put his thoughts about himself on canvas.

A Rising Star

Rembrandt and Lievens worked so hard that they became well known in Leiden and abroad. News of their talent reached the ears of Constantine Huygens, the secretary assistant of Prince Frederick Hendrick of Orange. The prince of Orange was an avid collector of art and wished to add to his collection.

Huygens thought Rembrandt and Lievens perfect for the job. He noted that they “were already on a par with the most famous painters and would soon surpass them.”

Huygens could also see that Rembrandt was already different than most painters in that he “excelled in liveliness of emotional expression.” As proof of his assessment, he referred to Rembrandt’s painting *Judas Returning the Thirty Pieces of Silver*. In this painting, Judas, the apostle said to have betrayed Jesus Christ for thirty pieces of silver, is returning the coins and begging for forgiveness. Huygens said he was “struck dumb” by the expression of piercing anguish and regret on Judas’s face.



Jan Six

Rembrandt began working for the prince on a regular basis. This was fortunate, for although Rembrandt sold many works to collectors in Leiden, they didn’t pay well. Normally, Rembrandt could expect only 10 guilders per painting, but the prince paid as much as 600 guilders.

Rembrandt eventually realized that the prince couldn’t be his sole well-paying client. If ever the prince became dissatisfied with his work, Rembrandt would suffer financially. He decided, therefore, to move to Amsterdam, where there were plenty of wealthy art-lovers. This turned out to be a wise move: a few years later, Rembrandt had a disagreement with Huygens and never worked for the prince again.

Want to Read More?

Ages 9–12

Rembrandt by Mike Venezia

Ages 12+

Rembrandt’s Eyes by Simon Schama

The Rembrandt Book by Gary Schwartz



Online Fun

Rembrandt Van Rijn: Life and Works

<http://www.rembrandtpainting.net/>

Tour the Rembrandt House

(click on Museum at top, then virtual tour)

www.rembrandthuis.nl/cms_pages/index_main.html



What to Watch

Rembrandt 400 Years – Foreign Media Group



The Toast of Amsterdam

When Rembrandt first came to Amsterdam in 1630, he could do no wrong. The city was brimming with families, newly rich from Dutch trade, who liked to show off their wealth and status by owning plenty of art. Individuals and groups clamored to have their portraits made and Rembrandt was happy to oblige. He became associated with an art dealer, Hendrick Uylenburgh, who provided him with many well-paying clients. But his career truly took off after he completed a group portrait titled *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp* in 1632.

In this painting, Rembrandt portrayed Dr. Tulp, a well-respected anatomist, lecturing to a group of men who are listening attentively as he dissects the arm of a cadaver. The painting broke many traditional rules of group portraiture. Usually, the painter arranged all the subjects in a row and painted them in stiff, formal poses. In contrast, Rembrandt arranged the men in pyramidal form and gave them realistic attitudes and expressions – some leaning intently forward, others looking off to the side or staring straight ahead. This dynamic new portrait style created a sensation, and Rembrandt became more sought after than ever.

To meet the increased demand for his work, Rembrandt began to create more etchings. Unlike paintings, which can only be sold once, an etching (which is a type of print) can be printed and sold multiple times. One of his most famous etchings from this period was *Descent of Christ from the Cross* (1633), which was praised for its palpable emotion and drama.

At this time, Rembrandt was on top of the world. In 1634, he married Saskia van Uylenburgh, and they bought a large house in a swanky part of Amsterdam, filling it with beautiful paintings, sculptures, and drawings. Life was good. Unfortunately, it didn't last.

A Change in Fortune

Toward the end of the 1630s, trouble began to touch Rembrandt's life. He and Saskia had three children, but each one died in early infancy. In 1641, Saskia finally gave birth to a healthy boy, Titus, but she herself died less than a year later. To make matters worse, Rembrandt's art became less popular. Tastes in

Amsterdam were changing; clients preferred a more flamboyant, prettified manner of painting. Rembrandt refused to change his penetrating, introspective style and lost business. Eventually, he was forced to declare bankruptcy, sell his house and possessions, and move to a poorer section of town.

Despite these difficulties, Rembrandt kept working. In 1642, he completed *The Night Watch*, a large, dramatic group portrait of a military company moving out. Other celebrated works during this time include *Jan Six* (1647), a unique etching of an Amsterdam patrician, and *Conspiracy of the Batavians* (1661–62), which he made for the Amsterdam town hall. During this period, he fell in love with his housekeeper, Hendrickje Stoffels, and made many beautiful paintings of her, most notably *Hendrickje Bathing* (1655).

Toward the end of his life, Rembrandt suffered more sadness as both his son Titus and Hendrickje died. After their deaths, his finances fell in further disarray. By the time he died, he owned little more than some clothing and his painting equipment. The self-portraits he painted during these final, difficult years are thought to be some of his finest pieces. Honest to the last; Rembrandt looks out at us with calm, guileless eyes, making no attempt to mask his old age or his descent in status. He died in 1669 and was buried in an unmarked grave, a sad end for an artist who brought so much joy to those who loved his work.

Then again, it wasn't really an end. More three hundred years later, Rembrandt's work still brings joy to people the world over. As long as this continues, Rembrandt will never truly be gone.



About the author
Barbara Diggs is a freelance writer living in France. She graduated from Stanford Law School and practiced law in New York and Paris for several years before changing careers.