

Introduction



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We are deeply grateful to Nancy and Nelson Schaenen, Jr., the collectors of these six etchings by Rembrandt (1606–1669). They have been brought together over many years, and they are truly remarkable in several respects.

First, most of the six are superb, lifetime impressions. Rembrandt made close to three hundred etchings; he seems to have printed fifty or so examples, or impressions, from each plate during his lifetime. However, the copper plates that he used survived and found their way into the market after his death; indeed, over seventy of them are still preserved in various public and private collections. Editions – series of impressions – were taken from many of those plates in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

These later, posthumous impressions tend not to be as interesting or, simply put, as beautiful as those Rembrandt himself printed. The plates often are exhausted from too much wear, lines break down, details and even whole figures sometimes disappear. Also, Rembrandt would leave films of ink, as a kind of plate tone, here and there on his own impressions, and he would experiment with different kinds of paper, or add touches of drypoint burr, creating a velvety line which quickly wears down.

Thus, it is certainly preferable to have lifetime impressions of Rembrandt's prints; they are fresher, more complete, and they show the artist's intentions more clearly. Most of the prints exhibited here are beautiful

lifetime impressions, with their drypoint intact and subtle touches of plate tone, as well as being in excellent condition.

A second aspect of this group that is striking is its variety of subject matter. They range from a dramatic religious scene, the Death of the Virgin, to a quiet peasant family at the door of a well-appointed house, an intimate landscape, set in a village, two very different portraits, and a self-portrait. Although Rembrandt's choice of subject matter is truly Shakespearean in its variety, these six works give a sense of his endless curiosity and energy, his fascination with everything and everyone around him.

A third aspect of this remarkable collection, related to the second, is the time period the prints cover, from 1639 to 1650. During these dozen years, Rembrandt's work – in fact, his whole artistic personality – went through a profound change. This can be seen, for example, by comparing the Death of the Virgin, from 1639 (catalogue number 1), with the peasant family, with a blind musician playing the rommelpot, from 1648 (cat. no. 5). The earlier work is dramatic, even melodramatic, with its swirling clouds and cornucopia of angels and bystanders, and the dying Mary at the center. Even the bed is High Baroque in size and style.

The peasant family, nine years later, is quiet and inward; this is an intimate scene of generosity, as the older man reaches out with his coin from the safety of

his home, with its thick walls and barred window (and even a little "moat" in front). Especially eloquent is the boy we see only from the back; every detail of his clothing is noted, even his leggings, one of which has fallen down. We can see why 1648 is sometimes called Rembrandt's "holy year," the year when his work reaches a special quietness, sensitivity, and, on occasion, sense of loss.

The transition over the same span of years is equally apparent if we compare the 1639 "Goldweigher" (cat. no. 2) and another portrait, of the physician Ephraim Bonus, 1647 (cat. no. 3). The Goldweigher, or, properly, Jan Uytenbogaert, the Receiver-general of taxes for the province of Holland, is a formal, full-dress portrait; the somewhat daunting subject is in control of his world, a responsible official to whom others automatically defer. Every detail of his affluent office is clearly documented, from the scales to the strongbox.

How different Bonus is from Uytenbogaert! He is alert, and his large eyes engage us immediately. However, his body is quiet and contained – his shoulders almost look too small for the rest of his head and torso – and he stands modestly, even shyly, behind a railing, his only gesture one hand resting on it, as an extraordinary sea of shadows flows back and forth across the wall and alcove behind him.

The same spirit can be seen in Rembrandt's Village Street of 1650 (cat. no. 6), again an intimate scene – a simple village street, not a city thoroughfare, with a few thatched cottages and a clutch of children and adults in the middle ground. Equally intimate, and moving, is his self-portrait of 1648 (cat. no. 4), almost his last etched

self-portrait. It shows the artist in a simple setting, dressed in everyday clothes, next to an open window; he is as focused as ever, but he is also quiet and restrained, and far from the flamboyant drama of his youth.

Taken together, these six etchings give us a sense not just of the artist's curiosity, energy, and capacity for growth, but also of the complexity and depth of emotion that he was able to express throughout his career.

It is a privilege for the Johnson Museum to show these works, and we thank the collectors for their generous loan.

FRANK ROBINSON

The Richard J. Schwartz Director