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JAN BLANC

Why Rembrandt?

> For in the end, fame is no more than the sum of all the misunderstandings that gather around a new name.
>
> – Rainer Maria Rilke, *Auguste Rodin*, 1903[1]

There is something unfair about Rembrandt's fame. As he built his career, he was surrounded by brilliant colleagues, rivals and students – so why was his the only name to reverberate throughout Europe? And how did his name manage to survive the vicissitudes of time to become that of one of the world's most renowned artists?[2] To answer these questions it is not enough to simply cite the artist's "genius" or to evoke, like Rilke, the mysteries of a celebrity or a legacy that are ultimately inexplicable. Rembrandt's achievements, as demonstrated here, owe nothing to chance. The success of an oeuvre, both during its creator's lifetime and posthumously, is always a collective construction, and, as I hope to show, the reputation the master enjoyed from the very start of his career was to a large degree the result of strategies that he himself skilfully deployed to promote his name and works.

The Construction of an Image

Around February or March 1631, Constantijn Huygens noted in his journal his meeting with two young painters who were then sharing a studio in Leiden: Jan Lievens and Rembrandt van Rijn. Huygens compared the artists' abilities, judging Rembrandt's freedom of touch and talent for portraying emotions to be quite astounding,while declaring the originality of Lievens' subjects and ideas to be superior. The two artists seemed to be working at the same level. Yet, it was Rembrandt, older by a year, who captured the attention of the poet and diplomat, and he did not hesitate to compare the young Dutchman to the greatest painters of antiquity: "I maintain that it did not occur to Protogenes, Apelles or Parrhasius, nor could it occur to them, were they to return to earth, that a youth, a Dutchman, a beardless miller, could put so much into one human figure and depict it all."[3] Half a century later, Joachim von Sandrart, who had almost certainly met Rembrandt and Lievens in person, expressed similar astonishment that a miller's son, a child of the Leiden countryside, could have succeeded in reaching the summit of European art.[4]

These accolades are not entirely to be trusted, for Huygens and Sandrart seem to have been unaware that Rembrandt's social and family background was actually quite prosperous, and that before embarking on his apprenticeship he had attended the Latin school in Leiden, and later Leiden University. The young painter appears to have mischievously suppressed these details, probably to give a pattern to his life that echoed that of the most celebrated Renaissance artists, often described in the legendary chronicles of Giorgio Vasari and Karel van Mander as coming from modest rural backgrounds, their natural talents emerging

spontaneously, first in the solitude of early youth and later in their master's studio.[5]

The accounts that succeeded one another throughout the seventeenth century seemed to confirm the scenario concocted by Rembrandt himself. But the art theorist Filippo Baldinucci, who knew the painter only through his works, would be the first to speak of "Rembrandt's extravagance of manner," which, the writer explained, "was entirely commensurate with his mode of living, since he was a most temperamental man and despised everyone."[6] Later, the painter Jean-Baptiste Descamps would maintain that Rembrandt "associated only with the lower orders and people far beneath him."[7] How could these authors have imagined that Rembrandt, who at the height of his career was the most sought-after portraitist in Amsterdam, lived among beggars and paupers? It was possibly because the artist was fond of portraying such figures as extras in his paintings and of making them the subject of prints, even occasionally assuming their identity (see pl. xx). He may have done this to set himself apart from rivals who were pursuing fame and riches, but also, with more than a touch of irony, to attract the attention of potential patrons.[8]

Rembrandt was a free man and eager to broadcast the fact, both through his works and his declarations. Although the painter Arnold Houbraken and the playwright Andries Pels deplored the liberties Rembrandt took, seeing them as a form of libertinism, they were the first to recognize the master's unique place in the history of Dutch art, which he dominated by defending and illustrating his own freedom. "When I wish to rest my mind," Houbraken reported the artist as saying, "it is not honour that I seek, but freedom."[9] It was this freedom that distinguished Rembrandt from his peers, including Lievens, and from former pupils who sought initially to emulate him, such as Govert Flinck. But it was this same freedom that, as Sandrart noted with grudging admiration, enabled him to boldly flout the conventions of his art: "Accordingly, he would remain faithful to his habit of never hesitating to contravene the rules of art."[10]

fig.xx **Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Raising of Lazarus*, 1630–34, etching on laid paper; 36.5 × 25.6 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (RP-P-OB-596)**

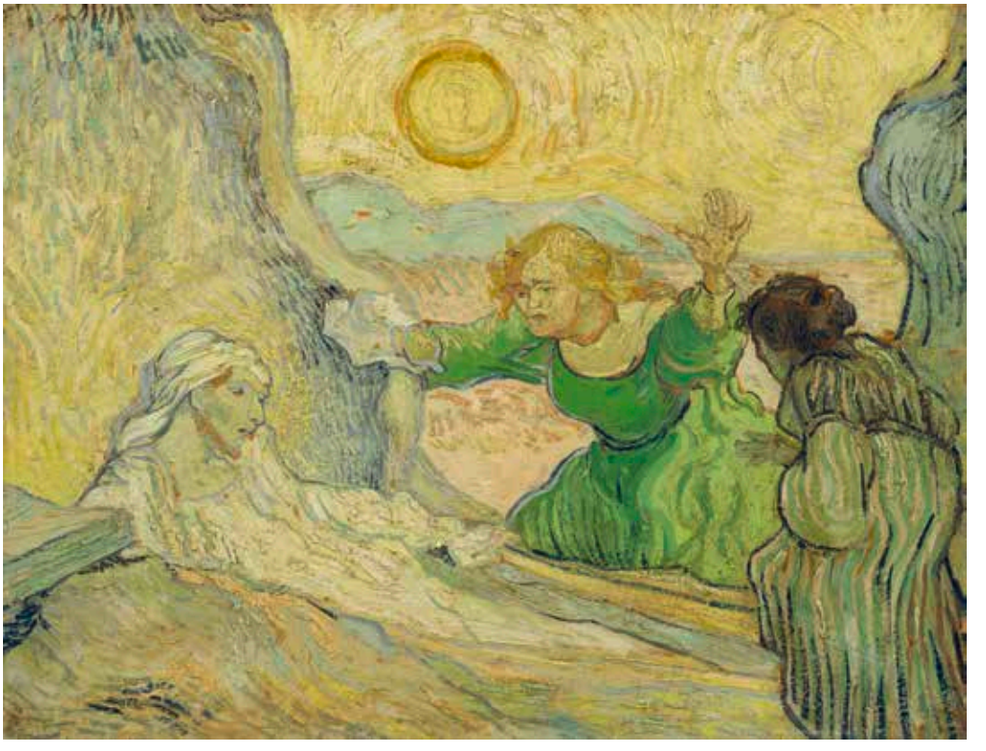

fig.xx **Vincent van Gogh (after Rembrandt van Rijn), *The Raising of Lazarus*, 1890, oil on paper; 50 × 65.5 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. Vincent van Gogh Foundation (S0169V1962)**

Artistic and Political Heroization

Early in the eighteenth century, a new myth was added to the image constructed by Rembrandt himself – that of the stubborn and visionary genius.[11] In the view of the French art theorist Roger de Piles, "every line etched by the needle, like every brushstroke of his painting, lends the parts of the face a quality of life and truth that prompts admiration of his *genius*."[12] Rembrandt's achievements began to be compared to those of Shakespeare.[13] If Rembrandt committed an error, explained the critic Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Chaussard, "he made it sublime," for he was a member of that elite of geniuses who knew how to "sin against art with art."[14] During the Romantic period, the myth escalated. In a play devoted to the Dutch artist published in 1800, he is portrayed – inaccurately, but in line with the growing mythologization of the modern genius, who must be damned before achieving recognition – as an artist who "during his life suffered every misfortune … constantly exposed to the injustices of his contemporaries."[15] Along with Raphael and Rubens, Rembrandt was now one of the "true saints" (*wahre Heilige*) worshipped by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.[16] He was a "Dutch sorcerer," a "painter of miracles," a "wizard" (*Zauberer*),[17] but also "the least classical and most romantic of all painters."[18]

During the 1830s, attitudes toward Rembrandt began to shift, and he became an icon of realism and anti-academicism. Théophile Thoré-Bürger contrasted him with Raphael, as he contrasted Eugène Delacroix with Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres.[19] A painter "of man for man," Rembrandt offered young realist artists some hope of posterity:

> For the past two centuries those who value nothing but the grand Italian style have always dealt harshly with Rembrandt, which has not prevented him from making his way into the museums and leading galleries of Europe. This should console the *realists* somewhat for current injustices, and give them a little hope for the future.[20]

Almost a year before he came up with a highly personal new interpretation of Rembrandt's *Raising of Lazarus* (figs. xx, xx), Vincent van Gogh also expressed a sense of a shared destiny with his Dutch compatriot, "alone or almost alone … among painters" to have captured "that heartbroken tenderness, that glimpse of a superhuman infinite which appears so natural."[21] The Old Master had become a new "painter of modern life."[22] When in the early 1950s the novelist Jean Genet saw the "two portraits of Madame Trip" (fig. xx) at London's National Gallery – "these two old women's heads that are decomposing, that are putrefying before our very eyes, that are painted with enormous love" – he in turn recognized Rembrandt as a kindred spirit for whom "decay is no longer considered outlandish but as worthy of love as anything else."[23] A few years later, in *Figure with Meat* (fig. xx),[24] Francis Bacon would express his admiration for the decomposing flesh of *The Slaughtered Ox* (fig. xx) and how the master's self-portraits captured the passage of time: "The way in which it's always Rembrandt that you see, in an image which changes each time, it's really astonishing, magnificent."[25]

fig.xx **Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of Margaretha de Geer, Wife of Jacob Trip*, 1661, oil on canvas; 75.3 × 63.8 cm. The National Gallery, London. Presented by the Art Fund, 1941 (NG5282)**

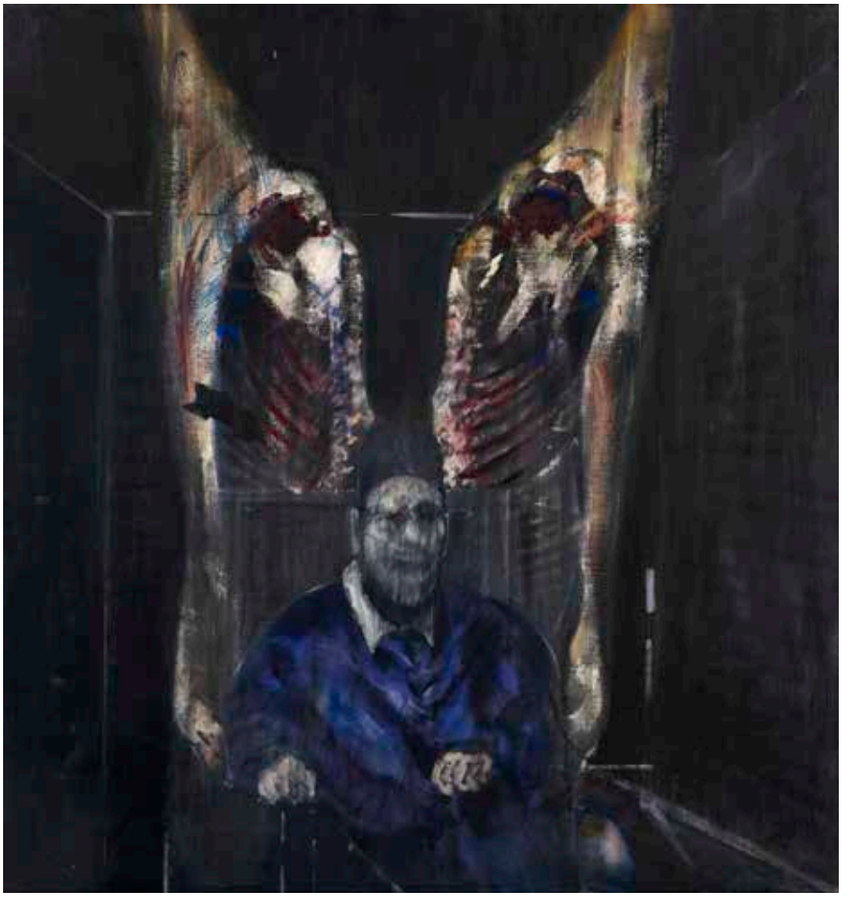

fig.xx **Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Slaughtered Ox*, 1655, oil on panel; 94 × 69 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (M.I.169)**

fig.xx **Francis Bacon, *Figure with Meat*, 1954, oil on canvas; 129.2 × 121.9 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago. Harriet A. Fox Fund (1956.1201)**

The heroization of Rembrandt was political as well as artistic. After the creation of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands (1815) and the secession of its southern provinces following the Belgian Revolution (1830), Rembrandt became a veritable national hero whose love of freedom was identified with that of his "people," at last emancipated from the successive jurisdictions of revolutionary and imperial France. Twelve years after the statue of Peter Paul Rubens by Guillaume Geefs was erected on Antwerp's Groenplaats in August 1840, the Dutch performed a similar act of artistic patriotism with the unveiling on 27 May 1852 of the portrait of Rembrandt by Louis Royer (fig. xx), originally installed on the Kaasplein in Amsterdam. This early political appropriation of Rembrandt would lead to two other forms of distortion. The first was nationalist. According to the German art historian Carl Neumann, Rembrandt's life and work were symptoms of the "hypertrophic savagery," "burlesque humour," "devilish imagination" and "anti-academic barbarism" that characterize "all the medieval Northernness" that had "re-emerged for the umpteenth time" in his work.[26] Wilhelm von Bode, a leading expert on the artist, also maintained that Rembrandt was "the product of a purely Germanic background," a thesis that reappears in the writings of the racist and anti-Semitic ideologue Julius Langbehn.[27] The second distortion, older and more lasting, makes Rembrandt into a hero of Republicanism. He is portrayed as "the highest expression" of "Batavian genius," who developed independently "under the protection of a people's government" and the "republican model."[28] Rembrandt is seen as a true revolutionary, born of the "people," "among victors and free men," the "Luther of painting" who belonged "to the Third Estate, and barely to that, as they would have said in France in 1789."[29]

fig.xx **Louis Royer, *Rembrandt van Rijn*, 1852, cast iron; 816 cm (height). Rembrandtsplein, Amsterdam**

A Cultural Symbol

By the end of the nineteenth century, Rembrandt's art was being discussed not just for what it was but also for what it represented or embodied: it became a "cultural symbol."[30] When the first "catalogue raisonné" was published in 1751, based on notes that the *marchand-mercier* Edmé-François Gersaint had put together on the subject of Rembrandt's etchings, the idea was to appeal to "lovers of the fine arts." The aim, according to the publishers, was "helping them research the pieces of interest to them" – in other words, facilitating the assessments of dealers and collectors by enabling them to estimate the fair value of the master's prints.[31] Thus did Rembrandt become part of the history of connoisseurship and art dealing.[32] His illustrious name would henceforth frequently be the focus of controversies concerning attributions, disattributions and appraisals of his works. Newssheets were constantly reporting the appearance on the market of some "new Rembrandt" or other. When the Flemish painter Pierre Joseph Lafontaine purchased *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* (fig. xx) in 1803, and subsequently exhibited it in Paris, there was much excited comment in the French press, not about the work itself but about the identity of its author: was the painting by Rembrandt or Rubens?[33] The same showcasing of the activities of art experts and historians dominated early catalogues devoted to Rembrandt's painted oeuvre. Those written by the first great Rembrandt specialists – Carel Vosmaer, Wilhelm von Bode, Wilhelm Valentiner, Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, Abraham Bredius and Horst Gerson – played a crucial role in how the artist's work and that of his emulators was received. But what lingers in the collective memory above all are the quarrels between different schools of thought and the methodological conflicts that accompanied them. This includes arguments provoked by a radical reduction in the mid-twentieth century of the corpus of autograph Rembrandt paintings and by early findings

of the Rembrandt Research Project, between 1968 and 1989, which resulted in the sometimes controversial disattribution of a number of works previously considered iconic.[34]

These disputes have had two outcomes. For some, the successive mistakes and oversights of connoisseurs, likely to confuse Rembrandt's work with that of his pupils, have had the effect of desacralizing the Dutch painter by demonstrating that the artists he trained, or who drew inspiration from his works, were capable of rivalling him and thereby of confounding even the greatest experts.[35] This desanctification is evident in different forms of commercial exploitation of the artist's name or image, ranging from simple postcard reproductions of his works to Rembrandt® toothpaste – an example of what is known today as "artketing."[36] But it is also manifested more subtly, as with the recent project called *The Next Rembrandt*

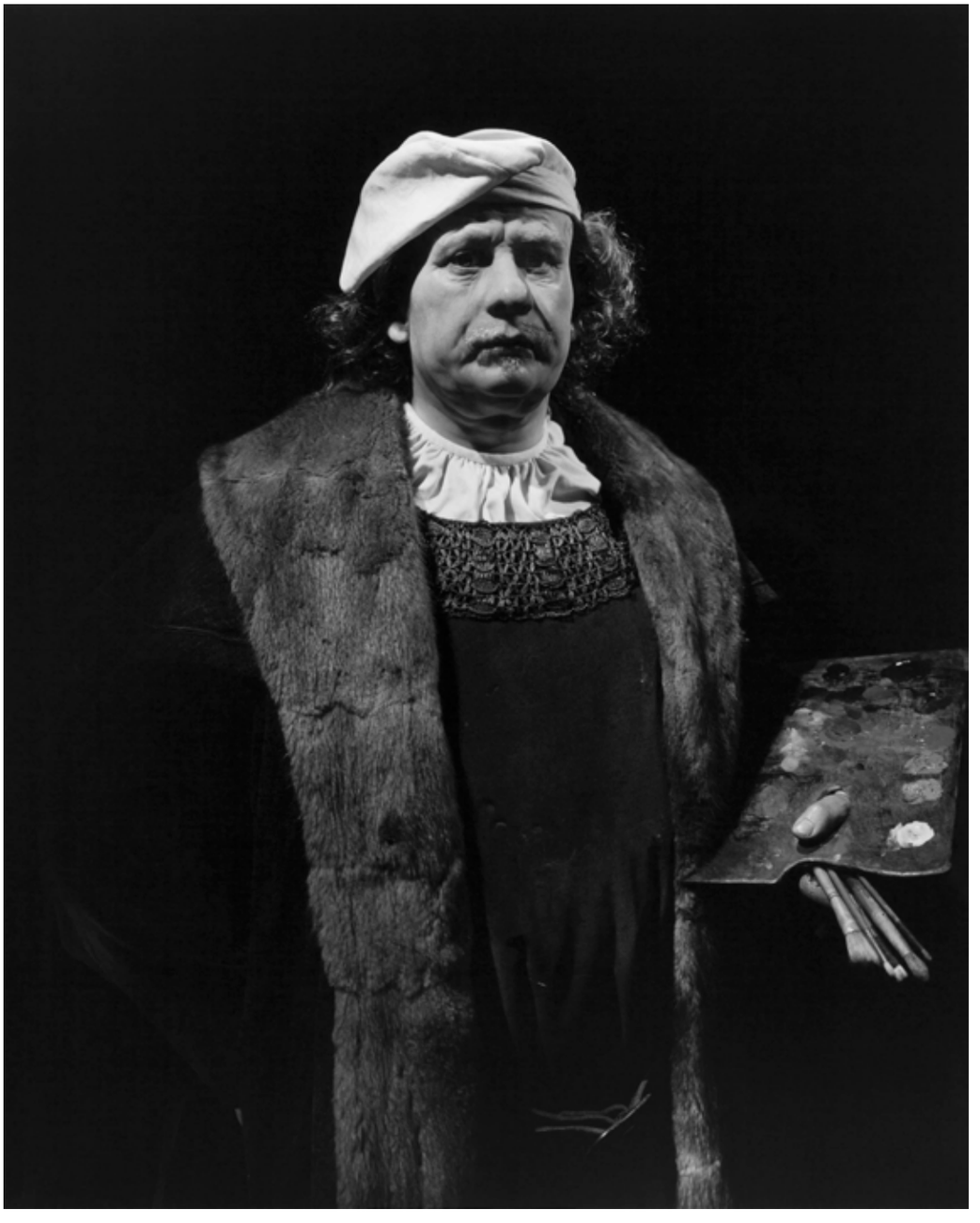

fig.xx **Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Rembrandt van Rijn*, 1999, gelatin silver print; 148.6 × 118.7 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Commissioned by Deutsche Bank AG in consultation with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation for the Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin (2005.103)**

(2016), in which a machine with artificial intelligence was fed a vast amount of iconographical, formal and technical data characterizing the master's art, and was tasked with creating and 3-D printing a new "Rembrandt" painting.[37]

There are those, however, who have come to renounce the marketing of Rembrandt, now virtually a brand. In 1956 and 1969 the two major Rembrandt retrospectives held to celebrate the 350th anniversary of his birth and the 300th anniversary of his death triggered public protests from numerous artists concerning the economic exploitation of the Dutch painter. In the name of the "freedom" that Rembrandt himself had defended throughout his life, they were calling for enhanced recognition of their profession, but also – like Hiroshi Sugimoto, who in photographing the wax figure of Rembrandt on view at Madame Tussauds purposefully reproduced a reproduction (fig. xx) – criticizing the cultural industry's appropriation of the artist's name and art, which they felt was contributing to the fossilization or (in Adornian terms) fetishization of his image.[38] For admirers of this type, the "cult of Rembrandt" (*Rembrandt-Kultus*), the "veneration" (*verering*) that originated in the nineteenth century must be protected at all costs,[39] even if it means fortifying it with a gloss of scholarly justification, by utilizing the notions of "quality" and "genius" to highlight the inimitable and unique character of his art,[40] or by employing the resources of literary or cinematic fiction to reinvent his life and work.[41]

In his *Essays* (1580), Michel de Montaigne attempted to explain his friendship with Étienne de La Boétie, writing these famous words: "If you press me to tell you why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed, except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I."[42] As we ponder the reasons for Rembrandt's enduring legacy, perhaps we also should respond: because it was he, because it was we. *Because it was he*: for it is to Rembrandt himself and to the narratives surrounding his name and image that were developed during his lifetime that the painter owes his extraordinary fame, which far surpasses that of contemporaries less concerned about earning renown and admiration by making themselves the subjects of their art. Rembrandt's works thus offer access not to his private personality but rather to the ideal and tactical construction that he chose to present – what sociologists would call his social and artistic *ethos*.

Because it was we: for if Rembrandt has exerted such fascination since the early 1630s it is undoubtedly because his first admirers and spectators chose not only to believe the personal fictions he invented for them but also to recognize themselves in them, as in mirrors held up for the purpose. And this attitude to the Dutch master's work is still current today. When in 1991 the American photographer Andres Serrano, of Cuban and Honduran descent, reimagined three portraits by Rembrandt by making the models people of colour (fig. xx), it was clearly not to mock or ridicule them in an unseemly instance of blackface. The principal aim was to pay glowing tribute to a painter Serrano had admired since his childhood visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.[43] But he also wished to remind us of the world in which Rembrandt lived and of the cost of building the Dutch "Golden Age," which involved the marginalization of the poor, the incarceration of the mentally ill and the imprisonment of atheists, and which saw hundreds of thousands of slaves torn from their African homes. Unlike most of his contemporaries, the Dutch master sought to reflect these shameful and tragic realities in his art (see fig. xx), daring to bear witness to a complex world by portraying himself and forcing us – as Serrano does now – "to look squarely at what we tend today, increasingly, to avoid, to deny knowledge of, to refuse to contemplate."[44] ■

fig.xx **Andres Serrano, *Black Rembrandt*, 1991, Cibachrome print mounted on aluminum, in three parts; 39.4 × 30.2 cm. Private collection**

NOTES

1 Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Poet's Tribute to the Great Sculptor," in *Auguste Rodin*, trans. Victoria Charles (London: Parkstone Press International, 2011), 7.

2 Among the many publications to explore the critical reception of Rembrandt's work, see esp. Slive 1988; Scheller 1961, 81–118; Bialostocki 1972, 131–157.

3 Huygens 1897, 79; trans. from Leiden 1991, 133.

4 Sandrart 1675–80, vol. 2, book 3, 326.

5 Kris and Kurz 2010.

6 Baldinucci 1686, 79; trans. from Ford 2007, 58.

7 Descamps 1753–64, vol. 2, 89.

8 Dickey 2013.

9 Houbraken 1718–21, vol. 1, 272–273. See also Pels 1978, 77.

10 Sandrart 1675–80, vol. 2, book 3, 326.

11 Evert van Uitert, "Rembrandts roem: hoe hij werd opgenomen in de kring van de grootste Geniën aller tijde," in Rijnders and Rutgers 2014, 135–169, 149–150.

12 De Piles 1699, 437.

13 Brom 1936, 169.

14 Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Chaussard, "Beaux-Arts. Exposition des ouvrages de peinture, sculpture, architecture, gravure dans les salles du Muséum," in *Décade* 1798, 468.

15 Étienne et al. 1800, 3.

16 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Nach Falconet und über Falconet*, 1776, in Goethe 1975, 146.

17 Michelet 1876, vol. 14, 373–374; Verhaeren 1904, 8; Bode 1907, 15.

18 Hazlitt 1930–34, vol. 18, 123.

19 Thoré-Bürger 1870, vol. 2, 69 (Salon de 1864).

20 Thoré-Bürger 1870, vol. 1, 98 (Salon de 1861). The emphasis is Thoré-Bürger's.

21 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 2 July 1889, *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, Van Gogh Museum, http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let784/letter.html (accessed 9 Jan. 2020); Blanc 2017, 290. In analyzing the painting of Lazarus, Van Gogh made use of a heliogravure executed by Charles Amand-Durand after the fifth state of Rembrandt's original etching (1630), then part of the Dutuit Collection and published in the series *Eaux-fortes et gravures des maîtres anciens* (ibid., 343). On the relationship between Van Gogh and Rembrandt, see Hecht 2006.

22 On Rembrandt's place in modern and contemporary art, see Stückelberger 1996.

23 Genet 1979, 32. As well as the three-quarter portrait reproduced here, Genet saw another portrait of Margaretha de Geer, a frontal view painted around 1661 as a pendant to the one of her extremely wealthy husband, Jacob Trip (c. 1661, The National Gallery, London).

24 As well as paying tribute to *The Slaughtered Ox*, this work makes clear reference to the portrait of Pope Innocent X painted in 1650 by Diego Velázquez (Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Rome).

25 Bacon and Archimbaud 1993, 38.

26 Neumann 1902, 655.

27 Bode 1907, 5. See also Langbehn 1926, 48. This view was probably a response to the now-contested theories of Eduard Kolloff, one of the first art historians to claim that Rembrandt maintained close friendships with several leading members of Amsterdam's Jewish community (Zell 2000–01, 181–197).

28 Blanc 1883, vol. 1, 15–16, 20, 19.

29 Taine 1869, 165; Thoré-Bürger 1860, vol. 1, 321; Proudhon 1865, 85; Fromentin 1984, 776–777.

30 Robert W. Scheller, "Rembrandt als Kultursymbol," in Kelch and Von Simson 1973, 221–234.

31 Gersaint 1751, v–vi.

32 Alpers 1991, 14.

33 Van der Tuin 1948, 152. The painting was bought as a Rembrandt by John Julius Angerstein in 1807 and entered the collection of the National Gallery, London, in 1824.

34 On the turbulent history of the Rembrandt Research Project, which is currently under the direction of Ernst van de Wetering, see Bruin 1995, 100–105, and, for a broader view, Scallen 2004.

35 Gary Schwartz, "The Clones Make the Master: Rembrandt in 1650," in Albrecht and Imesch 2001, 53–64.

36 Christophe Rioux, "Le luxe et l'art : du marketing à l'*artketing*," in Assouly 2004, 331–352.

37 www.nextrembrandt.com. This "new work," created jointly by a team drawn from Microsoft, the Rembrandthuis in Amsterdam, the Mauritshuis in The Hague and the Technische Universiteit in Delft, was based on the digitization and interpolation of 346 paintings securely attributed to Rembrandt.

38 Chalard-Fillaudeau 2004, 219.

39 On the modern cult of Rembrandt, see McQueen 2003, 7–9.

40 Ernst van de Wetering, "On Quality: Comparative Remarks on the Functioning of Rembrandt's Pictorial Mind," in *Corpus*, vol. 5, 283–310.

41 Notable among the many novels and plays devoted to Rembrandt published during the twentieth century are *Crucial Instances* (1901) by Edith Wharton; *Rembrandt vor Gericht: eine romantische Komödie in vier Akten* (1933) by Hans Kyser; *Rembrandt van Rijn: The Life and Times of Rembrandt van Rijn* (1930) by Hendrik van Loon; *Rembrandt* (1961) by Gladys Schmitt; *Ferienreise mit Rembrandt* (1970) by Lothar Freund; *Rembrandt's Hat* (1973) by Bernard Malamud; *The Rembrandt Panel: A Novel* (1980) by Oliver T. Banks; and *Rembrandt till sin dotter* (1998) by Agne Erkelius. There have also been numerous films, including *Rembrandt* (1936, dir. Alexander Korda); *Rembrandt* (1940, dir. Gerard Rutten); *Rembrandt* (1942, dir. Hans Steinhoff); *Rembrandt fecit 1669* (1977, dir. Jos Stelling); *La Ronde de nuit* (1978, dir. Gabriel Axel); *Rembrandt* (1999, dir. Charles Matton); and *Nightwatching* (2007, dir. Peter Greenaway).

42 Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais*, ed. Jean Céard (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2001 [1595]), vol. 1, chap. 28, 15; trans. from Donald M. Frame, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958), 139.

43 Arasse 2006, 40.

44 Ibid., 33.