

**Northern Baroque Art and Architecture 1600-1700:**

*The shifts in Rembrandt's self portraits*

Institutional Affiliation

## Northern Baroque Art and Architecture 1600-1700:

### The shifts in Rembrandt's self portraits

In mid-1999 till the early part of January 2000, an exhibition of Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn was mounted by the National Gallery, London and the Mauritshuis in The Hague respectively. Considered to be the first exhibition of the painter's works, *Rembrandt's by Himself* "explores the one truly unique feature of Rembrandt's career: his production, over the course of four decades, of over eighty self-portraits in paintings, drawings, and prints."<sup>1</sup> A book written especially written for the said event describes itself as "an opportunity, never attempted before in an exhibition, to study the artist's appearance and, no less revealing, the changing guises in which he presented himself."<sup>2</sup> As the exhibition aims to study Rembrandt's changing appearance, it did serve as a good venue to view, to study and to analyze the self-portraits created by Rembrandt. The book accompanying the exhibition is a good help or alternative for art lovers who were not able to visit the exhibits almost seven years ago.

*Rembrandt by Himself* showcases the shifts in the self-portraits created by the Dutch artist during his career. While the debate on the total number of self-portraits created by Rembrandt continues<sup>3</sup> as well as the artist's purposes of creating numerous self-portraits remain a popular discussion among art scholars<sup>4</sup>, the more than eighty self-portraits of Rembrandt showcases the shifts in the Dutch painter's self-portraits.

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<sup>1</sup> Dickey, S. "Rembrandt by Himself (Book Review)." *The Art Bulletin*. June 1, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> White, C. and Buvelot, Q. (eds., et al.). *Rembrandt by Himself*. London: National Gallery Publications; The Hague: Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven, 1999, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Osmond, S. "Rembrandt's Self-Portraits." *World and I*, January 2000; Milijenic, V. "The Representation and Reality of the Self in Art." M.A. Thesis in Philosophy and Art, California State University, Long Beach 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Osmond, S.

While Rembrandt is considered as a seventeenth century artist, it was not until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that art scholars discovered the numerous times that the artist had portrayed himself <sup>5</sup>. Up to this time, art scholars and art historians are still in disagreement as to the exact number of self-portraits created by Rembrandt. While the exhibit, *Rembrandt by Himself*, showcased sixty-six self-portraits in paintings, etchings, and drawings, the catalog accompanying the said event reproduced eighty-six works which “can reasonably be considered as self-portraits by Rembrandt.”<sup>6</sup> It seems that Rembrandt portrayed himself in about forty to fifty paintings, about thirty-two etchings, and seven drawings. <sup>7</sup> Such output is considered unique and numerous as most artists usually produce only a handful of self-portraits. <sup>8</sup> More important than the contention of the real numbers of self-portraits created by Rembrandt are the reasons why the artist did so many self-portraits. In fact, “why Rembrandt did this (numerous self-portrayals) is one of the great mysteries of art history.”<sup>9</sup>

The reasons or purposes of Rembrandt's in creating such numerous self-portraits can be determined through an analysis of the shifts in his self-portraits. A quick glance of Rembrandt's self-portraits done in various years and stages of his life would indicate that the self-portraits serve as an autobiography. Perhaps Rembrandt's created those masterpieces to record his life as a young man in 1628 to his life as a 63-year old artist in 1669. It can be easily noted that the shifts in the self-portraits indicates the physical changes as well as emotional experiences of Rembrandt's for about forty years. This type of reasoning has long been held by most earlier art scholars and art historians who “about twenty years ago interpreted Rembrandt's remarkable

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> White and Buvelot, cited in Osmond

<sup>7</sup> Osmond, S.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

series of self-portraits as a sort of visual diary, a forty-year exercise in self-examination.”<sup>10</sup> Art historian Manuel Gasser wrote in 1961 that: “Over the years, Rembrandt's self-portraits increasingly became a means for gaining self-knowledge, and in the end took the form of an interior dialogue: a lonely old man communicating with himself while he painted.”<sup>11</sup>

Earlier literature, specifically by Jacob Rosenberg “focused particularly on Rembrandt’s late self-portraits, as they reveal this vigorous self-reflection most profoundly.”<sup>12</sup> Rosenberg wrote of the: “ceaseless and unsparing observation which [Rembrandt's self-portraits] reflect, showing a gradual change from outward description and characterization to the most penetrating self-analysis and self-contemplation. ... Rembrandt seems to have felt that he had to know himself if he wished to penetrate the problem of man's inner life.”<sup>13</sup>

Following the earlier scholarly analysis on Rembrandt’s self-portraits its can be assumed that the Dutch painter has created numerous masterpieces of himself as his way of self-analysis: the shifts in the color, moods, and even techniques of the various artworks can be an indication of how Rembrandt has viewed himself or how he was feeling when he created his self-portrayals.

Some art scholars, however, believed that “at the very most, the painter may have used himself as a model for the sake of convenience.”<sup>14</sup> More importantly, Rembrandt’s self-portraits which shifted in different guises may be an indication of the artist’s willingness to be his own model. “By displaying his willingness to cast himself as an actor in his own dramas and his conscious deployment of artistic identity as an aspect of pictorial content, they shed light on the

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<sup>10</sup> Osmond, S.

<sup>11</sup> Gasser, M. , quoted in Osmond, S.

<sup>12</sup> Osmond, S.

<sup>13</sup> Rosenberg, J., quoted in Osmond, S.

<sup>14</sup> White and Buvelot, p. 167

more enigmatic autonomous self-portraits, whose meanings are encoded in costume and demeanor. They also mark his participation in a venerable pictorial tradition.”<sup>15</sup>

Rembrandt’s self-portraits depicted the artist in various guises and costumes: as a beggar in 1630 or as Apostle Paul in 1661 or as Zeuxis in 1662 shows the artist’s inventive self-imagery and his willingness to be his own model.

Rembrandt may have used his own face because the model was cheap, but perhaps he was killing two birds with one stone. The art-buying public--which now included people from many walks of life, not only aristocratic or clerical patrons, as in the past--went for etchings of famous people, including artists. By using himself as the model for these and other studies, Rembrandt was making himself into a recognizable celebrity at the same time that he gave the public strikingly original and expressive tronies. The wide dissemination of these and other prints was important in establishing Rembrandt’s reputation as an artist.<sup>16</sup>

This theory on Rembrandt’s self-portrayal as done for convenience sake is further implored by Van de Wetering who argued that “it is extremely unlikely that Rembrandt made his self-portraits as personal form of self-analysis”<sup>17</sup>. Contrary to the traditional view that Rembrandt’s self-portraits indicate the artist’s attempt at self-analysis, “these works declared his status as a celebrity and served as specimens of his extraordinary technique.”<sup>18</sup> Van de Wetering focuses on the idea that Rembrandt created self-portraits because there was a ready market for it during his time.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Dickey, S.

<sup>16</sup> Osmond, S.

<sup>17</sup> White and Buvelot, p.10

<sup>18</sup> White and Buvelot, p.31

<sup>19</sup> Osmond, S.

[Van de Wetering] points out that a detailed inventory of Rembrandt's possessions made in 1656, when he faced bankruptcy, included no portrayals of the artist by himself. In self-portraits, artists in Rembrandt's day and previous eras sometimes included a painting in the genre for which they were best known, as an example of their style. In the case of Rembrandt, he was most noted for his eccentricity of technique and for his tronies and depictions of one or a few figures. So, in making his self-portraits, which van de Wetering contends were probably all seen as tronies in their day, Rembrandt was making the kind of images art buyers expected of him, which had the added attraction of being depictions of their maker and exemplars of his unusual technique.<sup>20</sup>

Van de Wetering argued that Rembrandt's self-portraits "provided the purchaser with both the portrait of a celebrated artist and a display of the mastery that had made him famous in the first place"<sup>21</sup>. While Van de Wetering argument may have merited some values, this assumption of Rembrandt's self-portrait as being for financial purpose is contradicted by some art scholars who rather believed that Rembrandt's self-portrayal are an indication of his self-centeredness. "Rembrandt's students were regularly assigned to paint and draw portraits of him, primarily copies or variants of his own self-portraits. These circumstances seem to reinforce a perception of Rembrandt's self-centeredness not only as a pictorial strategy but also as a personality trait."<sup>22</sup>

While the purposes or reasons presented by different art scholars were not a clear explanation on the shifts in Rembrandt's paintings, it can be surmised that the shifts in self-

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> White and Buvelot, p. 30

<sup>22</sup> Dickey, S.

portraits are the representation of how Rembrandts viewed himself. Wheelock, Jr. offered the most comprehensive explanation yet on the shifts or changes in the self-portraits of Rembrandt.

Most of the self-portraits created by Rembrandt in 1620s depict his face half in shadow by 1630 there was a shift from the shadowed face to a brighter, more detailed face. Wheelock, Jr. believed this shift as result of Rembrandt's growing popularity. Wheelock has pointed out that the contrasting features of Rembrandt's self-portraits during this period mirror the artist's "conflicting feelings about conforming to the bourgeois-artist ideal."<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the 1630s a curious dialectic occurs in Rembrandt's self-portraits, in which he alternatively portrays himself as an accepted member of society, elegantly dressed and honored with gold chains, and as an outsider, whose character, and hence genius, cannot be identified with the Dutch middle class. At almost the same time that he represents himself as a fashionable middle class burgher, jauntily wearing a wide-brimmed hat and an expensive cloak, he depicts himself as a beggar. ... One cannot explain this extraordinary print, as is so often the case with his small studies of his own expressions, by concluding that the model was convenient and cheap.<sup>24</sup>

Wheelock, Jr. noted that the shifts in Rembrandt's self-portraits from the beggar to the elegantly dressed could be a manifestation of the artist's "inner conflict between his perception of himself as an esteemed artist and as an outsider to society reached a crisis point during the mid-1630s, at the time he married Saskia [van Uylenburgh], whose family and inheritance assured him a life of bourgeois respectability."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Osmond, S.

<sup>24</sup> Wheelock, Jr., A. "Rembrandt Self-Portraits: The Creation of a Myth," in Rembrandt, Rubens, and the Art of their Time: Recent Perspectives. Washington: National Gallery of Arts, 1997

<sup>25</sup> Wheelock, Jr. A.

By 1640s, Rembrandt's self-portraits indicate that the artist has accepted his fate as part of the bourgeois society. Rembrandts created paintings portraying himself as "the accomplished man of means who can stand alongside great creators of the past."<sup>26</sup>

He has drawn the pose indirectly from Raphael's portrait of the courtier-author Baldassare Castiglione, a self-portrait by Dfrer, and most directly a portrait by Titian that at the time was thought to be of the poet Ariosto. Wearing the rich yet quiet-toned garb of an earlier era that suitably sets him outside the mundane present and says he belongs to the ages, he presents himself as thinner as and more handsome than in his other self-portraits, a man of intelligence, dignity, and almost arrogant self-composure.<sup>27</sup>

With the death of his wife in 1642, Rembrandt's "urge to depict himself in paintings and etchings seems to have diminished. When [Rembrandt] returned to self-portraiture in the later 1640s and 1650s, his portraits are sensitive, inward-looking images."<sup>28</sup>

In 1652, Rembrandt created a self-portrait that is quite different from his earlier self-portrayals:

Gone is the historicizing garb with fur trim he often used (though the trademark beret remains); instead he wears a plain brown robe, sketchily rendered, that was probably his working attire. Here is not the artist as a man of means and taste, as in 1640, but as the indomitable creator. He stands in a position not seen in any of his other painted self-portraits. Facing front, his arms akimbo, hands firmly on hips, he looks to the viewer (and himself in the mirror) with an intensely searching gaze.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Osmond, S.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Wheelock, Jr., A.

<sup>29</sup>Osmond, S.

Around 1653, Rembrandt's began to suffer financial crisis due to the dwindling demand for his works. His self-portraits during this period “indicate varying responses to his situation.”<sup>30</sup> A 1655 self-portrait shows “traces of self-doubt intermingled with hurt and outwardly directed disdain..”<sup>31</sup> While another painting in 1658 “shows him sitting magisterially as if on a throne, holding a stick reminiscent of a scepter and garbed in golden cloth. It is an assertion of undeterred mastery.”<sup>32</sup> In 1669, Rembrandt created his last self-portrait at age 63. This self-portrait shows a complete opposite of the earliest self-portraits he has created. While in his self-portrait in 1628, he has depicted himself as a young man whose face was partly hidden in shadow, his last self-portrait shows a full-face of an aged man.

...light emanates from the above left almost like a benediction, illuminating nearly all the now puffy, fragile, almost womanish face. In the early painting the artist was concerned with creating a smooth illusion with carefully delineated gradations of tone, but in the last we can see how far he has come to redefine the art of painting. The subject has become not only the sitter but the paint itself and how expressively it is applied--in thick impasto, each telling brush stroke is revealed.

Indeed, the shift in Rembrandt's self-portraits can be a manifestation of how the artist viewed himself in different situations: from a promising young man to an old financially broke artist. Or perhaps Rembrandt was a self-centered artist who have used his artworks to promote his own ingenuity or he was an artist whose "works are commodities distinguished from others by being identified as his ... in making them, he in turn commodifies himself." <sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Alpers, S. Rembrandt's Enterprise. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988, p. 118.

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