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Rembrandt: Portraits in Print, and: Rembrandt's Late
Religious Portraits (review)

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(Review)

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Stephanie S. Dickey. *Rembrandt: Portraits in Print*.

Oculi: Studies in the Arts of the Low Countries 9. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005. 366 pp. index. append. illus. bibl. \$216. ISBN: 90-272-5339-0.

Arthur K. Wheelock and Peter C. Sutton, eds. *Rembrandt's Late Religious Portraits*.

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005. 152 pp. index. append. illus. bibl. \$40. ISBN: 0-226-89443-6.

It is a tribute both to Rembrandt and to the authors of the books under review that shortly before the 400th anniversary of Rembrandt's birth in 2006, two volumes provide important new contributions to our understanding of his portrait and portrait-like images. As is well known, in his lifetime Rembrandt himself helped to shape a new attitude toward, and a new value for, the print as an artistic medium. Of the more than 300 etchings he produced over four decades, seventeen can be classified with confidence as formal portraits. While the painted portraits that served as Rembrandt's bread and butter have been studied extensively, his portrait etchings as a group have, until now, only been examined in a small but important exhibition with catalogue by R. E. O. Ekkart and E. Ornstein-van Slooten in 1986. Stephanie Dickey's thoughtful and meticulously-detailed study remedies this hiatus in the literature.

Dickey eloquently characterizes these portraits and their impression on the viewer through a close analysis of the lines, ink, and painterly effects employed by the artist. The book is not an easy read, however, for she locates each work within a dense and meticulously-researched network of the sitter's social location and biographical circumstances, the visual tradition, and the social, artistic, and economic forces within which the artist worked that — while always stimulating — does not always maintain a clear focus. Nonetheless, along the way Dickey offers a number of convincing new understandings of familiar works and leaves us with rich readings of these well-known but understudied masterpieces.

While the three self-portraits that Dickey includes raise a number of issues that differ from those of the seventeen other portraits examined, she justifies their inclusion by observing that they were produced "in dialogue with" the latter (23), and, importantly, illuminate Rembrandt's motivations, sources, and practice. Dickey offers a rich account of each of the four portrait prints Rembrandt produced of preachers over the next decade-and-a-half, and their unique visual and technical qualities: Jan Cornelis Sylvius (1633 and 1646), Johannes Wtenbogaert (1635), and Cornelis Anslo (1641). While several of these leave space for inscriptions, only the portraits of Wtenbogaert and the latter one of Sylvius bear verses on the original plate. Like his history paintings that focus upon the personal and psychological dimension of a narrative, his prints rely upon the vivid presence of the sitter rather than an accompanying text to convey character.

The 1639 portrait of Jan Wtenbogaert, cousin of Johannes and Receiver-General of Taxes for the province of Holland, is customarily known as *The Goldweigher*. Rembrandt presents the Receiver-General in old-fashioned clothing and a complex setting. While normally the artist first worked-up the face of his sitters, a handful of proof impressions of this print are worked-up in every detail except the face. About a dozen copies in this state are known today, suggesting that Rembrandt recognized the market value of an incomplete work. Svetlana Alpers has convincingly argued that Rembrandt worked with an eye to self-fashioning and the market. Dickey adds another dimension to his creative stimuli: competition with the activities of Joachim Sandrart from 1637 to 1645, and of Jan Lievens who in 1644 returned to Holland from London and Antwerp.

Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait Leaning on a Stone Sill*, also of 1639, has long been recognized as similar in pose to portraits of both Balthasar Castiglione by Raphael, which Rembrandt sketched at the auction of the estate of Lucas van Uffel, and to a portrait thought at the time to be of Ariosto by Titian (but now believed to be a self-portrait of the Italian master) in the collection of the buyer, Alphonso Lopez. Eddy de Jongh's argument that Rembrandt was engaged in a *paragone* with both Raphael and, particularly, Titian, as well as their literary subjects, has been highly influential. Dickey points out that the fundamental composition (an arm over a parapet) had a longstanding tradition in Northern European art, and may well have laid the groundwork for Rembrandt's ready reception of the formula, self-consciously celebrating its Northern roots.

Twelve of Rembrandt's seventeen etched portraits, and one self-portrait, including some discussed above, were created between 1646 and 1658. Dickey suggests that this flourishing of graphic activity, and the innovative techniques with which Rembrandt was experimenting, were spurred on by his immersion in a community of artists, authors, and connoisseurs who were interested in "practices of self-fashioning, eulogy and commemoration" (110). Many of his prints depict members of this circle.

Seventeen of Rembrandt's late half-length figures, all but one of which is dated or assigned by the authors to the years 1657 to 1661, are the subject of a catalogue that accompanied an exhibition held at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, in 2005. In labeling these half-lengths *religious portraits* the catalogue title situates them among two of the artist's great strengths: history paintings and portraiture. The catalogue contains three survey essays in addition to detailed entries on each painting: Arthur Wheelock sketches Rembrandt's life, possible religious beliefs, and several issues raised by these works, Volker Manuth locates these paintings in the context of religious practices and representations, Peter Sutton surveys the *portrait historié*, which featured contemporaneous individuals dressed and posed as historical figures.

In a subject and style that served as the basis of Rembrandt's high reputation since the late eighteenth century — half-length introspective figures created in broad strokes of brown and ochre — these works raise important and as yet unanswered questions about contemporaneous reception and taste. Hovering

between portraiture and history painting, the intended associations of these diverse figures remain a puzzle. Most can be said to fit into the genre of the imaginary portrayal of an historical religious figure in which their apparent portrait-like quality enhances their immediacy for the viewer. These portrait-like qualities vary considerably, however, from the recognizable face of the artist himself in the guise of Saint Paul to the generalized features of the Virgin of Sorrows hidden behind dark shadows and broad strokes. The identification of many of these with specific religious figures, however, does not seem to be their primary purpose. A few are accompanied by attributes, others are identified on the basis of their pose, and two figures are generically titled "portrait of a man."

Given that most of these half-lengths can be potentially identified as religious figures — long used for Catholic contemplation — they also raise as yet unanswered questions concerning the audience and original owners of these works in a nominally Protestant country. At the stimulating scholar's day held in the exhibition galleries in January 2005, the idea, first raised by Wilhelm Valentiner in 1920 but dismissed by Wheelock, was again considered: that some of these may have been painted for Catholic patrons and collectors both within and outside of the northern Netherlands. In addition, Wheelock and Manuth discuss the continued importance to Protestants of apostles in general and such images in particular. Wheelock also suggests that some may have served more generally as popular examples of *virii illustri*.

Despite the rising popularity for brighter and more finely painted work toward the end of his life, Rembrandt retained a following for his darker broadly-painted creations as demonstrated by important portrait commissions such as the *Syndics of the Drapers' Guild* of 1661–62 and the large number of self-portraits he produced. While all of these works display some aspect of the free brushwork, dark pallet, and introspective figures of Rembrandt's late style, their diversity raises important questions about the number and role of possible students and assistants late in Rembrandt's life, who are not examined in this catalogue. Aert de Gelder, who arrived in Rembrandt's studio in 1661, is the only student currently documented after the mid-1650s. As Wheelock points out, the lack of documentation may be due in part to Rembrandt's arrangement with the company run by Hendrickje Stoffels and his son Titus from around 1658, behind which his assets and income were hidden.

Rembrandt's early and midcareer work has been carefully studied in several studies and exhibitions. However, the late work has received relatively little attention. The exhibition and its record in the catalogue are welcome for raising questions which have yet to be addressed. This exhibition demonstrates how complex and as yet unknown this period remains for scholars, and how moving it remains for viewers.

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