‘Horrible nature, incomparable art’: Rembrandt and the depiction of the female nude

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At the beginning of the eighteenth century, when Arnold Houbraken devoted a passage in his biography of Rembrandt to the latter’s portraits of the female nude, he first stated that naked women were ‘the most glorious object of the artist’s brush’ and had been depicted by the most renowned masters since time immemorial. This introduction, however, is followed by deprecating comments on Rembrandt’s nudes: they are too pathetic for words—dignifying, no less—and, he maintains, it is surprising that such a great man could be submissive to so depict them thus. He adds that Rembrandt took the same view as Caravaggio (1571–1610), who, according to Karl van Mander (1540–1606), is supposed to have said: ‘if one should only make nature, anything not painted from life being a futility.’

Houbraken was by no means the first to voice such criticism, and he would certainly not be the last. That his comments are with any relevance to the ideology of Caravaggio, as well as with the idea that all great masters have painted the female nude because this is the subject a painter can revive for, makes his comments, as we shall shortly see, very enlightening indeed. Like Houbraken, Rembrandt, too, must have been well aware of the special prestige enjoyed by this traditional topic: everything points to the fact that nudity, the celebrated painter of the past was of great importance to Rembrandt as regards this kind of subject matter in particular. In painting the female nude he hoped to secure a place among the greatest in his profession.

Why, then, did the outcome so very much from the prevailing conventions, with the result that the conceptions he makes were found astonishing? Were Rembrandt’s works a subject of controversy in his own day or, as has been continuously stated in recent decades, did they become controversial only after his death, by which time theoretical views on art and beauty had changed? To begin answering these questions we shall first have to follow Rembrandt’s career in the field of the female nude, a field that has traditionally been full of pitfalls in the history of Western art, not least because of the sexual connotations implicit in nude observation of a nude female body portrayed by, and for, men.

When Rembrandt made his first appearance around 1630 as a painter of the female nude with his depiction of Adam and Eve (fig. 30, which was also his first painting of a psychological subject, he was already well aware of his many illustrious predecessors who had already depicted this theme. In portraying Adam and Eve Rembrandt chose a subject which, more than any other representation of a nude, had been frequently depicted in art at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century by the renowned Hendrick Goltzius and artists of his circle (fig. 31, 32). Rembrandt would also have learned from reading Karl van Mander’s biography of the admired ‘man whose great master of the naked painted a famous Adamoede, and he probably knew prints of this composition as well. And from history he might have known that Rubens had even painted the subject on the garderobe facades of the house. Moreover, from Van Mander’s biographies of painters of antiquity, he could have heard of the extraordinary existence of a naked Antochorda in the celebrated Greek painter Nikos. In traditional pictorial schemes: Andromeda tied to a rock, rendered frankly as a nude figure forming the focal point of the composition—in it the perfect subject, for an artist who wanted to show off his abilities as depicting naked female beauty. The four engravings after designs by Goltzius, therefore, provide the examples of his idea regarding the portrayal of the anatomy and proportions of the female body, clues which changed radically during the course of his career.

‘But the subject could function as a kind of thermometer of the ability to paint the nude’ was probably an important reason Rembrandt took interest in this peculiar theme. Because he felt the need to produce his own new image of the nude, a model of an extremely exciting image—charming and fascinating by a8887. The hero of the story, who falls in love the moment he sees her naked, fertilized body, will see her as the model of his own life.

Because the overall design of Rembrandt’s composition conforms with the basic scheme usually seen in representations of Andromeda, the effect produced by the deviation was all the more powerful. By having Pennes’ battle with the monster ‘out of this picture’—something that had never been done before—and having Andromeda tied to something, the canvas as Rembrandt created a strong feeling of surprise. The most striking feature, however, is the fact that Andromeda’s tied body is the first to be shown in the disguise, in stark contrast to all the examples of the subject which Rembrandt could have known. In Rembrandt’s painting there is no trace of the customary, elegant counterpoises. Rembrandt maintained what her attitude could actually have been. Andromeda’s body moves in a tense curve from themonster, and her arms, tied together at the waist, twist in a painful and fearsome diagonal manner: The expression of fear is therefore more intense than in any earlier depiction of this subject. The very fact that the well-known composition by Goltzius would have been the main point of reference, the Andromeda as well as for the connoisseurs of that time, clearly shows just how radical the decisions are. In contrast to what we observe
in Fidelio, here we see a body completely lacking in overtly sexual, whose narrow upper body, swivel arms, fronts hanging to the side, hefty hips and bulky, protruding stomach—suggest that this is what we observed from Life.

The potential reaction of what was customary must have been a conscious choice on Rembrandt's part and would have been recognized by connoisseurs as something completely new. Rembrandt used all the means at his disposal to intensify the viewer's empathy. The lack of expression found in the nude is being brought much closer to the viewer's sphere of perception. It strengthens the impression of the girl's helpless vulnerability, which

Rembrandt further heightened by lighting her naked body against the dark and threatening background. The texture and color of her skin—contrasting sharply with the hard, rough rocks—makes the fragility of human skin almost palpable.

Rembrandt serves to suggest the scene of a living being by means of subtle shifts in tone, making one of cubic breakdowns that follow the body's forms. In the first nude Rembrandt succeeded, even in this small format, in suggesting a nearly tangible female body.

In the same or slightly later, Rembrandt produced two fascinating nudes from model Susema (cat. 112 and 113). These rich in particular that have been regarded with precision over the past unearthing, for instance, the following response from Kenneth Clark: "They are some of the most unpretentious, not too dazzling, pictures ever produced by a great artist." The portrait of Diana, of which there is a preparatory drawing (cat. 159, probably original 9), is even more dazzling. When drawing this nude, Rembrandt must have had several renowned nudes in mind (in which he probably owned himself). An engraving of Avice and the by Anthonie van Bree (cat. 160), an etching by Willem van Booyr (cat. 161), as well as Rembrandt's instantaneous examples, etc., after a composition by none other than Raphael (fig. 41)—the two lower-replicating Bathshebas at her ruler—were his respective predecessors. Rembrandt, however, characterized her at Diana-bathing in the woods by adding a bit, background greenery and red a quiver. She sits on a nude dress draped her an undress whose subject is hump down, which strengthens the impression that she has just undressed.

Placing the nude in this context it has distinctly repetitive implications for the viewer, because each is later familiar with the conventions of painting and putting one who saw an undressed Diana bathing would immediately recall the popular representation in which Actaeon spits on the naked Diana and her nymphs, a subject that Rembrandt would also depict a few years later in a painting.

"This means that the viewer sees a woman, who

just like Bathsheba and Susanna, likewise sleeps upon while laughing—assumes "Biblical" desires in the person beholding her. Thus, the most popular subjects that include female nudes are about the danger of seeing things one should not see.

In the same sense, this Diana is in the most expressive depicted as the model the artist had posing for him. She seems to be acknowledging the viewer's gaze without reacting to it with anger or fear, as Diana would. The artist apparently wants to underscore the fact—and this is more strongly emphasized in the etching than in the drawing—

that he has clearly observed a specific woman's body and is showing exactly what she saw. With the etching inside Rembrandt has suggested, just as the to deal with paint in the case of Stadler, the texture of in a way not previously demonstrated. Connoisseurs would have recognized this as a direct challenge to Anthonie van Bree and Willem van Broy (later), who had been in the rendering of nude figures skin by means of an innovative, experimental etching technique.

As for the suggestion of harmonious flesh which is concerned, Rembrandt went one step further in a Social Tree's Viola (12.13). He modeled the body with extremely subtle gradations of light and shade and faultlessly re-creating every nose and wrinkle in the skin. Once again, the clearly visible sleeve of an undergarment indicates that this woman is not naked by nature but has just undressed for the artist drawing her, looks him directly in the eye, and via him the viewer of the nude. The immediate confrontation created by her gaze, and the strong feeling that she is not really nude but merely undressed, distinguishes her from the illustrious sisters whom she resembles and with whose daughters Rembrandt was engaged in a dialogue: in the first place we again recognize

in a number of aspects Amphilocka Caracci's Susanna, but her attitude recalls most of all Romance, the beak of Alexander the Great; as she appears in a print by Jacobus Carpoglio a drawing by Raphael (fig. 40). Just as in Diana, she moves of earth and the cleverly indicated greenery suggest that this woman—like Susanna, Bathsheba and Elisa—

is sitting outside in an undressed state. The support of a recognizable subject has, however, been omitted; it is left to the viewer to see her as either Susanna, Bathsheba or Diana (with all the accompanying playful suggestions) or simply as a model posing. In the latter case the viewer would have considered her to be a faithful portrait of a delicious woman, presumably a prostitute.

A clothed version of A Social Tree's Viola (cat. 158) is seen in a painting, dated 1637, of a woman at her toilet, dressed in a sumptuous, facsimile oriental and with jewels (cat. 162). Her figure—the narrowness of the upper parts of the body giving way to the curvatures spread below—is also the same. If one imagine her undressed, then the lower part of her body, if possible, even more massive than that of the nude.

We also see this silhouette in the portrait of Ciaffaloni (cat. 157), where few realistic and repre-

sentative portrait of a young woman that

Rembrandt made in this period. Anne Hollander, commenting on the etching discussed above, is probably right in saying that "the intention to make these bodies look "realistic"" but specifically desirable is conveyed by their restrain-

ance the curves and muscles are more defined for the sake of high-waist, plump but narrow shoulders, large chest, and so forth. This explains why the most of these instances flesh skin elks. Thus Rembrandt suggests not only that the outward appearance of those women was even further portrayed from life, but also that their bodies, precisely where they deserve more classical proportions, conform to the bodily shapes that a viewer of that period found attractive (compare for instance also cat. 52, 33 and 156).

In these etched studies from a nude model Rembrandt, competing with his illustrious predecessors, was striving to exhibit, by means of his engraving technique, his unpretentious virtuosity in the depiction of female body that goes far beyond a feeling of close proximity and fineness. Rembrandt's success in this endeavor is apparent from the copy made by Wenceslaus Hollar in 1635 (fig. 41). Hollar, however, found it necessary to tone down the effect of directness by taking the body's surface smoother and giving the figure a more summery character by means of sharper contrasts.

Several years later, in his painting of Susanna and Elders of 1665-67 (cat. 160), Rembrandt continued along the path he had taken with the aforementioned, aiming at all the means at his disposal to portray and give powerful emotionalism in nude paintings.

In depicting Susanna he chose a subject that was the most popular vehicle for the depiction of the nude female and one that explicitly treated the forbidden act of young on a young, chaste beauty who has taken off her clothes to bathe, thereby aversely arraying the basest desires of those making her, the lascivious elders who will eventually be punished with death. The viewer, in whose face finds itself in the same position as the spits in the trough (with a much better view of Susanna), were fine no punishment for right, moral, virtuous, morally considered, prime example of shameless charity. That sexual light was the best known of the vices that stood in the way of the artist in this sort and he had been corroborated by the playful identification with the dreamers and madmen, who always met of Trouble to The Hague, Sir Dudley Caroe, who wrote to Rembrandt that he hoped the Susanna was he be beautiful that she could even make old men fall in love with her. Counterpoint: all painters had paid this subject before, and Rembrandt would have been
familiar with works of various compositions by Hendrick Goltzius, Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem, and Pieter Pietersz, as well as the famous etching by Ambrosius Borremans mentioned earlier (fig. 48).\(^{13}\) A composition by his teacher, Pieter Pietersz, was the immediate point of departure (fig. 44a), but it must have been the composition by Rubens in particular—especially the invention envisaged by Lucas van Leyden—that challenged him the most (fig. 44b). It was Rubens who wanted to surpass in the credibility of Susanna's reaction. Rubens's attempt to involve the spectator directly by having Susanna turn towards the viewer must have been an important stimulus to Rembrandt.

More potently than any painter before him, Rembrandt placed the viewer in the position of a spying child. Susanna seems to be suddenly to be startled by something that raises a reading sound, for example, a cat meowing. She does not see the man hiding in the doorway behind her. Rembrandt made the sides nearly symmetrical, so that Susanna seems to be alone. All attention is centered on her. Susanna turns incisively here,

 turning the upper part of her body away from the viewer. Attempting to stand up, she gives an impression of surrendering indulgence, which emphasizes the sudden agitation of her reaction. She turns with large, startled eyes towards the spectator, whom she confronts as the intruder who has disturbed her into hiding her naked body. Even more strongly than in the Anabasis, Susanna's vulnerable helplessness is underscored by the isolation of her bright red body against the dark background. She is, as it were, the epitome of the viewer's apprehension. This moral implication is heightened here, but at the same time the tension created by the psychologically charged moment comes more powerfully than ever to the fore. Susanna's head, modified in rather organically painted, is even more drawn on than that of Anabasis—almost palpably lifelike. The fact that Rembrandt incorporated into her attire a very clasped pose, accentuating the contrast between her antique sculpture attributes (most strongly by her rejection of the idealized outline of the naked body).\(^{14}\) What is really classical proportions of the body, which can, however, follow the shape of the fashionable allusiveness, suggests a highly lifelike quality. The awareness of a lifelike quality increases the involvement of the viewer, especially in the case of originally charged paintings, was powerfully expressed at this time by Jacob Cats, whose mortalitie exerted great success. When Cats wrote in Penseelen (Mimege), his handbook of 1610, against the inflating effect of paintings of female nudes, he added that better the girl is, and the more realistic her portrayals are, the more she confuses the mind of the viewer and the more serious the consequences.\(^{15}\) Such moralistic concern was obviously not shared by Boss van den

Vondel in a witty poem about a painting (unfortunately unknown) representing Susanna, in which he speaks appreciatively of the stimulating effect this highly lifelike depiction has upon the viewer. After an enigmatic description of her body—one could not help wanting to kiss her on the mouth, for example—he also whether lifelike patas is capable of leading such a lust and desire in us. He answers, of course, in the affirmative, pointing to the point where one can produce this effect: "behold Susanna in the back. Vondel hereby humorously turns the mortal Can's warning into a reason for praising the painter.\(^{16}\)

In a related poem by Jan Vis, in which he enunciates Vondel, we detect, moreover, the writer's fascination with the woman figure model whom the painter observed nudes and portrayed true-to-life to depict Susanna's beauty as convincingly as possible, it is necessary to portray an exact woman, remarks Vis. However, he states mysteriously, the depiction is not only a measure of reality, and therefore we do not have to fear the 'poison' of her truth.\(^{17}\)

The more true-to-life the nude, the stronger the suggestion that one is seeing the specific—indeed—woman who posed for the painter. While she in fact heightens the titillating effect, it makes the portrayal all the more problematic.\(^{18}\)

As we have observed, Rembrandt's choice of subject matter was based on a keen sense of competition with his great predecessor, whom he endeavored to surpass in the lifelike quality of his

never took up his breaks without having life before his eyes. Van Mander, who must have heard this artist just back from Italy, added that this was all very well, but first one had to learn to distinguish the most beautiful in natures.\(^{19}\) Van Mander is therefore very ambivalent about this central standpoint and finds that both methods must be combined: working from nature and choosing the most beautiful through analyzing antiques and other great examples.\(^{20}\)

The debate about these two methods was already underway before Caravage took his stand, and continued afterwards as a focus of discussion in many an artist's studio. The difference between, roughly speaking, the fine and the expression of the invention originating in the soul, which seeks the most beautiful and the root existed that nature has to offer, as opposed to the achievement of the most natural and lifelike expression as means of portraying from life, was, in fact clearly formulated—in writing, that is—by Vouet after he and Michelangelo had seen a painting of the naked Diana by Titian (fig. 45). The account of the confrontation between these two offering views was adopted in its entirety for Titian's manner of drawing, but afterwards saw what it was that Vouet painters did not learn to draw properly and did not study examples because, said there would have been no better painter than Titian if he had profited as much from studying the art of drawing as he did from making studies from nature and painting from life. The goal of painting the nude was to achieve beauty and lifeliness and naturalism. Vouet himself added to this painting that Titian uses his brush to make it look "baguette, child's play, or a toy," only has to imitate life in all its diversity. He—Caravage—

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**Fig. 44** | Plato Linnartz (1572–1616), Portrait of a Lady, Private Collection

**Fig. 44a** | Lucas van Leyden (1494–1533), The Prodigal Son, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

**Fig. 45** | Titian, Diana (c. 1546–1547), Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

**Fig. 46** | Rembrandt, Diana (1656) from the Hermann and Hildegart van der Hoorn Collection, Amsterdam
never make anything perfect. Nature, after all, is not perfect; the knowledge of art is necessary to give it beauty and grace."

This is a marvellous article and the controversy standpoint that from this time on we attract best sculptors and designers. Titian being the epitome of painting 'from life', whose point of departure was light and colour instead of line. In Titian's 'Vincenzo', Vasari had already described it— and this is also to be found in Van Mander—how Titian had developed a working method in which he completely bypassed the drafting stage and straightforwardly painted directly. Vasari seriously disagreed with this method, but Van Mander did not report his concerns. Literally: 'seems to be alive, naturally flesh-like and like reality' are notions we often encounter in Titian's biography, which must have been a great source of inspiration for a painter like Rembrandt.

After Van Mander's description, Rembrandt could now seize his chance in this debate, and we have already seen who with which arguments was to be the first, Van Mander being the first to record a Venetian's much talked about standpoint. The heated discussions this caused to Rome during the first decades of the seventeenth century emerge, for instance, from statements made by Giovanni Baglione, a contemporary of Caravaggio. Baglione had no ado about Caravaggio's palette was wonderful and of great marvels. But because Caravaggio always painted everything completely from life, the result was flawed, lacking in everything that is essential to great art. Caravaggio himself thought he had surpassed all other painters. Baglione writes, but others were of the opinion that he had ruined the art of painting. So many younger artists had followed in his footsteps, they had lost all sufficient knowledge of the fundamentals of drawing and painting and were satisfied with working from life and taking delight in their choice of palette. To his sorrow Baglione had to admit that the finest connoisseurs of that time greatly admired Caravaggio's works.

This controversy would have been taken back to the Netherlands by Rembrandt's redeemer Pieter Lastman and all the others who visited Rome in the first decades of the seventeenth century. Unfortunately, practically nothing was written about this period in the Netherlands, but we know that Caravaggio gained a great reputation in France with this battle was waged in a variegated pamphlet war by Jacques de Clé on which De Vleeschauwer in his book 'Titian' discusses the arguments.

Titian, roughly put, means that the only human is Titian and only Titian is Titian. Titian is Titian and Titian is Titian. And that is exactly what Rembrandt's work demonstrated.

Rembrandt, in this respect, was the forerunner of the late Baroque. He was the first to break away from the classical art in which the mere sight of a painting of Titian was enough for a young man to such an extent that heaped as gig was in love with this. With Titian's art Rembrandt and many other artists, who wished to compete with one another in the portrayal of an illusionistic and sensuous manner as possible. It is certainly no coincidence that the Danes by Correggio and Titian and Rembrandt are among the most sensual masters in the history of European art. By painting a life-sized female nude Rembrandt to demonstrate that the male figure is not more heroic, tradition, going back to classical antiquity and revived in Italy, which, once the erotic was, should be seen as the highest ambition of every painter. By choosing this particular subject at a crucial moment and by making the painting of 10 and competent and in the first half of the eighteenth century Rembrandt's contemporaries were convinced that to man of lifelessness could be created by means of colour and light. In addition, it gives him the opportunity to compete in the representation of sensuality with a legendary painter from classical antiquity, as well as with the famous Danes by Titian, the greatest master of the genre.

More so than in Rembrandt's previous paintings, we see in Titian how the body is modeled by means of subtle nuances of colour that melt into one another and clearly visible paint texture. He has now surpassed even Titian in the convincing suggestion of supple form, breathing skin. Because the form of the body was so much more believable, so much more feeling of reality— Rembrandt depicted the bodily shapes in a more stylized manner than his earlier paintings. But here as well we see very unusual elements, by means of which he let us into the inner world of the subject. Rembrandt's departure was a living model the square proportions, the flatness was smoothed out by the brush and the breast pushed upwards by the hand are all elements not found in other Danes or Rembrandt's contemporaries. These traits undermine the naturalness and approachability of Daniel's body (Rembrandt's earliest studies and copies from Titian are placed in the picture by changing the slower of gold coins (medium) to a more sensuous golden light— the golden rain into which Jhering transformed himself— into a form of glowing light. The scene whose passion and desire have been aroused by Daniel's beauty is intimated only by the warm, sensual light. The radiant Daniel has done everything to his power to create a feeling of eroticism and sensuality. In the shoes and hose Dutch painters hardly ever deviated from the original Titianian, but Rembrandt has done everything to create a feeling of eroticism and sensuality in his paintings. In the shoes and hose Dutch painters hardly ever deviated from the original Titianian, but Rembrandt has done everything to create a feeling of eroticism and sensuality in his paintings. In the shoes and hose Dutch painters hardly ever deviated from the original Titianian, but Rembrandt has done everything to create a feeling of eroticism and sensuality in his paintings.
absent, causing the viewer himself to become the "Duida" who beholds her.** Everything is aimed at evoking an emotional response, the expression of the viewer's inner world. In the treatment of the primary theme, the painting is a masterful exercise in chiaroscuro, with the play of light and shadow creating a sense of depth and volume. The figures are depicted with great attention to detail, especially in the intricate folds of the drapery and the delicate gestures of the young woman. The painting is not only a representation of the nude but also a study of human emotion and the interplay of light and shadow. Moreover, like earlier Rembrandt, this depiction lacks any indication of narrative action - there is no indication whatsoever of movement or physical interaction. The figures are arranged in a way that directs the viewer's attention to the central theme, the female nude, which is depicted with great care and precision. The painting is a testament to the artist's mastery of the medium and his ability to convey the beauty and grace of the human form through the use of light and shadow.**