Acknowledgments

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Rembrandt and the Rules of Art Revisited
Eric Jan Sluijter

Since Jan Emmens’s influential book Rembrandt and the Regels van de kunst, it has been commonly taken for granted that classicist art theory took hold in the Netherlands after c. 1670 and that, as a consequence, the criticism of Rembrandt’s art came into being only after Rembrandt’s death. For example, Emmens was convinced that Joachim van Sandrart, in his 1675 biography of Rembrandt, showed little knowledge about Rembrandt and his work of the 1630s and 1640s and only repeated the popular clichés of the new classicism that had developed in Italy and France. He maintained that the works Von Sandrart put into Rembrandt’s mouth would have been impossible in the Netherlands in 1657–45 (the period Von Sandrart lived in Amsterdam), because classicist criticism did not yet exist.

In this essay, I argue that such criticism did not stem from theoretical ideas developed only in the later 17th century, but was rooted in debates that had already been going on for a long time, debates in which Rembrandt must have taken a deliberate and conspicuous stand. Von Sandrart, who wrote and ideed represent an alternative in the Amsterdam of the late 30s and early 40s, described with amazing precision how Rembrandt’s art in the 1630s and 1640s, especially the work of the 1630s and 1640s, reflects the influence of the Classical Antiquities in the works of this period. This ideology, to which Rembrandt adhered, was already quite clearly contested in the late 1650s and 1660s.

Since the publication of Jan Emmens’s influential book Rembrandt and the Regels van de kunst (Rembrandt and the rules of art), it has been generally taken for granted that the criticism of Rembrandt’s art—which was seen as issuing from a purely classicist standpoint—came into being only after Rembrandt’s death. The main argument was that classicist art theory took hold in Netherlands art literature after c. 1670. For instance, Emmens was convinced that Joachim von Sandrart, who lived and worked in Amsterdam between 1637 and 1645, had little knowledge about Rembrandt and his work of the 1630s and 1640s. He maintained that instead of giving reliable information, Von Sandrart used his Teutsche Academie (1675) in his Teutsche Academie (1675) the popular clichés of the new classicism that had developed in Italy and France. According to Emmens, the anti-classical remarks that Joachim von Sandrart put into Rembrandt’s mouth—and which he saw as deriving from such sources as Bellori’s and Malvasia’s criticism of Caravaggio or Du Fresnoy’s notions of the ignor- rant painter—would have been impossible in the Netherlands in the period 1637–45, since such classicist criticism did not yet exist. Emmens’s argument was so convincing that scholars no longer asked themselves whether Von Sandrart’s criticism might possibly reflect long-standing controversies. This is all the more remarkable because an alternative style in history painting, which already existed when Rembrandt started his career, has been given close attention lately and has, paradoxically, been labeled “Dutch classicism.”

The differences in style between these “classicists” and Rembrandt and his followers were, however, only discussed in twentieth-century “Wolfflinian” terms of style, without taking into account how Rembrandt and his contemporaries would have thought and talked about such stylistic distinctions. Emmens’s views, on the contrary, were exclusively based on theoretical writings about art; from his book one gets the impression that artistic ideologies exist only if they were written down in hefty theoretical treatises. However, the works of art themselves can tell us other things if we relate them to debates that must have been raging in many European art centers, among them Amsterdam.

In my view, the criticism voiced by Arnold Houbraken, Andries Pels, Jan de Bisschop, Von Sandrart, and others was rooted in diverging opinions that were being hotly discussed in Rembrandt’s lifetime. The notions which Emmens considered plainly anti-classical remarks that were put into Rembrandt’s mouth by Von Sandrart, must have been burning issues in the 1630s and 40s, issues in which Rembrandt took a conspicuous stand. I am convinced that Von Sandrart’s comments on Rembrandt’s art reflect discussions in the Amsterdam studios during the period in which he lived in this city. A highly ambitious and competitive personality like Von Sandrart, fresh from Rome where he settled in Amsterdam, might have fueled such debates in the late 1630s and 40s.

Characteristic of the view that has taken hold among art historians since the late 1960s is Jossus Bruny’s discussion of Rembrandt’s notorious etching of A Nude Woman Seated on a Mount (c. 1631) (fig. 1) — the same etching that undoubtedly triggered Andries Pels’s well-known diatribe that Rembrandt did not choose to depict a Greek Venus, because he was contemptuous of all rules of anatomy and proportions and simply rendered whatever he saw before his eyes. It also must have pro- voked Houbraken’s assessment that Rembrandt’s nudes were disgusting
because he did not select the most beautiful in nature, "stating as his fundamental principle that one should only imitate nature; everything done otherwise he found suspect."  

Broun was certainly right in pointing out Rembrandt's "classical" model; he could have referred to an even more classical example, Raphael's Solenne (well known from a print by Caraglio), which must have been in Rembrandt's mind when devising this nude (fig. 2). But the rest of his argument is rather amazing. The "peculiar way" by which Rembrandt allowed "naturalistic observation to play a much greater part than any Italian artist" seems like some mysteriously external and unconscious Northern force to which Rembrandt unwittingly succumbed. However, precisely the fact that Rembrandt took a "classical" example as his point of departure makes clear how much he deviated from current conventions. Rembrandt had the compositions of these well-known engravings right before his eyes (or stored in his memory), and he consciously chose to do something completely different. That the Italians were "steeped in a figurative tradition entirely unknown in the north of Europe" is just as surprising. Not only had many Northern

1 Rembrandt, A Nude Woman Seated on a Mound, c. 1631, etching 177 x 140 mm

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![A drawing, c. 1633, etching 177 x 160 mm](image)

artists and connoisseurs been to Italy, but numerous prints after Italian masters – and certainly those after Raphael and by the Carracci brothers – were avidly studied as part of the training of an ambitious history painter. Even more important is the fact that two generations of successful Northern artists had represented nude figures in a highly stylized, "Italianate" manner in great numbers of prints and paintings.

The generations from Frans Floris and Anthony Blocklandt to Hendrick Goltzius, Cornelis Cornelisz, van Haarlem and Abraham Bloemaert – artists who had turned to Italian examples as well as to classical antiquity – had dominated the field for more than half a century. The numerous engravings of nudes by and after Goltzius, Cornelis Cornelis, and Bloemaert would have been the images that every Dutch connoisseur envisioned when considering or discussing representations of the nude female body. Moreover, Cornelis Cornelisz. was still producing a type of "classical" nude in the first years of Rembrandt's career, as was Adriaen van Nieulandt, who followed Cornelis's type. Van Nieulandt lived and worked right across the street from Uylehus's studio where Rembrandt settled in the early 1630s and was, as far as we know, the only Amsterdam artist who regularly painted female nudes around this time (fig. 3). The renowned Bloemaert was also still rendering highly stylized nudes. His type of nude was published as exemplary in De Passe's Licht dem toek en schilder kunst of 1643.7 Painters and printmakers of the younger generation who had turned towards a more naturalistic idiom seldom depicted female nudes. In the rare cases that they did, artists like Lastman, Van der Valk and Baeulich depicted "allowed more naturalistic observation," but they certainly did not de- viate as drastically as Rembrandt from the conventions that would have been considered normative by most connoisseurs.8

The changes towards a self-conscious and determined "from life" ideology among many artists that spread throughout Europe in the first decades of the century and that became especially powerful in the Northern Netherlands elicited fierce reactions all over Europe, including Holland. About three years before Rembrandt produced his etching, in 1628, Jacques de Ville made this clear in a pamphlet with the long title: Dialogue concerning architecture and Painting. Also serving as a warning to all craftsmen and lovers of this art: that they should not paste at the manner of painting only, but should look further. In this peculiar little treatise, which was never seriously examined, De Ville rallied against an approach to art he found reprehensible.9 The manner of the Caravag- giots was clearly his target, but his criticism also applies to the Caravaggio's work.10 He characterized this hated style in the negative terms that would recur time and again. We find the fiercely expressed reproaches that nowadays -- and this is 1628 -- many artists (and connoisseurs) are ignorant of the fundamentals of perspective, proportion, anatomy, symmetry, proper posture, beauty, and drawing. Their art has no foundation because these artists merely work closely from life (vlak naar het leven); they are only interested in acquiring a particular manner (handeling) and employment of colors (sierren handelen) -- in which, he has to concede, they were indeed better than any artist ever been. This is, he fumes, what presently receives the most attention and for which connoisseurs are willing to pay a lot of money.11

These were arguments that anybody who had visited Rome in the first decades of the century could have picked up from discussions there. And they are, in fact, not essentially different from what Van Sandrart would write 50 years later in a much more refined and sophisticated vocabulary. A fierce criticism of artists who did not breed the rules or foundational art is not an invention of the later classical critics; we find it in the 1620s and 30s with, to name some widely diverging trea- tises from this period, Baglione in Rome, Carducho in Spain or De Ville in Holland. The targets of such criticism were those artists who, indeed, were of the opinion that one always should have nature directly before one's eyes and that everything not done from life was just "child's play or trifle," as was the polemical standpoint of Caravaggio that Van Mander was the first to record in 1604 and which was then an exciting piece of

8 For examples, see Skiljtor 2000, figs. 60, 70, 124, 173, 174, 226. His type of trade remained the same during the 1620s, 70s and 80s.
9 De Ville 1628, p. 7.
10 For examples, see Skiljtor 2000, figs. 46, 102, 103, 175, 242, 335, 336.
11 De Ville 1628, p. 7.
news about this new star in Rome. Much later Van Mander's words about Caravaggio were quoted by Houbraken in his biography of Rembrandt, and he added that this was also Rembrandt's ideology— and I think there is no reason to doubt this. It was not so much a later classicist construction to describe Rembrandt in terms of the critique on Caravaggio; it was the artist himself who must have adhered to notions first voiced polemically by Caravaggio and written down by Van Mander.

Such artists would have thought that “observation of natural things as they really look” had to be depicted unconditionally, including “seeking to render nature which is so abundant in its ever-changing diversity,” to quote phrases of Philip Angel (1642). This line of thought was supplemented with the controversial notion that the ancients were by no means normative because they had been far surpassed by modern artists. This notion we see, for instance, clearly represented in Constantijn Huygens’s strong opinions on painting as well as on rhetoric of c. 1630, when he appeared to be a fervent admirer of the young Rembrandt. This meant that, for such artists, the visual examples of antiquity were not the norm to emulate, but the examples of the modern artists who were perceived as having surpassed the ancients, like Raphael and the Carracci, or Titian and Rubens.

Rembrandt could not have publicized his position more clearly than with this etching of a female nude (and the related etching of a nude Diana from about the same time). In the preface of his anatomy book for artists, published in 1634, Jacob van der Gracht chastised both the artists who only thought it necessary to study antique statues, as well as those of the opposite camp who thought it sufficient to paint “only from life as it appears to them.” Van der Gracht characterizes the latter as depicting no more than “the garment of the human body, which is the skin.” This observation is remarkably apt where it concerns Rembrandt’s nudes that were etched only a few years earlier and in which Rembrandt concentrated on rendering with the etching needle a littlelike suggestion of real, soft and rippling flesh. More than for any other artist before, it was his deliberate purpose to create in painting or etching without concession bodies that were “done with real and natural fleshiness [echte en natuurlijk vleeschachtig ghedaen],” only by “following life itself straightforwardly, without applying any (rules of) art to attain beauty in the torso or legs,” as Titian’s manner of depicting.
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a nude had been described by Vasari and Van Mander.20 Although these
nudes were, in my opinion, not literally drawn "from life" after models
posing completely nude,21 it was Rembrandt's endeavor to suggest that
what the beholder sees is exactly what he had before his eyes - to bring
the women depicted close to the beholder's world of experience and
to powerfully involve him.

Van Sandtrant's criticism of Rembrandt's art is entirely understandable
and quite precise if we consider it within the situation in which both
artists found themselves between 1627 and 1645. It is important to real-
ize that Van Sandtrant's text approaches Rembrandt through the eyes of
a highly ambitious rival who vied for the attention of the same elite
group of patrons and collectors in Amsterdam,22 and who would have
paid close attention to what Rembrandt - the then most famous painter
in Amsterdam - was doing. But just as importantly, he looked at Rem-
brandt from the perspective of a painter who had just returned from
Rome. As such, he was well informed about the latest developments in
the art world of that city, where he had directed the production of the
impressive series of engravings after Vincenzo Giustinian's collection
of antiquities at a time when the antique example had been gaining
a firm foothold in Rome as a paradigm of proportion and movement.23
The presence in Amsterdam of a prominent personality like Van
Sandtrant no doubt gave these ongoing discussions on diverging man-
ners of painting a more consciously "classicism" tone.

As a painter, Van Sandtrant represented an alternative to Rembrandt.
Van Sandtrant's colors are bright, his illumination uniform, and his con-
tours cleanly drawn, delineating ideal and graceful forms. A work by
Joachim van Sandtrant, made as an overmantel for a beautiful chimney
designed by Philip Vingboons in the house of Johan Huysdecrop
and painted around 1642, shows the huge gap that separates these two paint-
ers (fig. 4). Just as Rembrandt had done so often, Van Sandtrant emulated
a composition by Pieter Lastman. However, from that starting point he
went into the opposite direction. Van Sandtrant's Odynerus, despite his
miserable state, kneels in a tasteful pose before Nausicaa who is por-
trayed in elegant contraposto. Her companions calmly observe the
scene; their poses exude grace and leggianza, essential elements for all
artists who adhered to academic ideals, especially when depicting wom-
en.24 The vivid and narrative expressiveness of Lastman's figures has
disappeared. The women's deadpan faces, smooth skin, firm flesh, per-
fect proportions, and colorful shining draperies - all painted with bright
hues and precise contours - show that the way in which Van Sandtrant
competed with Lastman could not be in starker contrast with the man-
ner in which Rembrandt did the same. Compare, for example, Rem-

concepts to which Rembrandt was committed and for which he was especially celebrated.

In a painting as the Susanna we can also recognize virtually every aspect of van Sandrart's description of Rembrandt's art.25 Von Sandrart emphasized that Rembrandt (flouted) "our rules of art, such as those of anatomy and human proportions, or perspective and the usefulness of antique statues, and the drawings of Raphael ..." and that Rembrandt would have claimed that "one should imitate nature alone and not bind oneself to any other rules."26 We hear the polemical tone about only working from life as in Van Mander's account of Caravaggio's words and in the Italian debates in the first decades of the century.27 As a master of fact, we find this notion of binding oneself to no rules but only following nature and one's own innate talents also strongly expressed by, for example, Rembrandt's early admirer Constantijn Huygens, when he writes about the art of rhetoric. And later by the playwright and Rembrandt-supporter Jan Vos when he defends his tragedies against the Aristotelian type of tragedy.28 The "rules" Rembrandt flouted according to Von Sandrart, were the same rules — concerning anatomy, proportions, perspective, drawing and the example of the antique and the great Italian masters of the Renaissance as opposed to only working from life — to which Jacob de ‘s-Graveland had been referring.

Von Sandrart also maintained that Rembrandt just followed his own judgment and that only the effect achieved was of prime importance. Rembrandt did not bother with clearly drawn outlines; he was only concerned with "the unification of the overall harmony [die Zusammenhaltung der universal-Harmonia]" through light, dark and coloring. Rembrandt not only knew how to render the simplicity of nature impressively, but also to make it beautiful through a natural power of his coloring and the suggestion of standing out in space (natürlichen Kräften in Coloritum und starken erhoben).29 Rembrandt highlighted only "what he considered the most important part [dem fürnehmsten Ort seines Interessis]", around which light and shadow were artfully bound together (including carefully balanced shadows), so that the light in the shadows faded away [wiche] with great judiciousness, making the colors truly glowing (ganz günstig). Von Sandrart's remark that Rembrandt excelled in rendering human skin and hair, thus closely approaching life, is perfectly in keeping with this description of his coloristic talents. In fact, all these terms are related to terminologies that, since Vasari's critique of Titian, served to indicate painters adhering to the coloring and "from life" ideology, which would have been concerned with fervor in Dutch studies of the 1620s, '30s and '40s. Von Sandrart describes with quite amazing precision the way Rembrandt put such concepts into use and created an art that deliberately competed

5 Rembrandt, Susanna and the Elders, 1636, oil on panel 47.4 x 38.6 cm, The Hague, Mauritshuis.

31 For a discussion of Huygens and Vos, see Sleijfer 2006, pp. 150–159.
which was based on a composition by this
28. For a more extensive discussion of Van Sandrart’s sources, see Skiljer 2006, pp. 212–219. See also Elkerts Herstors and Van de Wering 2006, pp. 242–244.
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with “all the graceful beauty that has been produced through the ages”, as Huygens had noted when describing the pitiful hideousness of Rembrandt’s Judas.29
This debate was already clearly outlined by Vassari when writing about his visit with Michelangelo to Titian’s studio, during which the latter was working on a Danae, an account which was in extenso repeated by Van Mander.30 In this passage the distinction between two methods of working, which came to be known as colorir and disegno, was for the first time emphatically stated, and it is obvious that Van Mander understood this as a fierce controversy between adherents of the Venetian and the Roman/Tuscan manner.31 Most of the terms that would be employed for decades to come were already present in Vassari’s account of Michelangelo’s disparaging words on the one hand, studying closely from life which resulted in lifeliness and naturalness, and on the other no proper drawing, no study after the most antique or modern examples and no proper grace through knowledge of the rules of art.32
It seems almost like a manifesto that Rembrandt’s first life-size nude, a tour de force in reflections of light, in which he displayed as in no other painting his capacities in depicting lifelike flesh, was a painting of Danae (fig. 6).33 When Rembrandt presented his solution of this theme, he wholeheartedly sided with Titian, on whom Van Mander, following Vassari, had written that he strove to make everything appear more tender and with greater three-dimensionality [soalciar en meer verhevenen – più morbidezza e maggiore rilievo], painting “his things from life without drawing, seeing to it that he represented with colors everything he saw in life, be it hard or soft.”34 It is precisely a painting like this that shows to such good effect that, to quote again Von Sandrart’s acute comments, “Rembrandt was capable of breaking the colors (shifting the tonal values, the same term Van Hoochstraaten used) according to his own character with great ingenuity and artfulness, and was thus able to render the true properties of nature in a lifelike way and to portray it as harmoniously as in real life.”35
Rembrandt was challenged in a rival style by Jacob van Loo, who must have painted his Effigies Spielen upon invitation in competition with Rembrandt (fig. 7), before an audience of connoisseurs from the Amsterdam elite who knew about such discussions and who were interested in large, ambitious paintings that referred to examples and debates in Italian art. By adopting some elements of the pose Van Loo deliberately made recognizable that he was competing with Rembrandt in an alternative style. The body is drawn with clear contours and modeled...
with a rather uniform lighting, its smooth surface displays no brushstrokes, and its compact forms betray no accidental distortions.

It seems to be telling that Jacob van Loo opted for a subject with contrasting connotations. It emerges from many texts that images of Danaë came to be seen as the prototype of a portrait which aimed at sensual arousal of the viewer because of the anecdote from antiquity about a particularly arousing painting of Danaë, which was often mentioned since St. Augustine quoted it several times as proof of the power of images to affect the senses. Thus, it is not coincidence that some of the most sensuous nudes ever painted were the Danaë's by Correggio, Titian, and Rembrandt, all of them striving to elicit strong feelings of sensual enjoyment and erotic involvement.

Boccaccio's story of Effegia, on the contrary, centers around the notion that a coarse, uneducated man who, after gazing at the ravishing beauty of the sleeping Effegia, changed from a dumb country bumpkin into an expert of beauty, a sharp-witted thinker and a skilled musician, horseman, and warrior. The obvious moral of the story is that the love for beauty edifies, as is underlined in all the translations and adaptations of this story. It seems no coincidence that Jacob van Loo, competing with the then-dominant style of Rembrandt, chose a story that underscores the ability of beauty to edify the intellect rather than to arouse the senses. This was quite a witty thing to do if he wanted to make a statement with this painting, using a style based on line and selection of the beautiful in nature (a method always associated with intellectual appeal), rather than striving for the most lifelike expressive

with means of color, light, and shade (continually discussed as appealing primarily to the senses). Van Loo's nude is definitely far less sensuous than Rembrandt's Danaë, not only because Rembrandt was a much better painter, but also because Van Loo's manner of painting was not meant to involve the viewer's senses and emotions as Rembrandt's does.

The presence of Van Sandrart, a prominent personality who loved to show off his Italian experiences as well as his relations with the Amsterdam elite, might have worked as a catalyst in the Amsterdam of c. 1640, lending more prestige to a style long present — a style in which a linear clarity of forms, idealization, and the rules of proportion, anatomy, and perspective were of prime importance. It must have been fascinating for the Amsterdam connoisseurs to see and discuss the completely different means by which painters like Rembrandt and his followers on the one hand, and Van Sandrart and Van Loo on the other, succeeded in reaching their goals.

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