

How Rembrandt surpassed the Ancients, Italians and Rubens as the Master of ‘the Passions of the Soul’¹

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The passions had to be rendered through the movements of the human figure (Van Mander); however it was an Italian cliché that Netherlandish artists were not able to depict figures properly. This article demonstrates how Rembrandt from his earliest works promoted the image of being the master of the *lijdingen des gemoeds*. Throughout his career Rembrandt aspired to surpass the artists of antiquity and the Italians through the portrayal of the passions to arouse the strongest possible empathy in the viewer, as Huygens immediately recognised. It is argued that concepts grafted onto classical rhetoric, such as *oogenblikkige beweging* (a term of his pupil Van Hoogstraten; a violent movement due to a sudden reversal of emotion that involves the viewer forcefully) were paramount in his earlier period, and in which one finds parallels with the Senecan-Scaligerian tragedies popular at that time. In contrast, in his later works Rembrandt avoided any movement, realising that the depiction of violent motion undermines the persuasiveness of the still image; he forces the viewer to imagine the inner conflicts in the minds of the protagonists who recognise their fate. To engage the viewer powerfully through a radical ‘from life’ ideology (situating himself in a northern tradition) was for Rembrandt a central concern in his continuous competition with the greatest exponents of his art (Titian, Rubens).

Hoe Rembrandt schilders uit de Oudheid, de Italianen en Rubens overtrof als meester van de 'lijdingen des gemoeds'.

De passies dienden te worden verbeeld door middel van de bewegingen van de ledematen van de menselijke figuur (Van Mander), maar het was een Italiaanse gemeenplaats dat noorderlingen slecht waren in het schilderen van figuren. In dit artikel wordt gedemonstreerd hoe Rembrandt zich vanaf zijn vroegste werk nadrukkelijk presenteerde als dé meester van de 'lijdingen des gemoeds' en gedurende zijn gehele carrière ernaar streefde om door middel van de verbeelding van de passies en het opwekken van een zo groot mogelijke empathie bij de toeschouwer de schilders uit de Oudheid en de Italianen te overtreffen, zoals Huygens direct onderkende. Beargumenteerd wordt dat een op de klassieke retorica geënt begrip als 'oogenblikke beweging' (een term van zijn leerling Van Hoogstraten: een heftige beweging veroorzaakt door een plotselinge omslag van emotie die de toeschouwer meebeleeft) voor zijn vroegere werk cruciaal was, waarbij parallellen met de in die tijd populaire Senecaans-Scaligeriaanse tragedie zijn aan te wijzen. In zijn latere werk vermijdt hij daarentegen elke beweging, zich realiserend dat de uitbeelding van heftige beweging de overtuigingskracht van het stilstaande beeld ondermijnt, en dwingt hij de toeschouwer zich in te leven in de innerlijke conflicten van figuren die hun lot doorzien. Het krachtig betrekken van de toeschouwer bij het voorgestelde door middel van een radicale 'naar het leven' ideologie, waarmee hij zich in een Noordelijke traditie plaatste, stond voor Rembrandt altijd centraal bij zijn permanente wedijver met de groten in zijn vak (Titiaan, Rubens).

The Dutch and the depiction of figures and passions

In the mid sixteenth century we already find the first traces of what would become a commonplace of Dutch art: Dutch painters were highly proficient in 'copying' nature, were highly skilled in technical matters, preferred less exalted subjects and were especially good at landscapes. In written texts this started with Michelangelo's alleged criticism that painters from the north only depicted things that please the eye and did so through exact imitation of the external appearance of things, and 'although it pleases some persons, it is done without reason or art, without measure or proportion without skilful selection or boldness, and without substance or force'.² This condescending

1 I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers, the editorial board, and to Herman Roodenburg and Catrien Santing for their critical comments.

2 The Portuguese artist Francisco de Holanda, who had moved in the circle of Vittoria Colonna and Michelangelo, 'quotes' Michelangelo in

his treatise *Dialogos de Roma-Da pintura antiga* (1548). For an English translation see: Francisco de Holanda, *Four Dialogues on Painting*, trans. A.F.G. Bell (London 1928) 16. Dutch translation: Francisco de Holanda, *Romeinse dialogen. Gesprekken met Michelangelo en Vittoria Colonna*, trans. A. Boon (Amsterdam 1993) 24-25.

‘Italian’ criticism – rooted in a humanistic ideology that was based on classical rhetoric (and fed by jealousy about the fact that paintings and prints from the Netherlands were much sought after by sixteenth-century Italian collectors) – was to have a long life. In the Netherlands itself elements of this negative reputation would be turned around in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century and given favourable connotations by Dutch humanists such as Hadrianus Junius and Hugo de Groot, as part of a positive self image – technical ingenuity, knowledge of optical matters, and being particularly true to nature were highlighted and legitimised by invoking parallels with renowned painters from antiquity.³ As Frans Grijzenhout demonstrated, it was only late in the seventeenth century that such stereotypes came to be connected with the cold and wet temperament of the Dutch as the cause of their slow but patient mind, in contrast to the sanguine Italians whose hot brain made them more suitable for grand history paintings.⁴

Karel van Mander in his *Schilder-Boeck* published in 1604, repeated several times, that Italians always denounced painters from the Netherlands as being unable to paint human figures properly, admitting however, that northerners were especially good at painting landscapes. At one point Van Mander quotes a poem by Domenicus Lampsonius, who gave as the reason that the Italians use their brains, while the Dutch have ingenuity in their hands.⁵ Van Mander urged Netherlandish artists to do their utmost to belie the opinion of the Italians. In *Den Grondt der Edel vry Schilder-const* (The foundation of the noble and free art of painting), he devoted a chapter to the proportions of figures, one to pose and bearing, and a whole chapter to the ‘Representation

3 See E.J. Sluijter, “‘Vele vermaerde ende trefficke schilders’”. Beelden van de Hollandse schilderkunst’, in: T. de Nijs and E. Beukers (eds.), *Geschiedenis van Holland 1572 tot 1795* (Hilversum 2002) volume 2, 379-420, in particular 386-390. Hadrianus Junius, *Batavia* (Leiden 1588) 238-240, in particular in his paragraphs on Antonie Mor and Pieter Aertsen (with comparisons to Parrhasius and Piraecus); for Hugo de Groot on painting in *Paralellon Republicarum* (1602), see: M. Meijer Drees, *Andere landen, andere mensen. De beeldvorming van Holland versus Spanje en Engeland omstreeks 1650* (The Hague 1997) 47-48 and J. Becker, ‘Kettens in de kunst. Nederlandse kunst als afwijking van de regel’, in: H. Hendricx and T. Hoenselaars (eds.), *Vreemd volk. Beeldvorming over buitenlanders in de vroegmoderne tijd* (Amsterdam 1998) 21-54, 33-34.

4 F. Grijzenhout, “‘Schilders van zulk een lome en vochtiger gesteldheid’”. Beeld en zelfbeeld van de Nederlandse schilderkunst in de zeventiende eeuw’, *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 107:4 (1992) 726-744.

5 Karel van Mander, *Den Grondt der Edel vry Schilder-const*, in: idem, *Het Schilder-Boeck* (Haarlem 1604) cap. I: 71-72, fol. 6r and V:13, fol. 15v; and idem, *Het Leven der Doorluchtighe Nederlandsche en Hooghduytsche Schilders*, in: idem, *Schilder-Boeck*, fol. 215r and 219r. The poem (translated by Van Mander from Lampsonius’ Latin verse) in the life of Jan van Amstel (fol. 215r). See also H. Miedema, *Den grondt der edel vry schilder-const* (Utrecht 1973) volume II, 409-410.

of the Affects, Passions, Desires and Sufferings of Men’, which he called ‘the kernel and soul of painting’.⁶ Naturally, great ability in depicting figures was a prerequisite, because

[...] the affects and passions which move the heart and the senses from within, make the external limbs react and show demonstrable signs through an observable movement in bearing, appearance and actions,

as he wrote in the first strophe of this chapter.⁷ Indeed some artists, such as Van Mander’s friends Hendrick Goltzius and Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem, did everything in their power to demonstrate their virtuosity in depicting human figures, their movements and passions.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, it was Rembrandt’s master, Pieter Lastman in particular, who, stimulated by new developments in Italy⁸, quite literally followed Van Mander’s advice

[...] to pay attention to the movement of the exterior of the body and the changes and stirring of the limbs, so that everyone can easily see what our figures experience and what they do.⁹

This would culminate in the art of his pupil Rembrandt, who presented himself as the pre-eminent master of the passions. He did so from the very start of his career, often directly emulating Lastman and demonstrating what he was able to achieve with the same subjects and motifs; from his *Balaam and the Ass* of 1626 to *Abraham’s Sacrifice of Isaac*, or *Susanna Surprised by the Elders* of 1636, he takes compositions of his former master as a starting point to explore how to depict affects in a more natural and powerful way.¹⁰

Through the ages Rembrandt has been recognised as the greatest painter of the representation of the passions. One wonders whether the commonplace that northern painters were not able to depict figures also stimulated its ultimate rebuttal – the fact that, of all people, a Dutchman became the pre-eminent master of the expression of passions through the depiction of the human figure. Rembrandt’s early admirer Constantijn

6 Van Mander, *Grondt*, cap. VI ‘Wtbeeldinghe der Affecten, passien, begeerlijckheden, en lijdens der Menschen’; the quote in verse 55, fol. 27r.

7 *Ibid.*, VI:1, fol. 22v.

8 A. Golahny, ‘Pieter Lastman: Moments of Recognition’, in: S. Dickey and H. Roodenburg (eds.), *The Passions in the Arts of the Early Modern Netherlands (Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek 60 (2010); Zwolle 2010) 179-201.*

9 Van Mander, *Grondt*, cap. VI:35, fol. 25v.

10 About those paintings among others: J. Bruyn et al. (eds.), *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings* (3 volumes; Dordrecht, Boston, London 1986-1989) volume I, cat. no. A2, volume III, cat. no. A108 and A117; for the latter painting exhaustively: E.J. Sluijter, *Rembrandt and the Female Nude* (Amsterdam 2006) chapter IV, 113-141.

Huygens saw it precisely that way: for him the art of the young Rembrandt was the decisive Dutch answer to the achievements of the Italians and the ancients.

Rembrandt's exceptional capacities in rendering the passions and the great intensity with which he strove to achieve his goals were immediately recognised by Huygens when the former was only about 24 years old; this recognition constituted the essence of Huygens' admiration for Rembrandt, which he expressed in the paragraphs on the art of painting in the autobiography of his youth, written in 1631.¹¹ Huygens emphasised that Rembrandt's excellence was to be found in the 'affectuum vivacitas' and 'vividam inventio', his lifelike expression of emotions, and his true-to-life inventions.¹² To this he added that

[Rembrandt] being totally absorbed in what he is doing, prefers to concentrate on a smaller picture to bring about through compactness an effect that one may seek in vain in the largest paintings by the other

(the other being Rembrandt's friend and studio companion Jan Lievens)¹³, an acute observation that still holds true for all the history paintings Rembrandt made between 1626 and 1631. In Huygens' beautiful *ekphrasis* of Rembrandt's rendering of the figure of Judas – an involved reading in which he imagines that he really sees before him what is happening – he makes clear that this figure, 'contorted in pitiful hideousness', as he says, is entirely different from anything he has ever seen before.¹⁴ This leads him to the conclusion that this still beardless young man has surpassed all the Italians and the artists from antiquity:

11 For a Dutch translation of the passage on painting, together with the Latin text, see: J.A. Worp, 'Constantijn Huygens over de schilders van zijn tijd', *Oud Holland* 9 (1891) 106-136. Later translations: A.H. Kan, *De jeugd van Constantijn Huygens door hemzelf beschreven* (Rotterdam 1971) 64-87; and C.L. Heesakkers, *Constantijn Huygens. Mijn jeugd* (Amsterdam 1987) 74-94. Huygens worked on the autobiography from 1629 to 1631; the passage on painting was written in the first months of 1631. For the dating and a careful analysis of this passage, see: I. Broekman, *Constantijn Huygens, de kunst en het hof* (PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam 2010) 177-230. We do not know when Huygens visited Rembrandt's (and Jan Lievens's) studio; this might have been as early as 1629.

12 For Huygens on Rembrandt's depiction of the passions, see Sluijter, *Rembrandt and the Female Nude*, 100-103.

13 Worp, 'Huygens over schilders', 125-126; Kan, *Jeugd Huygens*, 79; Heesakkers, *Huygens. Mijn jeugd*, 86.

14 Sluijter, *Rembrandt and the Female Nude*, 100-101.

To bring Troy, yes, all of Asia, to Italy, is a less great achievement, than to bring the highest title of honour from Greece and Italy to Holland; and this has been accomplished by a Dutchman who has barely been outside the walls of his native city. (And) This I compare with all beauty that has been produced through the ages. This should be a lesson for all those nitwits who say that nothing is being created or expressed nowadays that has not already been done better in antiquity.¹⁵

Thus Huygens was truly excited that, in his view, a Dutchman has surpassed the Italians and the ancients. Huygens underlined two aspects of Rembrandt's art, the effect on the viewer – as if the viewer is present and experiences the emotions depicted – and the means with which this was achieved by giving up conventional beauty and daring to depict ugliness in the service of a convincing true-to-life representation. It is clear that he considered this as a great novelty and he emphasised that the artist owed this to his natural talent alone.¹⁶ This not only reflects Huygens' attitude towards painting, but is also perfectly in line with Huygens's notions about rhetoric: one should surpass the ancients and not be bothered by rules from antiquity. What counts is the result – moving and convincing the audience. To attain that one needs simplicity, naturalness, innate talent and practice.¹⁷

Half a century later, Rembrandt's pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten named Rembrandt as the unsurpassed master of the 'passions of the soul' (*lijdingen des gemoeds*) when he enumerated in which respect the greatest painters were exemplary models, thus defining the core of their reputation. At the same time he corroborated Rembrandt's exceptional stature in this particular field: for Michelangelo it was 'well constructed nudes', Raphael 'the grace of women', Titian 'the appearance of coming forward and receding in space', Caravaggio 'naturalness', Rubens 'rich compositions', Van Dyck 'gracefulness' and for Rembrandt 'the passions of the soul'.¹⁸

Moving the beholder by 'oogenblikke beweeging' and a radical truth to nature

At the beginning of the century Van Mander had underlined continually that one could only learn to depict the passions through close observation from

15 Worp, 'Huygens over schilders', 126; Kan, *Jeugd Huygens*, 79; Heesakkers, *Huygens. Mijn jeugd*, 86.

16 See Sluijter, *Rembrandt and the Female Nude*, 102.

17 *Ibid.*, 101-112. Apart from the passage in the autobiography of his youth (Kan, *Jeugd Huygens*, 53-60; Heesakkers, *Huygens. Mijn jeugd*, 57-64),

Huygens articulated such thoughts most extensively in *Mengelingh*, see A. van Strien, *Constantijn Huygens, Mengelingh* (Amsterdam 1990) 134-167.

18 S. van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst* (Rotterdam 1678) 75.

life.¹⁹ However this should not be taken too literally because, according to Van Mander, following life closely is important, but one should first learn to select the most beautiful from nature, as he writes explicitly when he criticises Caravaggio's 'from life' ideology.²⁰ Thus Van Mander made clear that he adhered to this traditional art theoretical view. The notion that one should avoid the imperfections and the contingencies of nature would always prevail in Italy. From the Carracci to Domenichino and Poussin – all masters who were highly praised for their depiction of the passions – expression of emotions was in the first place a narrative device to represent the story depicted as clearly as possible and within the bounds of decorum.²¹ For only two decades this tradition was disrupted by Caravaggio's manner: to him, gripping the viewer through the emotional presence of the figures was more important than a clear narrative.²² Compared to Rembrandt however, even Caravaggio's work looks idealised and graceful in the movements of his figures.

Rembrandt's combination of striving for the strongest possible empathy with a relentless 'true-to-life' in the depictions of the passions was unheard.²³ However, his endeavours were perfectly in line with the views on rhetoric of Cicero, Quintilian and Horace, at that time much studied; their advice of moving the audience as the main goal is taken literally and applied to images. Rembrandt's exceptional interest in this most theatrical-rhetorical type of painting might have been stimulated by his early education at the Latin school. In rhetorical handbooks of the time, based on Roman rhetoric, the eliciting of strong emotions, especially compassion, was discussed extensively.²⁴ To achieve this, one should imagine the emotions that have to be expressed and feel them oneself, while the audience should be able to do the same, famously summarised by Horace as: 'if you want me to cry, you should cry yourself first'.²⁵ Indeed, as Thijs Weststeijn demonstrated, it is remarkable

19 Much of his advice came from Leon Battista Alberti (through the German version by Gualtherus Rivius); see many of Miedema's comments on chapter VI: H. Miedema, *Karel van Mander. Den grondt*, vol. II, 494-511.

20 Van Mander was the first to write about Caravaggio and to report the latter's radical 'from life'-ideology, which would be quoted by many others: Van Mander, *Leven*, fol. 191r. See Sluijter, *Rembrandt and the Female Nude*, 195-197.

21 J. Montagu, *The Expression of the Passions: The Origin and Influence of Charles Le Brun's Conference sur l'expression générale et particulière* (New Haven, London 1994) 58-67.

22 See in particular: L. Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative* (London 2011).

23 Sluijter, *Rembrandt and the Female Nude*, chapter 3, *passim*. Also chapter VII, *passim* on Rembrandt's notions about art.

24 See particularly J. Konst, *Woedende wraakhierigheid en vruchteloze weeklachten. De hartstochten in de Nederlandse tragedie van de zeventiende eeuw* (Assen, Maastricht 1993) chapters 3.2 'De retorica van het movere' and 3.3. 'De pathetische elocutio', with further references.

25 T. Weststeijn, *The Visible World: Samuel van Hoogstraten's Art Theory and the Legitimation of Painting in the Dutch Golden Age* (Amsterdam 2008) 182-184.

that nowhere else it seems to have been articulated so emphatically – in particular by Franciscus Junius, and later also by Rembrandt's pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten – that the viewer has to imagine that the things observed in a painting are really there before one's eyes. The viewer should forget that they are depictions; he has to participate in the emotions rendered, immersing himself totally as if transported into a 'virtual reality'.²⁶ The painter himself, when making the painting, has to be entirely absorbed in the image he conjures up in his mind's eye as if he were present, all in the service of the strongest persuasion.²⁷

No other artist made it his goal so radically to combine such concepts with the notion that this could only be achieved by observing life closely. For artists in the classicising tradition, which became so strong in seventeenth-century Italy and France, observing nature would always mean that one sketched from life first, but should thereupon adapt one's drawings to the conventions of beauty and grace. Rembrandt denounced this notion emphatically, which was to arouse severe criticism from all later seventeenth-century writers on art.²⁸ Jan de Bisschop, writing in 1671, saw this as a specifically Netherlandish aberration, when he enumerates the horrors of

[...] this mistaken notion, which until recently was deeply rooted in many particularly fine minds of our country and had well-nigh found general acceptance, so that almost everything that was reprehensible to the eye was selected – indeed sought out – to be painted and drawn as if it were sacred and special.²⁹

For Rembrandt, this radical 'from life'-ideology, which had its roots in the sixteenth century but was revived in history painting by such masters as Hendrick ter Brugghen and Pieter Lastman (and which in some respects is also connected with the Dutch concept of 'schilderachtig'), might have been a way to emphasise a northern identity as part of his sustained rivalry with Rubens

26 Sluijter, *Rembrandt and the Female Nude*, 105-106 and 151-153; Weststeijn, *The Visible World*, chapter III, *passim*; also: T. Weststeijn, 'Rembrandt and Rhetoric: The Concepts of *Affectus*, *Enargeia*, and *Ornatus* in Samuel van Hoogstraten's Judgement of his Master', in: M. van den Doel et al. (eds.), *The Learned Eye: Reading Art, Theory and the Artists's Reputation: Essays for Ernst van de Wetering* (Amsterdam 2005) 111-130.

27 Weststeijn, *Visible World*, 187-206, and: T. Weststeijn, 'Between Mind and Body: Painting the Inner Movements according to Samuel van Hoogstraten and Franciscus Junius', in: Dickey and Roodenburg, *The Passions in the Arts*, 263-283, 279.

28 See Sluijter, *Rembrandt and the Female Nude*, 195-200 and 206-219.

29 J. de Bisschop, *Paradigmata Graphices Variorum Artificum* (Amsterdam 1671), in preface 'Aen ... Six', *recto*, quoted in J.A. Emmens, *Rembrandt en de regels van de kunst* (Amsterdam 1979) 71 (my translation, EJS).

and such Italians as Titian and Annibale Carracci, painters for whom, at the same time, he had the greatest admiration.³⁰

From the outset Rembrandt acknowledged and actively promoted the image of being the master of the ‘lijdingen des gemoeds’, as Perry Chapman demonstrated.³¹ He did so in the first place through his specific choice of subject matter, but most conspicuously through his publication in 1630 of a group of etched self-portraits that were a complete novelty – his own face, studied from life in the mirror, expressing all kinds of strong emotions. Thus, Rembrandt literally presented himself as the artist who relived the different passions and observed them from life, which he then displayed for a wider audience of art lovers.³² Rembrandt also showed his own face in scenes in which he himself ‘participates’, taking part in the dramatic action depicted. Tellingly, he presented himself as such in his earliest known painting, the ambitious *Stoning of St. Stephen* of 1625, as well as in the first two paintings of the most important commission of his early career, the *Passion* series for the stadholder Frederick Henry, the *Raising of the Cross* and the *Descent from the Cross* from c. 1632-1633.³³ Rembrandt broadcasted himself as the artist who is deeply engaged in portraying the passions, imagining the experience, to be able to represent them with the greatest degree of verisimilitude – a kind of seventeenth-century Horatian method acting, as Perry Chapman called this.³⁴ This attitude entirely corresponds with Junius’ words in his *The Painting of the Ancients*:

A minde rightly affected and passionated is the only fountaine whereout doe issue forth such violent streams of passions, that the spectator, not being able to resist, is carried away against his will.³⁵

30 See Sluijter, *Rembrandt and the Female Nude*, 207-212. For ‘schilderachtig’, see: B. Bakker, ‘Schilderachtig: Discussions of a Seventeenth-Century Term and Concept’, *Simiolus* 23 (1995) 147-162.

31 H.P. Chapman, ‘Reclaiming the Inner Rembrandt: Passion and the Early Self-Portraits’, in: Dickey and Roodenburg (eds.), *The Passions in the Arts*, 233-260. Also: H.P. Chapman, *Rembrandt’s Self-Portraits: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Identity* (Princeton 1990) 12-21.

32 Chapman, ‘Reclaiming the Inner Rembrandt’, 243-253.

33 *Ibid.*, 243-249. Also, Chapman, *Rembrandt’s Self-Portraits*, 105-127. For the paintings, see Bruyn et al., *Corpus*, A1, A65 and A69.

34 Chapman, ‘Reclaiming the Inner Rembrandt’, 249 and 251-252. See there also on Samuel van Hoogstraten’s advice about acting before a mirror, for which one needs a ‘poetic mind’ (Van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding Hooge Schoole Schilderkonst*, 109-110). The ‘Selbstbildnis in der Assistenz’ has a long tradition, but the way in which Rembrandt applied this is a complete novelty; see H.-J. Raupp, *Untersuchungen zu Künstlerbildnis und Künstlerdarstellung in den Niederlanden im 17. Jahrhundert* (Hildesheim, etc. 1984) 243-255.

35 F. Junius, *The Painting of the Ancients* (London 1638) 299, cited in Chapman, ‘Reclaiming the Inner Rembrandt’, 251.



Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, *Self-portrait, open mouthed as if shouting*, 1630.

Reproduced here in original size.

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

All this was highly innovative. In a remarkably short time the image of Rembrandt as the master of the passions must have become the core of a fame that was unheard of in Holland up till then and which within a few years made his works among the most expensive of his time.³⁶

It comes as no surprise that the only words we know from Rembrandt about his own art, refer precisely to this image of the artist who is deeply immersed in and intensely preoccupied with representing the passions. In January 1639 he wrote to Huygens that the prince will be pleased with the paintings he is going to send (it concerns the last two paintings of the *Passion* series, the *Resurrection* and the *Deposition*)³⁷, because particularly in those paintings he has observed *die meeste ende die natuereelste beweeghelijkheid* ('the strongest and most natural motion and emotion'), which he also gives as an excuse for taking so long to paint them (and as a justification for the absurdly high payment he expected for the paintings).³⁸ Thus he underlined what must have been considered both by himself and by his audience as being the essence of his art.

Rembrandt's preoccupation with violent emotions was to reach its climax in a number of spectacular, large paintings produced in the years 1635-1636, such as the *Feast of Belshazzar* (see cover of this issue of *BMGN - LCHR*) and the *Blinding of Samson*.³⁹ Building on the teachings of his master Pieter Lastman, no artist adapted the 'from life' ideology to achieve the *natuereelste beweeghelijkheid* so drastically as he did, jettisoning conventional gestures and poses with which emotions were usually expressed, and renouncing all grace in movement and attitude. Lastman had already begun to do that, but compared to Rembrandt, his gestures still look conventional and his figures contain vestiges of grace. Grace, *grazia*, had always been a central tenet in Italian art theory, but Rembrandt consciously did away with the conventions of graceful poses and movements such as *contraposto*. He tried to imagine what the event would really have looked like. Hence we see, for example, in *Andromeda Chained to a Rock* (c. 1630/1631) Andromeda as a frightened, cowering girl, not nude but naked, her hand and arms awkwardly twisted while trying to shy away but not able to do so, reacting to something horrible that we cannot see, which heightens the suspense.⁴⁰ This drastic lifelikeness must have been a shock to connoisseurs who, like Rembrandt himself, would have had the many well-known prints of *Andromeda* by and after Hendrick

36 E.J. Sluijter, 'Determining Value on the Art Market in the Golden Age: An Introduction', in: A. Tummers and K. Jonckheere (eds.), *Art Market and Connoisseurship* (Amsterdam 2008) 7-28, in particular 13-16.

37 For the paintings, see Bruyn et al., *Corpus*, A126 and A127.

38 H. Gerson, *Seven Letters by Rembrandt* (The Hague 1961) 34.

39 For the paintings see: Bruyn et al., *Corpus*, A110, A116.

40 See on this painting exhaustively: Sluijter, *Rembrandt and the Female Nude*, chapter 2, *passim*.



▲
Peter Paul Rubens, *Prometheus*, 1618.
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

Goltzius as a kind of prototypes in their minds.⁴¹ This was the radical way in which Rembrandt strove to outstrip his predecessors and contemporaries, such as the celebrated master of depicting violent passions, Peter Paul Rubens.⁴² For Rubens, the example of antiquity would remain the norm that one could only try to equal.⁴³ For Rembrandt – and he might have been stimulated by Huygens, who is clear about this in the autobiography of his youth, whether it concerns painting or rhetoric – the ancients had been surpassed by the greatest painters of the renaissance, such as Titian and Rubens: it was these artists one should try to equal or even surpass.⁴⁴

For Rubens the combination of *grâce et véhémence* was essential, even in the most violent scenes, as he himself wrote in a letter about a painting of a *Lion Hunt* to the English ambassador in The Hague, Sir Dudley Carleton, who owned many paintings by the artist.⁴⁵ Rubens was devoted to the classical conventions of graceful pose and movement, such as we see, for example, in the Herculean body of the chained *Prometheus*, who suffers horrifying pain and terror but with graceful movements of body and limbs. Rubens's brilliant depiction of Prometheus' agonies, an image of atrocious violence that was painted in 1611 or 1612, was in the possession of Sir Dudley Carleton, who bought it in 1618. In 1612 Dominicus Baudius, a professor in Leiden, had already lauded this painting in a poem in Latin that was published in 1620.⁴⁶

41 About the Goltzius prints of *Andromeda Chained to a Rock*, see: E.J. Sluijter, *Seductress of Sight: Studies in Dutch Art of the Golden Age* (Zwolle 2000) 48-61.

42 About Rubens and the depiction of the passions, see N. Büttner and U. Heinen (eds.), *Peter Paul Rubens. Barocke Leidenschaften* (Braunschweig, Munich 2004), in particular Heinen's essay with the same title (28-39) and U. Heinen and A. Thielemann (eds.), *Rubens Passioni. Kultur der Leidenschaften im Barock* (Göttingen 2001).

43 J.M. Muller, 'Rubens's Theory and Practice of the Imitation of Art', *Art Bulletin* 114 (1982) 229-247.

44 See, for example, Sluijter, *Rembrandt and the Female Nude*, 94-97, 109-111 and 260-263.

45 See Heinen in: Büttner and Heinen, *Rubens. Barocke Leidenschaften*, 28 and 146.

46 Heinen discussed this poem (with a German translation from the Latin) in Büttner and Heinen, *Barocke Leidenschaften*, 29. There are several letters from Baudius to Rubens from the years 1611-1612 which were published in 1620, among them the poem, which he had also sent to Rubens (D. Baudius, *Epistolarium Centuriae* [Leiden 1620], nos 52, 47 and 69 respectively, the poem on 632-634). Translations of the letters in: R. de Smet, 'Een nauwkeuriger datering van Rubens' eerste reis naar Holland in 1612', *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen* (1977) 199-220.



▲
Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, *The blinding of Samson*, 1636.
ARTOTHEK / Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main.

Baudius, who was acquainted with Rubens and a friend of such men as Daniël Heinsius and Petrus Scriverius⁴⁷, described with great gusto the experience of gruesome pain – such as the sharp talons in the hero's face and thigh, the bloody wound in his breast from which the aquiline beak tears the liver – ending with the words that 'horror holds captive those who stand before it'.⁴⁸ Rubens's choice of this subject for depicting such violent agonies would not have been a coincidence; he was always fond of 'reconstructing' subjects of which famous paintings had existed in antiquity. He certainly knew the elaborate *ekphrasis* of a painting portraying the chained Prometheus by Achilles Tatius:

[...] he, in agony, is all drawn up, twisting himself on to his side, and lifts up his thigh [...] the other leg is stretched out straight right down to his feet, and the tension of it can be seen actually into the toes. His torture is shown in the rest of the representation of him: his eyebrows are arched, his lips drawn up, his teeth shewn: you cannot help feel pity even for what you know is only a picture.⁴⁹

Rubens would also have been acquainted with the anecdote about the Greek painter Parrhasius who tortured a slave to death to be able to observe the agonies that he wanted to depict in a painting of Prometheus.⁵⁰

Rembrandt transformed Rubens's composition into another epitome of gruesome vehemence and suffering – Samson whose eyes are being poked out. Like Rubens's hero, Samson is tumbling towards the viewer; Samson too, is attacked with a violent movement sweeping down upon the victim from the right background – not an eagle with terrifying claws and beak, but armed soldiers, one of whom gouges out Samson's eyes with a kris. Nothing is left of a beautiful heroic body; there is no reference whatsoever to classical anatomy

47 Marloes Hemmer demonstrates extensively in her forthcoming dissertation the importance of this Leiden circle of humanists for the early dissemination of Rubens's fame in the Northern Netherlands. She also argues that Baudius must have visited Rubens in Antwerp and have seen the painting, which he describes in some detail, in his studio. For Baudius' circle, see De Smet, 'Een nauwkeuriger datering van Rubens'. For Scriverius as one of the connoisseurs who admired Rembrandt as a young artist and was probably even a patron, see G. Schwartz, *Rembrandt. Zijn leven, zijn schilderijen* (Maarsse 1984) 38-39; E. van de Wetering, 'Rembrandt's Beginnings – an Essay', in: idem, *The Mystery of the Young*

Rembrandt (Berlin, Amsterdam 2001) 22-57, 27-32; also A. Chong, 'The Myth of Young Genius: Understanding Rembrandt's Early Career', in: idem (ed.), *Rembrandt creates Rembrandt: Art and Ambition in Leiden, 1629-1631* (Boston, Zwolle 2000) 65-82, 74. A recent correction: P. Tuynman, 'The Earliest Extant Judgement on Rembrandt: Schrevelius and Buchelius, with an Aside on Scriverius', in: M. Roscam Abbing (ed.), *Rembrandt 2006. Vol. 1. Essays* (Leiden 2006) 217-229.

48 See Ulrich Heinen, 'Barocke Leidenschaften', 37.

49 Quote from Montagu, *Expression of the Passions*, 60.

50 *Ibid.*, 63.

and proportions. The lifelike rendering of the pain reflex – for example the angular, spastic movement of the right leg and the ugly foot with the clenched toes that replace the flowing movement and beautiful foot of Rubens's hero – are all meant to bring the scene closer to the world of experience of the viewer, to hit him forcefully and to fill him with intense empathy. Rembrandt and his audience of connoisseurs were undoubtedly aware that Rubens's figure, in its turn, was an emulation of an invention by Titian, widely known from a famous engraving by Cornelis Cort (*Tityus attacked by a Vulture*), but this made it all the more challenging; it offered Rembrandt the possibility to rival the two masters who were his greatest examples and to show off what *he* was able to do by imitating the same motifs.⁵¹ He did so by depicting horror with a ghastly lifelikeness, the blood spouting from Samson's eye.⁵² Thus he created the most violent painting of his career, arguably even the most violent painting of the seventeenth century.

Rembrandt's history paintings of the late 1620s and 1630s demonstrate precisely what his pupil Van Hoogstraten later gave as advice when discussing the depiction of the passions;

[...] one should depict an oogenblikkige beweeging (meaning: an instantaneous motion and emotion that takes place at one single moment) that expresses in essence what occurs in the story; as Horace says, 'create every work as is fitting, singly and unequivocally [enkel en eenwezich]'. Do this in such a way that the depicted scene involves the viewer unambiguously [eenstemmich] as if he were one of the bystanders, and will make him frightened when showing a brutal deed, or moved with compassion when someone suffers harm, or gratified by some fair deed.⁵³

Such notions were perfectly in line with rhetorical advice and correspond to rhetorical concepts such as *enargeia*, *evidentia* and *perspicuitas*, as Thijs Weststeijn has shown.⁵⁴ They would have been discussed in circles of playwrights as well as ambitious painters. The term 'oogenblikkige beweeging' wonderfully articulates the visual rendering of a sudden motion and emotion and seems to originate in conversations of painters in studios like those of Lastman and Rembrandt.

51 See about this type of imitation: E.J. Sluijter, 'Over rapenen wedijver in de Nederlandse schilderkunst van de zeventiende eeuw', *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 21 (2005) 267-292, in particular 280-282.

52 The jets of blood might have been inspired by a version of Caravaggio's *Judith killing Holofernes*, that must have been around in Amsterdam in that

period; see my forthcoming book *Rembrandt's Rivals: History Painting in Amsterdam, c. 1630-1690* (Amsterdam, Philadelphia 2014).

53 Van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding Hooge Schoole Schilderkonst*, 116.

54 Weststeijn, *Visible World*, 185-191; Weststeijn, 'Between Body and Mind', 267-286.

There certainly are similarities with the ways in which the passions were rendered in the dramas performed on the stage in the first half of the century, which were determined by the example of the tragedies of Seneca and the poetical concepts of Horace and the humanist Scaliger. Such ‘Senecan-Scaligerian’ tragedies were immensely popular in Amsterdam between 1610 and 1650. Characteristic of this type of drama is the alternation of violent emotions through disastrous reversals of fate, meant to shock the audience forcefully and involve them through horror and compassion. In such tragedies, which are full of the most gruesome deeds, there is no gradual development of a plot that carries the viewer away. Within the separate building blocks of the drama, it is the rendering of the fierce and intense emotions that had to move the beholder, emotions such as rage, terror, fear – especially of innocent victims – and despair, in scenes of rape, betrayal, mutilation and other horrors like violent killing.⁵⁵ Such motifs can all be found in the subjects Rembrandt depicted between 1625 and 1640.

However, it is hard to say whether Rembrandt was consciously concerned with the example of Seneca’s stoic ethics, which were certainly of paramount importance for Rubens. The latter was a great admirer of Seneca and fervent adherent of his Stoic philosophy⁵⁶, which taught that one should always maintain one’s mental balance, whatever horror might afflict one, and to be immune to the changes of fate by shielding oneself against uncontrolled emotions and every form of intemperance. From that point of view, seeing gruesome, intemperate and violent changes of fate, which strike one with sudden, involuntary disturbance – Seneca described this as *ictus* – should immediately be mastered by reason and lead to the insight that one has to remain steadfast under all circumstances; the horrors of the theatre stage

55 For a survey with a discussion of the characteristics of the Senecan-Scaligerian type of tragedy see: Mieke B. Smits-Veldt, *Het Nederlandse renaissance-toneel* (Utrecht 1991) chapters III and IV, especially 45-55; also see M.B. Smits-Veldt, *Samuel Coster. Ethicus-didacticus* (Groningen 1986) 27-80; and J. Konst, *Woedende wraakghierigheid*, 31-46 and 163-178; and K. Porteman and M.B. Smits-Veldt, *Een nieuw vaderland voor de muzen. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1560-1700* (Amsterdam 2008) 173-175.

56 See Heinen, ‘Barocke Leidenschaften’, 31-34 (with further references) and W. Brassat, ‘Tragik, versteckte Kompositionskunst und Katharsis im Welt von Peter Paul Rubens’, in: U. Heinen and A. Thielemann (eds.), *Rubens Passioni*, 41-63. The abundance of gruesome suffering in the beloved Senecan dramas in combination with the Tridentine reform of the use of images, in which pathos was considered an appropriate means to intensify the devotion of the viewer, for Rubens were the legitimization of the violence and horror in paintings, especially those depicting martyrdom.

might strengthen the beholder to mentally withstand one's own real fate, to face it with equanimity and to conduct a virtuous life.⁵⁷

It accords perfectly with Senecan-Stoic ethics that in his most gruesome and violent painting Rembrandt chose to represent a hero who perishes because of his moral blindness, having succumbed to uncontrolled desires.⁵⁸ The ambitious subject choice for Rembrandt's earliest known painting, the *Stoning of St. Stephen* (1625), possibly commissioned by Petrus Scriverius⁵⁹, might be considered a perfect demonstration of the Senecan-Stoic contrast between worldly violence and suffering of the steadfast.⁶⁰ However, most of his paintings of killing (*Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1635), rage (*Balaam and the Ass*, 1626; *Christ Driving the Money Changers from the Temple*, 1626), terror (*Belshazzar's Feast*, c. 1635), threat (*Samson Threatening his Father-in-Law*, 1635), despair (*The Repentant Judas*, 1629), betrayal (*Samson and Delilah*, c. 1628), rape (*Rape of Proserpina*, c. 1631; *Rape of Ganymede*, *Rape of Europa*, 1632), or innocent suffering of defenceless women (*Andromeda Chained to the Rock*, c. 1630; *Susanna and the Elders*, 1636), and scenes from the *Passion of Christ* (1631-1639) seem to be determined in the first place by the challenge to surpass all others in gripping the viewer with force and arousing intense empathy. Competition with Rubens must have been continually on his mind in this period. The tension between, on the one hand, feeling strong emotions by experiencing the things seen as if they are real, and on the other hand the aesthetic admiration of the work because at the same time one knows that it is a brilliant painting, must have been central for the enjoyment of such works. The *locus classicus* of such pleasure comes from Aristotle who wrote that things we would not like to see in reality – the ugly, the gruesome – one enjoyed seeing in a truthful representation.⁶¹ This is most clearly expressed in Huygens's enthusiastic account of Rubens's horrifying portrayal of *Medusa* (which, however, he would rather see in the house of a friend, and was kept behind a curtain), in which he describes the combination of shock, disgust and delight (the latter caused by 'the vivid and charming cruelty of the matter').⁶² We already met something

57 See U. Heinen, 'Huygens, Rubens and Medusa: Reflecting the Passions in Paintings, with some Considerations of Neuroscience in Art History', in: Dickey and Roodenburg, *The Passions in the Arts*, 151-176. About *ictus*: 153-156. Heinen also tries to connect the rhetorical theories of response to present day results of neuroscientific research. See below, note 63.

58 On the example of the Senecan drama and neo-stoic ethics among the Amsterdam playwrights, see Smits-Veldt, *Samuel Coster*, 58-74; idem, *Nederlandse renaissance-toneel*, 34-36, 68-69, and *Konst, Woedende wraakghierigheid*, 31-46.

59 Schwartz, *Rembrandt*, 38-39.

60 On the 'stoic Kontrapost' see: W. Brassat, 'Tragik, versteckte Kompositionskunst und Katharsis', 54.

61 See, for example, Heinen, 'Huygens, Rubens and Medusa', 162.

62 See the exhaustive analysis of Heinen, 'Huygens, Rubens and Medusa', *passim*; also: W. Vetter, "'Gegen rasende Wut, was vermag da Schönheit?" Inszenierungen von Schrecken und Gewalt im Werk des Peter Paul Rubens', in: Büttner and Heinen, *Barocke Leidenschaften*, 58-68.

similar in Baudius's pleasure when experiencing and admiring the gory horror depicted in Rubens's *Prometheus*, or in Huygens's glowing description of the hideousness of the repentant Judas's contorted body in Rembrandt's painting.⁶³

Contemplating the 'woelingen'

However, from the 1640s Rembrandt was searching for different ways to depict the emotional content of his history paintings. He must have been struggling with the fact that the depiction of strong movement can never be natural, because a painting is always a 'still'.⁶⁴ In paintings such as the *Abraham and Isaac*, the *Resurrection*, or *Belshazzar's Feast*, he had gone to the limit in depicting sudden, split-second movements by way of a knife falling, wine being spilt, a falling sword, even a man falling head over heels, all suspended in the air. These were spectacular images, but in the end unsatisfactory, because this movement threatened an entirely convincing lifelikeness.

As of the 1650s Rembrandt had completely revised his manner of rendering the passions, entirely abandoning the *oogenblikkige beweeging*. Perhaps one may compare this change with the development in Vondel's later tragedies. From the early 1640s Vondel's tragedies were to become more and more inspired by Greek drama – his first step in this new direction being his translation in 1639, with the help of Vossius's son Isaac, of Sophocles' *Elektra* – in which the emotional reactions of the spectator are manipulated in an entirely different way.⁶⁵ Fear and compassion were now incited through a

63 The reality of kinaesthetic empathy and of the viewer's corporeal and affective response when engaged with such images, that are implicit in such rhetorical concepts as *natuereelste beweegelijkheid* and *oogenblikkige beweeging* have lately been examined from the angle of neurosciences and anthropology. See H. Roodenburg, 'Beweeglijkheid embodied: on the corporeal and sensory dimensions of a famous emotion term', in: Dickey and Roodenburg, *Passions and the Arts*, 307-318; see *ibid.*, note 12 for further literature. Recent work of David Freedberg examines the emotional impact of art from a neuroscientific point of view. Also Heinen, 'Huygens, Rubens and Medusa', *passim*.

64 Ernst van de Wetering has argued that this phenomenon must have been the cause of Rembrandt's 'crisis' in the 1640s. See E. van de Wetering, 'Rembrandt als zoekende kunstenaar', in: E. van de Wetering et al. (eds.), *Rembrandt. Zoektocht van een genie* (Zwolle, Amsterdam 2006) 108-115.

65 See Smits-Veldt, *Nederlandse renaissance toneel*, 51, 58, 64-65; Konst, *Woedende wraakghierigheid*, 189; Porteman and Smits-Veldt, *Nieuw vaderland voor muzen*, 177. For an innovative and stimulating view on Vondel's move from Senecan drama to the entirely different emotional technique of 'anti-stoic' Aristotelian poetics 'effecting a profound change of heart in the audience by means of the play's emotional poetics', see the essay in this volume by Kristine Steenbergh.



▲
Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, *Bathsheba with King David's letter*, 1654.

RMN-Grand Palais, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Photographer: Hervé Lewandowski.

continuous unfolding of the plot in which the development of inner conflicts, *woelingen*, as Vondel called them – inner agitations – play an important role and gradually lead to the climax, the *peripeteia* or *staetveranderinge* (the reversal of the fate of the protagonist), which is accompanied by *herkenisse* (recognition).⁶⁶ For Vondel this meant not just a situation of recognition, but a realisation of and insight into the true state of affairs – the inescapable situation in which the protagonist finds him or herself.⁶⁷

In Rembrandt's later history paintings we never see a sudden reversal of emotion, but mute and motionless situations in which a reversal of mood seems to take place gradually. The viewer experiences a strong suggestion that he sees protagonists who recognise and realise their tragic circumstances; this makes him empathise with the inner conflict or the agonies, the *woelingen*, that trouble the subjects' minds. On the stage such inner conflicts could be represented by long laments and soul-searching monologues, but how can something comparable be done in a painting? The artist has to visualise what in fact *cannot be visualised*, the inner thoughts, the ponderings, the internal struggle, of the protagonist(s). Rembrandt solved this brilliantly by forcing the viewer to think about what is going on in the minds of the persons depicted. To this purpose he banished all action and reaction and avoided any indication of dialogue (for example: *Bathsheba with King David's Letter*, 1654; *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph*, 1656; *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 1659; the *Banquet of Esther*, 1660; the *Disgrace of Haman*, c. 1665; the *Return of the Prodigal Son*, c. 1666).⁶⁸ The suggestion that the protagonist(s) is/are in deep thought is about the only element for the viewer to go by. Because little information is given, the beholder is forced to concentrate on this motionless and mute figure and is thus left to his own devices to interpret inner emotions, being free to project his own feelings and emotions onto the image and to empathise with the assumed agonies.

For example, Rembrandt emphasised Bathsheba's expression of being lost in deep thought.⁶⁹ Simultaneously, by depicting the letter in the

66 See Smits-Veldt, *Nederlandse renaissancetoneel*, 55-58, 90-92; Konst, *Woedende wraakghierigheid*, 188-202; Porteman and Smits-Veldt, *Nieuw vaderland voor muzen*, 177, 379-386, 531-538. Albert Blankert, followed by many others, mistakenly referred to the concept of 'staetverandering' in relation to Rembrandt's early works; see E.J. Sluijter, 'Rembrandt's Portrayal of the Passions and Vondel's "staetverandering"', in: Dickey and Roodenburg, *The Passions and the Arts*, 283-301.

67 See W.A.P. Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah* (Zwolle 1959) volume 2, 294, note 2 and 366.

68 See for the paintings, for example, C. Tümpel, *Rembrandt* (Antwerpen, Amsterdam 1986), cat. nos. 24, 26, 29, 30, 31 and 72 respectively.

69 For an exhaustive interpretation of this painting, see Sluijter, *Rembrandt and the Female Nude*, 352-368 and idem, 'Rembrandt's Bathsheba and the Conventions of a Seductive Theme', in: A. Jensen Adams (ed.), *Rembrandt's Bathsheba reading King David's Letter* (Cambridge, etc. 1998) 48-99. In this book also interpretations of the same painting by Mieke Bal, Svetlana Alpers and Margaret D. Carroll.

centre of the image, he indicated to the informed viewer that she knows that her beauty has elicited the sinful desires of a male voyeur, King David, in whose position the viewer is placed. This is not a Bathsheba in the centre of a narrative action, as was usual; in other paintings Bathsheba was handed a message, being spoken to and/or reading a letter (while David was looking at her from a distance). By banishing every sign of action and movement, Rembrandt compels the viewer, who realises that she is aware of her situation, to contemplate her inner conflict: the impossible choice between adultery and disobedience to King David. In all Rembrandt's later paintings, instead of experiencing an *oogenblikkige beweging* that is *eenstemmig* or *eenwezig*, making immediately clear what is going on, the viewer is forced to wonder what troubles the minds of the figures depicted and to contemplate their situation, which always contains a far-reaching change of their fate. Even in *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, both Jacob and the Angel seem to be locked in a motionless embrace, so that the viewer is compelled to wonder about Jacob's thoughts and to reflect on the reversal of his fate.

However, in contrast to Vondel, Rembrandt would never renounce his basic principle that life should be followed unconditionally to bring the represented as close as possible to the world of experience of the viewer. In this respect he was closer to Jan Vos, who in 1641 in the dedication of *Aran and Titus* challenged Vondel, who had published *Elektra* shortly before. In the preface of the latter, Vondel had used terms from painting as a comparison (as he did more frequently to make his point)⁷⁰, writing

[...] that all the parts of this noble maiden [Elektra] are well measured and flawless, just as the colours of Greek eloquence are artfully scumbled. Here one does not see anything misshapen, and all the parts, from the minor to the major parts, cohere and flow together effortlessly.⁷¹

In the dedication of his play Jan Vos however, set against the idealising perfection of *Elektra*, the 'deformity' of his heroes, maintaining that nature has to be represented in all its aspects and that one finds pleasure in gazing 'at creatures whom nature has refused pleasing proportions and the right highlights and shadows of their shapes'.⁷² Thus, Vos reacted wittily to Vondel's pictorial metaphors: instead of well measured proportions, scumbled

70 J. Konst, 'Een levende schoon-verwighe schilderije. De tragedie als historiestuk', in: A.C.G. Fleurkens et al. (eds.), *Dans der muzen. De relatie tussen de kunsten gethematiseerd* (Hilversum 1995) 102-115.

71 J.F.M. Sterck et al. (eds.), *De werken van Vondel. Volledige en geïllustreerde tekstuutgave in tien*

deelen (Amsterdam 1927-1940) volume 3, 642; also see: M. Meijer Drees, 'Toneelopvattingen in beweging. Rivaliteit tussen Vos en Vondel in 1641', *De nieuwe taalgids* 79 (1986) 453-460.

72 J. Vos, *Aran en Titus, of Wraak en Weerwraak* (Amsterdam 1641) 7.

transitions and flowing, coherent compositions, he shows unpleasing proportions and strong contrasts in highlights and shadows. In the 1630s Rembrandt might have used a similar vocabulary to describe his works. However, unlike Vos who was to continue the Senecan-Scaligerian mode throughout the following decades, albeit without the strong moral undertone of the Senecan dramas from the earlier period, Rembrandt abandoned the exciting spectacle of his earlier paintings, as we have seen.

The only true *pathopios*

Rembrandt seems to have been the only painter from the Northern Netherlands to be intensely preoccupied with the problem how to depict the passions most convincingly. As Weststeijn pointed out, in his treatise on painting, *De graphice* (1650), Vossius terms the painter *pathopios* (maker or designer of the passions) to indicate the latter's essential task.⁷³ No other artist would have deserved this epithet more than Rembrandt. Although for some time his manner became the great fashion, neither Rembrandt's many pupils nor his competitors followed his continual search for how to emotionally involve the viewer as strongly as possible; some of them because they felt they were not capable, others, such as his highly talented pupils Govert Flinck and Ferdinand Bol, because they were not willing to sacrifice grace and the long standing conventions in gestures and poses. Samuel van Hoogstraten, also a pupil who moved to a more classicising style, was to write that 'it is not enough for a picture to be beautiful, it must have in it a certain *beweeglijkheid* that has power over those who see it', but in the same sentence he adds the admonition that one can only do this well if one also considers what he calls 'dansleyding', graceful movement.⁷⁴ It is unlikely that Rembrandt would ever have said such a thing.

In the 1640s an alternative manner – in which emotions were subordinate to beauty, grace and clarity – already began to challenge Rembrandt. Joachim von Sandrart, a highly ambitious German painter of the same age as Rembrandt, must have been a catalyst in this respect. He came to Amsterdam in 1637, fresh from Rome, where he had been befriended by such artists as Francois Duquesnoy and Nicholas Poussin.⁷⁵ From the paintings

73 Weststeijn, *The Visible World*, 171, 193-196, 209-215 and Weststeijn, 'Between Mind and Body', 263-283, 279.

74 Van Hoogstraten, *Hooge Schoole*, 293.

75 About Sandrart, see C. Klemm, *Joachim von Sandrart. Kunst, Werke und Lebenslauf* (Berlin 1986). About Sandrart's career strategies in

Rome and Amsterdam, see: Erna Kok, *Culturele ondernemers in de Gouden Eeuw. De artistieke en sociaal-economische strategieën van Jacob Backer, Govert Flinck, Ferdinand Bol en Joachim von Sandrart* (PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam 2013) chapter 4.



Rombout van Troyen, *The Ghost of Achilles demanding the Sacrifice of Polyxena*, 1652.

The Bridgeman Art Library, Private Collection, Johnny Van Haefte Ltd., London.

he made in Amsterdam, we may infer that he strove to be as different from Rembrandt as possible, reintroducing grace as a central tenet, together with the rules of proportion and anatomy, while using even lighting and clean contours, as can be seen, for example in his *Odysseus and Nausicaa*, painted in 1641 for burgomaster Joan Huydecoper.⁷⁶ Sandrart, who left Amsterdam in 1645, for a short time was the darling of the social and literary elite and had become a great friend of Vondel, who probably learned from him how to use with insight the vocabulary of the painter.⁷⁷ Van Hoogstraten was later to contrast both manners, saying about artists whom today we would call the ‘classicists’, that they ‘esteem only a straightforward representation, freely organized, boasting that only what they do represents true grandeur, following the Roman gracefulness of Raphael and Michelangelo’, and that they renounced painters who harm dignity by ‘the depiction of unbefitting passions’, and by ‘the deliberate manipulation of light and shadow [...] beautifully highlighting one thing by obscuring the other’.⁷⁸

It is mainly in the paintings of masters working at the lower end of the art market that one finds the gruesome and spectacular scenes that remind us of those performed on the Amsterdam stage. However, such painters did not follow Rembrandt’s manner and did not bother about the issues with which Rembrandt was struggling. A good example is the Amsterdam artist Rombout van Troyen, also the same age as Rembrandt, for whom it sufficed to depict horrifying occurrences through wildly gesticulating figures, preferably with sacrifices in creepy caverns, or such scenes as the ghost of Achilles rising from his grave to demand the sacrifice of Polyxena, a scene derived from the tragedy *Polyxena* by Samuel Coster.⁷⁹ Such paintings cost a fraction of a work by

76 See about Rembrandt and Sandrart, Sluijter, *Rembrandt and the Female Nude*, 242-219 (the *Odysseus and Nausicaa*, fig. 181) and my forthcoming article: ‘An Admired Rival in Amsterdam: Joachim von Sandrart on Rembrandt’, in: S. Meurer (ed.), ‘Aus aller Herren Länder’. *Die Künstler der Teutschen Academie von Joachim von Sandrart*. Before he came to Amsterdam Sandrart worked in a style that strongly recalls the earlier manner of his master Gerard van Honthorst (with forceful contrasts in light and shadow); he completely dropped this style when in Amsterdam, reverting to a colourful classicism with elements of Domenichino, Lanfranco and Poussin.

77 See about Vondel and Sandrart: K. Porteman, *De maanden van het jaar. Joachim von Sandrart, Joost van den Vondel, Caspar Barlaeus* (Wommelgem 1987).

78 Van Hoogstraten, *Hooge Schoole*, 175-176. See for this passage: Ernst van de Wetering, ‘Towards a Reconstruction of Rembrandt’s Art Theory’, in: idem (ed.), *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings* (Dordrecht 2011) volume V, 3-140, 59.

79 Smits-Veldt, *Coster*, 233 and 258. *Polyxena*, lines 1019-1090. In Coster’s play, as in the painting, it is not Achilles himself who appears as a ghost, but a treacherous accomplice of the revengeful Odysseus, the priest Mantis, disguised as Achilles’ ghost. The scene is based on Seneca’s *Troades*, where it is Achilles himself.

Rembrandt, and were therefore available for people of a more modest cultural and social status.⁸⁰

After the 1660s the notion that had won the day was that the outward manifestations of the body, including the expression of emotions, had to be governed by beauty, to be achieved through grace and decorum and with clear systematised conventions in expressing the emotions.⁸¹ Thus, Rembrandt's combination of a radical 'from life' ideology with an intense preoccupation with emotional involvement remained exceptional in Dutch art and had become old fashioned by the 1660s. At the beginning of the eighteenth century Houbraken was to write that pupils of Rembrandt had told him that the latter kept sketching the same figures and same subjects over and over again to study the great variety of the passions that cause the movements of the body, to get the natural representation of the characteristic features and poses right.⁸² He also pointed out that Rembrandt was the greatest master in the expression of passions, but he deplored that instead of selecting the most beautiful, Rembrandt even emphasised the ugliness of his figures, acknowledging as his only law was to follow nature without heeding any rules.⁸³ As a true classicist Houbraken also complained that Rembrandt's manner of representing the passions could not be learned or used as example, because it was entirely due to his rare natural talent that

[...] he knew, by way of a miraculous image fixed in his mind, how to express and how to employ the affects (*gemoedsdriften*) in the moment that they revealed themselves in their essence.⁸⁴

He could not have phrased this more acutely. ◀

80 See my valedictory lecture (15-04-2011, UvA, Amsterdam; 21-05-2011, IFA/NYU, New York): <http://www.kunsthistorici.nl/leden/eric-jan-sluijter/>, and my forthcoming book *Rembrandt's Rivals*.

81 See L. de Vries, *How to create Beauty: De Laissezse on the Theory and Practice of Making Beauty* (Leiden 2011) 67-81 for Laissezse's opinions on this.

82 A. Houbraken, *De Groote Schouburgh der Nederlandsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen* (3 volumes; The Hague 1719-1721) volume I, 258 and 261.

83 *Ibid.*, volume I, 262-263 and 267-268.

84 *Ibid.*, 265.

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