Rembrandt's "Leiden History Painting" Reconsidered. The obvious ignored?

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In this short paper I will *not* present a solution of my own for the subject of Rembrandt's enigmatic *Leiden History Painting*, but add some more material for discussion. My main point is that I am convinced that most of the proposed subjects are not valid for, in my view, quite obvious reasons. Many elements that clearly indicate that we should forget about all subjects from the bible, classical antiquity or Batavian history have largely been ignored. Many of these elements have already been described in volume I of the Rembrandt-*Corpus* (1986), but by far the most exhaustive description was given by Roelof van Straten in the appendix of his book of 2006 (fig. 2).

I find it amazing that the proposals by Roelof van Straten and Bob van den Boogert, who came up with subjects from sixteenth-century (Van den Boogert) or even early seventeenth-century history (Van Straten), have been brushed aside without valid counter-arguments; what's more, they barely received a footnote. I must admit that I do not agree with the subjects these authors proposed (about which later), but I do support their view that we should reject all biblical and classical themes. I will elaborate on this point and add some arguments of my own.

In the first place there are the musket and arquebuses, most obviously the large musket in the foreground (fig. 3). It cannot be anything other than a musket, with its iron barrel attached to a wooden stick that ends slightly before the end of the barrel. There are also two barrels of smaller harquebuses, or clovers, sticking out at the right (fig. 4), also with wooden sticks ending just before the end of the barrel. I show you Rembrandt's own *Nightwatch* and De Gheyn's *Wapenhandelinghe* to compare (fig. 5). Moreover, the men in the background are carrying muskets (fig. 6). These do not have the shape of swords, nor does one ever carry a sword this way. The shape and the slant with which they are held over the shoulder cannot indicate anything but muskets - not the very large ones that De Gheyn's soldiers or the men in the *Nightwatch* handle, but the smaller harquebus or clover you see for example in Jacob Backer's Civic Guard painting for the *Kloveniersdoelen* (fig. 7). The man in the middle carries one over the shoulder with the same slant (right in the middle of the painting, because the clover is what has given their *doelen* its name).

It appears that many scholars, *if* they show themselves aware of this at all, somehow pooh-pooh this away, saying something along the line that at that time, or for Rembrandt, being historically correct was not an issue. They seem to assume that young Rembrandt was a bit of a dumbhead, who did not think about such blatant anachronisms – as if he was just feeling like depicting muskets. But this large painting was a very ambitious work that must have been of great importance for this young artist. It was undoubtedly a painting with which he wanted to attract approval among learned people; all motifs in this painting seem to be included with great care.

Rembrandt was well educated at the Latin School, and was surrounded by a group of humanists art lovers. Orlers underlined explicitly that already *before* his training with Lastman, *Const-Liefhebberen* had been highly amazed about Rembrandt's accomplishments and realized that he would become an excellent master; this made his father agree to send him to Lastman in Amsterdam. Thus, there was a group of connoisseurs in Leiden that immediately spotted this great talent in 1624/25. We know that in 1628 Schrevelius (repeated by Buchelius) said that Rembrandt was highly thought of among art lovers (too early, in his view), and that, probably the next year, Huygens thought it worthwhile to visit his studio. We

also know that to this circle belonged men like Petrus Scriverius, Daniel Heinsius, and Jan Orlers himself, and collectors like Matthijs van Overbeke and Bartholomeus Ferreris, of which Marloes Hemmer made a network diagram for an excellent paper she presented at the HNA conference of 2018. In this paper, not yet published, she demonstrated that some men from this circle of learned connoisseurs had also been instrumental in promoting Rubens in the Northern Netherlands about a decade earlier (fig. 8). Such people would not have accepted this kind of muddling with biblical, classical or Batavian subjects.

The same is true for the costume. Rembrandt himself had trained with Pieter Lastman. Lastman who would always make a clear distinction between costume in biblical stories or stories from classical antiquity. The costumes in the *Leiden History Painting* are very specific and many elements do not return in any of Rembrandt's other paintings. His biblical figures wear very different attire (fig. 9), and, being well-informed by both his masters and by sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century prints and history paintings, he would have depicted figures from mythology or classical history in a different way. To say that these are just the *Landsknechten*-costumes, or Burgundian attire, which, at that time, could stand for anything from a distant past, misses the point, simply because the costumes in this painting are different and too specific. We might consider Batavians, but Tempesta's prints after Otto van Veen, which would have been exemplary for Rembrandt, and which were still used as examples for the Batavians in the Amsterdam Town Hall, show very different types of dress, even though they both contain elements of sixteenth-century costume (fig. 10). (When looking carefully, one sees that also the dresses and headgears in Rembrandt's *Claudius Civilis* still has many elements in common with Tempesta's prints.) As a matter of fact, the standing soldier's dress in the *Leiden History Painting*, with a short trunk-hose with slits and this shape of breast plate had quite recently still been in use with soldiers, and we see this bulging trunk hose, and the sashes under the knee even in Willem van Swanenburg's portrait of Prince Maurits (fig. 11). And as you may know, the man in the middle looking out at us, who might be the patron, wears a similar jerkin and wrought leather sash across his breast as De Caullery (and you recognize the musket) (fig. 12).

Also in the case of the crown it has been easily waved aside that this is an imperial crown, more specifically, the crown of a Habsburg emperor (fig. 13). Rembrandt would have known this very well; the different crowns of the emperor, kings, counts, or dukes were everywhere around in prints, and this crown was to be seen in many images. The Habsburg crown had changed at the end of Maximilian I's reign into the mitre-crown – the first time depicted in this late painting by Bernhard Strigel - and Charles V and later emperors are portrayed with this mitre crown (fig. 14). (This type was later in the sixteenth century adopted to crown the Amsterdam coat of arms; for the first time in 1555 in the Old Church and soon everywhere around [fig. 15]. Maximilian had honored the city in 1489 with the Habsburg crown in its coat of arms.) However, Bas Dudok van Heel showed extensively that *before* that time the Amsterdam imperial crown contained no mitre, but was of the type that we see in our painting. Maximilian is represented with this crown many times: in paintings, in woodcuts in historical chronicles, such as the renowned *Divisiekroniek* (fig. 16). We also come across it on many coins, in this beautiful woodcut in the series of the counts of Holland by Jacob Cornelisz van Oostzanen, and we see it in several woodcuts by Jacob Cornelisz in which the Amsterdam coat of arms appears (fig. 17). In Scriverius's *Oudt Batavien nu genaemt Holland*, Maximilian, who was also count of Holland, is shown wearing the crown of the *aartshertog* (fig. 18). Interestingly he is depicted with a feather in his crown. One wonders if Rembrandt combined the two.

It's important to keep in mind that we see a ruler with his army commander; the man standing at the left is not just a side-kick, but his general, holding a commander's baton (fig. 19). Rightly he received an important role in Roelof van Straten's interpretation, who saw him

as general Albrecht von Wallenstein, and in Bob van den Boogert's; the latter proposed that this figure represented count Henry III of Nassau, who was a general under Charles V. Bob adduced this print by Coornhert after Maarten van Heemskerck with the surrender of the German cities to Charles V from a series of victories of Charles V (1556) (fig. 20). The similarities to Rembrandt's composition are remarkable: the general at the side in the foreground, the gesture of the emperor reaching out with his scepter, the dais with the cloth rippling over the steps, the kneeling figures before the steps, the elderly bearded man, who is split up by Rembrandt in two figures: the bearded elderly counsellor and the standing man in the middle. Rembrandt must have had this print in mind when devising this ordonnance. Therefore, Bob interpreted Rembrandt's painting also as Charles V, and the general as Henry III of Nassau; for this identification he referred to this beautiful design by Bernard van Orley for the Nassau tapestries (c. 1530) fig. 21). Indeed the likeness is striking. But regrettably the men in Rembrandt's painting are certainly not burgomasters, or representants of German cities. They are soldiers (fig. 22).

A few words about these men in the foreground:
First: this is about three men. Interpretations that regard two men (Hecht's for example), can be dropped. The standing soldier is not placed *behind* but *between* the other two; his feet stand between the knee of the one and the leg of the other soldier (fig. 23). Naturally he is situated slightly to the right, otherwise he would overlap the other one. This is the way to depict three men placed close to each other and seen from the side, and with the needed variety in poses; all three react in different ways to the same address of the ruler (fig. 24).

One may wonder whether they are sentenced or granted clemency. Most interpretations amount to the latter, clemency. But I tend to lean to the former, a sentence. Rembrandt did his best to show the *gemoedsbeweging* of each figure, their passions; these do not seem to be joyful (fig. 25). The standing man is anxiously swearing an oath, with a furrowed brow, perhaps to save his life by demonstrating loyalty (fig. 26). The expressions of the other two, having their mouths open, both wide eyed, and brow furrowed, seem to show shock and fright (fig. 27). The raised hands, with open palms and fingers slightly spread, are used by Rembrandt for people who are both shocked and frightened (Fig. 28: *Raising of Lazarus*, *Rape of Europe*, and *Daniel and Cyrus*, Daniel raising one hand, putting the other on his breast when the angry Cyrus threatens to sentence him to death, if he cannot prove that Bel is an idol).

A very striking motif is the sheep on the column (fig. 29). It has also been called a wolf, but it is clearly a sheep. Remarks on the presence of this beast have been brushed aside too, as being not important. But it is a very conspicuous element that immediately catches the eye of the viewer and must have a significant meaning. Because of its weird shape contemporaries would immediately have thought of the Order of the Golden Fleece, which would point again to the Habsburg emperors Maximilian or Charles V, both head of the Order (after having inherited this position from the dukes of Burgundy) (fig. 30). But this sheep is not golden, and why would you depict a hanging sheepskin as a standing sheep on a column? It remains a mystery.

For a very short moment I thought that I might have found the solution. As is extensively recorded by Orlers and Scriverius, and earlier in the *Divisiechroniek,* Maximilian was an important figure for Leiden, because it was there that he made an end to the civil war between *Hoeken* and *Kabeljauwen*, that had lasted for more than a century. In 1481 Maximilian came to Holland to settle in person this endless warring between the two parties. Leiden was then besieged by the *Hoeken*; but they fled when Maximilian marched up to Leiden; he was almost wounded because he was fired at with harquebuses and clovers(!), Orlers tells us. Leiden burgers offered him the keys at Leiderdorp and having arrived in Leiden he sentenced three leaders to death (Dirck Potter van der Loo, Pieter Adriaensz and a

third one, of whom no name is given). This happened on the eve of Easter day. It was thus that within the city of Leiden this civil war was at last put to an end, they record. This sounded to me like a wonderful subject to be commissioned by someone from the circle of Orlers and Scriverius, but regrettably, in no way can the background in this painting be perceived as Leiden in the late 15th century (fig. 31); the Leiden artist would have included some recognizable element. So, this idea falls apart too. The background rather points to the image a Dutchman might have had of a German city like Aix la Chapelle. I wish I could offer a convincing solution, but I cannot. I have little doubt, however, that we can rule out all biblical, or classical subjects, including the Batavians.