

Rembrandt: an audio course on the artist's life and work

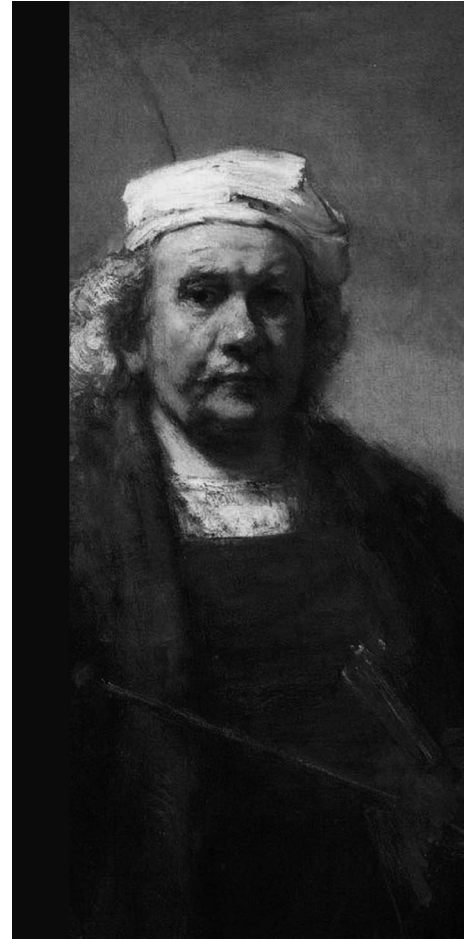
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Gary Schwartz is the webmaster of the following sites:

The CODART list of museums with collections of Dutch and Flemish art (www.codart.nl) Includes a special section on Rembrandt exhibitions held in celebration of the artist's 400th birthday in 2006.

The Schwartzlist (www.garyschwartzarthistorian.nl)

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REMBRANDT

▶ AN AUDIO COURSE ON THE
ARTIST'S LIFE AND WORK

By Gary Schwartz

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BOOKS ON REMBRANDT BY GARY SCHWARTZ

Rembrandt: all the etchings reproduced in true size

Dutch: De Haan (1977); Gary Schwartz | SDU (1988)

English: Robert Oresko and Uitgeverij Gary Schwartz (1977);

Dover (1992)

French: Office du Livre and Société Française du Livre (1978)

German: Belser Verlag (1978)

Rembrandt: his life, his paintings: a new biography

Dutch: Uitgeverij Gary Schwartz and Boek en Plaat (1984); Atrium (1987)

English: Viking, Allen Lane and Book Club Associates (1985); Penguin (1991)

German: Belser and Wissenschaftliche Buchverlag (1987); Karl Müller (1991)

Rembrandt (First Impressions, a series of books on artists for young readers)

English: Abrams (1992)

Japanese: Abrams (1993)

German: DuMont (2005)

The night watch: a Rijksmuseum dossier

Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese Russian and Spanish:

Rijksmuseum and Uitgeverij Waanders (2002)

The Rembrandt book

Dutch: Mercatorfonds and (with the title De grote Rembrandt) Waanders (2006)

English: Mercatorfonds, Abrams and Thames & Hudson (2006)

French: Mercatorfonds, Flammarion and France Loisir (2006)

German: Mercatorfonds and C.H. Beck (2006)

Spanish: Mercatorfonds and Lunweg (2006)

Russian: Mercatorfonds and Biblion (2007)

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY
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BY GRAHAME LOCK

Table of Content

CD 1

Lecture 1: **Plato** - The beginnings: justice and the philosopher kings
Lecture 2: **Aristotle** - Happiness, politics and the telos of mankind
Lecture 3: **St. Augustine** - The State as a necessary evil

CD 2

Lecture 4: **St. Thomas** - A rational Christian philosophy
Lecture 5: **Machiavelli** - Behind the scenes of the political game
Lecture 6: **Thomas Hobbes** - Why we need a Leviathan to rule over us

CD 3

Lecture 7: **John Locke** - Life, liberty and estate
Lecture 8: **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** - The general will: a critique of
representative government
Lecture 9: **Alexis de Tocqueville** - America and democracy: an aristocratic
point of view

CD 4

Lecture 10: **Karl Marx** - Class struggle and history
Lecture 11: **Sigmund Freud** - Why the masses love their leaders
Lecture 12: **The present day** - Contractualism, individualism and the dogma
of our times

Suggested Literature
Other Literature

GARY SCHWARTZ



Foto: Roger Dohmen

Art historian Gary Schwartz is one of the most renowned living authors on Dutch art. He has written numerous works and articles on Rembrandt and Dutch art and is the author of *The Rembrandt Book* (2006). He is the initiator of CODART, an international council for curators of Dutch and Flemish art. Gary Schwartz is from New York and has been living in the Netherlands since 1965.

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Chapter 11: Divinity

In Rembrandt's history paintings God or the gods are often on the scene or visibly on the mind of his figures. The artist seems to have lived on a fault line between the here and now and a realm where the supernatural is real. The gods of the ancients, God the Father of the Jewish Bible, God the Son of the Christian Bible, angels of the Lord, in human, animal and nearly immaterial guise, intervene in the doings of man. Dutchmen of Rembrandt's time half expected to see angels in their own houses. A number of angelic visits are even recorded in his Leiden milieu.

It was the proximity of Christ that most mattered. Rembrandt followed him lovingly from birth to death. His many depictions of the infancy and childhood of Christ evoke feelings not only about families but also about the mystery of the incarnation. Christ's ministry was not as pervasive in Rembrandt's work as his infancy. Of Christ's thirty-six miracles, Rembrandt depicted only seven, and only four of the thirty-nine parables. Numbers do not tell the whole story, though. Perhaps the greatest effort Rembrandt ever exerted on a single work of art deals with the ministry of Christ, the Hundred-guilder print.

Twice Rembrandt undertook major series of the Passion: five paintings for the Stadholder in the 1630s and in the 1650s two majestic drypoint prints of a projected sequence. The commission for the early

touch the feelings and stir the passions. From the admonitions of writers on art and preachers, he knew that the artist should respect certain limits of good taste and moral propriety. In at least one case, he showed even greater sensitivity than called for. His Bathsheba with the letter of King David of 1654 does not show her as an object of lust, as was her usual lot. She is not a seductress but a woman wronged by the adulterous lust of King David. Strikingly, this was also the twist given to his etching of Medea, the frontispiece to a play by Rembrandt's friend and patron Jan Six. In the preface, Six states that he was out to rehabilitate Medea. Rembrandt, I believe, had the same explicit aim in his Bathsheba.

Bathsheba's look of sad resignation in the face of powers greater than hers we find in other figures painted by Rembrandt. He gives this contemplative bearing to his paintings of old men and women of the mid-1650s, and to some of his later apostles and evangelists.

The heroes of the Old Testament, to Rembrandt's contemporaries, were not so much Jews as Protestant saints – safe saints, since they had never been worshipped as such by Catholics. In popular Christian literature, entire books were devoted to some of the heroes we find in Rembrandt. Some, like David and Samson, were as famous for their weaknesses as for their strengths. Rembrandt shows both.

Synopsis of the audio-course on the life and work of Rembrandt

Chapter 1: Rembrandt's birthright as a child of the Truce

There was no better place or time in early modern Europe for an artist to be born than the county of Holland at the start of the seventeenth century. It was the good fortune of Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn to be born in Leiden, the second-largest town in Holland, in the first decade of what later came to be called the Golden Age. When he was born in 1606 – according to his earliest biographers; some documents date his birth earlier or later – his country was fighting a long war of independence against Spain. In 1609 a Twelve Year Truce was signed, allowing the Dutch Republic to establish itself as a proud newcomer among the countries of Europe.

The new country, small as it was, was the wealthiest in Europe. A rather large class of non-aristocratic regents and merchants had acquired fortunes in international trade and manufacture, which they now began to spend on the better things in life, including art. The war with Spain had led to massive immigration into the northern Netherlands of mainly Calvinist refugees from the southern Netherlandish provinces of Flanders and Brabant. Among them were many highly skilled and well-connected craftsmen and artists.

When as a teenager Rembrandt made up his mind to become an artist, he joined the largest cohort of professional artists Europe had

ever seen, supported by many patrons, a well-developed system of banking and commerce. The tide for art was rising, and Rembrandt rode the wave.

Chapter 2: Artistic inheritance

At least as important for a budding artist as money and markets were training and artistic tradition. His two consecutive masters, Dutch painters who had lived in Italy, acquainted Rembrandt with European artists from the early sixteenth century to his own time. He even looked at miniatures by Indian artists of the Mughal court. Lucas van Leyden, a child prodigy from his own city who lived a hundred years before Rembrandt, was a lasting role model, as was the Antwerp painter Peter Paul Rubens, the towering giant of Netherlandish art in Rembrandt's time. A review of Rembrandt's borrowings shows that he turned increasingly to Italian art of the sixteenth century.

Chapter 3: Biography

The very earliest documents we have about Rembrandt make a point of calling him the son of a miller. The writers make it sound like a sign of modesty, but in fact a successful miller was more like a small industrialist. Rembrandt's family was definitely well-off.

Rembrandt specialists also write about the style and dating of his works, their iconography and symbolism. They trace their ownership and reconstruct the artist's biography, family relations, circle of acquaintances and network of patrons. They identify the sitters and the location of his landscapes. The reception of Rembrandt's art is a thankful and often colorful object of research. Recently, scholars have rediscovered the ways in which Rembrandt and his reputation were instrumentalized for political and social causes in the nineteenth century.

Chapter 10: Humanity

Rembrandt was not a modest artist. He took in his embrace images of God, of humankind and of the world. For a man who was so often in conflict with his neighbors and patrons, his view of humanity was notably mild. While he had a tendency to show encounters and confrontations between two heroes, these were almost never bloody. The center of attention in such compositions is the bond of rapt attention that comes into being when for example Jacob wrestles with the angel, Samson argues with his stepfather or the young Tobit cures the blindness of his frightened father.

Rembrandt was fully aware that art can arouse the senses,

Critical commentators wrote that later in life Rembrandt preferred the company of ordinary people to that of society folk. Those are not people whose inventories were carefully drawn up by well-informed notaries. However, almost everyone in the country could have afforded to own one of the master's simpler prints, which sold for a few stivers.

Chapter 9: International fame and posterity

The attribution, appreciation and valuation of Rembrandt's work has never been a cut-and-dried matter. Some of the earliest documents express doubt about his authorship. Copies after his work are referred to as early as the 1630s. Rembrandt's way of working with others no doubt helped create this problem.

It is surely strange that the work of an artist who is praised for his individuality and uniqueness should be so hard to distinguish from that of his pupils and followers. Somewhere along the line, we are apparently missing the point about what makes a Rembrandt a Rembrandt. This uncertainty has actually helped to focus attention on Rembrandt. Doubts about the authorship of paintings and drawings tend to spark new development in technical research. More often than not, this cuts across old assumptions and raises new questions.

The eighth of ten children, Rembrandt was sent to the prestigious Latin School of Leiden. According to his first biographer, his parents intended him for a career in public service. Instead, he chose to follow a craft. Nonetheless, his education must have raised his expectations in life and society, expectations that were largely fulfilled.

His first master, the mediocre Jacob Isaacsz. van Swanenburgh, was the son of the best-known Leiden artist of his generation, Isaac Claesz. van Swanenburgh, who was a town officeholder as well. Rembrandt's second master, Pieter Lastman, an Amsterdam Catholic, was a serious interpreter of Biblical and classical subjects. From Rome he brought home knowledge of old and new developments. In his later choice of biblical subjects, Rembrandt kept almost entirely to Lastman's repertoire, surely a sign of profound, lifelong influence.

At the age of twenty-eight, Rembrandt married the seven-year younger daughter of a burgomaster of the Frisian capital, Leeuwarden, Saskia Uylenburgh. They lived in Amsterdam until her sad death before she turned thirty. Of their four children only the last one, Titus, lived past the age of two months. With the nurse who cared for Titus, Geertge Dircx, Rembrandt had an affair that ended disastrously when Hendrickje Stoffels came into the household, and Rembrandt fell in love with her. Geertge did not react well to this shift in his affections. In the ensuing conflict Rembrandt behaved cruelly, having Geertge put away in a penal institution and threatening friends of hers who years later tried to have her released. Although he never married her,

Hendrickje was a true helpmate to Rembrandt. She cared for Titus and when Rembrandt's finances turned seriously sour, she backed him up legally with everything she was worth. Sadly, she died in her mid-thirties, after giving him a daughter, Cornelia. To add to the bitterness of Rembrandt's late years, Titus died before Rembrandt.

In the early 1630s Rembrandt moved to Amsterdam to stay. He first lived with the art dealer Hendrick Uylenburgh, Saskia's cousin, with whom he had existing business relations, in a house on the Sint Antoniesbreestraat, in an area that was home to many artists. After his marriage, he and Saskia left Hendrick Uylenburgh and ended up buying a grand house next to his, the present Rembrandt House Museum. He lived there until 1660, when it was sold as part of his bankruptcy proceedings. He died in 1669 in a poorer neighborhood on the other side of Amsterdam.

Rembrandt's vast collection of curiosities, drawings and prints made him one of the most important collectors in the city, but as an investment it was a failure. When auctioned at his bankruptcy, it fetched a fraction of its worth. He was not only short-sighted in money matters, but also not always good for his word. He could not bring himself to compromise. He was involved in no fewer than twenty-five documented conflicts with relatives, patrons, creditors, colleagues, neighbors and authorities. Writings about him nearly all speak of his difficult character.

conflicts between these groups did not stand in the way of a working relationship with the artist. Among these sitters are Calvinist relatives of the artist's wife Saskia and Mennonite relations of her cousin Hendrick Uylenburgh. Catholic clerics at home and abroad collected and praised his work. Rembrandt's self-chosen image as St. Paul was understood by the clergy of his age.

The members of the class into which Rembrandt was born were his most reliable patrons as portrait sitters and buyers of his work. At every phase of his career he created images of himself that match, in mode and allure, portraits of his colleague artists and merchant sitters, even the mightiest of them. These do not show their business activities or commercial interests, but picture them as the Wise Merchant, the term applied by Caspar Barlaeus to the burghers of Amsterdam.

With his atmospheric evocations of mood and narrative, Rembrandt's work fit magnificently into the ideal of painting as the sister art of poetry. In self-portraits of mid-career he identifies himself with the Italian poet and courtier Ludovico Ariosto. A personal friend was the Christian poet Jeremias de Decker. A crown on Rembrandt's artistry is formed by a three-painting suite for the Sicilian collector Antonio Ruffo; the hero of the suite is the poet Homer, with whom Rembrandt shared the controversial reputation for following nature beyond the limits of discretion.

the greatest artist of Amsterdam and the greatest powerholders cost both of them dearly. Rembrandt was denied protection, income and commissions; the regents lost the kind of immortality that an artist can bestow. Today the best-known Amsterdam regent of the seventeenth century is Jan Six, only because Rembrandt painted and etched his portrait. The estrangement became painfully visible in the early 1660s, when his Oath of Claudius Civilis and the Batavians in the sacred grove was ordered for the new town hall of Amsterdam, and removed within a year. The reason, as I believe, had more to do with economizing by the city fathers and insufficient protection for Rembrandt in the town government than with taste or style. Rembrandt was being patronized and collected by many others in the final decade of his life.

Descending the ladder of social class in Rembrandt's world, the following picture emerges. During his lifetime and in the decades after his death, self-portraits and other works by Rembrandt are recorded in the royal and imperial palaces of Britain, France and the Holy Roman Empire, in several German courts as well as among the art-loving Medici in Florence and in the court of the prince of Orange in The Hague.

The clergy was also taken with Rembrandt. Between 1633 and 1646 Rembrandt portrayed at least four ministers of the Reformed, one of the Remonstrant and one of the Mennonite faiths. The mutual

None of these conflicts involved a pupil. His work as a teacher of young artists and amateur art lovers was an important part of his professional life and income. There is a lively debate among specialists about the size and nature of what is called the Rembrandt School. The greatest expert in this field, Werner Sumowski, includes the work of about fifty known artists and many more anonymous ones in this category. Whether or not Rembrandt actually taught them all, their style is thought to derive from his. He also dealt in the work of some of apprentices and colleagues.

Most of Rembrandt's contemporaries had clearly marked religious allegiances. His own stance, let alone his faith, are not clear-cut. He was not a pledged member of any church, and he had professional contact with members of all denominations: Calvinists, Remonstrants, Lutherans, Mennonites, Catholics and Jews. Going by the frequency of these contacts, I would say that Rembrandt had Remonstrant sympathies early in life and became more of a Calvinist later on. However, his paintings of men in Franciscan garb, even one of Titus in habit, mean that we was not an adamant anti-Catholic. Truly confessional indications, which are found in the work of some of his contemporaries, are lacking. What does come across strongly is a deeply felt Christian faith.

A recurring theme in Rembrandt studies and in popular culture is the relationship of Rembrandt to the Jews who also lived on and around Sint Antoniesbreestraat. He is often said to have been a

friend of Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel and to have had a sympathetic interest in Jews and their religion. The closer one looks at the evidence, however, the more this seems to rest on misunderstanding and wishful thinking. The Old Testament, to Christian artists of Rembrandt's time, was a Christian holy book. It was full of proofs for the coming of Jesus, and the fact that Jews continued to deny this was incomprehensible to a believing Christian. There is nothing in Rembrandt's work or life to indicate that he thought any differently about Jews and Judaism than his fellow Christians.

Chapter 4: Techniques, artistic means and modes

As a craftsman Rembrandt could be quite sloppy, making things up as he went along, and some of his works are out-and-out technical failures. Nonetheless, he has always been acclaimed for his technique. This is due less to exquisite handwork than to the thinking behind his use of various media. He was anything but a purist. In his drawings he sometimes restricts himself to one technique – pen-and-ink is the most common, followed at a long distance by black chalk – but more often he combines pen with brush or with chalk, and sometimes creates sheets of all the wet and dry techniques he knew.

Rembrandt painted in oils like those used by his colleagues. First mainly on oak panels, later on canvas. His glowing colors derive

10

Chapter 8: Rembrandt's Amsterdammers

Amsterdam was a boom town when Rembrandt moved there in the early 1630s, and he boomed with it. He found good customers especially among the merchant and professional class. For the surgeons' guild, located on the upper story of the Sint Antonieswaag, down the street from Uylenburgh, Rembrandt painted two majestic commissions: the anatomy lessons of Drs. Nicolaes Tulp and Joan Deyman. At the other end of the Kloveniersburgwal from the Waag stood the proud Kloveniersdoelen, the headquarters, practice range and meeting hall of the musketeers' and pikemen's civic guard. For the prestigious new "great hall," Rembrandt and five other painters were commissioned to paint group portraits of the six companies of guardsmen. The result was the iconic masterpiece known as the Night watch. Rembrandt's final group portrait, of the sampling officials of the Amsterdam drapers' guild, was also painted for an institution in his own neighborhood. For an artist with such widespread appeal today, it is astonishing to find that his home grounds were so limited.

The oligarchy of old families that controlled Amsterdam politics was, next to the Stadholder, the most powerful force in the country. With them, Rembrandt never established a solid patronage base. He did not court them and they rarely used him. At first that was not a problem. In the end, however, this estrangement between

15

in just this way, but most of his other narrative paintings, portraits and genre compositions as well. As successful as St. Paul was in becoming all things to all men, so was Rembrandt.

Chapter 7: Early patrons

From a base in Remonstrant and humanist circles in Leiden, Rembrandt and his friend Jan Lievens were discovered when they were in their early twenties by the great man of court patronage, the poet and polymath Constantijn Huygens. For six years he and the prince of Orange, Stadholder Frederik Hendrik, lavished commissions on the young Leiden artists. From Rembrandt the court ordered five paintings of the Passion of Christ. In it Rembrandt emulated two famous altarpieces: Titian's Assumption of the Virgin in Venice, a city Huygens had visited as a young man, and the Descent from the Cross in Antwerp Cathedral by Rubens, whom Huygens dearly wished to patronize but could not for political reasons. Huygens wrote glowingly of Rembrandt, praising him for his ability to capture universal principles in minute details. The miller's son, he wrote, brought the qualities of the art of the ancients back to life in Holland. The court commissions came to an end after 1633, around the time that Huygens reacted badly to a Rembrandt portrait of his friend, the artist Jacob de Gheyn, a companion portrait to one of Huygens's own brother, Maurits.

less from the variety of his pigments than from his technique of applying layers of glazes. One technical innovation that is credited to him as a painter is the use of quartz in the grounds for his canvases.

It was as an etcher that Rembrandt had the most impact on technique. Before him, etching was thought of as a variant of engraving, with its hard outlines and systematic hatching. Rembrandt created much freer effects. Contemporary foreign manuals credit him for the invention of a stopping-out varnish.

As limited as the range of colors Rembrandt used, so broad was his palette of light and dark, which covers the entire spectrum. He does not draw surface compositions in light and dark; he molds them spatially. He was practically a sculptor in light and dark.

Chapter 5: Genres

In his depictions of figures, Rembrandt went the full range from close-up cropped heads to full-lengths, in standing, sitting and reclining poses. Independent portraits and pendants of husbands and wives make up a large part of his production, with a highpoint in the early 1630s, when he was with Uylenburgh. He had an inventive way with his four group portraits, adding action to otherwise static scenes. Some of his narrative paintings or histories, on which he worked

throughout life, are in a spare mode, with a minimum of figures and appurtenances, and others in a lavish mode, with a full complement of both. His landscapes cover an equally wide ambit, from modest cottage studies to panoramic mountain valleys. A century of research has identified many of the locations in Amsterdam and surroundings. Rembrandt's production of landscapes is mainly limited to a few midlife campaigns.

In addition to portraiture, history subjects and landscapes, which Rembrandt depicted in all techniques, he also made drawings and etchings, but no paintings, of scenes from daily life. The inventory of his goods shows that he also painted still lifes, but none of these has been identified.

Chapter 6: Self-portraiture

The genre that was most unique to Rembrandt was self-portraiture. He created self-portraits in all techniques and formats. Some viewers interpret them as entirely autobiographical or as instances of self-fashioning, some as exercises in expression, others as calling cards or publicity for the artist. Most recently, it has been suggested that they are nothing more than a successful sales item.

These interpretations all begin by isolating them and studying them as a distinct set of works. However, these images can be viewed

differently. Nearly all the self-portraits bear a close resemblance to portraits of others, including sitters that Rembrandt was painting at the same time. The self-portrait of Lucas van Leyden at the age of fifteen, published in a print when Rembrandt himself was that age, provided a model for him, as did a self-portrait print by Peter Paul Rubens and Titian's portrait of the poet Ariosto.

Not all of his images of himself were portraits. He also gives his features to beggars and personages in history paintings. Rembrandt as a beggar seated on a rock, his face wrenched in pain, in an etching of 1630, bears close resemblance to his Christ on the Cross of the following year. When in 1633 he painted a Descent from the Cross, Rembrandt gave his own features, marked with pity, to one of the friends of Christ lowering his body to the ground.

The most explicit identification he assumes is in a self-portrait of 1660 in the Rijksmuseum, where he shows himself as the apostle Paul. That apostle engaged in a similar practice as Rembrandt, saying in a famous verse that in his missionary activities he assumed the guise of whatever audience he was addressing. Constantijn Huygens too wrote of himself that in his practice of Latin oratory he crept into the guises of people about whom he spoke. He calls this a technique of the art of rhetoric. Mastery of this art can make an audience believe that it is not a speaker they are hearing, but the subject of the speech in person. Not only Rembrandt's self-portraits can be viewed profitably