

Rembrandt van Rijn



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait*, 1658, oil on canvas, 52 5/8 x 40 7/8 in. ©The Frick Collection, New York.

Rembrandt van Rijn was the most acclaimed painter of the Dutch Golden Age, an era marked by Holland's prominence in trade, global exploration, science, and art. Portraiture sprang to life as a new class of prosperous citizens desired likenesses to hang in fashionable mansions, and civic and professional organizations commissioned life-size group portraits to commemorate their roles as members of the Dutch Republic. Rembrandt garnered fame for his profound ability to express mood and feeling in his portraits and historical and religious paintings, although his inventiveness as a draftsman and printmaker is equally notable.

The son of a miller, Rembrandt was born in the university town of Leiden and moved to Amsterdam around 1632, where he worked for the remainder of his career. The city pulsed with intellectual curiosity — wondrous goods arrived in port daily, as did accounts of an ever-expanding world. Scientists studied natural phenomena, and philosophers challenged long-held beliefs, seeking new ways to find meaning in existence.

Rembrandt's genius stemmed from a similar impulse to understand and express one's place in a changing world.

Acknowledged as one of the most distinguished portraitists in European art, the impact of Rembrandt's style comes from his perpetual interest in observing directly from nature and exploring new possibilities of expression. His early years in Amsterdam were incredibly prosperous. Many young artists came to study in Rembrandt's studio, and commissions flowed in from princes and wealthy burghers. Shedding the static, idealized poses favored during the Renaissance, his keen appreciation of the subtleties of expression, gesture, and emotion reveal the personality and likeness of his sitters far beyond their physical appearance — Rembrandt's portraits stand out because they so readily capture us and draw us in.

In his day, Rembrandt was popular, innovative, and at times, controversial. He was renowned for his ability to capture psychological moments and suggest the inner complexities coursing beneath his sitter's outward appearance. In quick chalk drawings, leisurely sketches, and numerous prints, Rembrandt captured endless varieties of pose and form, but also subtle, fleeting passages of mood and spirit, often turning to himself as a subject. Although criticized for not making the requisite journey to Italy to study classical models, Rembrandt was acutely aware of Renaissance masters like Titian, Raphael, and Caravaggio, and emulated his predecessors' use of color, light, and shadow. Inherently an innovator, Rembrandt stepped beyond older models by reducing compositional elements and amplifying the expressive potential of his paintings with the bold twist of a brushstroke, the tactile presence of paint, and the looming power of negative space. Masterful and forward-thinking, Rembrandt's



IMAGES (TOP TO BOTTOM): Rembrandt van Rijn, *Saskia van Uylenburgh in Arcadian Costume*, 1635, oil on canvas, 48 3/5 x 38 2/5 in. ©The National Gallery, London; Rembrandt van Rijn, *View of Amsterdam from the Northwest*, ca. 1640, etching, 4 7/16 x 6 in. ©The Metropolitan Museum of Art

a biography



style feels almost modern to audiences today. The period when Rembrandt created the portrait of Dirck van Os saw a profound shift in the artist's life. The artist was struck by a number of personal hardships, beginning with the death of his wife in 1642. Legal and financial troubles forced him to declare bankruptcy in 1656, and in 1663 his common-law wife died. His son, Titus, died shortly after. Rembrandt's early fame tangled with changing tastes, but the works he produced between 1656 and his death in 1669 are recognized as his most bold and evocative.



Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606-1669
Portrait of Dirck van Os
ca. 1658
oil on canvas, 40 3/4 x 34 1/2 in.
Museum purchase, 1942.30

Dirck van Os III (1590–1668) was a prominent Dutch citizen and respected *dijkgraaf* or mayor of the Beemster, a municipality built upon land reclaimed from a former lake. Using windmills, canals, and a ring of dikes, Dirck van Os' enterprising father (Dirck van Os II, 1556–1615) drained a large area north of Amsterdam to create the Beemster in 1612. The elder van Os financed the engineering project with the huge fortune he amassed in banking and as a founder of the extremely profitable Dutch East India Company, considered the first multinational corporation in existence.

The younger van Os earned considerable respect in his own right. Over the course of his lengthy governance of the Beemster (1618–1666), Prince Maurits awarded him the title of Lieutenant Forester, and Holland's most famous poet, Joost van den Vondel, praised van Os as a wise and experienced “ox” — a reference to his last name — overseeing an Arcadian land.

In his later career, Rembrandt used an increasingly expressive brushstroke to experiment with texture, formal abstraction, and emotional intensity. Dirck van Os' aging face and downcast eyes suggest solemn introspection. Although he holds a cane, his careful posture conveys quiet authority, making us question whether this is a fragile old man, a resilient commander, or both. Rendered in a manner that is insightful and empathetic, Rembrandt instills in his likeness an expectant tension. The evocative quality of Dirck van Os' expression and the careful modeling of his features glow softly against the heavily-shadowed background, exemplifying Rembrandt's genius as a portraitist.



Shown above are details of the portrait before and after conservation. Conservator Michael Bijl removed the 18th century additions of lace, tassels, a gold chain, and unbuttoned blouse, leaving Dirck van Os looking far more understated and refined.

Discussion Questions

How does Rembrandt create mood?

What painting techniques does he use to convey authority and intellectual depth in this portrait?

What was happening in Rembrandt's life when he painted this portrait? How do you think that it influenced his painting style?

If experts had determined *Portrait of Dirck van Os* was not painted by Rembrandt, what difference would it make?

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Before Conservation

century, including lace added to the sitter's collar and on his right cuff, a ribbon added to his cane, and a chain with a cross. Gold-colored ends were added to the sleeves, as were other parts of the costume, such as gold buttons that were painted over the original deep purple buttons. Significantly, a large coat of arms was also added in the top right corner with an inscription, a common practice when the identity of the sitter was at risk of being forgotten.

These elements of Dirck van Os' dress were considered to be later additions for several reasons: they were atypical for Rembrandt's style, they appeared to be painted in an awkward fashion, and they were historically inaccurate to the period the portrait was originally painted, in particular the lace additions to the collar and the cuffs. Research confirmed that these decorative elements were painted on top of dried paint, and that the quality of white lead in the paint used for these additions did not exist in the seventeenth century.

To return the portrait to its appearance in Dirck van Os' time, old layers of varnish were first removed with alcohol, and all modern retouching from previous conservations was removed. The coat of arms in the upper corner — considered to be of possible historic value — was not removed. Following this process, the surface of the canvas was carefully retouched under magnification, using what remained of the original paint as a guide. Bijl was able to determine with certainty that the portrait originated in Rembrandt's workshop because ground quartz was found in the background layer of paint, a practice exclusive to his studio.

During the conservation, the characteristics and qualities of the original areas of the canvas became more clearly evident. On the basis of those original passages, most especially in the face of the sitter, ample evidence was preserved to support the attribution of the painting to Rembrandt. Ernst van der Wetering — a leading Rembrandt scholar — pointed to the relation between brushwork, color, and illusion in the face as characteristic of Rembrandt's own hand, as well as the rendering of the facial features and hair of the sitter, firmly attributing Joslyn's portrait to the great Dutch Master.

Portrait of Dirck van Os will be included in van der Wetering's definitive publication surveying Rembrandt's oeuvre. Five volumes of *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings* have already been completed as part of van der Wetering's Rembrandt Research Project, begun in 1968 with the aim of separating Rembrandt's own paintings from the vast number of Rembrandtesque paintings made by his many apprentices and followers. A relatively small number of Rembrandt paintings (possibly as few as 40 or 50) exist outside of Europe in US Museum collections, making this artwork a prize object in the Joslyn Art Museum's collection.



prints are produced by scratching directly into a metal plate. In this technique metal scrapings on either side of the lines, known as the burr, hold a dense film of ink which prints as a rich, velvety black. However, drypoint is not practical for producing multiple images, because the delicate burr wears away so quickly that only a small number of good impressions, no more than a dozen, can be taken from the plate.

Rembrandt used touches of drypoint to amplify the tonal effects of his etchings—something that was extremely innovative at the time. He played with different papers and bases, and loved to make changes to the plate in



Etchings by Rembrandt

Rembrandt upended the traditions of printmaking, transforming a medium that was predominantly used to make reproductions into a whole art form unto itself. Experimenting boldly, he combined etching and drypoint techniques to create effects that paralleled the expressive qualities of his canvases.

An etching is produced using a plate of metal covered with a layer of acid-resistant varnish or wax, called the “ground.” The artist scratches through the ground with an etching needle to expose the metal beneath. When the design is complete, the plate is dipped in acid, which eats away the lines where the metal has been exposed. The depth of the lines depends on the length of time the plate is exposed to the acid. Once the ground has been removed, the incised lines on the plate are used to make prints.

In contrast, drypoint prints are produced by scratching directly into a metal plate. In this technique metal scrapings on either side of the lines, known as the burr, hold a dense film of ink which prints as a rich, velvety black. However, drypoint is not practical for producing multiple images, because the delicate burr wears away so quickly that only a small number of good impressions, no more than a dozen, can be taken from the plate.

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Timeline

1600

1602 Dutch East India Trading Company (VOC) is founded

1606 Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn is born on July 15 in Leiden, Netherlands

1610

1612 Beemster lake in Amsterdam is drained

1613-1615 Attends Latin School

1619 Apprentice to Jacob Isaacszoon

1620

1620 Enrolls at Leiden University at age 14

1624 Apprentice to Peter Lastman

1625 Begins independent painting career in Leiden

1628 Gerrit Dou becomes Rembrandt's first pupil

ca. 1631 Moves to Amsterdam

1634 Marries Saskia van Uylenburgh

1639 Purchases the "Rembrandt House," a grand home & studio in Sint-Antonisbreestraat

1641 Son Titus is born to Saskia

1642 Saskia dies & Rembrandt begins relationship with his nursemaid, Geertje Dircks

1647 Hendrickje Stoffels joins household as maidservant, later becomes common-law wife

1650 Conflict results in Dircks' detainment in a correctional house

1654 Daughter Cornelia is born to Hendrikje

1656 Files for bankruptcy

ca. 1658 Rembrandt paints *Portrait of Dirck van Os*

1660

1663 Hendrikje dies

1668 Titus dies

1669 Rembrandt dies on October 4 in Amsterdam

Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-portrait*, c. 1628, oil on panel, 8 9/10 x 17 2/5 in. ©Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632, oil on canvas, 66 6/8 x 85 1/5 in., ©Mauritshuis, The Hague, Netherlands

Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of Hendrickje Stoffels*, ca. 1654-6, oil on canvas, 40 x 33 in. ©The National Gallery, London

Rembrandt van Rijn, *Titus, the Artist's Son*, c. 1657, oil on canvas, 27 x 22 1/2 in. ©The Wallace Collection, London

BACKGROUND IMAGE: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Militia Company of District II under the Command of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq*, known as the 'Night Watch' (detail), 1642, oil on canvas, 149 1/2 x 178 1/2 in. ©Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Rembrandt made several prints of friends and colleagues—Six was an important patron and de Jonghe a successful art dealer and collector. It is believed that these personal images were intended as gifts to honor his friendships or as tokens of gratitude.

IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait in a Cap, Open Mouthed*, 1630, etching; only state, 2 x 1 3/4 in. ©Norman Simon Art Foundation, Pasadena; *Christ Crucified between the Two Thieves: The Tree Crosses*, 1630, drypoint printed on vellum; second state, 15 x 17 1/4 in. ©The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Rembrandt van Rijn, *Clement de Jonghe*, 1651, etching and drypoint, 8 1/4 x 6 1/2 in., Bequest of Robert P. Morsman, 1943.28; *Jan Six*, 1647, etching and drypoint, 9 5/8 x 7 3/4 in., Bequest of Robert P. Morsman, 1943.29



REMBRANDT VAN RIJN
DUTCH, 1606-1669

PORTRAIT OF DIRCK VAN OS
ca. 1658, OIL ON CANVAS

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Museum purchase, 1942.30