COMPLETE ETCHINGS OF Rembrandt RVR

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Of All Time! —

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—John Fowles White, in the "Encyclopedia Britannica" (14th ed.)

And Here — For The First Time
In A Single Volume — Are
ALL HIS ETCHINGS!

"All that have been definitely ascribed to him are here, and others which seem to leave little doubt that he was their creator. Only those whose authenticity is clearly questionable have been excluded."

From the Introduction.

401 REPRODUCTIONS
OF SUPERB WORKS OF ART

A complete catalogue of the fruits of the world's greatest genius in etching—here collected in one priceless book for the shelves of all true lovers of art.
THE COMPLETE ETCHINGS OF REMBRANDT

Villa Rebay Collection
TO
M. V. B.
INTRODUCTION

The name of Rembrandt is graven more deeply in the consciousness of all lovers of art than any line in copper cut by his own tools. His father, a miller, and his mother, daughter of another miller, gave it to their son in Leiden, where the baby, who was to become known as the world’s greatest etcher, was born July 15, 1606 (or, as less reliable authority has it, June 15, 1607.)

Before this there had been seven children born to the miller Harmen Gerritzoon and his wife, Neetje Willensdonchter van Zuitbrough. And before this Gerritzoon, in a gesture of affection for the stream of water which turned the wheels of his mill, had taken the river’s name for his own, adding van Rijn to the name his parents had given him. And so, looking at the infant lying beside the proud and happy mother who had given her husband another son, they launched a new name on the world. The name of another miller? A baker? A shoemaker like his brother? Who could tell?

“He shall be called ‘Rembrandt Harmenis van Rijn’,” they said.

The sacks of flour which came from the mill on the Rijn, the loaves of bread baked by Rembrandt’s brother, the boots and shoes made in another brother’s shop, these essentials of human sustenance and comfort—we would not even know that they had existed, were it not for the masterpieces of art left as an endless heritage of the human race by the eighth child of the miller, the brother of the baker and the shoemaker. Such is the infinite force of creative power, the ultimate magic of art, that paintings and etchings such as Rembrandt’s should preserve an immortal identity for sacks of flour, loaves of bread, and boots and shoes!

It is not the purpose of this introduction to discuss Rembrandt’s etchings critically. His place in the history of art is too well established to be modified or added to by this commentator. And even if this were not so, reproductions of the etchings themselves are here—all of them which he is known to have produced, so that you may go to the source, be moved by their beauty and power, and learn through your own esthetic experience why Rembrandt has been called the greatest etcher of all times. But that experience, of seeing, and feeling, and living those tremendous forces which are in the etchings, will be a greater one, and a more personal and sympathetic one, if it is engaged in against a background of knowledge of the artist as a man.

Rembrandt’s three older brothers had been sent early into trade. But the golden age was upon Holland; science and literature flourished in the universities, the theatre and art enjoyed the acclaim of the people, the miller had done well financially, the youngest van Rijn showed intellectual promise, and so he was packed off to school to learn a profession and lift the name of van Rijn out of the mere chronicles of trade.

But his mind wandered from the books. When his Latin instructor declined a noun Rembrandt found himself less interested in the words which issued from the lips than in the fascinating movements of the lips themselves, the mysteriously flexing jaw muscles, the lights which came and went in his instructor’s eyes. As he wrote the words which he must learn to spell, he found the subtle curving lines he made on paper more interesting than the spelling of the word. And his gaze would wander away from the face of the man who expounded theological dogma as a sudden flood of sunlight would burst through the window of the schoolroom to bathe the drab interior in golden glory.

Often on his way home from school he would pause to watch the face of a man or woman which held something different from that which he saw in ordinary faces, to gaze in a sombre ecstasy at some conformation of feature, some evanescence of expression which lifted his seeing out of the
ordinary routine of existence, and he was smitten by a mighty covetousness, a driving necessity to seize and hold what he saw, before it might be lost, to put it onto paper that he might keep it forever.

But though his room became cluttered with bits of sketches, and his burning purpose to be an artist grew more and more apparent, his mother and father persisted in their own desire to make a scholar of him, and, his high school days over, registered him at the University of Leiden. For a few months he followed their will, but the fire of adolescence was burning in him now, the pure bright flame of approaching manhood, which so illuminated his passion to be a painter that there was at last no denying it. Before the first year of his university career was finished, he had abandoned it, and, following the dictates of Destiny, had dedicated his life to art. He was not yet fifteen years of age.

At first he studied under the inferior Jacob Gaahsz van Swanenburgh. Even then the simple, painstaking lines of the box (which, unlike the early works of lesser artists, showed no attempt at flamboyance, no desire to go beyond his slowly advancing mastery), must have shown his actual superiority to his teacher.

After three years of such as van Swanenburgh could give him, the youth fortunately fell into the hands of the famous Pieter Lastmann in Amsterdam, and through him the pupil became influenced by such men as Elzheimer, Uffenbach, Grimmer, and Mathias Grünewald. In Leiden he also worked with Lievens, another well-known artist, and aroused so much interest that, before he was twenty-two, he stimulated criticisms and disputes about the possibilities of artists who were still "beardless youths." He had at least one pupil in these early days, Dou, to whom may probably be attributed a number of etchings which have been accepted as Rembrandt's.

For one day, looking at himself in a mirror, he had dropped his brush and, in a fine frenzy had seized a copper plate and tried to transfer to it that which he had seen in the glass. What his burin was no one knows—certainly not a proper etching tool, perhaps an old nail, perhaps a knife, obviously an instrument with two dissimilar points not designed to bite incisively into a copper plate. The print is confused and purposeless, evidence of a frantic attempt to attain a result without true comprehension of the medium. But the fine energy of creation is in it, the conceptual power which only the great artist has. Nowhere in his early work is the proof of Rembrandt's genius as an artist more clearly evidenced than in this plate which proves equally how little he had mastered the technique of etching when he made it.

During this period Rembrandt's paintings exhibit an amazing simplicity and tameness, in consideration of the power and violence which mark his later work. He seemed still to be feeling his way, still working soundly at the long hard task of mastering the rudiments of his art before letting down the bars of artistic restraint which would allow the flood of his energy to be released. He sketched his family at home, beggars and children whom he saw on the street, rich man or poor man, still lifes—whatever caught his eye and charmed him. Yet even in their tameness these early works show a marvelous originality and power of imagination. He saw what others did not see, and what he saw he put on his canvas.

It was while he was still working at his parent's home that a friend induced him to take one of his best paintings to an art dealer at the Hague. Delighted with the picture, the dealer paid Rembrandt one hundred florins and gave him high praise. This was the stimulation which the young artist needed. Encouraged by his first financial success he pushed on more vigorously than ever.

The dealer, too, was apparently a good press agent, for Rembrandt began to receive invitations from personages high in the social and creative annals of Europe. He was invited to come to France, to Italy, to travel and study. But unlike most artists, he seemed reluctant to leave his native
land. Nature, which had furnished the eyes of his childhood with the mysterious spectacle of an instructor whose facial muscles seemed never twice the same while his lips spouted Latin phrases, which had sent the magic shafts of sunlight through the window of his school room, which had thronged the streets of his childhood with such a variety of faces, seemed still to him to be a better instructor than any foreign artist. These people around him he was coming to know better every day. This environment which had spawned and nourished him seemed a greater support to him than that which any foreign land could give him, and he stayed at home.

Financially able now to support himself, he left the home of his parents and went to Amsterdam where, for a little while, he lived with his sister. But not for long. For among the faces which fascinated him in Amsterdam was that of Saskia van Uylenburch, and though he painted her many times, his covetousness of her was still unsatisfied. And likewise she found the gift of art which the artist made her insufficient to satisfy her desire for the man. So Saskia and Rembrandt were married and she became, in addition to his well loved wife, the model for many of his finest works.

Apparently they lived happily together and obviously Rembrandt was more productive during the period of his marriage to Saskia than at any other time during his life. The famous Augsburg-Nurnberg painter, Joachim van Gandrart, who visited Rembrandt in Amsterdam, wrote that he had "filled his house with almost innumerable well-born children for the purpose of instruction, of whom each paid him yearly about a hundred gulden, not counting what he made out of the paintings and engravings of these pupils, which must have amounted to two or two and a half thousand gulden ready money."

It was during this period that he executed some of his best known masterpieces, the full length portrait of Martin Daly, which, with that of Madame Daly, appeared in the collection of Van Loon in Amsterdam, "The Marriage of Samson," which went to the Dresden Gallery, "Flight of the Angel," now in the Louvre.

As his financial success grew there developed in him two traits which proved the man was less than the artist. He became exceedingly avaricious and encouraged his own eccentricities to the point of offensiveness. His home was furnished more plainly than that of many men whose income was much less than his own. His furniture was old, and much of it out of repair; the china on his table was cheap and often chipped, and his meals are said to have consisted often of no more than a salt herring and a bit of cheese. Yet his income was substantial, and, to increase it rapidly, he is said to have adopted some methods not strictly in accord with the best ethics of the artist. Often, avid for quick returns, it is said that he would abandon his former careful, finished style, in favor of rapid execution and a quick fee. And it is known that he sometimes retouched the work of his pupils and sold it as his own.

Driven by his avarice and the position of respect his fame had brought him, he developed an arrogance and insolence which amounted at times to boorishness. It is told of him that, while painting a family portrait in the home of a wealthy and well respected man, one of his servants came breathlessly to see him, saying that his pet monkey was dead. Impulsively, as if to ease his regret, the artist began to sketch on the canvas which already contained the partly finished work, the form of the dead monkey, working from memory. Neglecting the models before him, he worked on the semblance of the monkey until he felt release from his sorrow. And when the family who had commissioned him objected to the picture of a monkey on the canvas which bore their image and insisted that it be removed, he refused angrily, took the canvas under his arm, and went home, leaving the portrait unfinished, and, of course, unpaid for.
The workroom which he had chosen in his own house was sombre and dark, receiving its only light from a small window in the root. This shaft of light seemed to fascinate the artist and he used it with remarkable dramatic effect, directing it as he chose, diminishing it or admitting it in blazing glory to illuminate his subject. It was in this setting that he completed his famous "Night Watch," and many other pictures which show clearly the powerful effect he was able to get from contrasting light and shade which he was able to produce in his own workroom.

But grief and misfortune followed the years of his greatest prosperity. In 1642 Saskia, who had cheered and encouraged him, died, leaving him with one son and a fortune of 40,000 gulden, to be altogether his so long as he did not marry again. From this time on the character of his work changed. There was an air of sadness and humility in it which never left it, for Rembrandt never fully recovered from the loss of Saskia. His grief seems to have changed his conception of himself somewhat also, for a self-portrait which he did shortly after his wife's death, shows not the finely dressed gentleman of the early portraits, but a simple burgher.

Now he turned passionately to his work of etching. His subjects included portraits, landscapes, and the material of Bible stories. But the hand which had driven the crude tool that had first etched his own face in copper had acquired such skill and mastery of his medium as to bring him an acclaim as an etcher equal to that which he had already gained as a painter. The light effect which had so fascinated him in the sombre workroom in which so many of his finest paintings were produced still held his attention and he used it in many of his etchings.

It was during this period that he produced "Death of the Virgin," "Christ Preaching," "Christ Healing the Sick," "Crucifixion," and many of the other etchings reproduced in this book. Still avaricious, he adopted a technique of merchandising his etchings which increased his income. He sold impressions from unfinished plates, then finished them and sold more impressions, then made a few slight alterations and again sold impressions, thus selling the same work three or four times. This accounts for the "variants" or "variation imprints" which are still sought by collectors.

He never married again, after the death of Saskia. But he brought into his house and lived with Hendrickje Stoffels, a peasant girl, who was his companion and helper through prosperity and later financial reverses, until her death from pneumonia, the dreaded scourge which had taken Saskia from him. For Rembrandt was getting more and more deeply into trouble. The financial tide which had carried him so far toward fortune reversed on the receding wave of a great depression in Holland, and spending, in an amazingly short time, the combined fortune represented by his earnings and Saskia's bequest, he soon fell so deeply into debt that finally his creditors refused to have further patience with him and he was declared bankrupt.

The courts never discharged him from his obligations, so that his work, as soon as it was finished, was taken by his creditors. He retired into seclusion, seldom seeing anyone save his faithful friend Van Loon, until his death in 1669.

Thus came and passed one of the greatest geniuses which has ever been given to the world, a great artist, and by turns an arrogant and a disappointed and disillusioned man.

Here, in this book, are the fruit of his greatest genius—his etchings. All that have been definitely ascribed to him are here, and others which seem to leave little doubt that he was their creator. Only those whose authenticity is clearly questionable have been excluded. And under the influence of their beauty and power, we can forget the little human qualities, the arrogance, the greed which lessened the quality of the man, and remember only the immortal greatness of the artist.
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