What Rembrandt saw: The great Protestant painter

by Stephanie Dickey in the June 21, 2000 issue

Rembrandt's Eyes, by Simon Schama

In this lavish new book, Simon Schama explores the boisterous, dynamic, capitalist society of 17th-century Holland through the eyes of the artist who, more than any other, has become synonymous with its vividly expressive pictorial culture. This biography of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) provides the pretext for a wide-ranging discussion of an era ripe with invention in science, economics and the arts.

The title of the book, printed on the dust jacket over a close-up of one of Rembrandt's many penetrating self-portraits, alludes to the power of sight itself, a recurring metaphor (along with its opposite, blindness) both in Rembrandt's work and in Schama's elucidation of it.

Bisected by religious and political conflict in the 16th century, the Low Countries were divided into the Southern Netherlands, an appendage of Catholic Spain with Flanders at its heart, and the United Provinces or Dutch Republic, a newly minted, Protestant, entrepreneurial oligarchy whose growing pains sometimes seem uncannily predictive of our own. Determined to enjoy (but not too much) the fruits of their labors, the growing middle class of Dutch burghers, merchants, traders and manufacturers filled their tidy townhouses with art that celebrated their personal dignity and accomplishments, the humid sweep of their lowland countryside, and the miraculous bounty of Indonesian spices, Chinese porcelains, tropical fruits, Persian carpets, Venetian glass and other luxuries made available through the expertise of their merchant fleets.

Patronage of the arts, converted by Protestants from a privilege of the church to a thriving private enterprise, became a means for displaying personal success and civic virtue. Rembrandt participated in this consumer paradise as artist, art dealer and collector of exotic artifacts that often lend picturesque credibility to his biblical subjects. As Schama notes, the dagger used to puncture the hero's eye in the

Blinding of Samson, one of Rembrandt's most dramatic history paintings, is a Javanese kris. The golden goblets, sparkling jewels and authentic, right-to-left Hebraic script in *Belshazzar's Feast* bespeak a far-ranging curiosity about the world beyond.

Schama takes a celebratory and sensory excursion through Rembrandt's milieu, lavishly describing the sights, sounds and smells of the studio and the street, as well as the political and religious climate that surrounded Rembrandt as he climbed the ladder of artistic success. Born in the conservative university town of Leiden, Rembrandt spent his mature years in the bustling capital city of Amsterdam. Dutch artists often gained financial success by specializing in subjects that suited the tastes of their bourgeois clientele. (Vermeer, for instance, painted primarily scenes of everyday life.) Rembrandt developed two specialties: portraits that made their sitters look both distinguished and vividly alive, and dramatic history paintings that probed the emotional heart of familiar biblical themes.

More than a third of Schama's book is devoted to another artistic giant, Pieter Paul Rubens, who far surpassed Rembrandt in fame and wealth, and whom Rembrandt must have considered both an archrival and a potent role model. Rubens, wealthy citizen of Antwerp in the Southern Netherlands, painter to kings and queens across Europe, was revered by Rembrandt's generation as the epitome of success among artists north of the Alps.

Art historians have long been intrigued by Rembrandt's appropriation of certain Rubensian themes and pictorial types, but Schama makes this the centerpiece of his argument, as if the primary motivating force of Rembrandt's career was to imitate, emulate and eventually get the better of Rubens. This picture of the Dutch artist's dependence on his Flemish forbear (Rubens was amost 30 years Rembrandt's senior) exaggerates the evidence and contradicts Schama's other insistent claim: that Rembrandt should be recognized as an unparalleled genius. That assessment was widely held in the 19th century, but has been somewhat abandoned by recent scholars.

Schama also argues for Rembrandt's intellectual accomplishments, again presenting the learned Rubens as a role model. For the reader, the value in this fixation on Rembrandt's relationship to Rubens is that it leads to a historical digression on the conditions surrounding the Dutch revolt from Spain, in which Rubens's father played a minor diplomatic role. By this means, *Rembrandt's Eyes* becomes not just a picture

of Rembrandt’s environment but a capsule history of its origins.

Schama frequently pauses to describe and analyze specific works by Rubens and Rembrandt. He comments on telling nuances of subject and style, spinning rich interpretations from minutely observed details. Rembrandt’s portrait of the Mennonite preacher Cornelis Claesz Anslo and his wife, Aeltje Gerritsdr Schouten, seated at home as Anslo practices an oration, becomes for Schama an example of Rembrandt’s “astounding capacity for transforming the ordinary into the sublime.” The still life of Bible and candle is “a high altar” on which “books . . . are not mere heaps of parchment and paper. The pages stir, rise and flutter with light and life. The books, like Ezekiel’s dry bones, respire. The Word lives.”

This poetic description incorporates an essential principle of both Mennonite and mainstream Protestant thought: the supremacy of word over image, a prejudice that Dutch painters in general and Rembrandt in particular countered by imbuing their portraits and historical subjects with the visual equivalent of sound. Anslo’s parted lips and emphatic gesture almost make it possible, as the Dutch poet Vondel wrote, for the viewer to hear the preacher’s voice.

As he often does, however, Schama overextends and trivializes his argument, interpreting the composition, with Anslo at its elevated center, as a portrait of a marriage in which the domineering husband “leans heavily toward his wife, benevolently overbearing, just short of bullying,” while Aeltje, “her head slightly cocked like an obedient pet or a contrite child,” patiently accedes to his diatribe. The handkerchief crumpled in her hand attests to what “hard work” it is to be “perpetually on the receiving end of the Word.”

For this viewer, however, and I think for anyone aware that Mennonite belief valued both the outer and the inner word, it seems entirely possible that Rembrandt intended Aeltje (whose status in the composition was diminished when the canvas was cut down by a later owner) to appear genuinely moved by her husband’s speech, and by the deep faith that binds them together. Decorum and good business sense make it unlikely that Rembrandt would have painted paying customers in a way that was less than flattering. Certainly, for Rubens and his aristocratic patrons, portraiture was essentially a celebration of its subject, seldom a critique.

While Schama emphasizes Rembrandt’s struggle to surpass Rubens, it is the differences between their lives and careers that illuminates the complexities of life

in the Netherlands. Rubens, born into a privileged diplomatic family and graced with a humanist education, was fluent in several languages, conversant with Greek and Latin literature, and on friendly terms with an international network of intellectuals and connoisseurs. (Schama delights in the juicy gossip surrounding Rubens's youth, when his father was accused of having an affair with the wife of his noble employer, William of Orange.) An early sojourn in Italy imbued Rubens's style with the grandeur and vivacity of Titian and Michelangelo, and exposed him to the wonders of the classical past.

Rembrandt was the son of prosperous, middle-class mill owners in Leiden, where he attended college for a short time before dropping out to apprentice as a painter. He never left Holland, and scoured the markets for paintings and prints by the old masters.

As Rubens's growing reputation brought him commissions from the courts of Spain, England and elsewhere, his distinguished demeanor enabled him to engage in diplomacy, often using painting assignments for royalty as a cover for conducting delicate negotiations between courts. The surfeit of commissions awarded to Rubens was managed by a businesslike outfit in Antwerp, where specialist assistants in landscape, costume, flora and fauna collaborated to produce large-scale panels and canvases that were ultimately certified as Rubenses by the final enlivening touch of the master's hand.

Rembrandt's interactions with his patrician patrons are characterized, as far as documents show, by squabbles over late payment and complaints about likeness and lack of finish. He, too, managed a busy workshop, but seems to have run it less as an assembly line than as an association of colleagues.

By the time Rembrandt began to attract notice in Amsterdam, Rubens was spending a golden maturity in his palatial house in Antwerp, designed by his own hand to rival the palazzi of Genoa and Venice. He strolled in the garden with his lovely second wife, Helena Fourment (whom he married when she was 16 and he 53), and benignly surveyed the progress of their four children (the fifth was born soon after his death, in 1640, at 63).

All this is vividly reimagined, yet the contextual differences between the two men are blurred by Schama's presumption that Rembrandt's goal was, essentially, to become another Rubens. Ultimately, the two artists and their output reflect

divergent environments: one the international milieu of Roman Catholic cathedral and aristocratic palace, the other the Protestant, middle-class marketplace of Amsterdam.

In film and fiction, Rembrandt has long embodied the archetype of the profligate, rags-to-riches genius who willfully defies expectation in both art and life. He is depicted as making and losing a fortune, shocking his straitlaced patrons by having an affair with his housekeeper, and painting in a style too unconventional for his contemporaries to appreciate. While recognizing that the legend of Rembrandt's plebian origins and self-destructive lifestyle is largely a romantic exaggeration, Schama preserves the picture of an artist who, although never deliberately flouting convention, delighted in pushing the envelope.

The greatest crisis of Rembrandt's life after the death of his wife in 1642 came in the mid-1650s, when financial mismanagement pushed him into bankruptcy. Schama immerses us in the atmosphere of gathering doom, taking us through the rooms of Rembrandt's house as 30 years' accumulation of precious possessions are carted off to the auction block. Ultimately, this was as much a moral disaster as a financial one, since Rembrandt's Calvinist patrons regarded material wealth as a sign of God's favor, good stewardship of one's assets as an ethical necessity, and bankruptcy as a sin.

By the time Rembrandt reached maturity, the Inquisition's persecution of Anabaptist and Protestant heretics had long ceased in northern Europe, as had any real hope of Spain's reconquering the rebellious provinces of the Netherlands. The religious controversies that occupied Rembrandt's Dutch contemporaries were internal debates among Calvinist factions—the conservative Reformed establishment against the more liberal Arminian or Remonstrant sect that favored free will over predestination, and peace—a policy also good for business—over continued war against Catholic Spain.

As Schama notes, Rembrandt's move from Leiden to Amsterdam took him from a bastion of Reformed conservatism to a polyglot capital in which the Remonstrants dominated politics and mercantile pragmatism made it sensible to tolerate anyone who offered a good deal, whether Mennonite, Jew, millenarian or Calvinist—anyone, that is, except Roman Catholics, who were required to practice their faith in clandestine sanctuaries disguised within private homes.

Rembrandt, like many other artists, treated subjects that suited each of these faiths, often by crafting versions that cut across confessional boundaries. While his patrons included Calvinists, Remonstrants, Catholics and Jews, Rembrandt was not, as far as we know, an active churchgoer himself. His spirituality reveals itself best in his art, arguably the greatest body of work ever produced by a Protestant painter. Like many of his contemporaries, he read the Bible frequently and internalized its lessons. Especially popular among Protestant art buyers were Old Testament themes, such as Samson and Delilah or the prodigal son.

Schama's analyses of Rembrandt's paintings of biblical subjects (as well as of Rubens's commissions from Oratorians, Jesuits and other Catholic factions) reflect a sound knowledge of the visual and doctrinal traditions that shaped them. He illuminates Rembrandt's acute sensitivity to the essential pathos and drama that make these stories both entertaining and profound moral lessons. Rembrandt's wonderfully earthy depiction of the fall in an etching of 1638 is revealed as innovative in its rejection of the classical ideal yet firmly grounded in the medieval tradition, "which had imagined Adam and Eve not as smoothly sculpted by the hand of Divinity but rather as roughly fashioned, grotesque vessels of shame."

When discussing themes or circumstances that invite a leer or chortle, like Rubens's penchant for modeling his female saints on buxom blondes or the baroque taste for sexually charged subjects like *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife* (a "tug of war" between Joseph's virtue and the "gross sensual appetite" of his mistress), Schama's tone can be vexingly flip. He closes the book, however, with a commentary on the profundity of Rembrandt's last works, including the *Return of the Prodigal Son*, left on the artist's easel at his death in 1669 and completed by a pupil. In this painting, which has inspired the meditations of Henri Nouwen and so many others, Schama finds "the dying, phosphorescent flare of Rembrandt's deathbed vision." The painting returns to the leitmotif of vision, blindness and spiritual insight, as the forgiving father delivers "the balm of grace with . . . lids closed and . . . arms outstretched."

Schema's book is an entertaining read, though its multitude of details may strike readers as self-indulgent. The careful reader will come away knowing the leaders of the seven angelic choirs, the variety of dialects spoken on the streets of 17th-century Amsterdam, the specific pigments that compose a Rembrandt portrait, the type of acid used to destroy Rembrandt's *Danaë* in the Hermitage (one of the most egregious acts of cultural vandalism in recent memory) and the methods used by early modern surgeons to excise gallbladders and cataracts.

Whether one finds Schama’s verbal pyrotechnics amusing, annoying, brilliant or poetic, his work offers much to stimulate both intellect and imagination.