

Rembrandt

March 26 to June 27, 2004

With this large Rembrandt exhibition, the Vienna Albertina dedicates another exhibition to one of the main masters of its collection. It will be the first retrospective on Rembrandt's work in Austria.

The exhibition will bring together 30 paintings by Rembrandt with the most significant examples of his graphical oeuvre – 80 drawings and 70 etchings. This gives a suspenseful insight into the great universality of this most important and influential Dutch artist of the 17th century.

Rembrandt's creative genius, his fascinating technical mastery in all media and the wide thematic spectrum in his work will be honoured in a unique manner. The exhibition will be organised into thematically oriented groups, within which one can study the fascinating interplay between the individual media.

The exhibition will show self-portraits, figure studies, nudes and animal studies, portraits, mythological and religious representations as well as landscapes from all creative periods of Rembrandt's work.

The exhibited paintings include major works such as „Flora“ from London, „Landscape with Stone Bridge“ from Amsterdam, self-portraits from Munich and Vienna and „Sophonisba“ from Madrid. Brilliant sheets such as the „Reclining Lion“ from Paris or the „Reclining Nude“ from Amsterdam as well as gripping scenes such as „Hagar and Ishmael in the Desert“ from Hamburg and countless landscape drawings filled with light, air and atmosphere will be shown.

Loans from the most important collections of the world will complete the excellent Albertina collection of drawings and etchings by Rembrandt, several of which were already acquired by the collection's founder Albert von Sachsen-Teschen – and which the Albertina is famous for. This is why the Albertina was always – and especially under its director Otto Benesch from 1948 to 1961 – an important centre of Rembrandt research.

The Exhibition

Among the exceptional aspects of Rembrandt's artistic personality was his versatile creativity both in the thematic and the technical area – a rare case in the Dutch Golden Century, during which artists increasingly concentrated on special areas, sometimes even only on one specific technique. Rembrandt's versatility is even present within single media, as is demonstrated in the Albertina collection's more than 40 drawings. Every artistic phase, every thematic area and nearly every technique is represented in qualitative examples.

Hence the arrangement of thematically oriented groups in this exhibition unfolded in a natural manner. This arrangement is not a forced construction, but rather corresponds to the way in which Rembrandt himself ordered his drawings. From the inventory list made of Rembrandt's possessions in 1656 we were able to deduce that Rembrandt kept his drawn studies in albums that were systematically ordered by categories such as nude figures, landscapes, figure studies, animal representations, views, drawings of antique figures and others.

It is an immediate consequence of Rembrandt's way of working that it is nearly impossible to demonstrate creative processes or coherent work groups in these thematic complexes. As far as research has shown, Rembrandt brought nearly all his compositions without preparation immediately onto the canvas or etching plate.

Almost all his works, whether painted, drawn or etched, were the result of an autonomous artistic process and can be regarded individually. A quick landscape sketch thus appears as „completed“ and closed within itself as an exemplarily produced etching or an intricately detailed landscape painting does; the small chalk study of a beggar may demonstrate the same concentrated gift of observation as a life-size portrait may. The spectrum of Rembrandt's creativity comes to life in multifarious ways in the ever-returning tension between small and large formats, between sketch-like and carefully designed compositions, of fine line structures and generous artistic forms.

The Leiden Years (c. 1625-1631)

After Rembrandt finished his six-month apprenticeship with Pieter Lastman in 1625, he established himself as an independent artist in his birth-town of Leiden. In his main subject, history painting, the young artist found his own distinctive style within a remarkably short time. In addition to his genre paintings and history paintings, Rembrandt drew and etched so-called „Tronies“, portraits whose aim was not the representation of the individual portrayed person, but rather the general characterisation of specific social types: such as old men and women, Orientals or soldiers.

One central focal point during his Leiden years was Rembrandt's representation of bearded old men. They primarily took the roles of prophets and apostles, usually in a state of meditation, sorrow or desperation. Rembrandt showed an interest in this psychological aspect already early on, as is vividly demonstrated in his painting *The Apostle Peter in Prison*. Rembrandt used this bearded male figure repeatedly as a model for the paintings, drawings and etchings of his later Leiden years.

In his drawings, Rembrandt often dedicated himself to studies of individual beggars and simple workmen or costumed figures.

In the early painted and etched self-portraits, he used his own facial traits primarily for the study of enacted emotions and moods as well as of extreme light effects.

Figure Studies from the Thirties

Since the first years in Amsterdam, where Rembrandt moved from Leiden, he spent several decades studying the human figure in his drawings and etchings in the most different manners. Like a permanent observer, his drawing pen registered his environment: strange animals, unusual types or even inconspicuous, commonplace figures.

Even for his most imaginative determinations of images, Rembrandt could always lean on these studies „from life“; at the same time these sheets provided an important store of models for his pupils.

Portraiture of the Early Amsterdam Years

When Rembrandt began his work in Hendrick Uylenburgh's studio in Amsterdam in 1631, there opened for him a new dimension of character representation with portraiture. The portraits he painted in Amsterdam clearly stood out from the works of

all other contemporary artist from the beginning through their sensitive characterisation as well as their new colour and light effects. Rembrandt was soon buried in portrait commissions. More than half of his paintings from between 1631 and 1634 are portraits. Having ended his successful work with Hendrick Uylenburgh in 1635, whose cousin Saskia Uylenburgh he had married one year before, Rembrandt abandoned portraiture for some time and concentrated primarily on history paintings.

Actors and Charlatans

The world of theatre and the related art of costuming held a particular fascination for Rembrandt. This specific interest is attested to by a number of drawings which – executed mostly by pen, sometimes also by brush – originate from the late 1630's.

Animals

Animals were an important motif for Rembrandt. He collected his studies on the topic in a „Book Full of Drawings Consisting of Animals from Life“. Although it includes an impressive range of drawings and etchings of many different animals, we do not know of any individual animal paintings by Rembrandt. Rembrandt drew simple household animals such as pigs or dogs, but also rare and exotic animals like birds of paradise, lions or elephants.

The elephant drawings are among Rembrandt's most famous animal representations.

Women's life and children

An important place in Rembrandt's oeuvre of drawings is given to the group of studies of mother-child representations. Rembrandt himself titled these works in his convoluted drawings as „women's life and children“. The sheets exhibited here are from the mid-1630's and were made using different techniques – in black and red chalk as well as by pen. These spontaneously captured scenes from daily life are masterworks of the psychological art of observation; moreover, they impress formally through their subtle light play.

Rembrandt's Self-Portraits in the Tradition of International Portraiture

In many of Rembrandt's self-portraits of the late 1630's and early 1640's, he confidently included himself as a celebrated painter in the great tradition of

international portraiture. He signalled this intention both through the imaginative costumes of the 16th century and via his obvious references to famous self-portraits of the great masters of the past. In the etching *Self-Portrait with Resting Arm*, Rembrandt was inspired by the works by Titian and Raphael. He made a very free copy of Raphael's *Portrait of the Baldassare Castiglione*, which was auctioned off in Amsterdam in 1639. This drawing served as compositional model for Rembrandt's own painted self-portrait.

Nude Figures from the 1630's and 1640's

In Rembrandt's paintings, drawings and etchings, the subject of nude figures received differentiated treatment. In one of his earliest nudes, the etching *Nude Woman, Sitting on an Earthen Hill* (1631), his uncompromising observation led to a realism shocking to his contemporaries. Classicistic criticism was soon ignited by realistic details, such as the representation of the breasts, the female genitals or the emaciated bodies of hard-working men.

The importance Rembrandt as teacher gave to communal drawing from models is shown in the etching *Male Nude, Sitting and Standing* (around 1646), in the background of which he later added the first steps of a small child in a walking carriage as an instructive implication of the importance of continuous practice.

Landscapes „from life“ and „from spirit“

The combination of work „from life“ and „from spirit“ that is so characteristic for Rembrandt is manifested particularly clearly in his early landscape representations of the thirties. On the one hand, he dedicated himself to studying peasant houses, which he represented alone, in groups or in close-up views. On the other hand, he developed a general landscape type, into which he integrated realistic details from studies that he had made at the site „from life“. The results were dramatically exaggerated compositions marked by strong effects of light and dark. This applies particularly to the drawing *Peasant Houses in front of a Dark Sky* from 1634 as well as his earliest landscape painting *Landscape with Stone Bridge*. Observation and copying on the one hand entered a tense synthesis with invention and artistic exaggeration on the other.

Lastman and Rembrandt

In various phases of his career, Rembrandt addressed the work of his teacher Pieter Lastman, with whom he trained as a history painter in Amsterdam. In the 1630's he was particularly interested in the movement of the crowds in Lastman's densely crowded figure compositions, which Rembrandt copied very liberally in chalk drawings. In his etching of Lastman's painting *The Triumph of Mordechai*, completed around 1641, his interest focussed on the historical background and the exotic costumes as well as the psychological aspect.

Landscapes of the 1640's

A new realism emerged in Rembrandt's landscape drawings of the 1640's. The artist captured numerous motifs from the surroundings of his home and from the watery area around Amsterdam with black chalk in his sketchbooks. The drawing *Two Boyers at Anchor* is a result of his extensive walks. The other sketches exhibited here, three of which are from the same sketchbook, are, despite their small format, marked by breathtaking effects of distance and subtle atmospheric effects. The washed pen drawings are mostly from the late 1640's: this technique was particularly effective for the depiction of wide meadows, light reflecting water surfaces and soft horizons.

Heroic Women

During the thirties, Rembrandt painted a number of richly costumed, monumental female figures from the Bible and from ancient mythology. The commissioners and the purpose of these grand, virtuously painted pictures is unknown. There is much speculation about a possible similarity these fascinating heroines have with Rembrandt's wife Saskia. However, whether this similarity was intended is as uncertain as the exact theme of the paintings is: some of them are hence even known by different titles. The phenomenon of different possibilities of interpretation is certainly designative of Rembrandt's free, often even obstinate, approach to historical models and literary sources. It is characteristic of Rembrandt that he often changed the identity of his mythological subject even while already at work by making minor changes in the figure.

This is demonstrated particularly well in the 1634 painting *Flora*. The mythological goddess of spring, *Flora*, is presented here with a great flower bouquet, a flower staff and a small crown of flowers in her hair. Rembrandt's flexibility in his approach to this motifs is shown in the fact that the representation was originally planned as an old-testament Judith figure with a sword and the head of Holofernes. He painted over this representation at a presumably late of progress, by raising the right arm higher, replacing the sword by the flower staff and making the left hand, originally stretched out carrying the head of Holofernes, into the bearer of the presented flowers.

Portrait Etchings

Rembrandt met the great demand for portraits by him not only with paintings, but also with etchings. The portrait etchings were exclusively commissioned by men. The exhibited examples offer a revealing insight into the artist's social context. *Jan Six*, a highly educated young man with a great interest in art, who came from a family of rich silk traders and would later become mayor of Amsterdam, commissioned his portrait from Rembrandt in 1647. This unusually detailed, technically virtuous etching is marked by its refined effects of backlight. The strictly frontal portrait of the art dealer *Clement de Jonghe* (1651), on the other hand, has a very immediate appearance.

The Late Landscapes from the 1650's

Rembrandt's late landscape drawings and etchings present a very differentiated group. The drawings stretch from the fine lines of the early 1650's to the summary characteristic style of his reed pen work at the end of the decade; the increasingly simple compositions convey an infinite depth and a unifying atmosphere. Rembrandt made his last landscape etchings in 1652, followed by sporadic landscape drawings until 1660.

Religious Representations

Rembrandt's interpretations of the life of Christ – from the birth and incarnation of the Son of God until his execution at the cross – is among the most intensive realisations of the mythical stories from the New Testament.

Rembrandt and his pupils often depicted the story of Christ and the Woman of Samaria. The conversation between Christ and the woman standing next to the fountain related to the water from the source, which humans keep being thirsty for, as opposed to the water given by Christ that leads to eternal life. It has still not been satisfactorily clarified whether this painting was painted by Rembrandt himself or by one of his pupils.

Rembrandt's monumental dry point work *Ecce Homo* (1655), like its probable counter-piece *The Three Crosses* (1653) addresses the Passion of Christ. The two sheets exhibited here – in the second and the final, eighth, stage – show the beginning and the end of a technically and artistically dramatic transformation process. In the earlier version, Pontius Pilate is presenting the bound Christ and the

criminal Barabbas to the people. In the following versions, Rembrandt reduced the size of the plate, re-worked the architectural setting and removed the group of people below Christ. Now, in the eighth stage, the observer is placed into the role of the people who committed Christ to his death.

Self-portraits from 1648 to 1660

The group of self-portraits exhibited here was completed between 1648 and about 1660 using different techniques. They display an introverted character and treat Rembrandt as an artist. In the etching *Self-Portrait at the Window – Drawing on an Etching Plate* (1648), Rembrandt presented himself in the simple dress he wore in his studio. The once long, curled hair was by this point replaced by a short haircut and instead of the elegant pointed beard of the earlier portraits, in which he posed in pompous Renaissance costumes, the artist here bears a simple moustache. The cylinder-shaped hat with the thin rim is also featured in the famous drawing *Rembrandt (Self-Portrait?), Standing in Whole Figure*, in which the artist is wearing a simple work-coat. Among the great series of painted self-portraits, the *Large Self-Portrait* is deemed among the uncontested highpoints both for its painting technique and for the intensity of its expression.

The small, highly unconventional etching that exists in this form only in the Albertina and the *Self-Portrait with a Beret* have a simple immediacy. In the miniature format, the manner of work that marks his entire work of the later years reveals itself here: great precision combined with extreme artistic freedom. The multiplicity of his artistic means is staggering considering the small format: Rembrandt worked in several phases alternately with pen and brush.

The Late Oeuvre

During the 1650's, Rembrandt reduced heavy pathos of the history paintings. The compositions became calmer: Rembrandt avoided sudden shortenings and perspectives with an extreme depth-alignment in favour of an increasing monumentalisation of his heavy figures. This monument-like simplification of the large format thus went hand in hand with a reduction of the spatial depth of the stage, which would now, as opposed to the earlier works, be illuminated by a softer light. This new Classicism in Rembrandt's late works was the result of a confrontation with Italian renaissance, especially with the Raphael's works.

The figure's outwardly calm is contrasted with the nervously vibrating lines of the drawing or the artistic small format of the brushstrokes as an expression of the depicted persons' mental revival and internalization.

Rembrandt and the Albertina

In 1822 Archduke Karl, the adoptive son of the Albertina's founder Duke Albert of Sachsen-Teschen ordered the first ever inventory of his uncle's extensive and valuable collection. At that time, no less than 141 pieces by Rembrandt were mentioned, including works coming from such trustworthy sources as the collections De Ligne and Moritz von Fries. However, despite further additions of allegedly authentic drawings by the Dutchman over the course of the next hundred years, only 64 sheets by Rembrandt himself were mentioned among the Albertina's possessions in the 6-volume oeuvre catalogue authored by Otto Benesch in 1954 to 1957. As is the case with all other Rembrandt collections, the Albertina's own collection has also behaved somewhat like a melting glacier.

Rembrandt research of the last two decades has further diminished the Albertina collection of universally recognised drawings by the greatest Dutch artist of the 17th century to just over 40 works by this point. Nevertheless, this still makes the collection one of the Albertina's treasures both in its quantity and in view of its outstanding artistic quality. Together with the print works by the Dutchman, which almost in their entirety belong to the Albertina, the whole Rembrandt body of the Viennese collection is also one of the oldest inclusive collections of its kind.

The largest part of the print oeuvre originated with the important French aficionado of the 18th century Pierre-Jean Mariette and with Prince Eugen. After the Albertina collection was combined with the imperial collection in the imperial library, including Prince Eugen's collection, in 1922, this collection of graphic works by Rembrandt has been comparable in its richness only with the collections in Berlin and Amsterdam.

The decimation of drawings attributed to Rembrandt is part of the general tendency of an increasing decimation of original works by Rembrandt. As late as in 1923, Wilhelm Valentiner was able to still proudly state that in the preceding decade it had been possible to extend the oeuvre by Rembrandt – already consisting of 600 paintings – by another 100 hitherto unknown paintings. Horst Gerson, however, fairly soon introduced the opposite trend and only 40 years after Valentiner, he allowed the number of apparently ascertained works to diminish to 420.

Another turning point in this development was reached with the establishment of the Rembrandt Research Project. Since the first volume on the Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings was published in 1982, there occurred a paradigm shift in the broader public perception of Rembrandt, as well. No longer did his works trigger, as they once did for Georg Simmel, the address of questions of human life: no longer did the aim for such an interpretation dominate the works' perception. Instead, a portrait or drawing bearing the label „Rembrandt“ today triggers first of all the question „Rembrandt or not?“, hence also the title of the Hamburg and Bremen Kunsthalle exhibition four years ago, as they were examining their Rembrandt collection. One symbol of the general insecurity in the search for the „real Rembrandt“ was without doubt the announcement in 1986 by the Berlin Gemäldegalerie that their most famous Rembrandt – the „Man with the Golden Helmet“ – was not by Rembrandt. The third volume of the Corpus in 1989 in part even placed into doubt its own earlier research results for the Rembrandt Research Project – not at all diminishing the level of uncertainty. A preliminary culmination in this process of decimation was the exhibition „Rembrandt / Not Rembrandt“ in the New York Metropolitan Museum in 1995. Out of the 41 paintings owned by the Museum that had until then been ascribed to Rembrandt himself, only 18 pieces are still considered authentic. It speaks for the contemporary Museum ethics that two different researchers within one and the same house, Walter Liedtke and Hubertus of Sonneburg, had to openly declare their conflicting opinions and then had to agree on only 15 Rembrandts they declared authentic. Of these, the Rembrandt Research Project is challenging a further four paintings; of the remaining eleven works, eight have been doubted by one or another Rembrandt specialist in the past. Only three of the Metropolitan Museum's paintings remain unchallenged. One of these, the „Portrait of Gerard de Lairesse“, is shown next to a differently evaluated Rembrandt here by the Albertina.

While the „cleansing process“ that has become possible in the field of drawings due to improved methods and greater knowledge may have been given less attention in the public eye, its dimensions and effects are nevertheless even more dramatic than was the case with Rembrandt's paintings. One by one, every Rembrandt collection is examining its possessions, as was most recently done in Munich and will soon be done by the Berlin collection. The example in Munich shows how dramatic the quantitative reduction of what used to be mountains of Rembrandt drawings can

become. While 373 drawings were considered original works by Rembrandt at purchase, in 1906 already only 155 were attributed to the master. In 1957, just 80 drawings were accepted as originals. The latest exhibitions in 2001 ascribed a mere 14 of the sheets in its own collection to Rembrandt.

However, it would be wrong to understand the focus on problems of attribution as a mere auxiliary academic interest in the work. Quite to the contrary: it was not least the growing occupation with the drawings that has deepened our understanding of Rembrandt's way of running the studio and of the artist as a businessman. Everything that was produced in the studio belonged to Rembrandt; everything that was sold received the master's signature – essentially like a logo. The study pieces that were not intended for sale were not signed and nor do we know their titles. From the inventory of Rembrandt's possessions made in 1656, we merely know that the drawings in his own albums and portfolios were ordered by subjects and motifs: a pragmatic order that guaranteed the easy location of motifs, figure positions and gesticulations.

Beginning with the Albertina's own large collection, this system of order by Rembrandt was now taken as directive system for this exhibition, since our collection includes pieces to exemplify each different thematic area and each different technique as well as nearly every artistic phase in Rembrandt's work at hand of one major work or even several representative pieces. This makes the current presentation clearly different from the past three Rembrandt exhibitions by the Albertina: As the author of the oeuvre catalogue of the Rembrandt drawings, Otto Benesch organised the first Rembrandt exhibition in Austria in 1956 with about 150 drawings and 140 etchings. On the occasion of the 300th anniversary of Rembrandt's death, Benesch's successor in the director's chair Walter Koschatzky first showed the Albertina's 64 drawings that Benesch had already attributed to Rembrandt in 1969/7, and in the following year he presented an extensive selection of the etchings kept in the Albertina. A Rembrandt exhibition encompassing all media – paintings, drawings and etchings – has never before taken place in Vienna: remarkably so, considering the great number of Rembrandt presentations that have already taken place worldwide.

Klaus Albrecht Schröder

From the preface to the catalogue

Biography

1606 until 1625 Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn was born in Leiden as the ninth child of the miller Harmen van Rijn and his wife Cornelia.

At the age of 15, he began a three-year apprenticeship with the history painter Jacob van Swanenburgh , who had just returned from Italy. Immediately afterwards, he spent half a year in Amsterdam as a pupil of the history painter Pieter Lastman

1625 Rembrandt settled as an independent artist in Leiden.

In **1631**, Rembrandt moved to Amsterdam. At first he lived with the painter and art dealer Hendrick Uylenburgh Rembrandt became one of the most desired portrait painters of his time, at first still as Uylenburgh's leading employee.

In **1634** Rembrandt married Saskia Uylenburgh, the daughter of a wealthy lawyer and mayor in Frisia.

In **1639**, Rembrandt purchased a large house in Amsterdam, the financial means for which were far beyond him despite his excellent work situation. He also collected contemporary art works and valuable art chamber pieces.

In order to meet the great demand, Rembrandt led the running of his studio like a businessman: everything that was made in the studio received the master's signature on sale.

In **1642**, Saskia died of Tuberculosis. Their son Titus, who was born one year before, would remain the only child by Rembrandt and Saskia to survive into adulthood.

1643 until 1656 After Saskia's death, Geertje Dircks, Titus' nanny, managed Rembrandt's household.

In **1647**, Hendrickje Stoffels began her position as maid and housekeeper for Rembrandt. She would become Rembrandt's last partner

When Geertje Dircks successfully sued Rembrandt for having broken his promise of marriage, the artist had her declared mentally ill and detained in an institution.

In **1654**, Rembrandt and Hendrickje Stoffels' only daughter Cornelia was born.

In the 1650's, Rembrandt's life became increasingly difficult due to the general economic slump as a result of the Anglo-Dutch War (1652-1654).

In **1656** Rembrandt was declared bankrupt. In the following years, all his possessions were auctioned off. These foreclosure sales could also not raise enough funds to meet his debts..

1658 until 1669 Having moved to a removed part of Amsterdam, the last years of Rembrandt's life were marked by increasing social and artistic estrangement. Dutch art was now dominated by a non-dramatic and smooth style of painting oriented at French Classicism.

Pursued by his creditors, Rembrandt was officially employed in a small art dealership run by his son Titus and his partner Hendrickje Stoffels.

In **1662**, he received his last major commission for the decoration of the Amsterdam city hall. The painting he painted for this purpose did not meet the dominating tastes and was removed after a few months.

1663 Hendrickje died;

1668 Titus died at the age of 27 years.

On October 4, 1669, Rembrandt died at the age of 63 years.

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