

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or electronic reproductions of copyrighted materials. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or electronic reproduction of copyrighted materials that is to be "used for...private study, scholarship, or research." You may download one copy of such material for your own personal, noncommercial use provided you do not alter or remove any copyright, author attribution, and/or other proprietary notice. Use of this material other than stated above may constitute copyright infringement.
CHAPTER 5
REMBRANDT VAN RIJN

Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn was born on 15 July 1606 in Leiden, the son of the miller Harmen Gerritsz. van Rijn. His mother Cornelia (or Nelligen) Willemsdochter van Zuytbroek was the daughter of a baker. The parents lived on the Weddelzeg, close to the ‘Rijn-null’, and the family name ‘van Rijn’ was derived from this malt mill. On his mother’s death in 1640 – his father died in 1639 – an inventory was taken of her estate which reflects fairly comfortable circumstances. In addition to half of the mill, she owned some houses. The total value of her estate, not far from 10,000 guilders, was to be divided among the heirs. While Rembrandt was the eighth of nine children, only four were alive at this time: Adriaen, a shoemaker, Willem, a baker, Rembrandt, and his sister Lysbeth. The facts of Rembrandt’s origin are not unimportant. The harsh force in the master’s nature, most obvious in his early works, and his inexhaustible vitality may have something to do with his ancestry. They should also be considered in connexion with the remarkable scope of his development. Rembrandt progressed, with powerful impulses, with extraordinary elan, and with an intensity hitherto unknown, from the rough to the sensitive, and from a somewhat brutal character in his art to the sublime. One wonders if a man who had been brought up from the beginning in wealth and in more cultivated surroundings would ever have been driven by such dynamic forces to the height of his activity.

According to J. Ockers, Rembrandt’s first biographer, the boy’s parents destined their gifted son for a learned profession, apparently with the ambition of opening his way to a higher social sphere. He attended the Leiden grammar school for seven years, and on 20 May 1620 was enrolled as a student at the university of Leiden. It is not known how long Rembrandt studied there. It is certain only that his parents soon recognized their son’s natural inclination towards art as too strong to be denied, and that the boy was allowed to give up his university studies. He was then sent to an artist to learn the rudiments of art. His first teacher has not been identified; his second was Jacob Isaacksz. van Swanenburgh (c. 1571–1638), an obscure Leiden painter of architectural views and scenes of hell. Rembrandt spent three years with Van Swanenburgh, but not a trace of his style can be seen in the youthful artist’s early work. It is also noteworthy that, as far as we know, Rembrandt, who depicted almost every subject during the course of his career, never painted an architectural scene or a view of hell. Ockers tells us that Rembrandt’s work with Van Swanenburgh showed such great promise that his father, in order to secure his son’s best advantage, sent him to Amsterdam to study for six months with the famous Pieter Lastman. The eighteen- or nineteen-year-old youth returned to Leiden about 1624–5 and set himself up as an independent master. The earliest works which can be attributed to him date from about this time.

The Leiden Period: 1625–1631

Rembrandt’s development can be divided into four basic periods: the beginnings in Leiden, and three phases in Amsterdam. In Leiden, a university town and important centre of humanism and scholarship, there was a distinct local atmosphere, while in cosmopolitan Amsterdam Rembrandt was more strongly exposed to the great international trends of Baroque art. It was in Amsterdam during the thirties that he first reached a High Baroque phase, clearly under the impression of Rubens’ art; and later – in the fifties and sixties – a more classical style which, though far from outright classicism, showed some influence of the tectonic and monumental character of Renaissance art. An intermediary period during the forties was a time of inner crisis and transition. This division of Rembrandt’s career into four periods must, however, be applied with caution and judgement. Rembrandt’s artistic development was not a rigid one. He was capable of shifting moods and modes with great rapidity, and the style he used in one medium did not fully parallel one he used when he worked in another. Rembrandt’s genius was flexible and sometimes explosive. There are fluctuations, cross-currents, premonitions, and recurrences in his œuvre.

His first period was a time of rapid growth, rich enough to fill out the whole life of a minor master, but in Rembrandt’s career only a beginning which was followed by more important stages. From the moment he embarked on independent activity he began to make religious pictures, and during the course of his career he worked more from Scripture than from any other source. The amazing Feast of Esther (c. 1665, Raleigh, North Carolina Museum of Art; Plate 28b), bursting with energy, yet over-rich in detail and somewhat immature in its lack of control over forms in space, can be explained as an over-ambitious attempt by the youth to combine the lighting effects and the large scale of the Utrecht Caravaggistes painters with the style of his teacher Lastman. The synthesis was not a complete success. Young Rembrandt was more at home with the new form of small realistic historical painting in the Early Baroque manner which Elsheimer’s Dutch followers developed after their return from Italy. He did not attempt another lifetime composition again until 1631, when he painted the Holy Family (Plate 35a) now at Munich. Rembrandt’s earliest extant dated work, the Stoning of St Stephen of 1629 (Lyon, Museum; Plate 28a), shows how impressed he was by Lastman’s forcefulness based upon lively gestures and a vivid chiaroscuro. The young Leiden artist used the same kind of fanciful Italianate setting that his teacher employed, and depended on similar strong contrasts of light and shade to give his work a dramatic character. In his colouring Rembrandt also follows the example of Lastman in giving a hard brilliance to the illuminated figures. Rembrandt’s immaturity is evident here in the overcrowding and confused spatial relationships; however, the young artist already surpasses his famous teacher by achieving a greater concentration in his composition. The horsemen and figures on the left have been massed into a group by a dark shadow which suppresses detail in almost half the painting. This device focuses attention
PART ONE: PAINTING 1600–1675

out the main action and intensifies the mood. There is nothing comparable to it in the œuvre of Lastman or any of the other 'pre-Rembrandtists'.

One of the heads in the Lyon picture—the one looking at the scene in painted horror just below the arm of the man holding a rock with both hands high above his head—shows that Rembrandt was already making studies of his own physiognomy at this early date. It is a self-portrait, the earliest extant by the artist, who represented himself more frequently than any other master. Almost one hundred self-portraits by Rembrandt are known. This unique autobiography presents Rembrandt’s conception of himself from the beginning to the end of his career: as a gay gallant, a proper bourgeois, a majestic Titan, and finally, as the aged sage who plumed the secrets of his interiormost life.

During his Leiden years Rembrandt also frequently used himself as a convenient model to study chiaroscuro effects and facial expressions. The results of these studies were incorporated into his more ambitious historical compositions. This experimental approach was not an uncommon one among Baroque artists; both Caravaggio and Bernini used themselves as models for their early physiognomical studies. The volcanic energy and bold originality of the young genius is seen in the early Self-Portrait (Plate 30A) now at Kassel. Rembrandt painted his powerful head and bust in deep shadow and silhouetted them against the light wall—a device reminiscent of the Utrecht Caravaggisti. But the distribution of light and shade in the self-portrait is unique. The upper part is deeply shadowed, and it requires a strong effort on the part of the onlooker to recognize the artist’s questioning glance. The effect is as dramatic as it is bold in the neglect of the portrait conventions of the time, and it shows how early Rembrandt began to exploit the variety of texture that can be achieved by altering the fluidity of oil paint. Here he used a heavy impasto for the accents of light on his shoulder, neck, and check; the grey wall was brushed in with thin paint; and vigorous scratches into the wet colour with the butt end of his brush were used to depict his wild mane.

Such passages anticipate the master’s later freedom in handling paint. The final result is one of intense realism and romanticism—a combination found frequently in Rembrandt’s art.

Lastman’s influence persists in the subject pictures painted during the Leiden years, and even during his first years in Amsterdam Rembrandt found it profitable to make drawings after his old teacher’s paintings. But he quickly displayed more power than Lastman. Works by the youthful artist already reveal on an intimate scale unmistakable signs of the complete master. No painter in Holland could have equaled the humanity and power of perception Rembrandt brought to his small picture of Tobit and Anna (1626, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Plate 30A). Nor is there a parallel for his conception of Joseph striding forward out of the mysterious night in the Flight into Egypt (Tours, Musée des Beaux-Arts) painted in 1627; fifteen years later, Rembrandt was to paint the lifesize figure of Captain Cocq, the central figure in the Night Watch, in a similar pose. Expressive gestures used to enliven and dramatize the Presentation in the Temple (c. 1628, Hamburg, Kunsthalle) may still recall Lastman, but the depth of expression is Rembrandt’s own.

During the Leiden years Rembrandt was also as much at home with the etcher’s needle as he was with the painter’s brush. Even his earliest prints have a radiance and intimacy of effect that exert a miraculous power. We not only read their stories; we increasingly feel their graphic charm and their spiritual flavour. Here, too, Rembrandt discovered his way with lightning swiftness. After making a few experiments with the technique he was able to exploit the potential of the medium with absolute surety. By the time he left Leiden for Amsterdam he was the outstanding etcher of his day.

There is, however, one important category of Rembrandt’s later activity which is absent in his first period. Rembrandt did not execute portrait commissions until about 1631, his last year in Leiden. In his youth he aspired to be a history painter, not a mere face-painter. The portraits he made in Leiden of members of his family and old people in fanciful guise were primarily studies of types for his subject pictures. The artist’s mother, sister, and a model traditionally identified as his father, as well as Rembrandt himself, can be recognized in the Music Party of 1626 (Brittius 635). His mother served as the model for Anna in the Tobit and Anna of 1626 at the Rijksmuseum, as Hannah in the Hamburg Presentation in the Temple, and again as Hannah in the painting of the prophetess at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, which is of 1631. But Rembrandt’s interest in old people was not confined to making likenesses of his parents. To the youthful artist old age was the ideal age. It afforded him the best opportunity of showing the richness of inner life gained through experience and suffering. In this early period the meditative quality of old people attracted him. His preference for elderly faces and his keen appreciation of their potentialities for expression may have come from his early familiarity with the Bible, in which the patriarchal type plays such a dominant role. St Paul seated in Contemplation (c. 1629–1630, Nürnberg, Germanisches National-Museum; Plate 31A) belongs to a group of outstanding paintings that Rembrandt made during his Leiden phase of saints, apostles, and philosophers in dimly lit interiors.

From the very beginning Rembrandt used chiaroscuro in his own individual manner. In the works by Caravaggio and his early followers the light and shade are intensely contrasted, and there is little penumbra transition. In their pictures, sharp borders between the illuminated and the shadowed parts create the effect of clear-cut contours, and in consequence of this, figures as well as separate objects stand out with a pronounced sculptural character against a dark and rather spaceless background. In the Money Changer of 1627 (Berlin-Dahlem, Staatliche Museen; Plate 29A) young Rembrandt takes up the problem of the light and shadow produced by the flame of the taper, covered by the old man’s hand. Here he was doubtless inspired by Honthorst, who popularized this device. Rembrandt, following Honthorst’s example, carefully studied the coloured reflections on the face of his model and the other objects in the room. There is, however, a difference in effect between this nocturnal scene by early Rembrandt and any by Honthorst. Rembrandt has already surpassed his model in unifying light and atmosphere throughout an interior. In his St Paul in Contemplation (Plate 31A), painted a few years later, the light and shadow are even more closely interwoven. A permanent fluctuation from the one to the other takes place, producing a nebulous atmosphere, full of mysterious effect. But more than this is achieved: by the fluctuating light the figure is expressly connected with the surrounding space, and the space itself
is drawn into the representation. It becomes a vibrant, living medium. Space and figure in Rembrandt's art now share one inseparable existence and are equally expressive. At this point of his development Rembrandt was already able to use chiaroscuro to give the atmosphere both a visual and a spiritual meaning. Throughout his career, chiaroscuro remained his most powerful means of expression. Of course, there are other important features of his art: his colouristic treatment, his draughtsmanship, his brushwork, his compositional devices; but in a way they are all subordinated to, or in any case co-ordinated with, his chiaroscuro.

During his last years in Leiden Rembrandt's style became finer and more intimate. A subtly diffused, yet dramatic chiaroscuro develops, and cool, delicate colours predominate. In some cases this precious style continues into the early years in Amsterdam. The dully lit interior of colossal dimensions, the fantastic columns and deep shadows intensify the mysterious atmosphere of The Presentation in the Temple (1631, The Hague, Mauritshuis; Plate 31A), but the small figures of the main group gain distinctness by means of the sparkling sunlight which strikes them. The golden halo of the Christ Child who will be 'a light to lighten the Gentiles' makes a source of light within the beam. Around this time Rembrandt also painted historical scenes in expansive landscapes with a minuteness of attention recalling Elsheimer's pictures. There is almost the exquisite refinement of fifteenth-century Netherlandish painting in these jewel-like works (e.g. The Rape of Proserpine, Berlin-Dahlem, Staatliche Museen), in which the dramatic possibilities of the Baroque style are still somewhat checked by the very small scale of the figures and the extremely subtle execution. The delicate connoisseur taste of a group of Dutch humanists apparently valued these qualities, and the tiny pictures by Elsheimer must have been treasured by them as one of the perfections of contemporary art. A leading figure amongst this group of connoisseurs was Constantijn Huygens. Around 1650, Huygens noted in his autobiography that the miller's son Rembrandt and his friend Jan Lievens were on a par with the greatest painters, and would soon surpass them. This was not routine praise. Huygens, a well-travelled, cultured man who combined a full life of service to his country with a mastery of the polite accomplishments, was extremely familiar with the art world of his day. It was he who suggested to Rembrandt and Lievens that they should travel to Italy to perfect their art. But neither artist had a desire to go south. Huygens reports that the painters said that now, in the flower of their youth, they had no time for travel, and they did not want to interrupt their work. Moreover, they added, pictures by the finest Italian artists could be seen in Holland. They exaggerated. The quality of the Italian paintings which could be seen in the Netherlands around 1650 was not very impressive. But what is more important, they cared little for classical models during this period of their careers. Young Rembrandt was more attracted by the romantic and the picturesque than he was by a classical ideal of beauty. His predilection is clear in his choice of subjects, his models, the fanciful oriental attire of his subjects, and even his studio props. He was also interested in the mean and the ugly. Unlike his forerunners, he did not view poor people as quaint or amusing creatures. His early etchings and drawings of beggars represented them as pathetic and suffering. Nothing could be farther away from the classical ideal.

Huygens was keen-eyed enough to appraise the difference between Rembrandt and his gifted friend Jan Lievens. Rembrandt, he wrote, is superior to Lievens in judgement and in the representation of lively emotional expression. Lievens, on the other hand, has a grandeur of invention and boldness which Rembrandt does not achieve. Huygens selected Judas returning the Pieces of Silver (1629, private collection; Plate 29B) to show Rembrandt's superior ability to convey the expression of emotion in a small, carefully worked-out picture. He wrote at length how impressed he was with Rembrandt's skill in representing expression, appropriate gestures, and movement, particularly in the central figure of Judas, who appears ravaged and convulsed by despair. Huygens applauded Rembrandt's ability to paint biblical pictures, and adds that Lievens would not easily achieve Rembrandt's vivid invention. Thus Rembrandt won recognition as a history painter - the most important branch of painting to Renaissance and Baroque critics and collectors of painting - even before he left Leiden, from one of the leading connoisseurs of his day. Huygens did more than write praise. He also helped the young artist get commissions from the Prince of Orange. It must have been with great confidence that Rembrandt decided to move from his native town to the principal city of Holland about the end of 1631 or early in 1632.

The First Amsterdam Period: 1632-1639

With Rembrandt's arrival in Amsterdam he embarked on the most successful epoch of his life - successful that is, in the eyes of his contemporaries. He became wealthy, and quickly acquired an international reputation. By 1635 works of his had even percolated down to Genoa. He experienced a kind of social ascent, thanks to his popularity as a portraitist, as a master in the field of biblical and mythological representation, and as a popular teacher who had as many pupils as he could handle. His marriage in 1634 to Saskia van Uylenburgh, the daughter of a respected and wealthy family, introduced him to the patrician class of Amsterdam. He became active as an art collector, and in 1639 he bought a large house. This happy time of prosperity and of an exalted social position lasted about a decade.

The move to Amsterdam was an important one for his development. It was during his first years in the metropolis that Rembrandt came into closer contact with contemporary High Baroque art, an art in which he finally excelled. Here he discovered the monumental style of Rubens, who had become universally known by the engravings after his work. Now the young Rembrandt dared work consistently on a large scale, and in vigour of realism, as well as dramatic intensity, he soon outdid his Flemish model. It is a case of a man with a tremendous temperament throwing himself upon the contemporary ideals of his time and rapidly assimilating them. Only after he had mastered them did he become more fully conscious of his own inner leanings.

In Amsterdam Rembrandt's portrait production rapidly rose to unprecedented heights, and apparently there is some truth to the report that people had to beg him as well as pay him for a portrait. As we have noted, Rembrandt only began to work as a professional portraitist about 1631. His earliest dated commissioned portraits (Portrait of a
REMBRANDT: FIRST AMSTERDAM PERIOD 1632–1639

PART ONE: PAINTING 1600–1675

Scholar, Leningrad, Hermitage; Portrait of the Amsterdam Merchant Nicholas Bult, New York, Frick Collection) are both of that year. The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp [The Hague, Mauritshuis; Plate 31] of 1632 shows how quickly he surpassed the smooth technique of the fashionable Amsterdam portraitists Thomas de Keyser and Nicholaas Eliasz. This group portrait probably established his reputation immediately. All Amsterdam must have been impressed by the new verticality and pictorial richness he gave to the portraits. The picture still impresses us today by the dramatic concentration of the figure on Dr Tulp's demonstration of a dissection. The corpse is the focus of the composition, by its intense brightness. From here, the eye of the spectator is led to the illuminated heads of the listeners, whose expressions and attitudes reflect different degrees of attention, and to the face and hands of Dr Tulp, who is a most convincing representation of a scholar absorbed in his subject. The illusionism is enhanced by the vivid characterization of the individuals as well as by the artist's great power in dramatizing the moment within a coherent group. Without the strong chiaroscuro and the fine atmospheric quality that is combined with it, the picture would lose its intensity, the sculptural quality of the forms, and all the excitement of the moment. Here, psychological and pictorial tension combine to create the feeling of an extraordinary event.

Rembrandt received other commissions for group portraits during this period, and for each one he found an original solution (Portrait of a Couple, 1633, Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum; Jan Pellicorne and his Sons Caspar and Susanna van Collen and her Daughter Eva Susanna, London, Wallace Collection; The Shipbuilder and his Wife, 1633, London, Buckingham Palace). The majority of his single portraits are half-lengths, some are three-quarter, and there are a few full-lengths. Rembrandt distinguished himself from other Amsterdam portrait specialists by maintaining a high standard of characterization and pictorial execution throughout his vast production. He was able to satisfy the taste of the wealthy burghers for a full description of their elegant clothes, and could give a precise rendering of lace and embroidery without becoming trivial. Sometimes he enlivened a portrait (Marten Soolmans, 1634, Paris, private collection; Plate 31a) with a momentary action in the way that Hals did, and he frequently employed his forceful chiaroscuro to enhance the illusionistic effect. There are also from this period character studies of old men and fanciful portraits of Orientals which are often fleet in execution than the commissioned portraits. An excellent example is the Portrait of an Oriental (1633, Munich, Alte Pinakothek, Plate 31b). By means of a strong contrast of light and shade, Rembrandt made the powerful head stand out from the pictorial plane with a more pronounced sculptural character than in most commissioned works.

Rembrandt also continued to portray himself year by year. The self-portraits of the 1633s exhibit an air of bold confidence, and some are even aggressive. A few of the etched portraits show a more serious expression, but more characteristic is the intense painting of 1634 in the museum at Berlin-Dahlem (Plate 34a). Here, Rembrandt evidently enjoys the prosperity and enviable position he had acquired in Amsterdam society. He assumes the air of a cavalier, and he dresses himself proudly with his velvet breast and a silky blue-and-yellow scarf over a fur coat. The Baroque element is more obvious now in the forcefully curved silhouette of the figure and the pronounced chiaroscuro effect. By the vertical division of his face into one shadowed and one lit part, he cleverly conceals the inelegant breadth of his face and becomes an acceptable gentilhomme. The famous and rather pompous Self-Portrait with Saskia on his Lap (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie; Plate 128), which is related to the Netherlandish tradition of representations of the Prodigal Son in gay company, was painted a year or two later. Husband and wife are turned towards the spectator with an animated expression of gaiety, and the pattern made by the couple has the freshness and irregular lines of a wild flower. The over-rich attire of the figures betrays an extravagance of taste and a prurient revelling in licentious deeds which is frequently found in this period. The colours, however, are delicate and restrained. The red, which is a kind of copper colour, is still somewhat pale; a refined blue and yellows occur too. There is also, as we have seen, a touch of Frans Hals in the work. However, there is something forced in the laughing face of the painter. Laughter was not as natural to Rembrandt as to Frans Hals.

Saskia remained Rembrandt's favourite model from the time of their betrothal on 5 June 1634 until her death in 1642. Numerous drawings and etchings give intimate glimpses of the nine years they shared, and they also show her change from a radiant maiden to a sick, frail woman resigned to an early death. Saskia bore three children, who died in early childhood (Rumbarts in 1631, Cornelia I in 1638, Cornelia II in 1640). Only the fourth child, the boy Titus (baptized 22 September 1641), lived to young manhood.

The Baroque spirit of this period is most obvious in Rembrandt's biblical and mythological pictures, which are now often done on a monumental scale. In some cases direct traces of the influence of Rubens can be seen. The celebrated Flemish painter was the idol not only of Flemish, but also of Dutch society at this time. About 1630 Constantijn Huygens called Rubens the greatest painter of the Netherlandish. The picture by the Flemish master, among the many he has seen, which Huygens chose to discuss in his account of the history painters of his day was a horrific Medusa head, which created such terror that it uncovered, and Joseph leans over the cradle and watches the scene. The colours are subdued, the eyes are covered with a curtain. Huygens and his contemporaries were fascinated by the representation of the terrible and the sanguinary, the drastic and the erotic. They delighted in the display of physical strength and vigorous action in art, and praised the glorification of heroic personalities and grand gesture. No artist surpassed Rubens' mastery of all these effects. The huge size and the unusual naturalism of Rembrandt's Holy Family of 1631 (Munich, Alte Pinakothek; Plate 15a) is the first indication of Rubens' influence. Rembrandt has chosen a moment when the Child has fallen asleep after nursing. As in one of Rubens' paintings, the mother's breast is still uncovered, and Joseph lies over the cradle and watches the scene. The colours are relatively subdued and approach a monochromatic effect, as in other works made around this time.

It was probably due to Huygens' efforts that Rembrandt received the enviable commission to paint a series of Passion pictures for the Prince of Orange during the 1630s. The five pictures which make up the series are of the same format and once hung in
the Noordeinde Palace at The Hague; all are now in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich.\(^9\)

The Departure from the Cross (c. 1633; Plate 35) which belongs to this group is inspired by Rubens' famous picture of the same subject in the cathedral at Antwerp, known to Rembrandt by the engraving of Voetserman. But Rembrandt's masterly arrangement of the figures in space, his treatment of mysterious light and dark shadow, and his incisive realism, which does not shrink from brutal veracity, have completely transformed the Flemish master's conception. Rembrandt's picture is closer in spirit to Caravaggio than it is to Rubens. The artist daringly pushed the main action back to the middle distance, where supernatural light breaks the darkness and illuminates the central group. The body of Christ is a pitiful dead mass, sinking down on the shoulder of a supporter, instead of a heroic body with beautiful outlines, and the individual faces are different from the ideal types Rubens used. Rembrandt deepened and intensified the realistic content of the scene by a sharp individual characterization of the emotional reaction of the man devotedly concerned with the painful and complicated task of lowering the corpse. The artist made himself a participant in this scene; the shadowed face of the man on the ladder who clutches Christ's lifeless arm is Rembrandt's own.

We know from a letter that Rembrandt sent to Huygens in 1636 that the prince asked Rembrandt to paint three additional scenes from the Passion (an Entombment, a Resurrection, and an Ascension of Christ) after he had received the Departure from the Cross and the Elevation of the Cross. Six other letters by Rembrandt are known,\(^10\) and, like the first, they are addressed to Huygens and are concerned mainly with matters-of-fact business affairs pertaining to the Passion series. One of them (12 January 1636) contains a rare remark by the master about his own work. Rembrandt wrote that in his pictures of the Entombment and the Resurrection 'die meest ende die naestereelste heechhelligheijp' has been observed. The meaning of this phrase has been much discussed. The passage is interpreted by some students as 'the greatest and most natural movement'. Others follow H. E. van Gelder, who pointed out that seventeenth-century authors frequently use the word 'beweeglijkheid' to express 'emotion' and not 'physical movement'. They interpret the phrase as 'with the greatest and most innate emotion', and argue that Rembrandt wanted to tell Huygens that he did his utmost to express the emotions of the figures in accordance with their characters.\(^11\)

The story of Samson, which had a great attraction for the Baroque public, is prominent in Rembrandt's production during the thirties. He painted Samson threatening his Father-in-Law (1635, Berlin-Dahlem, Staatliche Museen), The Marriage of Samson (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie), and in 1641 the miraculous announcement of Samson's birth in the Sacrifice of Manoah (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie; Plate 40). His Blindness of Samson (1636, Frankfurt, Städelisches Kunstinstitut; Plate 36) is more than any other work shows Rembrandt's unrivalled use of the High Baroque style to appeal to his contemporaries' interest in the sensational. It is significant that Rembrandt presented this lifesize painting to Huygens as a reward for services rendered — probably in connection with the paintings of the Passion. Rembrandt must have known about Huygens' interest in horrific pictures that had to be covered with curtains. In the letter Rembrandt sent to Huygens with the picture he wrote: 'My lord, hang this piece in a strong light so that one can stand at a distance from it; then it will show at its best.' The picture Rembrandt wanted seen from a distance is his most gruesome and violent work. It represents the bloody climax of the story. Samson has been overwhelmed by one of the Philistines, who has the biblical hero locked in his grip. Samson's right hand is being fettered by another soldier, and a third is plunging a sword into his eye, from which blood rushes forth. His whole frame writhes convulsively with sudden pain. The warrior standing in front, silhouetted against the light in the Honthorst manner, seems horror-stricken. Delila, with a look of terror mixed with triumph, is a masterful characterization seen in a half haze, as she rushes to the opening of the tent. Here again the chiaroscuro adds an element of mystery and pictorial, as well as spiritual, excitement. The whole scale of light, from the deepest shadows to the intense bright light pouring into the tent, has gained in power and gradations over the works of the Leiden period. The scene could not have been represented with more dreadful accents, and Rembrandt may have finished it with the triumphant feeling of having surpassed Rubens' dramatic effects; for this picture was also inspired by a work of the Flemish master: The Capture of Samson now at Munich (a painting designed by Rubens and executed by van Dyck). Rubens chose to represent the moment when the Philistines invade the tent with torches and have caught hold of Samson as he rises from his couch. The hecatomb giant struggles against his tormentors and Delila watches the success of her treachery with undisguised joy. But even in the most tense situations Rubens remained faithful to the classical ideals of the beautiful and the heroic. For Rembrandt, the moment of the Samson story chosen by Rubens was not violent enough. At this point of his career Rembrandt knew no restraint and did not shrink from the horrible or the bizarre. However, Rembrandt did not continue to exploit this aspect of the Baroque for very long. He did not represent this episode of the Samson saga again. The Marriage of Samson painted two years later shows a happier moment in the life of the Old Testament hero, and there are already indications in it of a softer pictorial atmosphere. The Sacrifice of Manoah of 1641, the last picture added to the Samson series, marks the beginning of a radical shift in Rembrandt's style.

Among the mythological subjects, the Rape of Ganymede (1635, Dresden, Gemäldegalerie) and the Danai (1636, Leningrad, Hermitage; Plate 37) are outstanding examples of Rembrandt's sense of high-pitched drama and expressive chiaroscuro. Both these pictures, done on a monumental scale, are of extreme originality and uncompromising realism. There have been various suggestions about the subject of Rembrandt's lifesize nude reclining on a bed, but it seems that the traditional side of Danaë is correct.\(^12\) The servant draws the curtain back as if in expectation of a visitor. The seated crying Cupid decorating the bedstead is an obvious allusion to the heroine's story. The bound Cupid, a symbol of chastity, alludes to the exclusion to which the maiden Danaë was condemned by her father. Rembrandt has substituted celestial light for the traditional golden shower indicating Jupiter's arrival. The picture is relieved of an oppressive sensuality by its pictorial beauty. It is the most attractive painting of this period. A pale golden light glorifies the body of the young woman and lends it warmth and brilliance. The Baroque character is evident in the undulating rhythm of...
the soft forms of the nude, which are exposed only for a moment. It is also evident in the curvilinear design of all the other objects, the over-rich surroundings, the decoration of the bed, and the dramatic manner of illumination. The key of the whole composition is the woman's outstretched hand, which is beautifully illuminated by reflections. It is of the greatest significance for the spatial and pictorial organization of the picture; for it defines the intermediary plane between the nude and the background, and it relates the various light accents to a coherent design. The gesture also has psychological significance: more insinuating than conscious, it can be interpreted as a gesture of invitation for her approaching lover as well as one of protection against the blinding light.

The appearance of landscape painting after the middle of the 1630s coincides with the turn of Rembrandt's style to a softer tonal treatment. Rembrandt's painted landscapes are dominated by his romantic attitude. Most of them are imaginary views of great valleys and mountain ranges, gigantic trees and fantastic buildings and ruins. He reserved a realistic treatment of nature for his drawings and etchings, and some of the sites he depicted in his graphic work have even been identified. We shall see that other seventeenth-century Dutch landscapists combined the romantic and realistic trends in their work, but only Rembrandt seemed to believe that different techniques demand a different approach to nature. In the panoramic landscape with the Baptism of the E111111ch (1636, Hannover, Landesmuseum) the influence of Hercules Seghers' imaginary rocky landscapes with half-bare pines clinging to steep slopes is obvious. The Landscape with an Obelisk of c. 1638 (Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum; Plate 38a) is a dramatic view with deep emotional undertones. Threatening storm clouds, pierced by brilliant bursts of warm sunlight, fill the land with darkness. In this work Rembrandt imposes his brilliant Baroque imagination upon nature. The drama of the chiaroscuro does not describe meteorological conditions, but embodies Rembrandt's reaction to the mysterious forces of the sky and the earth. Something of Rubens' exuberant response to nature can be felt, but Rembrandt's landscapes are always more mysterious and less colourful than those of the Flemish master. The colour remains fairly subdued, with a few brilliant contrasts of golden yellow and browns against greens, pinks, and greys.

The bulk of Rembrandt's landscape production sets in only about 1640. By then he must have felt that there was something theatrical and pompous in the High Baroque mode which did not correspond to his inner nature, and he began to oppose it.

The Middle Period: 1640-1647

Even the greatest artist remains somewhat bound within the framework of his period, and within the general lines of the stylistic development of his century. Rembrandt is no exception. His work and development can be classified with the international development of Baroque art which is marked by its path from the flamboyant High Baroque of the second quarter of the century to more classicistic achievements. Rubens is the most outstanding figure of the former, Poussin is representative of the latter. Rembrandt develops from one style to the other. This statement, however, only indicates in a very general way his position in the history of seventeenth-century art. For a deeper understanding we must try to discern his individual achievement in both these phases. This has been attempted in the discussion of Rembrandt's work of the 1630s. It is more difficult with his production of the forties, because at this time Rembrandt is much more unusual than he was at the beginning of his career, and it will be still more difficult in his last phase.

For the artist the years from 1640 to 1647 are a time of transition. At first the Baroque and classical tendencies can side by side and interpenetrate, but finally, about 1648, the latter gain precedence. It goes without saying that Rembrandt never became a classicist, but we shall see that during the forties he accepted certain classical devices which give a more adequate expression to his inner mood than the exuberance of his earlier style. But the Baroque character is not eliminated: it lives on in a deepened chiaroscuro and an increasingly fluid painterly treatment. This formal development is paralleled by an emotional change from ostentatious loudness and dramatic violence to stillness and calm. Tragic experiences in Rembrandt's life during this period — the death of his wife Saskia in 1642 and his decreasing professional popularity — are generally considered responsible for Rembrandt's decisive turn to the introspective, to a greater intimacy of feeling, and to a deepening of religious content. These events must indeed have had some influence on his development — although it should be emphasized that romantic biographers have exaggerated Rembrandt's loss of patronage during this decade.

There is no scrap of evidence to support the story that the men who commissioned the Night Watch, completed in 1645, condemned it. Of course there is no question that in this painting Rembrandt's tremendous pictorial imagination broke the traditional way of representing a militia company; but we lack any proof that his patrons were dissatisfied and refused to accept it. On the contrary: contemporary records prove that Rembrandt was handsomely rewarded for it. Each man who figures in the composition paid him about 100 guilders; thus he received around 1,600 guilders for the picture. We also know that the Night Watch was never hidden in some obscure place. It hung in the great hall of the headquarters of the Amsterdam harquebusiers (the Kloveniers­drosten), where it was exhibited with militia pieces by other painters until 1715, when it was moved to the town hall of Amsterdam. The picture was trimmed probably to fit its new location; a horrible, but not an unusual fate for works of its dimension. Moreover, Rembrandt continued to receive important commissions after he had painted the Night Watch. In 1646 the Prince of Orange paid him 1,400 guilders for a small picture of the Adoration of the Shepherds (1646, Munich, Alte Pinakothek) and a Circumcision (now lost). The fee the prince gave the artist was a good one if one considers what he was paid for the Night Watch. We shall also see that Rembrandt continued to have important patrons at home and abroad during the last decades of his life.

What then was the case? Did Rembrandt have an appreciative public and ample reward for his genius during his mature years? The answer is no. The legend about the refusal of the Night Watch veils a truth. The mature Rembrandt did not enjoy the success he had as a young painter. A shift in the appreciation of his work by his contemporaries did indeed take place: but the Night Watch did not cause it, and the change was not as dramatic or as complete as some of his critics have maintained.
There was a change of taste in Amsterdam during the 1640s, when the bright colours of Van Dyck and a superficial elegance came into fashion, and Rembrandt’s former pupils followed this path with success. The new vogue must have made the dark manner of Rembrandt’s pictures look old-fashioned. The fact that Rembrandt was now approaching the ripeness of middle age, which generally brings a more objective, calmer, and more comprehensive outlook upon life, should not be overlooked: it helps to explain his increased subtlety of feeling during this period. Rembrandt sought and began to find ways to establish the mood of a picture by more sensitive pictorial treatment of chiaroscuro, atmospheric effects, and colour. He became more concerned with man’s inner life than his outer actions. Not many of his contemporaries were prepared to follow him on this road, but Dutchmen still considered him one of their greatest masters, and Rembrandt’s name continued to come easily to the lips of those of his countrymen who wanted to make a show of their knowledge of the arts.

Rembrandt began a more intimate study of landscape during these years. This new preoccupation seems to have given him inner balance as well as a broader outlook. Unhappy circumstances at home may have stimulated him to work out of doors. He roamed around the environs of Amsterdam, where he made drawings and etchings which capture the breadth of the Dutch plain and the brightness and airiness of the Dutch sky with an unprecedented economy of touch. An example of Rembrandt’s mastery in this field is the so-called Six’s Bridge of 1645 (Plate 19E). There is a tradition that Rembrandt made it in the neighbourhood of Burgomaster Jan Six’s country house as the result of a wager that he would be able to finish it during the time a servant was sent to fetch mustard for a picnic. The story may be an invention, but the fact that Rembrandt succeeded in showing all the essential features of a landscape with the utmost brevity cannot be denied. Even the wind in the air is expressed by his suggestive touch. The numerous landscape drawings made during the forties are equally impressive. They are mostly pen-and-ink studies expressing the spaciousness, the diaphanous atmosphere, and the shimmering light of the homely Dutch countryside with matchless sensitivity (Plate 30B). The late landscape drawings grow bolder, the technique becomes more summary, and structural features are stressed without loss of luminosity or atmospheric effect. A few realistic painted landscapes date from the middle period. Outstanding is the tiny Winter Scene (Plate 18A) of 1646 now at Kassel, which has the spontaneity and freshness of the etchings and drawings after nature and seems to be a direct study of the effects of cold air and wintry light. But it is an exception. In the main, Rembrandt’s rare landscape paintings (less than twenty are known) are imaginary ones of a visionary character.

Substantial changes came out of Rembrandt’s experience with nature. The softer chiaroscuro of the fortiess was probably formed upon his open-air studies, and their atmospheric qualities soon appear throughout his work. Even the portraits begin to gain spaciousness and transparency of tonality, and in so doing they show a deeper understanding of the sitter within his environment. The Self-Portrait leaning on a stone sill of 1640 (London, National Gallery; Plate 44B) shows the new mood of the period as well as the new stylistic tendency. The artist still represents himself in precious attire, as he did formerly. He wears a richly embroidered shirt and a heavy fur-trimmed velvet coat. More important, however, is the seriousness, the reserved and critical glance of the man who has abandoned all signs of vanity and of sensational appeal to the spectator. The illumination serves to achieve a more objective rendering of his face, which is shown with unrestricted honesty. The arrangement of the figure is also changed. It is no longer close to the front plane, but recedes behind a stone sill. The figure has a firmer outline and can almost be inscribed into a triangle having the sill as a base. Instead of stressing the sweeping curvilinear silhouettes of the 1630s, here Rembrandt repeatedly emphasized the horizontal: in the sill, the position of the arm leaning on it, the main accents of the face, and even the position of the cap. These repeated horizontals lend the picture stability, firmness, and calm. This, as we have seen, is the period when classical influence makes its first appearance in Dutch painting, and in this particular portrait we know of definite links with Italian Renaissance art. There are reminiscences of Raphael’s portrait of Baldassare Castiglione, now in the Louvre, which Rembrandt had seen at an auction in Amsterdam in 1639. He made a quick pen sketch of it (Vienna, Albertina) and noted the price the picture fetched, as well as the total amount of the sale. In the same year Rembrandt based an etched self-portrait on that sketch (Bartsch 21), but the London Self-Portrait of 1640 comes closer to the essence of Raphael’s style than either the immediate sketch made after the Castiglione portrait or the etching. The buyer of Raphael’s painting at the Amsterdam auction in 1639 was Alphonso Lopez, who worked as an agent in Holland for the French crown. Around 1640 Lopez also owned Titian’s so-called Arioste and Flora. There can be little doubt that Rembrandt had a chance to study both these pictures, as well as the Raphael. Distinct traces of the Arioste are evident in the Self-Portrait of 1640 in the National Gallery, and also in his Falcomat of 1643 (London, Trustees of the second Duke of Westminster). The influence of Titian’s Flora is seen in the Portrait of Saskia of 1641 (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie).

Self-portraits were not very frequent during these years. A few, which follow the one in London, reflect his rather sceptical expression, the artist’s unsold condition. In the Self-Portrait of about 1643 (Kassel, Kunsthalle) some Baroque features seem to be revived in the picturesque clothing of the artist, who even decorates himself with pearl earrings. This romantic vein of Rembrandt’s art never disappears. Again and again he wishes to see himself or his subjects in a world of fantasy and of higher pictorial beauty. More significant than the rich trappings is his rather sad and slightly depressed expression. Saskia’s death must have been a cruel blow. The posthumous portrait of her, dated 1643, in the museum at Berlin-Dahlem is a souvenir of the happy years they spent together. It is no accident that Rembrandt painted it on a rare, expensive mahogany panel—a support he seldom used. The painting is quite different from the etching (Bartsch 359), made a year earlier, which probably shows Saskia in the last stages of her illness. With an admirable objectivity, Rembrandt renders her exhaustion in the etching.

During the year of Saskia’s death, in 1642, Rembrandt finished his largest and most famous picture, the Night Watch (Plate 41). The correct title of this masterpiece, now at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, is The Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq and
Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenburch. Its popular title is based on a false interpretation by early-nineteenth-century critics. The picture represents a day, not a night scene. This became very clear when the colossal painting was cleaned and stripped of its dark varnish and dirt shortly after it was taken from the shelter where it had been hidden during the Second World War. At that time journalists promptly baptized the picture ‘The Day Watch’. But there is no foundation for that title either. As far as we know, the civic guards represented did not go out on day or night watches. However, the misinterpretation is understandable because of Rembrandt’s brilliant transformation of the traditional Amsterdam group portrait into a highly animated, unified composition. Before the picture was cleaned the forceful chiaroscuro, so many will still remember, gave indeed a nocturnal effect.

Rembrandt’s dynamic interpretation raises an insignificant event to a historical spectacle of extraordinary pictorial splendour. There is a maximum of action, with complex motion deeply set into space yet vigorously united by a dramatic chiaroscuro with intense colour accents. Light and shadow are powerfully contrasted, and in different degrees. Most effective is the centre group of the captain and lieutenant. These two figures, who appear to head the departure of the company, are also the focus of the colouristic arrangement. A brilliant lemon-yellow in the uniform of the lieutenant, a warm orange-red in the sash, and a deep black in the suit of the captain form the main accord. The red is repeated in the man with the gun on the left and in the drummer on the right. The brilliant yellow recurs in the figure of the girl running through the middle distance. There are some tints of blue and golden olive, and the whole background shows a golden olive-brown tone. Rembrandt gives the impression of increased activity by a variety of movement and direction in this large composition, which represents a revolutionary conception of a traditional subject in Dutch painting. It is easy to understand why Rembrandt’s pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten singled it out for special mention when he discussed the question of composing pictures in a handbook published for artists and dilettanti in 1678. Hoogstraten wrote that painters should not place their figures next to each other in a row, as one sees in so many Dutch militia pieces. True masters, Hoogstraten maintained, unify their work: ‘Rembrandt did this excellently in his militia piece in Amsterdam’ . . . ‘this work, no matter how much it can be censured, will survive all its competitors, because it is so painter-like in thought, so dashing in movement, and so powerful that, according to some, all the other pieces there [in the Koninklijke Museen, where it hung] stand beside it like playing cards.’

The Baroque effect of the Night Watch must have been even greater before the composition was cut on all four sides. Old copies of the picture show that the greatest loss was on the left, where two additional men and a child behind a parapet were once visible. In its original state the impression must have been of a much greater spaciousness around the figures, with a wider display of diagonals and also a wider range of chiaroscuro, better organizing the composition and lending it greater recession as well as dramatic pictorial life. A comparison with the Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp of a decade earlier shows the advance Rembrandt had made, and the change of style. The different character is not only conditioned by the greater multitude of figures: a new and more complex spatial and pictorial design is involved. The spatial design of the Night Watch is also more clearly thought out. The ground plan reveals a zigzag formation, a familiar Baroque device to lead the eye forward and back into space. As for the arrangement in depth, a succession of four planes constitutes the framework. This is most clearly distinguishable in the area where the composition opens up towards the brightly illuminated figure of the running little girl on the left. The first plane is marked by the glove that dangles from Captain Cocq’s outstretched hand; the second by the gun of the rifleman and the foot of the boy running to the right; the third by the little girl; and the fourth by the standard bearer above and behind her. Rembrandt has left no doubt about the extension of these four planes to either side, or their relation to one another, while in the Anatomy Lesson such spatial clarity is not attained. With it goes a higher compositional order, in which we should not overlook, in spite of the predominantly Baroque character, the slight classicistic elements that come into the composition through the threefold division of the architecture in the background. It sets the group off on either side from the advancing stream of men in the centre of the painting. About the same time that Rembrandt’s High Baroque tendencies reached a climax in the Night Watch, he formulated in the Sacrifice of Manoah (1641, Dresden, Gemäldegalerie; Plate 49) a composition of classical calm and simplicity, the first grand example of this new tendency. The painting announces the turn of the master’s taste from vehement noise to silence, from external dramatic effect to inward contemplation, from Baroque entanglement to classical clarity. It is also the first monumental religious painting by Rembrandt that emphasizes the inner reactions of biblical personages to a miracle, instead of the sensational aspects of a supernatural occurrence. Manoah and his barren wife are represented offering their thanksgiving. A stranger has announced to them the birth of a male child, the future hero Samson. The very moment the sacrifice flames up, the divine messenger vanishes in the upper left corner. Deeply affected by the sanctity of the incident and dazzled by the heavenly appearance, the man and woman have closed their eyes and lifted their hands in prayer. It is a moment of silence and profound devotion. The new classical simplicity becomes obvious in the construction of the group, which is bound together in a triangular pattern. Within this group Rembrandt has given Manoah’s wife the more prominent and static position. She is also more exposed to the light coming from the upper left corner, and she is distinguished by a strong colouristic accent of lemon yellow and deep red before a warm brownish background, an effect similar to that of the centre group of the Night Watch. Rembrandt probably made some radical changes in this painting after 1650. There is reason to believe that in the original version, the angel of the Lord who ascends in the flame was not included, and only a shaft of light symbolized the divine occurrence.

Another picture of the beginning forties on a monumental scale is the portrait group of the Mennonite Preacher Cornelis Audo and a Woman (1641, Berlin-Dahlem, Staatsliche Museen; Plate 42). Rembrandt represented the preacher talking to a woman who holds a handkerchief in her left hand. He seems to be consoling her. The great Bible lies open on the table together with other books and a candle; this still-life part of the picture is distinguished by a fine play of light and shadow in golden brownish tones.
above the warm red of the tablecloth. On the other side, the most intense light is given to the head and hands of the woman. Rembrandt shows the moment when she begins to forget her sorrow and feel the effect of the preacher’s words. It is a brilliant characterization of inner life. Here Rembrandt seems to have painted the kind of ‘speaking portrait’ which impressed his contemporaries so very much; he has suggested the power of Ansto’s speech as well as giving a likeness. Rembrandt apparently has accomplished precisely what Vondel, Holland’s greatest seventeenth-century poet, admonished him to do in the epigram he published in 1644 about a portrait of Ansto by Rembrandt:

O, Rembrandt, paint Cornelis’ voice
The visible is the least important part of him:
The invisible one only learns through the ears.
He who wants to see Ansto must hear him.18

We have noted already that commissioned portraits were less frequent during the forties. Those from the beginning of the decade excelled by their elegance and the golden warmt of their tones. The companion pieces of Nicholas van Barnevelt (1641, Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts; Plate 43A) and his wife Agatha Bisschop (1641, London, Buckingham Palace) show how Rembrandt began to soften the chiaroscuro effect. The figures do not leap out conspicuously from the foreground: they recede into the circumambient air. The transparent atmosphere that surrounds them is characteristic of the period, and, as so often happens during the following decades, his subjects have been placed between the light and shade—precisely where the transition between the two takes place—and their faces have been given life by tender half-tones. The chiaroscuro has not only lost all hardness; it creates a broader and more intimate union of figures and space. A kind of human atmosphere has been created. By the middle of the decade we already meet the unusual depth of characterization and the pictorial richness of the chiaroscuro. A number of these are subjects chosen by the artist rather than commissioned works. Portraits of old men and of Jews begin to predominate.

Whether he deals with the Holy Family or episodes from Christ’s childhood or from the Old Testament, Rembrandt’s biblical representations during this phase show in general a preference for quiet, intimate, and tender scenes. Drama is not excluded (Susanna and the Elders, 1647, Berlin-Dahlem, Staatliche Museen), but the emphasis is shifted from outward action to inward reaction. Landscape settings often widen the scene and contribute to the expressive mood. This trend is announced in the1638 (Detroit, The Detroit Institute of Arts; Plate 43B). Mary has crossed the mountains, and the happy moment of her arrival at the house of Zacharias and Elizabeth is represented. A negro servant takes off the mantle of the visitor. Old Zacharias hunches down the stairs of his great house, aided by a boy, to greet his wife’s cousin, and a friendly dog sniffs at the newly arrived guest. The intense light which falls upon Mary and Elizabeth focuses attention upon the glances exchanged by the pregnant women, and the dark shadows soften the realistic detail. It is a beautiful example of Rembrandt’s easy, unburdened way of telling a story. Other biblical subjects of the middle phase also show Rembrandt’s change to a more temperate style. The Reconciliation of David and Absalom19 (1642, Leningrad, Hermitage; Plate 44A) represents the moment when rebellious young Absalom is forgiven by his father, Absalom weeps on the breast of the king, who does not lose his dignified attitude and embraces his son with a wonderful fatherliness. The two are given up to a moment of deep emotion. The colours contribute to the tenderness of the scene. The fair blond hair of the prince and the light pinks and blues of his dress are surrounded by transparent brown and olive tinges in the background which are characteristic of the period.

The domestic happiness and intimacy denied to the master in his own house by Suska’s illness and her early death are created now in pictures of the Holy Family. This subject and other representations of the childhood of Christ occur frequently during the forties. The Holy Family (1640, Paris, Louvre) which shows the Virgin nursing the Child is already considerably less overpowering in size than the pictures Rembrandt made during the thirties under Rubens’ influence (cf. Plate 5A). The Holy Family with Angels (1643, Leningrad, Hermitage; Plate 44B) shows with human warmth; small details contribute to this effect. A burst of divine light accompanies the angels who invade the chamber to witness the scene from the everyday life of the Holy Family. The tenderness of the young mother’s movement accords with the deep, warm colour, among which the cherry-red of her skirt is the strongest accent. Another representation of the same subject made a year later (Kassel, Gemäldegalerie) is equally pervaded with the happiness of peaceful family life. This small picture is a rare case of painted illusionism in the middle period, for the frame and curtain are painted too. The Virgin is seated before the cradle near a little fire to warm her feet. The cat couches ready to spring at the cradle. Joseph is working in the back. Rembrandt conveys the impression that all the time take place as in a humble interior sanctified by faith.

The representations of the Holy Family of the 1640s show that one thing remained permanent, even in this period of transition: Rembrandt’s ever-increasing interest in and deepening observation of life around him. This quality comes out most strikingly in the master’s drawings. In the quick chalk sketch of Two Women teaching a Child to Walk (London, British Museum; Plate 46A) Rembrandt made a distinction between the old woman, who can only follow the child in a slow and bent attitude, and the mother, whose posture expresses youthfulness and elasticity. The structural quality which Rembrandt develops in his middle period is evident here in the powerful straight lines and the blocklike figures. It is combined with accents on all vital points, such as the anxious expression of the baby’s face and the attention of the two women. Nobody but Rembrandt could express so much with so little. The drawing of a Lute (British Museum; Plate 46B) is another example of a study from life from this period. The lute holds food between her paws, but the child looks as if she wanted another victim. There is tension in her body and keenness in her glance. Her head is bent over, watching. An enormous vitality and force are conveyed with a few powerful strokes of black chalk. Without a similar vitality in the master’s own nature he would not have been able to give the character of his subject with such striking forcefulness. Power and sensitivity are found side by side in Rembrandt’s work of the middle period. Both qualities were to continue to increase and lead to the final height of his art and the fullest expression of his humanity in his mature phase.
The Mature Period: 1648–1669

There is an aspect of Rembrandt’s art which cannot easily be explained by an analysis of his composition, colouring, and pictorial methods. This is particularly true of the works made during the mature period. We feel there is something of a deeper meaning that lies behind their formal qualities, something we must grasp if we are to fathom the art and personality of this great master. What is it?

Rembrandt opened a new field in the history of painting. It is the world which lies behind visible appearances, but is, at the same time, implied. It is the sphere of the spirit, of the soul. One may ask, with good reason, what is this spiritual element? The terms ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’ are perhaps too vague; they can be interpreted in many ways. And we must admit that it is as difficult to give a simple, direct answer as it is to define the meaning of these words in connexion with Rembrandt’s art. Perhaps, if we approach the question in an indirect way and consider the limitations of this spiritual sphere, and note what is not of interest to Rembrandt, in contradistinction to other artists, we may touch the centre of the problem.

It is worth noticing that Rembrandt usually does not express in the physiognomics of his subjects — especially in the mature stage of his art — either the power of the will or superficial emotions. In portraits like the one of an Old Woman in an Armchair (1654, Leningrad, Hermitage; Plate 45A) or of the Man wearing a gilt Helmet (Berlin-Dahlem, Staatliche Museen; Plate 45B), none of the forces that make up the so-called active life, by which we build our social position and careers, are accentuated. During his mature phase, the vita activa was of secondary importance to Rembrandt. He stresses what lies behind man’s exterior activity and emphasizes the more contemplative side of life which is the domain of the spirit. This side, which is less conditioned by any social standard, is not always apparent, but men of every rank and station may possess it. Extremely revealing in this connexion is the magnificent picture of Two Negroes (1661, The Hague, Mauritshuis), which brings no suggestion of a stereotyped conception of a Negro — something that even Rubens and Van Dyck could not always avoid; in both heads Rembrandt has captured the spiritual and moral substance of these men.

Our inner spirit is a very elusive element. As the Latin word spiritus suggests, it is a breath, deep-seated and concealed, easily disturbed and troubled by the forces of external activity. Nevertheless, the inner part of our life is the more basic one of our existence. And to this quality, which can be called the soul, the great religious leaders, above all Christ, have appealed. Rembrandt was born with a new, deep, and unique sense of it, and was able to probe with rare concentration through the external appearance of human beings, forcing us to participate with him in this, their most precious substance.

We have already noted that Rembrandt’s development follows the international trend of the Baroque style, which proceeded from a flamboyant High Baroque phase to a more classicistic one. The late Rembrandt, however, went far beyond contemporary and national ideals. He adopted, in a very personal and selective way, only those classical qualities which were of a deeply human value and corresponded to his own nature. Besides his peculiar classical tendency, the deepening of his conception of Christianity is an outstanding feature of his mature period. Both these tendencies have been fundamental in the development of Western civilization through the Middle Ages into modern times. They are still the main pillars of Western culture. The nature Rembrandt takes a definite and very personal attitude towards each of these basic conceptions. His synthesis of the two into a higher unity can be considered the real content of his late works — and in this synthesis the Christian element predominates, while the classical one only contributes some essential features.

The classical element can be studied in Rembrandt’s beautiful pen-and-brush drawing of Christ healing a sick Person (Berlin-Dahlem, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstickkabinett; Plate 47A), which he made about 1655. A feature immediately apparent in the drawing is the dignity and nobility of the figures and the attitude of Christ, which recalls the great Renaissance masters, particularly Titian. However, one feature, which usually accompanies classical art, is missing; there is not a trace of a purely formal attitude. None of the figures seem to have struck a pose. Rembrandt’s Christ does not gesticulate. He is silent, and the impression He creates on those around Him reflects His inner qualities. Another element of classical origin, characteristic of the late works is the monumental character of the composition in this drawing. The simplicity of the rectangular formation of the left group and of the triangle in that of the right affords a great clarity and firmness. These qualities are, however, softened by a wonderful atmospheric treatment and are integrated with the spatial design. Rembrandt avoids the schematic abstraction and the rigidity of a strictly geometric formation often found in classical compositions. He also avoids the strict linear manner to which conventional classicists adhere. His line is interrupted, and the rhythm of the whole group is slightly broken. The dissolved forms add tonal accents and are imbued with atmospheric implication. They link the figures to the space around them. In brief, the mature Rembrandt avoids the spaced attitudes, the rigid abstraction, and the isolation of the classical ideal. He takes only those formal elements which are suited to increase the monumentality, simplicity, clarity, and the ethical features of dignity, nobility, and calm. His character, it seems, prevented him from adopting any features of a conventional or academic nature.

Rembrandt’s devotion to the chiaroscuro principle, which dominates his art from the very beginning, and to which he subordinated even the colourism of his late years, is another reason why he could never accept the classical style except for certain selected features. The concept that such intangible elements as light and shade are the most essential means of pictorial expression was thoroughly unclassical. For Rembrandt, the chiaroscuro device became a guiding stylistic principle by which he expressed not only pictorial, but also spiritual values. His development shows a steady increase in this direction in his portraits as well as in his religious art. In his early paintings, for example the Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp, the chiaroscuro served primarily to dramatize the representation from the outside; it is a kind of sharp spotlight effect which Rembrandt derived from Caravaggio’s Dutch followers. In his mature works the chiaroscuro is as
PART ONE: PAINTING 1600-1675

powerful as it was during the thirties, if not more so. Intense lights are combined with the deepest shadows and have been deliberately interwoven into a rich harmony of tones, subtle and strong, and at the same time colourful and transparent. Rembrandt takes advantage of his earlier achievements, but lifts them to a higher plane. One great example is Jacob blessing the Sons of Joseph (1646, Israel, Gemäldegalerie; Plate 38). Here, light and shade seem to be independent of an outside source, and take on a more ideal meaning. Faces, figures, curtains appear to grow from within wherever their significance requires special attention. A general atmosphere is created in which we become aware of the most subtle inner emotions.

Rembrandt’s colour, as well as his chiaroscuro, remain thoroughly unclassical. His colouristic powers increase tremendously during his last period, although not all of his mature works display it; some of the single portraits remain largely monochromatic. Both the so-called Jan Six Bride 41 (c. 1666, Amsterdam, Pijks Museum; Plate 49) and the Family Portrait (c. 1668, Brunswick, Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum; Plate 47b) belong to his most brilliant colouristic creations. Even in black-and-white reproductions it is possible to see something of the fluctuating quality of his late paint, the vibration of the tones and the harmonious fusion of the whole; but, of course, they can hardly suggest the brilliance and warmth of the fiery scarlets, the golden yellows, the delicate blues and olives, the powerful whites and deep blacks of his late palette. In both pictures, the broad, calm, relief-like arrangement of the life-size half-figures recalls a certain type of Venetian Renaissance painting. This reveals a touch of classical taste, but the use of colour in these portraits is quite unclassical. The classical function of colour is primarily a decorative one. In the works of Raphaël, Poussin, orargo, colour is added in fairly the same areas of localized hues. With mature Rembrandt, a radical change takes place. Rembrandt’s colour not only acquires increasing warmth and intensity; it becomes a living, moving, substance which ebbs and flows through space. The fluctuating character of his colours, which is in a very way similar to the interrupted line of his drawings, goes far beyond the limited function of colour in classicist art. It produces the impression of a dynamic inner connexion between all substances, and links the subjects with their mysterious dark background and even with infinite space. Rembrandt’s ingenious brushwork also contributes much to the colouristic effect. He combines bold impasto passages with a subtle glazing technique, and this creates an up-and-down, or push-and-pull movement in the relief of the paint which heightens the floating character of the late works. Thus, it is chiefly in his colour and chiaroscuro that the Baroque dynamism lives on in his paintings, but it is restrained by a classical simplicity and dignity of setting.

During his last decades, Rembrandt’s personal life was not an easy one. The sad situation at home after Saskia’s death was not improved by the presence of Geertruyt Dirck, a washerwoman who served as a nurse for his young son Titus. She caused a great deal of trouble. On her dismissal in 1649 Rembrandt agreed to pay her a modest monthly pension, but Geertruyt demanded more in a breach-of-promise suit. The affair came to an end only after she had been confined to a mental hospital. More comfort was brought into Rembrandt’s life by the companionship of Hendrickje Stoffels, the daughter of a soldier. She seems to have joined his household about 1645-1646. Hendrickje appears in 1651-1652. She was the second wife, although this relationship was never legalised because of certain conditions set forth in Saskia’s will. A second marriage would have deprived Rembrandt of the badly needed income from Saskia’s estate. In 1654 Hendrickje gave birth to a daughter, Cornelia, who was baptised on 26 October. On 23 June of the same year Hendrickje had been called before the church authorities because of her illegal relationship with the painter. She confessed, and was admonished and punished, but continued to live with the artist. There is every reason to assume that Hendrickje helped Rembrandt in many ways to overcome the problems of his later years. All the numerous portraits he made of her show a quiet, warm-hearted woman with rather attractive features. Her portrait of 1659 (Berlin-Dahlem, Staatliche Museum; Plate 48b) excels by its compositional strength and rich pictorial beauty. Accents given to the window-frame upon which she is sitting recall a great favour. Both her arms - one resting on the sill, the other pressed against the end of the frame - emphasize the tectonic character of the composition. In contrast, the movement of her head and the soft, deep glance of her eyes are most expressive. The mature Rembrandt knew how to combine an easy naturalness with greatness of style. The firmness of the composition is also softened by the warm depth and the broad fusion of the colours, among which a deep red contrasted with golden yellows, black, and white are predominant. After Hendrickje, the person he portrayed most frequently during this period was his son Titus. The portrait of 1655 (Rotterdam, Boymun-Van Beuningen Museum; Plate 48a) is the earliest identifiable one. Few portraits have been able to suggest in pictures of venerable philosophers anything like this contemplative mood Rembrandt conveys in this portrait of his fourteen-year-old boy.

Serious financial troubles developed for Rembrandt about the middle of the fifties. Debts had accumulated upon his house. He borrowed more to avert disaster, and in 1655 he bought another, smaller house, partly in exchange for works of art. If the artist hoped to restore his situation by such speculation, it was in vain. In 1656 he had to transfer his large house in the Jodenbreestraat to Titus in order to save his son’s inheritance, which had been entrusted to him. For the removal of debts on the house Rembrandt had to pledge all his property, resulting in the declaration of his bankruptcy. To avoid bankruptcy, Rembrandt asked the authorities to grant him a reis buiss (haleffsdei), a less degrading procedure, often granted on the basis of losses at sea. He received this permission, and the liquidation of his property was ordered. The inventory of his entire estate, drawn up on 23 July 1656,3 gives a detailed insight into his extensive collections. Results of the public auctions of his effects, which took place in 1657 and 1658, were very disappointing. The proceeds were not enough to enable Rembrandt to pay off his debts. However, Hendrickje and Titus managed to protect him from his creditors by forming a business partnership in 1660 as art dealers and by making Rembrandt their employee. He had to deliver his entire production to them in return for their support. By this means, the artist was able to save the castings from his work.

Even a cursory examination of Rembrandt’s collection as described in the 1656
The last decade of Rembrandt's life brought no relief in his economic situation, and these were the years when the artist had to suffer most serious blows in his family life. Of the two large commissions which he received at the beginning of this decade, the group portrait of the Syndics of the Draper's Guild (1661/2, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; Plate 53) may have had some success, but the monumental painting of the Conspiracy of Julius Civilis, done for the town hall of Amsterdam, apparently did not meet with favour. It was hung in place for a short time, then was taken down, and was finally replaced by an uninspired work by one of his pupils. Only a fragment of this important painting has survived (Stockholm, National Museum; Plate 54). However, Rembrandt still produced portraits in fair numbers, and it seems that many of these were commissions. There was also some demand for his work abroad. Don Antonio Ruffo, a Sicilian nobleman who lived in Messina, ordered a painting of a philosopher in 1653. Rembrandt sent him the incomparable Aristotle with the Bust of Homer (1653, New York, Metropolitan Museum; Plate 50A). In 1661 Ruffo acquired an Alexander the Great (unfinished) from the artist, and in 1663 the Homer now in the Mauritshuis, The Hague, entered his collection. The Sicilian collector ordered and received 189 of the master's etchings in 1669, the year of Rembrandt's death. But on the whole Rembrandt's late years must have been solitary and lonely ones. After his large house was sold, he moved with Hendrickje and Titus to one in the Rozengracht, in one of the poorer districts of Amsterdam. The devoted Hendrickje fell ill; she died in 1665. Titus continued to help his father, but he, too, was sickly around this time. The haunting expression in the pale portrait made of him during these years (Paris, Louvre) presages his early death. Soon after Titus' marriage with Magdelena van Loo on 16 February 1668, he died. He was buried on 7 September 1668, and his property went to his young widow. A posthumous daughter, Titia, was born to Magdelena, and at the baptism in March 1669, Rembrandt was present as godfather. The artist's death came six months later, on 4 October 1669. He was buried on 8 October in the Westerkerk of Amsterdam.

The tragic events of the last years did not have an adverse effect upon his work. On the contrary, as outward circumstances became more difficult, his art gained in spiritual depth and power of expression. An artist who did not possess Rembrandt's extraordinary ethical and moral strength would probably have been crushed rather than inspired by the experiences Rembrandt had during his late phase. The self-portraits of the period are particularly revealing as to the maturity of his personality and art. The moods vary from a most assailable sensitiveness (Plate 51A) to majestic calm, and one might expect of an artist of Rembrandt's strong inner direction, the search for self-portraits are on the level of the greatest achievements of self-characterization in literature. They rank with the Confessions of Augustine or Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Confessions. Although closer in time to Rousseau, the late self-portraits seem to stand half-way between the autobiographies of these two; they show the humility of the great Christian thinker, and the directness and sincerity of the prophet of the Enlightenment.

In the Self-Portrait painted in 1659 (Washington, National Gallery of Art, Mellon Collection; Plate 50B), a man mightier than he appeared in any of the earlier ones
speaks to us through a greater breadth of composition, a richer pictorial treatment, and, not least, the increased power and softness of the chiaroscuro. The light seems to glow from within. A rich inner life and many tragic experiences have left their mark on his features and have ennobled his expression. An imposing objectivity speaks from this self-analysis. The muscles of his face have already slackened, but, at the same time, an extraordinary sensitivity is evident. The old Rembrandt’s eyes have grown large and dominating. They betray a most vulnerable human being, but we also feel that sorrow has deepened his understanding and human sympathy. We sense that he is free from resentment, self-pity, and any trivial sentimental reaction.

A number of commissioned portraits were made during the fifties and sixties, and some of these rank among the highest achievements of European portraiture. Particularly impressive are the Portrait of a Young Man (Portrait of Clement de Jonghe (?), Buscot Park, Lord Faringdon), Nicolaas Buysingh (1654, Kassel, Gemäldegalerie), and the famous Jan Six (1654, Amsterdam, Six Collection; Plate 57a). In the Jan Six, one of Rembrandt’s most informal portraits, the coloristic splendor dominates the chiaroscuro effect. The distinguished Amsterdam burgomaster, humanist, and connoisseur wears a grey coat with gold buttons. His scarlet, gold-braided mantle is casually draped over his shoulder. He is pulling on – or taking off – his chamois glove. The grey forms a beautiful contrast with the bright reds, gold, and creamy whites. But more moving than the matchless coloristic harmonies in this portrait and the freedom of the broad brushwork is Rembrandt’s psychological grasp of the instant when a man’s gaze has turned from the outer world to his inner self. The companion portraits of the last decade of the Man with Glasses and the Woman with an Ostrich Fan in the National Gallery at Washington show a further increase in power of characterization, and rich pictorial treatment, and even more impressive are the companion pieces in the Metropolitan Museum of the Man with a Magnifying Glass and the Woman with a Pink (Plate 52b). The veiling and revealing function of chiaroscuro is employed in these portraits, as it is used in the late religious works; it helps to create a deep and comprehensive mood. This mood is sometimes characterized as meditative. But that term seems inadequate, because it refers chiefly to the work of man’s brain, whereas in Rembrandt’s late works, one sees that feeling plays the dominant role. One is reminded of Rembrandt’s great contemporary, the French philosopher Pascal, who made the distinction between raison and cœur and put the work of the latter higher than that of the former.

The Syndics of the Cloth Drapers’ Guild (1661/2, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; Plate 53), Rembrandt’s largest portrait commission during his late years, is an ideal solution of the principal problem of painting a portrait group. Equal importance has been given to each of the syndics, yet the whole is united by ingenious psychological and formal means. The subtle composition, the glowing coloristic harmonies, and above all the sympathetic interpretation and profound psychological grasp of the personalities of the six men make this Rembrandt’s greatest group portrait. The total impression is of delicately adjusted harmony and tranquillity. An X-ray examination of the picture shows how Rembrandt struggled to attain the impression of equilibrium. While he worked on the painting he shifted all the figures, but the person with whom he experimented most was the servant. He tried placing him in two different positions on the extreme right; he posed him between the two syndics on the right, and finally gave him his place, after taking some liberties with the laws of perspective, above the two seated syndics in the centre of the picture. Rembrandt brilliantly exploits horizontals – a classical rather than a Baroque device – for the unification of the group. Three horizontals run through the picture at almost equal intervals: the edge of the table and the arm of the chair at the left mark the lowest one; the middle one is established by the prevailing level of the heads; and the upper one runs along the edge of the wainscoting. But here again Rembrandt avoids all formal rigidity. These repeated horizontals are broken by sharp deviations on all three levels. The sharpest is in the group itself, in the strong curve of the heads on the left. With a kind of contrapuntal effect, this movement is echoed by the slight rise in the upper horizontal on this side. While this style of composition is similar to the relief-like manner of grouping favoured by artists who worked in the classical tradition, there is an increased effect of space and atmosphere by Rembrandt’s use of chiaroscuro and colour. The harmonies are definitely on the warm side. A flaming red in the rug on the table, which is the most outstanding accent, is interwoven with golden umber. Golden-brown reappears in the background, in the panels of the wall, and within these warmly coloured surroundings the strong blacks and whites in the men’s costumes have a noble and harmonious effect.

The traditional interpretation of the Syndics is that the men were shown seated on a platform, before the assembly of the Drapers’ Guild whose governors they were, and that they are giving to the assembly – unseen by the viewer – an account of the year’s business. The syndic seated near the centre of the picture makes a gesture with his right hand which most seventeenth-century observers understood immediately; the gesture was a standard one employed by orators demonstrating evidence. H. van den Waal has shown, however, that such annual gatherings and accounts were not usual among the guild; and that therefore the often repeated interpretation that the syndic on the left is citing to deal with someone making a disturbance in the audience must be wrong. Even if this assumption is discarded, the fact remains that the rising man’s posture is a very momentary one. In addition, they all look at one point. It cannot be denied that the rising man adds substantially to the illusion that the group is reacting spontaneously to somebody in front of them. And since this object of attention cannot be somebody in an imaginary assembly, it must be the entering spectator. So Rembrandt was not only concerned with giving an ordinary illusion of a gathering, but dramatizes it slightly by aiming at the very moment of the spectator’s appearance. Such pointed illusionism would have endangered a less master. Not so with Rembrandt. He always endowed his group portraits with dramatic tension, and here the mature Rembrandt successfully combined it with the general impression of tranquillity. While the momentary diversion from their work brings an animating element into the syndics’ gathering and configuration, it is still the profound characterization of the group and of each individual which prevails.

Side by side with portraiture, history painting remained Rembrandt’s most productive
PART ONE: PAINTING 1600-1675

Rembrandt: The Mature Period 1648-1669

shake. Rembrandt’s colossal picture (it filled a space about 18 ft by 16 ft) was in the town hall by 31 July 1662. Shortly after it was mounted, it was removed, and it was never returned to the lunette for which it was designed. By 1663 its place had been taken by a painting by Juriaen Ovens, a weak pupil of Rembrandt’s, who completed the composition Flinck left unfinished at his death. Ovens’ picture is still in situ. Rembrandt’s picture was cut down, probably by the master himself, to make it more saleable. Rembrandt made some changes in the fragment, which is only the central group of the original picture, to make it a unified whole. A single precious preliminary drawing (1661, Munich, Graphische Sammlung; Plate 35a) gives us an idea of his majestic conception for one of the most monumental historical pictures ever painted. Rembrandt’s preparatory drawing shows that he set the night scene in a huge vaulted hall with open archways, and not in the sacred grove which Tacitus described. The change in setting was an important one, enabling Rembrandt to give his composition the architeconic grandeur and spaciousness which helped to emphasize the drama of the scene. Earlier masters of European monumental wall decoration often used architectural settings to attain similar effects. Rembrandt’s unique achievement — if we can judge from the small sketch and the fragment of the picture — was to subordinate the architecture to his dramatic chiaroscuro and phosphorescent colouring. Thus for the first time an artist achieved monumentality in a large wall painting primarily by pictorial means. In the preparatory drawing the distribution of light and shade is of great importance for the total effect, and in the fragment of the painting, which has lost its architectural setting, the eerie light and shadow and the iridescent greyish blues and pale yellows are even more important in bringing out the mysterious barbaric character of the conspiracy.

One cannot help wondering what the gallery of the town hall of Amsterdam would look like if Rembrandt had been commissioned in 1661, when he was at the peak of his power, to paint all the pictures of the series. If he had received the commission, he surely would have created a great climax of monumental Baroque painting. His series would be as famous as the grand-scale compositions Rubens painted for Marie de Medici, and perhaps even more impressive. Apparently the city authorities had no idea of the opportunity they missed. Even the single work they commissioned from Rembrandt did not remain in place. Why was it removed? The answers which have been given to this question are not above dispute, and unfortunately the relevant documentary evidence is meagre and vague. A lengthy contract signed by Rembrandt on 28 August 1662 states that one of his creditors shall receive one-quarter of everything which Rembrandt should earn on the ‘painting delivered to the town hall, and of any amounts on which he (van Rijn) has claim, or stands to profit by repainting [verschildering] or might in any other way be benefited, however this might befall’. If this document refers to the Julius Civilis painting, it seems that the city officials wanted some changes made in the picture. We can only conjecture what adjustments might have been asked for. However, it is not difficult to imagine that the picture did not suit men who followed the classicistic vogue which became popular in Holland around the middle of the century. Identification with the heroes of one’s national history was an
acceptable idea, but Rembrandt's conception of the ancient heroes was probably too brutal to suit all the city fathers of Amsterdam. Learned critics could also argue that Rembrandt failed to meet one of the principal tenets of classicistic art theory in a history painting designed for the most important building of the Netherlands: he showed men as they are, instead of as they ought to be. Moreover, his critics could maintain that he lacked decorum. They probably stated that Rembrandt should have depicted the one-eyed Julius Civilis in the way that Apelles, the renowned painter of Antiquity, painted King Antigonus, who was also blind in one eye. Apelles devised a means of hiding the king's infirmity by presenting his profile, so that the absence of the eye would be attributed merely to the position of the sitter and not to a natural defect. But there is also reason to believe that some of Rembrandt's contemporaries were not disturbed by his departure from the generally accepted notions about history painting. After all, he was given the commission; and in 1661 no one in Amsterdam could have been very surprised that Rembrandt did not concoct a conventional classical confection for the town hall. However, there was apparently enough powerful opposition to manage to have the work replaced by Owens' oil composition.

It is to the biblical pictures that we must turn to see Rembrandt's greatest contribution during his mature period. The deepening of the religious content of these works is connected with some shift in his choice of biblical subjects. During the thirties Rembrandt had used the Bible as a source for dramatic motifs, for example, the Blinding of Samson. In his middle phase he turned to more calm and intimate subjects: the Sacrifice of Manoah, the Reconciliation of David and Absalom, and scenes from the life of the Holy Family. At the beginning of the mature period the figure of Christ becomes pre-eminent. Scenes taken from the life of Jesus, quiet episodes of His youth, His preaching, and the deeds of His early manhood, and His resurrection form the main subject of the biblical representations. The emergence of the mature style is marked by works like Christ at Emmaus (1648, Paris, Louvre; Plate 538), in which Rembrandt expresses the character of Jesus without any concrete action or noisy stage-like effect. A moment before He was merely a man about to break bread with two pilgrims. Now He is the resurrected Christ whose tender presence fills the room. Without any commotion, Rembrandt convinces us that we are witnessing the moment when the eyes of the pilgrims are no longer 'held, that they should not recognize Him'. A great calm and a magic atmosphere prevail, and we are drawn into the sacred mood of the scene by the most sensitive suggestion of the emotion of the figures, as well as by the mystery of light which envelops them. The monumental architectonic setting lends grandeur and structure to the composition, and the powerful emptiness of the architectural background is enlivened by the fluctuating, transparent chiaroscuro and the tender spiritual character of the light around Christ Himself. A simple pathos and a mild, warm feeling emanate from His figure. Nothing could be farther from the conspicuous theatricality of the works of the thirties.

There is good reason to connect Rembrandt's tender conception of Christ during his mature period with the teachings of the Mennonite sect. According to Baldinucci, one of the artist's seventeenth-century biographers, Rembrandt was a Mennonite, and it is known that he was in close contact with Cornelis Anslo, a famous Mennonite preacher of Amsterdam. In 1641 Rembrandt made an etching (Bartsch 271) of Anslo, and in the same year he made the impressive double portrait of the preacher and a woman (see p. 63; Plate 42). In Rembrandt's day the Mennonite sect was a liberal one which discarded the sacramental idea, accepted no authority outside the Bible, limited baptism to believers, and held to freedom of conscience. Silent prayer was a feature of their worship. They emphasized precepts which support the sanctity of human life and man's word, and, following the Sermon on the Mount, they opposed war, military service, slavery, and such common practices as insurance and interest on loans. Compared with the severe Calvinists, the Mennonites represented a milder form of Christianity in which, according to the literal sense of the Sermon on the Mount, the leading principle was 'Love thy neighbour'. This spirit permeates Rembrandt's most famous etching, the so-called Hundred Guilder Print (Plate 56), which can be dated about 1648-50. Rembrandt began to make studies for this celebrated print earlier, but in its main types and in its final decisive achievement the etching belongs to the beginning of the mature period. The popular title, which is found in the literature as early as 1711, is derived from the high price the print is said to have fetched at a sale. The etching illustrates passages from Chapter 19 of the Gospel of St Matthew. Rembrandt treated the text with liberty; he merged the successive events into a simultaneous one, with Christ in the centre preaching and performing His miracles. According to the text, Christ had come from Galilee, a large multitude following, and He began to preach, healing the sick. The crowd look to the Lord, waiting for their turn to be healed. Near the centre, to the left, a young mother with a child advances to Jesus. St Peter interferes, restraining her, but Christ dedicates a counter-movement. It is the moment when he says the famous words: 'Suffer the little children, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.' In addition, this chapter of St Matthew contains the story of the rich youth who could not decide whether or not to give his possessions to the poor and follow Christ's teachings. The young man is seen sitting to the left, in rich attire. Here too, on the upper left, are the Pharisees, arguing among themselves, but not with Jesus, as in the text. A warmth of feeling seems to emanate from Him, spreading balm on the suffering souls of the sick, the poor, and the humble. The spell of devoutness and the intimate spiritual union of the composition are mostly due to a general atmosphere of wondrous light and shade that hovers and spreads over the whole scene. It is a light that by its infinitely subtle gradations and floating character transforms the transcendent sphere into reality. A miracle which binds visible energies with the invisible and the sublime is performed before our eyes.

The types of the Pharisees in the Hundred Guilder Print are of a more genuine Jewish countenance than those Rembrandt represented in his early works. Late in the forties he began to watch Jewish people more carefully, and to characterize them more deeply than before. Rembrandt had the opportunity to study the Jewish population of Amsterdam. From the time he purchased his large house in the Jodenbreestraat in 1639 until he was forced to sell it in 1666 he lived on the edge of the largest Jewish community in Holland. Among his Jewish acquaintances were the distinguished Rabbi Manasseh ben...
PART ONE: PAINTING 1600–1675

Israel, and the physician and writer Ephraim Bonus; he made portraits of both men. His intense familiarity with the physiognomies of the Spanish Jews (the Sephardim) and the Eastern Jews (the Ashkenazim), who were allowed to live in Amsterdam in relative freedom during the seventeenth century, helped him to enrich his biblical representations. His interest in them was not merely a romantic and pictorial one. To Rembrandt the Jews were the people of the Bible, and with his deepening realism he wanted to become more authentic in his biblical representations. He found among them inspiration for mildly passive and emotional characters, and he also studied the harder and more intellectual types, who show the perseverance of the Jews and furnished models for his figures of the Pharisees. The painting of King David (1651, New York, Louis Kaplan Collection) was probably derived from a study of a Jew. Even more remarkable is the series of portraits of Jesus made around the same time which are based on Jewish models (Plate 57A). Rembrandt, it seems, was the first artist to derive his Christ-type from a personal study of Jews. How intently he continued to observe their physiognomies is seen in the set of four small oil sketches (Plate 57B; Bredius 301; the others are Bredius 302, 304, 305) made as preparatory studies for the head of St Matthew in the famous picture of the Evangelist at the Louvre, dated 1656 (Bredius 614).

Although a basic change in his Christian attitude does not occur, the spirit of Rembrandt’s religious works shifts about the middle of the 1650s. As early as 1653 his religious art begins to show a more gloomy cast. In contrast to the mild, harmonious tenor of the works made at the beginning of the mature period, a sombre atmosphere now prevails. It is hard to relate this shift to the teachings of a specific religious sect. Rembrandt probably based his profound and highly personal interpretations of Scripture in his late biblical pictures upon his own experiences and his deepened sense of reality. Realism had long been the domain of Dutch art: but it was only the late Rembrandt who could extend it to the reality of the innermost life, to the invisible world of religion. One can notice the beginning of the new tragic mood in the monumental etching of The Three Crosses of 1653 (Bartsch 78), where the emphasis is on the suffering of Christ, on the drama of Golgotha, and the mystery of His sacrifice. It is true that scenes from the youth of Christ, His miracles, and the events following the Resurrection continue to appear in the etchings and drawings, but in the paintings themes from the Old Testament become more frequent, and they seem to be imbued with a sombre undertone. This is the mood of the lifesize painting of Bathsheba (1654, Paris, Louvre; Plate 62). Hendrickje probably served as the model for the picture. Bathsheba, the beautiful wife of Uriah, is shown holding the letter which King David sent commanding her to come unto him (2 Samuel 11). She will comply with David’s wishes, but tragedy is inevitable. David will arrange for Uriah to be killed, and the child conceived by Bathsheba in adultery will be struck by the Lord and will die. Rembrandt captures every overtone of the tragic Bible story – from the pain of consciousness of sin to the desire of the flesh – in the tension he builds up between Bathsheba’s reverie and the warmth and weight of her nude body. Most marvellous is the soft and mellow painting of the flesh. The expression of its solid form, which anticipates the heaviness of Courbet’s nudes, is combined with the unmatched brilliance and breadth of treatment of the late works. As always, the formal qualities are linked with naturalness. The effect of David’s letter upon Bathsheba is shown in the inclination of her head and her meditative mood, which is expressed in a wonderful relaxation throughout the whole figure. Her attitude reveals the forms of her body with great clarity, and her position is almost inscribed within a triangular scheme. A classical touch is also noticeable in theectonic quality of the figure, which has a static fullness and calm. But the intent of the picture has nothing to do with the classical idea of the nude. Raphael, Titian, or Rubens painted the female nude to show their conception of ideal feminine beauty. Theirs was a delight in the body made exquisitely perfect. Rembrandt’s Bathsheba was primarily painted to show the mood and innermost thoughts of a woman. There is no precedent for his conception.

One of Rembrandt’s most moving religious works is Jacob blessing the Sons of Joseph (1656, Kassel, Staatliche Gemäldegalerie; Plate 58), which was painted in the year he was forced to sell his house and treasures. This important picture, which is one of his largest biblical paintings, reflects nothing of that personal tragedy. It is relatively serene – the blond tonality contributes much to this effect – yet profoundly spiritual. The scene represents the last hours of the old and almost blind patriarch Jacob, who has brought his two young sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, to be blessed by his father. The children kneel in childish awe and curiosity, Jacob laid his right hand upon the head of fair Ephraim, the younger son, first. When Joseph saw this ‘it displeased him and he held up his father’s hand, to remove it from Ephraim’s head unto Manasseh’s’, who was entitled to the blessing (Genesis 48). But the ancient Jacob refused to change his benediction, and prophesied that the younger son would be greater than the older. According to tradition, Ephraim symbolized the coming of the Christian faith, while Manasseh stood for the Jews. Rembrandt showed the moment when Joseph tried to guide his father’s hand to the older boy’s head. But it is too late. The blessing of Ephraim takes place. God’s will is done. Jacob gently pushes back Manasseh with the back of the fingers of his left hand° (Plate 59). Asnath, Joseph’s wife, stands apart with a wonderful expression of motherly feeling about the deep significance of the event. There is very little action in the picture – so little that any other Baroque painter would have been embarrassed by the subject as it appears here, and would have turned it into something more dramatic by exterior agitation. But to the mature Rembrandt it was natural to neglect such Baroque conventions and to concentrate on the inner life of the figures, on their spiritual bond, during this sacred scene.

From the late fifties onwards, Rembrandt preferred to represent moments of heavy gloom, tragic upheaval, and of solemn pathos in human life, especially in the lives of great sinners or great worshippers. The aged Rembrandt is conscious, more deeply than before, of the fearful destiny to which man may be doomed and of the imminent terror that may at any moment engulf him. But at the Prodigal Son (-, 1669, Leningrad, Hermitage; Plate 63), one of his latest works, and perhaps his greatest, shows, he also penetrates more profoundly the idea of God’s grace by which repentant man may be forgiven and saved.
The picture of Saul and David (The Hague, Mauritshuis; Plate 60) shows the king haunted and depressed by heavy melancholy. He hopes to find some relief and consolation in the music made by young David playing the harp. We see the healing influence of music in the fact that King Saul is wiping a tear from his eye with the dark curtain. But at the same time a sinister feeling seems to stir within him. The king is possessed by hatred and jealousy against his young rival, whose growing fame is beginning to outshine his own. Saul's uncovered eye, wide open and darkly gleaming, betrays the approaching eruption. His right hand begins to move and will in a moment hurl the lance at David. It is the inner conflict in the king's mind which the artist reveals. We feel the heavy burden of destiny that is imposed on the man by an unseen higher power. This deeper significance is expressed in the picture by pictorial undertones. Shades of black deepen the shadows and add force to the gloom of the colours, among which a glowing red and golden yellow in the king's attire are prominent. Even the brocade and jewellery share in the mood of the picture. We may say now that Rembrandt has become more conscious of the formidable side of God as expressed in this Old Testament story. The dominating impression, however, is the profound human aspect of the story, not a theological one. It is a sympathetic and powerful exposition of the doomed hero's inner conflict in his hour of trial. And when we turn to a subject from the New Testament of about the same period, the Denial of St Peter (1660, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; Plate 61), we gain a similar impression. Here not an inveterate sinner like Saul is represented, but a repentant one who will be saved. Yet St Peter is also doomed to show human fallibility at his hour of trial. As Christ has foretold, he fails his crucial test and denies his Lord out of fear for his own life. Again Rembrandt's interpretation excels by sympathetic human insight into the chief actor's inner conflict at the moment when his faith has weakened. In this composition everything hinges upon the expression of St Peter, from whom an answer is expected. The questioning maid focuses the light upon his face and looks into his eyes with searching attention. Her features show decision, in contrast to the apostle's embarrassment. The faces of the two grim warriors on the left are equally searching. These three figures form a wedge directed at St Peter and symbolize a powerful challenge to the steadfastness of his faith. In the rear we see Christ turning back at this moment, as if aware of Peter's trial and failure.

During the last years no basic change occurs in Rembrandt's style; this explains occasional uncertainty about the dating of such prominent pictures as the Saul and David and the Christ at the Column (Darmstadt, Hessisches Landesmuseum). His expressive power, however, grows until the very end. The boldness and freedom of his brushwork are at a peak in the great works of the later sixties. Very few artists — one thinks of Michelangelo, Titian, Goya — offer the same spectacle of an ever-increasing power of expression which culminated at the end of their lives.

Rembrandt's final word is given in his monumental painting of the Return of the Prodigal Son (Plate 63). Here he interprets the Christian idea of mercy with an extraordinary solemnity, as though this were his spiritual testament to the world. It goes beyond the works of all other Baroque artists in the evocation of religious mood and human sympathy. The aged artist's power of realism is not diminished, but increased by psychological insight and spiritual awareness. Expressive lighting and colouring and the magic suggestiveness of his technique, together with a selective simplicity of setting, help us to feel the full impact of this event. The main group of the father and the Prodigal Son stands out in light against an enormous dark surface. Particularly vivid are the ragged garment of the son, and the old man's sleeves, which are ochre tinged with golden olive; the ochre colour combined with an intense scarlet red in the father's cloak forms an unforgettable colouristic harmony. The observer is roused to a feeling of some extraordinary event. The son, ruined and repellent, with his bald head and the appearance of an outcast, returns to his father's house after long wanderings and many vicissitudes. He has wasted his heritage in foreign lands and has sunk to the condition of a swineherd. His old father, dressed in rich garments, as are the assistant figures, has hurried to meet him before the door and receives the long-lost son with the utmost mercy. The occurrence is devoid of any momentary violent emotion, but is raised to a solemn calm that lends to the figures some of the qualities of statues and gives the emotions a lasting character, no longer subject to the changes of time. Unforgettable is the image of the repentant sinner leaning against his father's breast and the old father bending over his son. The father's features tell of a goodness sublime and heroic inner conflict in his hour of trial. And when we turn to a subject from the New Testament, we see Christ turning back at this moment, as if aware of Peter's trial and failure.