Amy Golahny

The Rembrandt Year 2006 in Perspective

The year 2006 is the four-hundredth anniversary of Rembrandt’s birth, officially known as July 15. Codart (the web-site clearing house of information about exhibitions worldwide on Netherlandish art) lists eighty-three exhibitions celebrating this anniversary (scheduled from 2005 to 2007); many of these exhibitions are accompanied by substantial catalogues that present new documentary and interpretive material. A select survey of exhibitions and publications reveals a flourishing business in Rembrandt research that appeals to the generalist, who enjoys looking at Rembrandt’s work, and to the specialist, who scrutinizes fine points of attribution and interpretation. Two directions dominate this scholarship, and reinforce one another. They are the investigation of documents, and the contextualization of Rembrandt as an artist and historical figure. Both directions are long established, but here they emerge as most fruitful approaches.

Two publications by Michiel Roscam Abbing highlight the documentation for the generalist. The Treasures of Rembrandt is packed with historical information and analysis of Rembrandt’s work, and provides, moreover, thirty inserted facsimile documents. Rembrandts olifant is an engaging biography of the elephant Hansken, born in 1630 in Ceylon, famous throughout Europe, and drawn by Rembrandt in 1637. Rembrandt would make use of his drawings of Hansken in his finished works, notably his 1638 etching of Adam and Eve. Aimed at a broad readership, these books satisfy curiosity on many levels, both aesthetically and factually. They also enliven the paper trail of correspondence, published announcements, transactions, and inventories of paintings.
For the specialist, this Rembrandt year has brought a flood of activity; it would be difficult indeed to present it thoroughly in these pages. The year of commemoration has become both a scholarly endeavor and a commercial one, more for Rembrandt than most artists. The phenomenon of a celebratory year to commemorate an artist probably began in 1828, when Germans honored the three-hundredth anniversary of Dürer’s death with exhibitions, performances, and publications. Since then, it has become a commercial and scholarly habit to focus on the fifty-year increments of anniversaries of an artist’s birth and death years, to seize the opportunity for sponsors, audiences, and tourists to share in the further appreciation of that artist, however much it might be driven by the economics of opportunism. Rembrandt’s years, 1606-69, have generated the commemorative years 1906, 1956, 1969, and 2006. In these years, major international exhibitions and public celebrations, often involving musical performances, were mounted, evidence of the artist’s status as a major player on the world’s stage. But exhibitions could also be used to celebrate national events, as the first large-scale Rembrandt exhibition in Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum honored the 1898 coronation of Queen Wilhelmina; a secondary effect of this show was to generate interest in the celebration of the three-hundredth anniversary of Rembrandt’s birth in 1906.

That year brought to a culmination the nineteenth-century worship of the artist as a cultural icon. The next Rembrandt year would have been 1919, as the three-hundred-and-fiftieth year following Rembrandt’s death, but the First World War precluded celebrations, although significant publications on Rembrandt, the fruit of long study, appeared in the 1920s and 1930s; very likely, these might have appeared earlier but for the war. During the period of occupation in the Netherlands, the Germans orchestrated various events during the early 1940s, including
musical performances, independent of a celebratory year, to generate national cultural identity. In 1956, the post-war recovery was well underway, and the Rijksmuseum mounted an exhibition, with a modest paperback catalogue: volume 1 for paintings, and volume 2 for drawings (see De Vries et al.) This catalogue followed an established format, and one that would endure for decades: essential catalogue information and brief commentary for each work exhibited, with black-and-white illustrations. Taken together, my handy paperback volumes are 3 centimeters in width. The publications of 1956 included a special issue of *Oud Holland* devoted to Rembrandt, and the monumental six-volume catalogue of Rembrandt drawings by Otto and Eva Benesch.

The next focus year was 1969. Because of the productive scholarship on Rembrandt during the interval between 1956 and 1969, and the founding of the Rembrandt Research Project (RRP) in 1968, the Rembrandt industry got into high gear. Individual exhibitions in Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin, Chicago, Montreal, Boston, and New York highlighted paintings, but also brought drawings and prints into prominence. The Amsterdam show focused on Rembrandt, alone, to survey his paintings and drawings (see Van Schendel et al.). The exhibitions of Chicago (see Cunningham et al.) and Montreal (see Carter et al.) presented the works of Rembrandt along with those of his pupils; these exhibitions would indicate the direction Rembrandt studies would take in featuring both master and pupils, some decades later. Several conferences, held at the museums in Chicago and Berlin, offered opportunities for scholars to discuss ideas and publish their contributions. Although these two publications of conference proceedings are unfortunately seldom cited, they offer a summation of research on Rembrandt circa 1970, and indicate the issues that will become rigorously investigated in the ensuing decades: Rembrandt in his own time, iconographic anomalies and interpretations, technical examination, pupils and
contemporaries, authenticity and attributions.²

Since that watershed year, the proliferation of Rembrandt scholarship related to exhibitions has been variously preparatory for, tied to, and independent of, the anniversaries of the artist’s birth and death. Rembrandt scholarship, often linked to large exhibitions and teams of scholars, has become too large to be contained in the limitations of these commemorative years.

In the past fifteen years, leading up to 2006 (independent of Codart’s eighty-three events), some of the significant exhibitions are, in chronological order:


Melbourne/Canberra 1997: A. Blankert et al., *Rembrandt: A Genius and his impact*, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria/Canberra, National Gallery of Australia

Amsterdam 1999: B. van den Boogert, *Rembrandt’s Treasures*, Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis


From this selection of fifteen exhibitions, it would seem that almost every year is a Rembrandt year, somewhere. Several of these catalogues accompany a largely in-house exhibition, as 1992 London, 1995 New York, 2001 Munich, and 2004 Dresden. These are especially significant for the scholar, if somewhat less rewarding for the general viewer. Collection-based scholarship reevaluates Rembrandt paintings and drawings for authenticity and place in his oeuvre; often, many of the exhibited works are derivative works by pupils, and less visually impressive. However, these publications provide insights that are especially revealing of workshop practices, gradations of authenticity, and changing views on the artist.

One overriding issue, and especially so from the 1968 founding of the RRP, is authenticity: Rembrandt – yes or no? In 1956, for example, the Saul and David (The Hague, Mauritshuis) was featured in the Mauritshuis exhibition; soon thereafter, it became “not Rembrandt,” and was relegated to “possibly workshop.” Another famous demotion of a Rembrandt painting is the Man in the Golden Helmet (Berlin, SMPK), considered workshop
since 1987. Yet in 2006, we are interested in the reception of these pictures for a more nuanced understanding of their importance, not only in Rembrandt’s time, but also in ours. We wonder why these pictures were so beloved at various times, and what viewers really thought about them.4

The Rembrandt exhibition catalogue has evolved, from the handy 1956 and 1969 volumes, to the unwieldy, albeit handsome and lavishly illustrated, catalogues of the past fifteen years, commencing with the 1991 Berlin/Amsterdam/London catalogue. This two-volume publication, featuring introductory essays and extensive entries on paintings and drawings by Rembrandt and his best pupils and associates, is nearly 6 centimeters in width and weighs over 2 kilos. This catalogue presented a model of scholarship and production, from which all subsequent catalogues proceeded in some way.

Here is a selection of four exhibitions from 2006:

Amsterdam/Berlin 2006: E. van de Wetering et al., Rembrandt: Zoektocht van een genie, Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis/ Berlin, Gemäldegalerie Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Amsterdam 2006: Duncan Bull et al., Rembrandt-Caravaggio, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (exhibition in Van Gogh Museum)


Copenhagen 2006: L. Bøgh Rønberg and E. de la Fuente Pedersen, Rembrandt? The Master and his Workshop, Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst

These four publications continue the trend of producing handsome volumes too heavy to carry through the galleries. They also continue in the contextualizing of Rembrandt in his milieu, culturally and historically. The first, Rembrandt: Zoektocht van een genie, is a volume of nine essays by six authors. By presenting aspects of Rembrandt’s oeuvre, rather than a
straightforward guide to the exhibition, the authors explore areas of their own expertise: religion, iconography, followers of Rembrandt, oil sketches, criticism, and the artist’s creativity. Rembrandt here (according to Ernst van de Wetering) is ambitiously competing with past standards in art on a quest to surpass all artists.\textsuperscript{5}

The second, \textit{Rembrandt-Caravaggio}, might be considered the most daring exhibition in its conception. Caravaggio (1571-1610) and Rembrandt (1606-69) share certain qualities: strong lighting and shading, intense psychological expression and physical gesture, focus on painting after life, and preference for dramatic and violent subjects. Both artists considered the placement of their paintings and the position of the viewer who looked at them. This means that the dirty feet in so many of Caravaggio’s altarpieces are, literally, in the face of the viewer, who stands in the original chapels, as in the \textit{Madonna of Loreto} (Rome, Cavalletti Chapel, San Agostino); and that Rembrandt’s figures in the \textit{Nightwatch} (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) seem actually to march forward off of the canvas, toward the viewer. Yet Caravaggio tends to present a dramatic and frozen action, while Rembrandt considered multiple moments with cause-and-effect, to a greater demonstration of theatricality and the passing of time.\textsuperscript{6} For the generalist, this is a stunning visual presentation, and for the specialist, a documentation of Caravaggio’s works and influence in the Netherlands. A handful of paintings by Caravaggio and a few prints after his works circulated in the Netherlands, and most likely they were familiar to Rembrandt. Specific correlations between the works of Caravaggio and Rembrandt are few, but their shared qualities make for provocative juxtapositions.

The \textit{Uylenburgh} catalogue concerns the wider social, economic, historical, and diplomatic functions of art in the seventeenth century, on an international European level.
Hendrick (c. 1584/9-1661) and Gerrit (1625-79) were merchants of art with important connections to prominent Dutch artists and collectors. Even if they had not had the connection by marriage to Rembrandt through Hendrick’s niece Saskia, they would still be fascinating characters for their art dealings in the European arena. With this family link to Rembrandt, Hendrick and Gerrit gain luster, and capture the popular imagination through the art works that make for a major exhibition. Through a careful examination of many documents, the authors reconstruct the business of making, selling, and trading art in some main European centers, and emphasize how prominent and influential Hendrick was. The Uylenburgh academy, as described by Baldinucci, appears to have been a place of study for young artists, and a workshop in which they produced copies or variations of their own or others’ paintings. In this workshop, Rembrandt was employed in 1631-35, and a number of his former pupils would work there: Flinck, 1635-38, Bernhard Keil, 1644-47, and Jurriaen Ovens, 1661-63. Other artists connected with the Uylenburghs include Gerard de Lairesse and Peter Lely.

One episode told here in detail reveals the difficulty of objective evaluation of some art works. In 1672, Gerrit put together a collection of twelve paintings, mostly Italian, for Friedrich Wilhelm, the Elector of Brandenburg, but the quality of the pictures was considered controversial by the Elector’s art advisor, Hendrick Fromantiou. An extraordinary series of artistic testimony was gathered, either to support or challenge Gerrit’s assertion of the authenticity of the paintings. Although few of the paintings may be identified on the basis of the description and various records, they include some of the most sought-after artists: Michelangelo, Giorgione, Titian, Palma, Pordenone, Holbein, and Raphael. All the paintings came from the Reynst collection, in Amsterdam from c. 1630 to 1660, and thus had a highly
respected provenance. But thirty-nine artists, including Vermeer, testified that the paintings were of dubious quality, and thirty-one, including Gerard de Lairesse, testified that they were of good quality. An adviser to the Elector, Georg Bernhard von Poellnitz, even sought the opinion of one foremost connoisseur, Constantijn Huygens, who wrote a letter attesting to the high quality of the paintings. At any rate, the paintings were returned to Uylenburgh. This extraordinary series of documents not only reveals how people wrote about specific pictures, but also how pictures were evaluated, financially and aesthetically.

Only one painting is now precisely identified and extant: Palma Giovane’s *Naked Children Dancing* (Amsterdam, Six Collection). Two artists proclaimed that this painting “left much to be desired” and revealed “no trace of the qualities possessed by the artist to whom it is attributed, in terms of colour, draughtsmanship, vitality, composition and light” (*Uylenburgh* 95-96). Very likely, when this painting was not accepted by the Elector, it was bought by Jan Six, an acquaintance of Gerrit.

This rich compilation and analysis of the Uylenburgh business dealings continues the investigations into the economics of art initiated by J. M. Montias some thirty years ago, with a focus on Vermeer and Delft. By bringing into relief the Uylenburgh firm, the authors have captured the lively exchanges of art between Amsterdam, London, Poland, and Germany. We can imagine some of the heated discussions that must have taken place in 1672 at the evaluation of the paintings for the Elector, and we can also envision this affair in the popular media.

The fourth catalogue in this group presents the Copenhagen paintings by Rembrandt and his pupils. Because this collection is not well known, its catalogue is especially welcome, and essential to making these pictures more familiar. The catalogue presents about twenty paintings
from Copenhagen alongside judicious loans that make for excellent comparisons. The specialist discerns the various relationships among the paintings, and the generalist gains a better understanding of how the workshop may have functioned, how pupils imitated and varied Rembrandt’s inventions, and how certain themes were repeated among these artists. However brilliant the pupils could be, they were consistently eclipsed by Rembrandt in luminous paint quality, incisive psychological expressiveness, and narrative inventiveness. The paintings from both Rembrandt’s invention and hand and from followers may be understood as documents that illuminate the process of production.

The Copenhagen *Emmaus*, signed and dated “Rembrandt f. 1648,” was the most treasured Rembrandt since it entered the collection in 1759 (fig. 1). In the past decade, with the scrutiny of the Rembrandt Research Project and its goal of authenticating the Rembrandts of the world, the painting became demoted to the status of a pupil’s work, undoubtedly made in Rembrandt’s studio. However, the original purchaser would have regarded it as a genuine painting by Rembrandt. The participation of students on paintings sold as by the master was a standard practice, and generally did not get noticed, nor affect the value of the painting at the time. Comparison between the Copenhagen *Emmaus* and related Rembrandts with good photographs would not have been possible until recently, and the related works are all in different cities. The core three figures of Christ and his two disciples are close variants of the same figures in Rembrandt’s painting of the same subject and same year (Paris, Louvre). The two servants, night setting with artificial light, and curtain painted to hang in front of the scene, are motifs adapted from other works by Rembrandt. Some passages are beautifully painted, as the glass held by one servant and the illuminated faces of the servants. As this painting was
considered autograph until a few years ago, its position in the historiography of Rembrandt is a
fascinating one, for it shaped the Danish conception of Rembrandt.

A case study: *Jeremiah*

One painting appearing in many of these catalogues is *Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of
Jerusalem*, signed and dated 1630 (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; fig. 2). A survey of how this
painting appears in exhibition catalogues reveals the progression of scholarship on it. In the 1956
Amsterdam catalogue the painting is described: “the old prophet, lost in his melancholy
thoughts, sits near the gold vessels from the temple and scripture; in the distance, the temple
burns, soldiers attack, and the inhabitants flee” (p. 17). Additional information includes
rudimentary provenance and two other references. The 1969 Amsterdam catalogue describes the
painting and adds the puzzling phrase: “the old man is probably the prophet Jeremiah” (p. 30),
with all references and provenance information omitted. The 1991 Berlin/Amsterdam/London
catalogue is thorough; the identity of the main figure was regarded as Lot, Anchises, or a
philosopher, until Wilhelm Bode identified it as Jeremiah in 1897. Citing Christian Tümpel, the
iconography of the vessels is explained as deriving from Josephus (rather than the Bible), who
reported that Nebuchadnezzar gave Jeremiah precious gifts (pp. 144-46; 3 endnotes). Making use
of the research of the RRP, this entry also adds information on provenance and bibliographic
references. The 2000 Boston amplifies the 1991 entry by discussing the passages in the Bible and
Josephus more extensively: relying on the scholarship of Shelley Perlove, the authors note the
blind king Zedekiah running and other details in the background (pp. 113-15; 12 endnotes).^7

Reconciling the iconographic discrepancies with traditional representations of Jeremiah, the
authors note: “Rather than illustrating a specific biblical episode, Rembrandt seems to have gathered a number of iconographic motifs associated with the destruction of Jerusalem. Breaking with the unities of time and place, he has encompassed in a single image the fullness of Jeremiah’s tales of woe: his prophecies as the harbinger of God’s wrath and his nostalgic ruminations on the desecration of the Holy City and the exile of the Jews” (p. 114). The comprehensiveness of the 2000 Boston catalogue rendered additional discussion superfluous, and in the subsequent 2006 *Rembrandt: Zoektocht van een Genie*, the essays by C. Tümpel and Jan Kelch mention the *Jeremiah* in passing (p. 139 and p. 225).

**Consequences of the Rembrandt Year**

A corollary to a Rembrandt year is the attention paid to artists associated with him, who otherwise get little notice. One who has benefited from such reflected glory is Pieter Lastman (1583-1633), generally best known as Rembrandt’s teacher. Lastman’s first and only other exhibition took place in 1991 at the Rembrandthuis, planned to coincide with the major Berlin/Amsterdam/London exhibition at its Amsterdam venue (see Tümpel and Schatborn). This year, the Hamburg Kunsthalle held an exhibition with the title, *Pieter Lastman. In Rembrandts Schatten?* (see Sitt et al.). The question is apt: is Lastman in Rembrandt’s shadow? Lastman occupies a peculiar position in art historiography that has depended on the fame of his two pupils, Rembrandt and Jan Lievens. Both studied first with artists in their native Leiden before completing their training with Lastman in Amsterdam. In the literature on Rembrandt, Lievens is a precocious associate of Rembrandt, until he leaves for London and Antwerp in 1631. On his return to Amsterdam some years later, he likely had some contact with Rembrandt, for they lived
near one another and shared acquaintances. Lievens has become a major feature of the
catalogues devoted to Rembrandt, as in those of 1991 Berlin/Amsterdam/London, 1992
Stockholm, 2000 Boston, and 2006 Copenhagen. Nonetheless, Lievens has had only one major
exhibition devoted to him, in 1979, entitled Jan Lievens ein Maler im Schatten Rembrandts (see
Bialostocki et al.). The title seems to indicate that Lievens, in Rembrandt’s shadow, will remain
there.

The title of the Hamburg exhibition suggests Lastman might deserve a place that is not in
Rembrandt’s shadow, and that perhaps it is time he emerges into a more independent position.
The Hamburg title plays on the title of the 1979 Lievens exhibition, and also calls into question
who is in the shadow of whom.

How would we evaluate Pieter Lastman if his fame did not depend on that of his pupils,
or if Rembrandt did not exist? We would regard his paintings as closely corresponding to texts
from the Bible and ancient history and poetry. We would recognize his borrowings from antique
sculpture and Italian art as evidence of his learned approach to art. We would recognize his
working method as typical of the best artists of his time: overall quick compositional sketches,
single-figure studies, and adjustments made on the painting surface. Lastman’s vivid coloring
and fluid brush demonstrate his study of Venetian painters, especially Veronese. His portable
canvases and panels are crafted as if each one is a staged tableau. Lastman’s rhetoric of gesture
and expression emphasizes theatricality. One painting that demonstrates his approach is his 1630
painting Dido’s Sacrifice to Juno, a subject from Virgil, in his fourth book of the Aeneid (fig. 3).¹⁸
On a shallow stage, Lastman has set forth with archaeological exactitude the temple setting with
cult statue of Juno, priest with divining rod and book, and attendants with vessels and sacrificial
animals. Dido, majestically at the center, prepares her libation, intended to bring the gods’ favor in the outcome of her love for Aeneas. Hoping that her prayers are not in vain, Dido’s downcast solemnity contrasts with those characters who gaze out and engage the viewer.

Vondel certainly recognized the theatricality and textual fidelity of Lastman’s paintings, and on several occasions was inspired to take note of them. To put it bluntly, Lastman may be considered a Dutch Rubens: learned in antiquity and art, erudite, and theatrically inclined. But squeezed between Rubens and Rembrandt in current art history, Lastman does not have much of a chance. He deserves better!

Conclusion

From 1956 to 2006, we have seen an explosion in Rembrandt studies, which parallels art in general as a popular entertainment and commercial endeavor. This is made concrete by comparing the Amsterdam Rembrandt catalogues of 1956, 1969, and 2006, for depth of discussion and the occupied space on the bookshelves. The Rembrandt who emerges in 2006 is integrated into the intellectual and artistic milieu of the Netherlands through his acquaintances, his own reading and collecting, and his pupils and artist associates.

Yet in the end, the character and works of Rembrandt are endlessly intriguing. They are so popular that they might be a welcome fixture in the kitchen. One of the souvenirs produced for the year 2006 is a set of refrigerator magnets of Rembrandt himself, with several sets of clothing so that he may dress up in his many costumes. Such magnets have been around for quite a while. Botticelli’s Venus and Michelangelo’s David are familiar types. But here, it is the artist himself, Rembrandt, who is represented as a magnet. This distinction signifies the cult status of
both artist and his works, and sets Rembrandt apart from other artists whose art may grace the
fridge.

Notes

1) Roscam Abbing 2006a and 2006b. See also Roscam Abbing 2006c.


3) Rembrandt uit de nalatenschap van Dr. A. Bredius, The Hague, Mauritshuis, 1956.

4) These questions are explored by Scallen 2004 and Golahny 2001.

5) I discuss this publication in Neerlandica extra muros, fall 2006.

6) I discuss this publication in further depth in Neerlandica extra muros, fall 2006.

7) See Perlove 1995: 159-70.


9) For the critical literature on Lastman, see Golahny 1996: 87-116.

References


Illustrations:


fig. 2 - Rembrandt, *Jeremiah*, 1630, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

fig. 3 - Lastman, *Dido Sacrificing to Juno*, 1630, Stockholm, Nationalmuseum.
