

ALISON MCQUEEN

# THE RISE OF THE CULT OF REMBRANDT

*Reinventing an Old Master  
in Nineteenth-Century France*



AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

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## PREFACE

Among the thousands of artists who have ever tried to interpret the world around them, Rembrandt van Rijn belongs to a small group who live on today as both an Old Master and a household name. The cult of Rembrandt does not just flow from his brush and etching needle, it is the result of his universal appeal, the accessibility of his personality and the capacity for his persona to be reinterpreted and reinvented by successive generations of academics, acolytes, and ordinary people alike. Indeed, Rembrandt is the only artist in history to have an international team of scholars reevaluate his output of paintings in an as yet unfinished project begun over thirty years ago. The Rembrandt Research Project, a team of specialists founded by the Dutch Government in 1968, navigates the globe attributing and deattributing paintings, often to the dismay of private collectors and museum curators. One wonders how this particular Dutch artist came to assume such a privileged position. Why is Rembrandt the center of such extensive scholarly and popular debate? The obvious answer is the market-driven phenomenon of contemporary art sales, which requires a clear distinction between works produced by the Dutch master himself and those executed by his students, followers, and admirers. In elite art circles, scholars also vie to protect Rembrandt's reputation from being sullied by any connection with lesser-quality works.

The reverence of Rembrandt is not solely the domain of art experts and he is popularly known today through mainstream movies and even a pricey Rembrandt® toothpaste, from Den-Mat Corporation. In this case, he is a curious choice since Rembrandt does not actually



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depict teeth very often. And when he does, the dark teeth in a cavernous mouth would hardly seem to encourage a dentist or patient today. Den-Mat also distributes Porcelain Bonding kits for restoring damaged teeth. These are set up like an artist supply case, complete with brush and miniature palette. The company encourages dentists to emulate Rembrandt's artistry as they apply the product.

In another use of the Old Master, Rembrandt Funds® ranked high on the money markets in the 1990s. Given the notoriety of Rembrandt's bankruptcy of 1656, he is an odd choice yet again. The RembrandtAdvantage™ Masterpiece Collection, sold through Kentucky-based company Pinnacle Solutions, offers human resources tools and services. These include the Rembrandt Portrait® personal assessment, which aids in employee interviewing and selection, a Rembrandt Morale Survey® to improve company spirit, and a Rembrandt Legal Clinic® program helping managers hire without being sued.

In Canada, Rembrandt adorns the packaging of Extra Butter Flavour Microwave Popping Corn marketed through the grocery store chain Loblaws as one of its President's Choice® products. In this reworking of Rembrandt's *Self-portrait at the Age of Thirty-four* (c.1640), the artist holds a large bowl of popcorn, glances out to the shopper and away from the hockey game on television. Here, Canada's national sport and the Dutch Old Master flank this savory television snack. In a warmer clime, luxury cruises traverse the Caribbean on SS Rembrandt and, coming out of the Netherlands, Rembrandt® Masterpiece Lager Beer can be enjoyed the world over.

In contemporary popular culture, Rembrandt's name has such resonance that the headline of an article in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1995 referred to the trendy inner-city barber Franky Avila as "The Rembrandt of Barbers."<sup>1</sup> By invoking Rembrandt's name, the author knew his readers would understand that this connection implies that Avila's skill with a razor equals that of Rembrandt with his paintbrush or etching needle. Even if a reader has never actually seen any work by Rembrandt, the connection is clearly meant to bolster the barber's reputation and status. Advertisers and consumers may not be aware of the vicissitudes of Rembrandt's reputation since his death in

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1669, but these references are successful because of the artist's symbolic resonance. He has come to stand for the archetypal bohemian artist who was unappreciated by his contemporaries, who had many romances, and who was burdened with financial problems on and off throughout his life, and yet whose *genius* has come to be recognized over time. Rembrandt embodies the proverbial myth of the misunderstood, starving artist.

For over 150 years, Rembrandt has been one of a select group of Old Master artists. His position is secure in art history's canon, the list – composed over time by scholars and critics – of the must-knows and the must-sees of the field. As an art historian, I am both subject to and object to the canon of art history and I have sought to understand how that canon works and how it came into being. For over three decades, exponents of feminism, postmodernism, and multiculturalism have criticized canons and challenged the privilege such established lists allocate on the basis of geography, gender, and race in all disciplines. Still, many people accept canons as naturally rather than socially constructed entities and I wonder why: how does it serve their needs?

The reverence Rembrandt now enjoys is due in part to the indisputably high quality of his drawings, paintings, and prints. However, many would argue for the comparable merit of the work of other artists who are not the subject of so much international attention and debate. What separates Rembrandt from other Old Masters is how his art and his biography, in combination with his artistic persona, have been manipulated to serve various agendas. The origins of the veneration of Rembrandt today can be traced in large part to nineteenth-century France and the critics and artists who made use of the Old Master's artistic persona.



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## INTRODUCTION

### *Reassessing Rembrandt*

This book offers the first comprehensive study of Rembrandt in nineteenth-century France, the country and century that held an incomparable position historically as the nexus of European art education, art criticism and its related construction of the canon of Old Master artists, and was also the center of an increasingly powerful commercial art market. Rembrandt's life and art, particularly his paintings and prints, had mythic resonance among nineteenth-century French artists, writers, and collectors. Although the academic establishment favored Old Masters such as Raphael throughout the period, Rembrandt had particular appeal for artists seeking to explore new subject matter and techniques. This study analyzes the discourse concerning Rembrandt's Old Master status and its role in the newly shaped aims of French painter-printmakers: Why did French critics and artists assign Rembrandt such a prominent position as an ancestral figure whom contemporary artists should emulate?

An unprecedented number of publications concerning Rembrandt's life and art – at least 150 – circulated in France from the 1830s to the end of the 1890s, especially from the early 1850s onwards. The proliferation of scholarly and popular publications was paralleled by the increasing sales and value of Rembrandt's paintings and prints on the Parisian art market. During this period, Rembrandt was appropriated as a symbolic figure by critics and painter-printmakers and assigned a heroic, cult-like artistic and political status. French critics molded and reinvented earlier anecdotal biographies and used new



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material from Dutch archives to formulate an artistic persona for Rembrandt that had particular meaning within the context of nineteenth-century French vanguard art and politics. I am indebted to Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz's important study *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist, A Historical Experiment*, which examines the popularity, historically, of stereotyping episodes as "artistic anecdotes" and repeating them until they become used as original sources. Their arguments, specifically regarding society's urge to find some access to an individual who is regarded as exceptional or gifted and the tendency to elevate a creative individual to the status of a cultural hero, are exemplified in the treatment of Rembrandt discussed here.<sup>2</sup>

The heightened level of interest in Rembrandt in France during the second half of the nineteenth century had unusually self-serving meaning as he became the favored model for non-conformist and anti-establishment aims. Students in academic establishments who avowed an appreciation of Rembrandt were not encouraged to seek inspiration from his paintings or prints or to emulate his adventurous biography. Still, when Paul Delaroche created his famous *Hemicycle des Beaux-Arts* [PLATE 1], in 1841, for the principal lecture hall of the École des Beaux-Arts, he included Rembrandt among the northern artists of distinction (ninth from the left), even though academics considered him a far less desirable model than Raphael.<sup>3</sup>

Rembrandt was a model from the past that artists and critics sought out on their own because he fulfilled their needs for a new, "non-ideal" exemplar, someone who could justify and bolster their own artistic projects and political views. Rembrandt was selected because for some he served as a challenge to the hegemony of the French Academy while for others he functioned as a new archetype. He became a benchmark for their aspirations and goals as artists exploring new subject matter and new techniques which received little institutional support or public acclaim among their contemporaries. Rembrandt was positioned as a successful predecessor and he functioned as a mentor both psychologically and through the practical emulation of his artistic techniques.

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One measure of Rembrandt's popularity was the production and sale of Rembrandt-like paintings and prints. Many of these were attributed to Rembrandt in nineteenth-century France and are now identified variously as works of Rembrandt's students, as seventeenth- and eighteenth-century copies, or as nineteenth-century copies or even intentional fakes. In this study, I evaluate how these diverse works were discussed, exhibited, reproduced, and treated as products of Rembrandt's hand by nineteenth-century French critics, collectors, and artists. In so doing, I attempt to reconstitute the aesthetic experience and the taste for Rembrandt's paintings and graphic works in the nineteenth century. The issues I consider will relate to authenticity and attribution only to the extent to which they were relevant in the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, my evaluation will only extend beyond the boundaries of France in order to discuss artists who exhibited relevant works in French exhibitions, such as the Salon, and critics of foreign nationalities who published their texts in French or whose works circulated in French translation.

A sizable body of literature has been published on Rembrandt's popularity since his lifetime. I am indebted to these texts, which provided much useful background information and indicated various approaches that can be used to evaluate the ways in which an artist is regarded in a later era.<sup>5</sup> I expand on previous scholarship to consider the recurring anecdotes of Rembrandt's biography within the larger context of publications on his artistic production. The fascination with Rembrandt's biography, which was fed by the increasing availability of information from archival sources, erased divisions between his art and life. Certainly the constellation of views that formed the conception of Rembrandt in the nineteenth century was not monolithic and I seek to reveal the discordance and contradictions in the conception of Rembrandt's personality and art in nineteenth-century France and suggest that it was in part this incongruity that fostered Rembrandt as a subject of interest.

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## *The Question of Influence*

The posthumous popularity of Old Masters such as Rembrandt is described typically as their *influence*. This vague term relates to a seemingly benevolent desire to connect a contemporary artist with a more famous artist in history. Discussions of *influence* pervade the literature about Rembrandt and later art – as do examinations of the popularity of all Old Masters in later periods. In art historical terms, *influence* is treated largely as an aesthetic phenomenon, a situation in which one artist reflected on, was inspired by, or incorporated elements from another artist or work of art from the past into the artist's own creation. Defining the impact of an artist only in terms of aesthetics restricts, however, any evaluation of connections between artists in different eras to formal comparisons, often with little to support the stylistic parallels.

In addition to compositional quotation, copies, particularly those executed in oil, have been the favored means of examining the *influence* of an Old Master artist. French artists, from the famous to the lesser-known, submitted requests to paint copies after Rembrandt and others in the Louvre and elsewhere in the nineteenth century. Extant copies after Rembrandt were painted by Léon Bonnat, Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, Gustave Courbet, Eugène Delacroix, Alexandre Descamps, Théodore Géricault, and Edouard Manet, among others.<sup>6</sup> There was even a short-lived *Musée des copies* established by Charles Blanc that opened in 1873 and included six copies after Rembrandt.<sup>7</sup> Consideration of the painted copies executed at the Louvre by famous male artists has, however, misrepresented the contents of the extant registers of copyists in the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> The vast majority of those who registered were female and few went on to become famous. While discussion of painted copies has been an interesting element of the analysis of the work of several individual artists, I seek to consider alternate means of understanding references to past art.<sup>9</sup>

Discussions of *influence* have also usually been restricted to an artist's early, student years when the artist is said to be building a foundation by learning from the past and then going beyond this founda-

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tion.<sup>10</sup> Such approaches are constructed on various assumptions, including the notion that once artists are established they do not require further inspiration because they have gone beyond the past. There is, however, a great deal of evidence that artists return to the past for inspiration throughout their careers. Michael Baxandall cogently critiqued the etymological constraints of the word *influence* and I am indebted to his analysis of the term.<sup>11</sup> I support his suggestion that art historians scrutinize their vocabulary and use diverse and more specific terms, such as copy, transform, respond, or quote, in discussions concerning interest in the art of the past. In the nineteenth century, French artists did their utmost to absorb, invoke, subsume and usurp Rembrandt's artistic persona in an effort to define their own identities.

*The Formation of the Louvre Museum and  
Rembrandt's Paintings in French Public  
Collections in the Early Nineteenth Century*

The popularity of Rembrandt's art in France must certainly be tied to its availability and while there was some interest in his art in the seventeenth century, little Dutch art was accessible to the French public until the end of the eighteenth century. The French royal collection, founded by François I and exhibited at Versailles throughout the reign of Louis XIV, became the first public picture gallery in France when it was installed at the Palais de Luxembourg in Paris in 1749. The collection grew under Louis XV and Louis XVI, who typically commissioned Surintendants to buy works at sales both in Paris and other European cities. Rembrandt's paintings, however, did not form a significant portion of the French royal collection during this period. Louis XIV acquired one work, *Self-Portrait with an Easel* [PLATE 2], before 1683 (probably in 1671) and Louis XV purchased another painting, *Angel Raphael Leaving Tobias* [PLATE 3], in 1742. Louis XVI added six works by Rembrandt to the royal collection, the largest number of paintings by Rembrandt acquired during the *ancien régime*. He acquired *Supper at Emmaus* in 1777, *Portrait of a Woman* [PLATE 4] and

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two paintings of the *Philosopher in Meditation* [PLATE 5] in 1784, and *The Good Samaritan* [PLATE 6] and *Self-Portrait before an Architectural Background* in 1785.<sup>12</sup> Thus, by the time of the Revolution of 1789 there were eight paintings by Rembrandt in the Palais de Luxembourg. While Italian art still dominated the royal collection, Louis XVI's director-general of royal buildings, Comte d'Angiviller, concentrated on buying northern and French paintings to diversify the royal collection before it was transferred to his principal project, the Grand Gallery of the Louvre.

Following the Revolution of 1789 and the decree that all ecclesiastical and royal assets become the property of the newly founded French nation, the royal collection finally transferred from the Palais de Luxembourg to the new Louvre museum, which opened August 10th, 1793.<sup>13</sup> Well before his *coup d'état* of 1802, Napoleon Bonaparte played a key role in the development of the new national collection of art through military campaigns which began in 1794 and expanded French borders into Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, and Prussian territory, thereby making France the leading European power until 1814. These campaigns placed several of Napoleon's relatives as rulers of neighboring countries – Louis Bonaparte became king of Holland and Joseph Bonaparte king of Spain – and provided a constant influx of looted art into Paris. Italy was undoubtedly the most fertile ground for French soldiers but, either by treaty negotiations or plundering, France successfully acquired objects from each country.

It is important to understand the Napoleonic pillaging of art and collectibles of all types within the context of the larger mission of the Commission of Sciences and Arts, a subgroup of the French Commission of Public Instruction. In the case of the commission's project in The Hague, they judged Stadholder Willem V's natural history cabinet to be more important than his cabinet of paintings. Thus shells, stones, stuffed animals and birds, books, maps, plants, vegetables, arms, and scientific machinery comprised the first three expeditions of goods to be transported from the Netherlands to Paris. Paintings were not shipped until the fourth expedition.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, paintings were the primary focus of all seized art works not only because painting was

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placed at the zenith of artistic production by the powerful French Academy, but also, more practically, they were more transportable than, for example, antique sculpture, which formed a smaller portion of the booty. Following the tradition of the Roman triumphal procession, seized works were paraded through the streets of Paris. They were then exhibited in the Salon Carré and finally installed in the galleries of the Louvre in what Cecil Gould aptly described as a “visible trophy of conquest.”<sup>15</sup>

The trophies acquired between 1793 and 1815 included an impressive fifty-three paintings and twenty-nine drawings by Rembrandt that were seized from collections in The Hague, Braunschweig, Kassel, Prussia, Florence, and French aristocratic collections – although in a few instances works were purchased from sales of the latter. H. van der Tuin published much of the inventory of the Napoleonic museum of 1810 but he specified the originating collection only for those works sent to Paris from Kassel and did not indicate where each work was located while it was in France.<sup>16</sup> The first three volumes of the *Rembrandt Corpus* refer to the presence of some of Rembrandt’s works in France, but with its emphasis on works attributed to Rembrandt, his school, students, and followers, the *Corpus* does not include works that at the beginning of the twenty-first century are considered foreign to what is now the perception of Rembrandt’s work.<sup>17</sup>

No previous scholarly study has considered the inventory of 1810 in conjunction with records from the National Archives. The combination of all these sources in the present study clarifies the number of works attributed to Rembrandt in France in the early nineteenth century – a figure that has previously been underestimated.<sup>18</sup> Exhibition catalogues from 1799, 1807, 1811, and 1816 also demonstrate the significant exposure of Rembrandt’s works in Paris in the early part of the century and clarify the location and availability of his paintings to the art-viewing public.<sup>19</sup>

In 1799, the first exhibition of works taken from Stadholder Willem V’s collection in The Hague included five paintings by Rembrandt: *Presentation in the Temple*, *Bust of a Man with a Plumed Hat*, *Self-Portrait*, *Susanna at the Bath*, and *Old Man*.<sup>20</sup> Another seven works

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were seized and/or bought from French aristocratic collections: *Portrait of a Man/Jewish Man with a Fur Hat*, *Holy Family/Carpenter's Household* [PLATE 7], *Pilgrims of Emmaus*, *St. Matthew and the Angel*, *Self-Portrait with Bare Head*, *Self-Portrait with Cap and Gold Chain*, and *Venus and Amor* [PLATE 8]. Lastly, the source of one work, *Portrait of Rembrandt's Sister with a Veil/Bust of a Young Woman* is unknown, but came either from a French aristocratic collection or one of the Italian collections transported to Paris in 1798. Works seized in Berlin, Braunschweig (Brunswick),<sup>21</sup> Kassel,<sup>22</sup> and Potsdam,<sup>23</sup> following the Battle of Jena on October 4th, 1806, included the largest number of Rembrandt's paintings transported to France. Unlike the exhibition in 1799, works displayed at the Louvre in 1807 – at an exhibition commemorating Napoleon's triumph the previous year – were subject to greater scrutiny. This exhibition included seventeen of Rembrandt's works imported from Braunschweig, Kassel, and Potsdam. Another three works from Braunschweig, classified as "School of Rembrandt," were also exhibited. But others works labeled "imitator" were not displayed and instead joined a select group of Rembrandt's works added to the Imperial collections at Compiègne, Fontainebleau, Malmaison, and Saint-Cloud.<sup>24</sup>

The Louvre collection received thirty-one new paintings by Rembrandt, the most prized of which were exhibited again in 1811 along with a new acquisition from Florence.<sup>25</sup> Most of these works also figured among the twenty-nine paintings by Rembrandt that were illustrated in print form in the ten-volume publication *Galerie du Musée de France*, produced between 1804 and 1815.<sup>26</sup> To judge from the representation of an artist's work in this *Galerie*, Rembrandt was already ranked by French authorities as the most important artist of any northern school – a position consolidated by later French critics.<sup>27</sup> Rembrandt's representation in the *Galerie* was, in fact, more extensive than that of Raphael and was surpassed only by the French artists Eustache Le Sueur and Nicolas Poussin.<sup>28</sup> Although Raphael continued to be the favorite of French Academicians for several decades, the extensive public display of Rembrandt's work demonstrates the appeal of alternative models even at this early date.

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The importing of works by Rubens and many Italian Renaissance artists has received greater public and scholarly attention due to their inclusion in a few contemporary prints illustrating the Louvre's galleries and exhibitions.<sup>29</sup> Reproductions in the principal publication on the early Louvre collections suggest, however, that Rembrandt's works were better represented and more significant in the early nineteenth century than previously realized. Furthermore, the availability of Rembrandt's works and their identification as "original" versus "school of" or "imitation" raises several points that are relevant to evaluating the increasing popularity of his art in France during the course of the century.

Art critics throughout the nineteenth century fostered the idea of fusing Rembrandt's life and art. Their approach expanded on descriptions in the Louvre catalogues which connected Rembrandt's works with his biography. The Louvre's publications from the early part of the century described *Family Portrait* from Braunschweig as *Portrait of Rembrandt with his Wife and Children*, Kassel's *Portrait of a Woman* as a *Portrait of Rembrandt's Wife* and *Portrait of a Man Trimming his Quill* as a portrait of Rembrandt's friend Coppenol.

The works exhibited in France early in the nineteenth century also spanned Rembrandt's career and fostered an interest in his entire oeuvre, rather than one period. They ranged from the early detailed and fine manner of painting to later works with a more painterly and tactile surface. This duality is most noticeable when comparing the Braunschweig *Family Portrait*, which was described as painted "at the first go,"<sup>30</sup> and the so-called "sketch" *Winter Landscape* from Kassel<sup>31</sup> to two other landscape scenes also from Kassel. The latter paintings, often referred to as *Landscape with Goats* [FIG. 1] and *Landscape with Hunters* [FIG. 2],<sup>32</sup> are precisely painted works where the hand of the artist cannot be detected. The linear and detailed technique of these landscapes is opposite that of the other bold and broadly painted works, yet the two diverging techniques were unproblematically combined under the one rubric of Rembrandt. The presentation of Rembrandt's different techniques at the Louvre did not suffer from the division of prize works which stayed in Paris from those works which were



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