

# *Rembrandt at the Vatican*

IMAGES FROM HEAVEN AND EARTH



## PREFACE

ANYONE FAMILIAR WITH REMBRANDT'S prints knows that they contain all kinds of things: from summer skies shot through by glare and foreboding to the fatal heaviness of the female body that both oppresses and comforts us. They contain the secret thoughts that cross the mind of a man (alone in his studio, in the twilight of an ordinary day) and the silent life of a tree, looming threateningly on the horizon. They teem with ghostly evocations of the Old and New Testaments and gatherings of Jews at the synagogue. Upright citizens and rogues, gentlemen and tramps, peasants, sailors and merchants, light-filled nights, sparkling brightness and infinite half-shadows all appear in Rembrandt's sheets.

Like all painters, and he more so than any other, the Master of Leiden knew that Truth is elusive. Truth is an ontological mystery. Just as you cannot bathe twice in the same river, nor can you look twice at the same thing. In the unceasing passing of time, in the changing light, changing thoughts and sensations that accompany it, altered imperceptibly but irreversibly, fraction of a second after fraction of a second, so the thing being viewed and the viewer also change.

Truth—the thoughts of men and the quivering life of nature, the colours of the sky and the body of a woman—is elusive. Or rather, it is an enigma. Just as St Paul wrote in his second epistle to the Corinthians, “*Nunc videmus per speculum et in enigmate*” (For now we see in an enigma by means of a mirror); as a Protestant, Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn would have been familiar with these words.

Rembrandt was aware of all of this. The truly distinctive character of his art is a slow approximation, relentlessly and incessantly at the very edge of *representability*. He attempts to look out over the threshold of the mystery and succeeds in doing so, in his prints more than in his paintings. The mark of etching and drypoint succeeds in replicating the secret life of things better than any other technical process, touching levels of perception inaccessible to painting. Beyond the boundary of the almost philosophical understanding of the mystery of Truth achieved in Rembrandt's prints, it is impossible to go. No one in fact, after him, has succeeded in finding their way there.

Rembrandt's prints should be examined at length with a magnifying glass, attracting us to them like a magnet. We will notice, for example, that an infinite number of blacks can be found in a single black, that light areas play host to a brightness and splendour that no paintbrush could ever signify, that every shadow lives and throbs with life. Finally, we will realise that the sheet before us goes beyond its boundaries. It takes with it the murmur of life and history as it grows, grows to the size of *The Night Watch*, a full

immersion in Humanity, thought and action, glorious youth and melancholic ponderings, the looming mystery and the haunting beauty of the world from which it is so painful to break away.

Rembrandt the etcher has already been seen in Rome, at the Scuderie del Quirinale in 2008, an exhibition that still lingers in the memory. He is now returning, returning to the Papal Museum in the heart of Roman Catholicism, alongside masterpieces of classical statuary, alongside Michelangelo and Raphael, alongside artists and artworks that for him, a Protestant from Leiden, represented the dark side of the moon.

It is thanks to the Netherlands' Ambassador to the Holy See—Jaime de Bourbon de Parme—and to Sweden's Ambassador to the Holy See—Lars-Hjalmar Wide—that from 23 November 2016 to 26 February 2017 we will be able to exhibit fifty-five engravings and two paintings on canvas from the Zorn Museum in Sweden and the Kremer Collection in the Netherlands. My colleague Arnold Nesselrath and the Director of the Zorn Museum, Johan Cederlund, are the curators of the exhibition that will be opened by the Queen of Sweden. We could not imagine a finer tribute to Rembrandt in Rome.

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