Rembrandt's 'Thirty Years War' vs. Anglo-Dutch Liberal Tyranny

by Bonnie James

Your Majesty,
I lately pass'd through Flanders and Brabant,
So many rich and blooming provinces,
Fill'd with a valiant, great, and honest people!
To be the father of a race like this,
I thought must be divine indeed! and then
I stumbled on a heap of burnt men's bones!
. . .
True, you are forced to act so; but that you
Could dare fulfil your task—this fills my soul
With shuddering horror! O 'tis pity that
The victim, weltering in his blood must cease
To chant the praises of his sacrificer!
And that mere men—not beings loftier far—
Should write the history of the world. But soon
A milder age will follow that of Philip,
An age of truer wisdom: —hand in hand,
The subjects' welfare, and the sovereign's greatness,
Will walk in union. Then the careful state
Will spare her children, and necessity
No longer glory to be thus inhuman.
—Posa to Philip II
—Friedrich Schiller, *Don Carlos,* Act III, Scene 10[1]

The year 2006 was an unusually rich year for significant birthdays: We commemorated the 250th birthday of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (Jan. 27, 1756) and the 300th birthday of Benjamin Franklin (Jan. 17, 1706). It is therefore fitting that, as we bid adieu to 2006, we remember the great genius and sublime artist, Rembrandt van Rijn, born 400 years ago, on July 15, 1606 (Rembrandt lived till 1669).

Like Mozart and Franklin, Rembrandt was a protagonist in a time of tremendous political, social, and economic upheaval, dominated by his nation's 80-year struggle for its independence from Hapsburg Spain, and by the Thirty Years War, both of which ended with the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. More than any other single figure of that era, Rembrandt embodies the most beautiful idea of his time, as it was given expression in the Treaty of Westphalia: that to establish peace among the warring parties, "each Party shall endeavour to procure the Benefit, Honour and Advantage of the other."[2]

Through his hundreds of paintings, etchings, engravings, and drawings, Rembrandt left us one of the most extensive bodies of creative output of any individual in history. His scores of self-portraits, an unprecedented and never-surpassed record of his life and character, provide a brilliant autobiography, as revealing as any ever written.

His courage and love for mankind, in the face of the evil of Venice's Habsburg oligarchy, whose hatred and contempt for humanity Rembrandt stood courageously against, as so beautifully expressed in his art, should inspire us today to take on Venice's satanic offspring, with Rembrandtian determination and *agapē.*

While art historians have pieced together the outlines of his life—and these are available in thousands of books, more of which are published each year, and on hundreds of Internet websites—if we really want to know Rembrandt, we must find the truth in his art: his paintings, drawings, and prints, which tell us much about the impact that the political, scien-

1. *The Works of Friedrich Schiller: Don Carlos,* R.D. Boylan, trans. (New York: Bigelow, Brown & Co., 1901).

2. "Treaty of Westphalia: The Avalon Project"; Yale Law School, www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/westphal.htm.

tific, and cultural revolutions of his time had on his thinking and his work. And we must look at his enormous artistic output in the context of the world-shaking events that took place in the 17th Century, and shaped his world view.

* * *

In 1606, the English King James I established two merchant companies eager to stake their claims upon the legendary riches of North America. They set forth on Dec. 20, and on May 14 of the following year; 108 settlers of the Virginia Company landed at what they called Jamestown Island, to establish the first English colony in the New World.

Some five months before the English ships embarked from London, a boy, the ninth of ten children, was born to a prosperous miller of Leiden, in the province of Holland, in the northern Netherlands. Harmen Gerritsz. van Rijn (whose name is derived from the Rhine River), and his wife, Neeltje van Suijttbroeck, who was the daughter of a baker, named their son Rembrandt.

These two events, the English colonization in North America, and the birth of Rembrandt, are connected by more than mere happenstance. The historical and cultural forces that led to the establishment of the United States of America, also produced this artistic genius who took into his art all the great discoveries and achievements of the 15th-Century Renaissance, and added to them his own contributions, which until now, have never been surpassed. As we shall see, Rembrandt anticipated, and gave expression, through his visual metaphors, to the very principles—the "self-evident truths"—that formed the foundation of the American Republic, as they were to be expressed a century after his death: the inalienable rights of all men; the basic goodness of mankind; the role of government as the protector of the common good.

Rembrandt's commitment to these principles would place him in direct opposition to the oligarchical forces that seized control of the Netherlands during the 17th Century, just as the founders of the American Republic would find themselves in a struggle, ultimately victorious, against that same Anglo-Dutch Liberal power.

Young Rembrandt

Rembrandt chose a propitious place for his birth.

Early 17th-Century Leiden was one of the leading intellectual and artistic centers in Europe, home to the celebrated Leiden University. It was also a magnet for refugees of religious persecution from all over Europe, who were fleeing the horrors of the ongoing religious wars and from the terrifying Spanish (Hapsburg) Inquisition. These included Puritans from England, Sephardic Jews from Spain and Portugal, Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe, and Catholics and Protestants of all stripes fleeing the horrors of the wars which swept the continent throughout the 16th and half of the 17th Centuries. The influx of immigrants added to the intellectual and economic vigor of the city, and helped to shape Rembrandt's earliest impressions.

FIGURE 1

Rembrandt depicts himself in 1648, as he looks up from his etching. It is the year of the Peace of Westphalia, ending the Thirty Years War, but Rembrandt's expression is anything but pacific; it seems to say, there is still a lot of work to be done.

By Rembrandt's time, these religious and political conflicts—which began in 1492 with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain by a monarchy in thrall to Venetian manipulation, setting Catholics against Protestants, Protestant sects against one another, nobles against peasants, feudal barons against the merchant class—ignited a series of wars which had lasted 150 years, and drenched the soil of Europe in blood over much of its territory. The Thirty Years War (1618-48), at the end of this period, devastated most of Europe, but struck most severely in present-day Germany: An estimated 5 million people were sent to their graves in Germany alone, and the population fell from 15 million to less than 10 million. Those who escaped the immediate effects of the war, then faced famine and disease as farmlands and cities were destroyed; the Plague struck again and again, adding its grim toll to the death count.

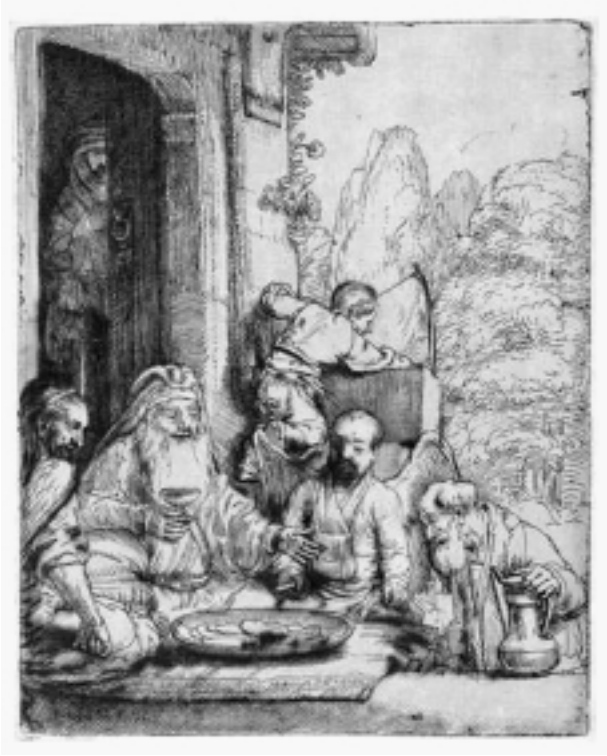
The setting of Rembrandt's birth and education cannot be separated from the fact that the Dutch attitude toward the education of children, even from the "lower classes," had

Strokes of Genius

The National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. has mounted an exhibition, titled "Strokes of Genius: Rembrandt's Prints and Drawings," from its own extensive collection, in celebration of the artist's 400th birthday (July 15, 1606). The exhibit, which includes 190 masterworks, and runs until March 18, is exceptionally well presented, so that the viewer can follow Rembrandt's development as a graphic artist, throughout his career.

What distinguishes this particular show, is the presentation of multiple impressions of the same print. Rembrandt often reworked his copper plates, sometimes using different types of paper or varying the inks, or making substantial changes in the composition itself, so that each impression or "state" became a singular work of art. The placement of the different states from a single copper plate, side by side, offers a rare opportunity to compare them, and to look into the master's mind as he "edited" his work.

Today, 82 of Rembrandt's original 300-plus copper plates, survive; one of the exhibition's highlights is the original plate for the print shown here, "Abraham Entertaining the Angels" of 1656. The plate, unlike most of those surviving, is in pristine condition; it still retains remnants of the ink Rembrandt used. The plate was found, after being hidden for 350 years on the back of a river landscape painted by a little-known 17th-Century Flemish artist. Following its discovery in the 1990s, it was purchased by the Gallery in 1997.



National Gallery of Art

"Abraham Entertaining the Angels" (1656) is based on a story from Genesis. The aged Abraham and his wife Sarah (seen in the doorway) are childless. One day three travellers appear at their house, and are invited to rest and eat. The visitors are actually two angels and God Himself (the central figure), who have come to tell the couple that Sarah will soon give birth. In Rembrandt's treatment, the three visitors are depicted as ordinary men (albeit with wings), including the most unlikely Jehovah, while Abraham's expression reveals his delight at the news.

been shaped by the influence of the schools of the Brethren of the Common Life, a religious/political movement, founded by Gerhardt Groote in the 15th Century, whose ideas were then disseminated by Thomas à Kempis's widely read book, *The Imitation of Christ.* In Leiden of Rembrandt's time, the movement, known as the *Devotio Moderna,* promoted the precept that the individual believer should develop a personal, direct relationship to God, without the intercession of priests, or other anointed figures. By reading the Bible, the individual could develop the spiritual strength to live in "the imitation of Christ." Needless to say, this was a revolutionary idea, one which demanded literacy for the common man, and challenged the feudal system, in which a small number of oligarchs ruled over the mass of what they viewed as human cattle. Among the more famous students of the Brotherhood schools were the Renaissance geniuses Nicholas of Cusa, the founder of both the modern commonwealth form of nation-state, and of modern science; and the Erasmus of Rotterdam associated with England's Sir Thomas More.

In this setting of his childhood and early youth, Rembrandt, as the son of a well-to-do miller, attended the Latin School in Leiden, from age 9 to 13. Then, in 1620, at the time of the Plymouth settlement in what was to become the U.S. Commonwealth of Massachusetts, he was registered at the University of Leiden to study literature, although we have no record of his having ever attended classes there. Instead, he was apprenticed at age 15 to a local artist, Jacob Isaacsz. van Swanenburg, with whom he studied until 1622.

Perhaps the question of why Rembrandt was taken out of school, and apprenticed to Swanenburg, is answered by Rembrandt's biographer Gary Schwartz.[3] In 1618, the year

3. Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings* (New York: Penguin, 1991).

of the outbreak of the Thirty Years War, Maurits, Prince of Orange, the Venetian-controlled son of the great and good William the Silent, the Father of the Netherlands, overthrew by force the ecumenical government of Leiden, and installed a virtual Calvinist dictatorship. The coup extended beyond the city council, into the schools, and other institutions of civic life.

The political opponents of the House of Orange and its Calvinist allies in Leiden were loosely organized around the followers of the Remonstrant faith, a branch of the Protestant Church, with which Rembrandt was associated. When the "Orange Revolution" in Leiden overturned the more moderate and tolerant Protestant leadership, other outcast groups, including both renegade Protestant sects and Catholics, tended to coalesce around the Remonstrants. It will be the members of this latter "coalition," with its ties into Amsterdam, who will constitute the humanist circles that nurtured Rembrandt in his early years in that city.[4]

The Leiden Studio

In that setting, 16-year-old Rembrandt had travelled to Amsterdam to begin his advanced training as a painter in the studio of Pieter Lastman. From the time that Rembrandt began his Leiden studies with Swanenberg in Leiden, he was taken under the protection and patronage of leading members of the Leiden/Amsterdam humanist intelligentsia. One of the key figures among them was the Remonstrant Pieter Hendricksz. Schrijver (Petrus Scriverius), Swanenburg's next-door neighbor, a Classical scholar, and patron of vernacular Dutch Renaissance poetry. Scriverius's Amsterdam relatives, especially his cousin Geurt Dirsksz. van Beuningen, an alderman, and his brother Jan Dircksz., were active in the art market. From 1617 to 1646, the van Beuningens were one of the two leading auctioneers of Amsterdam, and Rembrandt would have extensive ties with them, as he built his own collection of artworks, and sold his many prints through their auctions.

In 1622, the year Rembrandt arrived in Amsterdam, the van Beuningens were elected to the town council, thus giving the young artist important allies in the city. Moreover, Rembrandt's new master, Lastman, lived next door to Guert Dircksz van Beuningen.

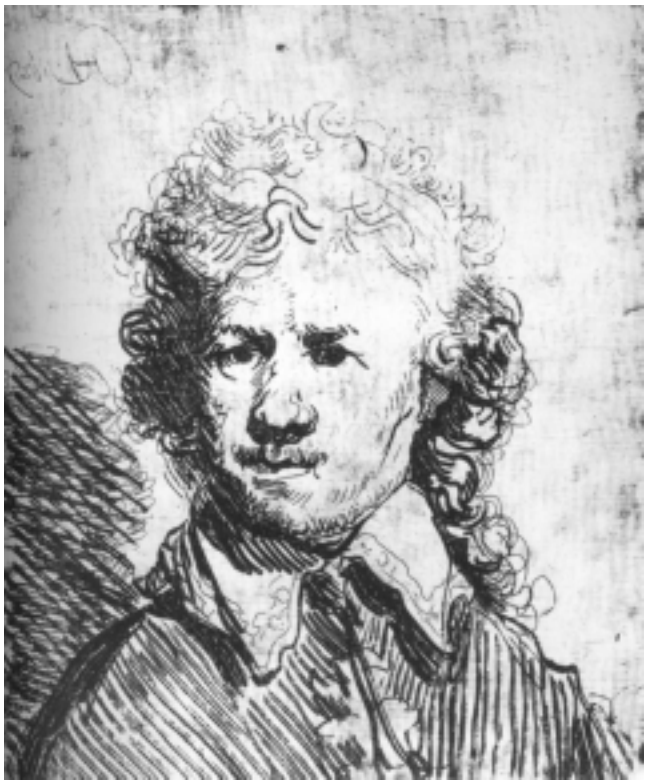
Meanwhile, even before Rembrandt left for Amsterdam to study with Lastman, he and his friend and fellow artist, Jan Lievens, had set up a studio in Leiden in 1624. After his apprenticeship in Amsterdam, Rembrandt returned to Leiden, and began producing etchings, in addition to paintings and drawings. At this time, he took on his first students.

Rembrandt's prints were to become the greatest part of his artistic legacy (see box). Like the German master Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) before him, Rembrandt understood the power of mass organizing through the medium of prints (he owned several series of Dürer's prints, along with those of the great Italian Renaissance artist Andrea Mantegna [1431-1506]). Each copperplate could produce hundreds of prints, and thus they were able to reach a wide market, whereas his paintings, which were commissioned by powerful and wealthy patrons, would be seen by only a privileged few. Through these prints—the equivalent of today's leaflets and pamphlets—Rembrandt was producing what Lyndon LaRouche has called a "mass effect."

His etchings reached far beyond the borders of The Netherlands, and were responsible for the international reputation he enjoyed during his lifetime. In 1660, the Italian painter Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri), speaking of Rembrandt's prints, which were circulating in Italy, said, "I frankly consider him to be a great virtuoso."

He also produced the first of his self-portrait prints in this period (**Figure 2**). In this rough etching from 1629, Rembrandt has given us one of the first examples of what will be a lifetime of portrayals of his own image: a hold-nothing-back autograph. His appearance, despite his early success, conveys anxiety; it's a troubled, but also determined expres-

FIGURE 2



A self-portrait of 1629, when the artist is only 23; these are troubled times, but Rembrandt appears confident, even combative, and ready to take on the world.

4. Rembrandt's mother was a Catholic; his father, a lapsed member of the Dutch Reformed Church. This may help to explain his lifelong ecumenical outlook.

What Is an Etching?

Rembrandt used a technique for his prints called etching, in which the medium is a thin copper plate, which is covered with an acid-resistant mixture known as the etching ground, composed of asphalt, resin, and wax. The artist "draws" his composition into the wax compound with an etching needle.

The plate is then submerged in a bath of dilute acid, which penetrates onto the plate where the needle has etched into the wax, so that the lines of the composition are etched away, producing grooves in the surface of the metal. The longer the plate is left in the bath, the deeper these grooves become. If particular lines have to be deeper than others, the plate is removed from the bath, the lines that have been bitten deeply enough are covered with acid-resistant varnish, and the plate is replaced in the bath.

After this, the wax mixture is removed and the clean plate is inked with an ink-pad or roller, and then wiped clean by hand so that the ink remains only in the grooves. Then a damp sheet of paper is laid on the plate, and both are passed through the rollers of the press. The paper absorbs the ink from the grooves, producing a reverse impression of the design on the plate.

Rembrandt often combined etching with drypoint, in which he used an etching needle or an engraving tool, the burin or graver, to draft directly onto the copper plate. As it passes through the copper, the drypoint throws up a burr which retains additional ink when the plate is wiped; this makes a softer, or blurred line. The burin has a V-shaped point which cuts a sharp-edged line, starting and ending in a point.

After about 1640, Rembrandt became increasingly interested in the more painterly effects of the drypoint line, which gave him new degrees of freedom in creating an astounding variety of textures and "colors," using only paper and ink (see **Figure 1,** done in etching, drypoint, and burin; it shows Rembrandt, etching needle in hand, as he renders his image into a copper plate; he peers into a mirror, and seemingly through it, out at the viewer—as if "through a glass darkly").

Rembrandt also experiments with different types of paper, to produce the effects he was after. Beginning about 1650, Japanese paper arrived in Amsterdam, and he began using it for its warm, off-white color (Figure 1 is done on Japanese paper). The National Gallery exhibition has examples of a single print produced both on European and Japanese paper.

sion. The tension around his mouth and eyes is reinforced by the lopsided set of his collar and his gaze away from us, toward a view we cannot see, but which is only suggested by his reaction to it. In this early print, we find the seed crystal of the mature artist he is to become.

In this early period, he and Lievens were "discovered" by Constantijn Huygens, the powerful statesman and secretary to the Prince of Orange. Huygens, the father of Gottfried Leibniz's associate and ally, Christiaan Huygens, was the sometime Ambassador of Orange to the English Court of St. James, and was knighted by King James I; the elder Huygens would later turn against Rembrandt, and was involved in the persecution of the artist, which led to Rembrandt's bankruptcy.[5]

Constantijn Huygens was, at the time, the leading promoter in the Netherlands, of the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), the official painter of the Council of Trent, and the Counter-Reformation. (Rubens, it seems, took after his father, Jan, a radical Calvinist and city counselor in Antwerp, who became infamous for carrying on an illicit affair with the emotionally fragile wife of the Dutch hero William the Silent.) Rubens himself became court painter at Antwerp, and later held the impressive title, "Secretary to the King in His Secret Cabinet." Huygens apparently intended to make Rembrandt a "Dutch Rubens," an effort doomed to fail: No two artists could have been more diametrically opposed in their life's mission: Rubens used his considerable skills as a propagandist for the oligarchy, while Rembrandt's art upheld the nobility of the most humble of his fellow men and women.

Yet, Rembrandt initially benefitted from Huygens' patronage: Huygens held the powerful post of Secretary to the Statholder and Prince of Orange Frederik Hendrik. Once established in Amsterdam, the young artist received a number of commissions for the court at The Hague; among them were a pair of portraits of the Prince (1631) and his wife, Amalia van Solm (1632).

Rembrandt was then 26 years old.

Between 1628 and 1631, Lievens and Rembrandt were kept busy with commissions from the Court. These included at least two of the Apostle Paul (St. Paul in Prison and St. Paul at His Desk)—Paul will become a subject that Rembrandt returns to again later, many times, including a self-portrait as

5. The question of Constantijn Huygens' relationship to Rembrandt and his key role as a leading figure in the Court at The Hague, is somewhat paradoxical, considering what we know of the plot by Christiaan Huygens and Gottfried Leibniz to copy covert papers from the British monarchy's captive documents of Leonardo da Vinci, doing this, under the protection of Constantijn, in service of the science program of France's Jean-Baptiste Colbert.

the saint. Rembrandt clearly saw something in the life of Paul, who underwent a transformation, rejecting his past as a persecutor of the followers of Jesus in the Roman Empire, to become a leader and teacher of the movement after Christ, following his "Damascus Road" conversion. Perhaps there was also a resonance in Rembrandt's mind between Paul's letters to the early "Christian"[6] communities, and his own many "epistles"—prints—which reached out into the population to spread the ideas of the Renaissance.

Amsterdam: The Venetian Takeover

> . . . Men hastened toward a country where freedom raised its gladdening flag, where respect and safety and revenge on her oppressors were assured to fugitive religion. When we consider the confluence of every people in today's Holland, who upon entering her territory regain their human rights, what must it have been then, when all the rest of Europe still groaned under a mournful oppression of spirit, when Amsterdam was wellnigh the sole free port of entry to all opinions? . . .
>
> At the very time when the republic of Holland was still struggling for her existence, she advanced the borders of her territory across the ocean and quietly built up her East Indies thrones.
>
> —Schiller, *Revolt of the Netherlands*[7]

The Amsterdam Rembrandt found at the age of 24 was a city of contradictions: As mentioned above, the city, which allowed a high degree of toleration in an age of religious warfare, became a refuge from war and persecution; at the same time, it was home to the most evil financial oligarchy in history. Following Venice's defeat of the League of Cambrai in 1511, the *Serenissima Repubblica* seized on Hapsburg Spain as its instrument to impose the bestial rule of the Inquisition, to terrify and demolish the enemies of its imperial rule. Thus was unleashed a century and a half of bloodletting, whose purpose was to crush out of existence the political, scientific, and cultural breakthroughs of the 15th-Century Renaissance, and the emergence of the modern nation-state republic. And so were founded, at the dawn of the 17th Century, the British and Dutch East India Companies—what Lyndon LaRouche has referred to as the "Anglo-Dutch Liberal" imperial maritime power. Indeed, the Dutch "Republic" was established as a replica of its Venetian parent: The republic was no such thing; rather, a tightly organized oligarchy of leading families ruled through a network of political and financial institutions.

Rembrandt's painting of "The Syndics of the Clothmakers' Guild (The Staalmeesters)" of 1662 (**Figure 3**) perfectly captures the character of this Venetian-style financial oligarchy: The conspiratorial meeting is interrupted, as these powerful men go over their books; the man at the far right is clutching his moneybag, which has taken on the shape of a snake's head. The standing figure at the left has risen from his seat, and cast a warning look at the intruder. What are they hiding?

In 1550, the Spanish King Charles V unleashed the Inquisition in his imperial colony, the Netherlands, and an orgy of executions began. With the arrival in 1567 of the Duke of Alva and his 10,000 troops, came the establishment of the "Council of Blood," a religious tribunal; over the next six years, 12,000 souls were condemned to a horrible death. A few years later, in 1576, the "Spanish Fury" consumed Antwerp: Over a three-day period, 8,000 civilians were slaughtered by Spanish troops. One historian described the carnage: "The whole country became a charnel house; the death-bell tolled in every village; not a family but was called to mourn for its dearest relatives, while survivors stalked listlessly about, the ghosts of their former selves, among the wrecks of their former homes. The spirit of the nation, within a few months after the arrival of Alva, seemed hopeless, broken. . . ."[8]

The Amsterdam which Rembrandt found, some 50 years after these events, was already home to the Venetian-installed Dutch East India Company, founded in 1601-02, whose predatory, anti-nation-state, slave-trading policies Rembrandt opposed all this life. In fact, in the year Rembrandt was born, 1606, the first Dutch slave ships sailed with their human cargo to the New World.

But, as a city of great wealth, Amsterdam was also a center of science, culture, and learning: The city saw its population quadruple between 1600 and 1650, from 50,000 to 200,000. Among the world-shaking developments that took place during Rembrandt's lifetime was the founding of European settlements in the New World, including the sailing of the Mayflower in 1620, a voyage which included Dutch citizens. All of Holland would have known of, and followed, the fortunes of those who sailed, and would have received news of the progress of the emigrés in America. New Amsterdam (now New York) was founded on Manhattan Island in 1624 as an overseas province of the Dutch Republic.

But unlike the oligarchs Rembrandt portrayed in his "Syndics" painting, who saw the New World as a "gold mine" for looting, he and his fellow humanists recognized that the intention behind the colonization of America was to form commonwealths reflecting the principle of the great ecumeni-

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6. It is anachronistic to refer to the believers in Jesus as the Messiah, during the time of Paul's ministry, as "Christians," as no such term or concept existed then. Paul saw his mission as convincing the Jews and Gentiles to accept Jesus as the Messiah.

7. "The History of the Revolt of the United Netherlands Against Spanish Rule," "Introduction," Susan Johnson, trans.; in *Friedrich Schiller, Poet of Freedom,* Vol. III (Washington, D.C.: Schiller Institute, 1990).

8. Robert Ingraham, "Origins of the Anglo-Dutch World Order," unpublished manuscript; Part V: "The Dutch Tragedy."

FIGURE 3

"The Syndics of the Clothmakers' Guild" (1662). Rembrandt's group-portrait brilliantly captures the bland evil of the leading merchants of Amsterdam—the Venice of the North—as they tally their profits.

cal Council of Florence (1438-39), at a relatively safe distance from pro-oligarchical cultures dominating Europe then (and still today).

During the same period, in which Rembrandt grew to maturity, the works of Shakespeare, who died in 1616, began to reach the continent, in translation. To give only a few examples: By 1604, *Romeo and Juliet* appeared in German; in 1621, *The Tragedy of Titus Andronicus* was translated into Dutch; a few years later, *Julius Caesar, King Lear,* and *Hamlet* were printed in German; in 1654, the *Taming of the Shrew* appeared in Dutch. In fact, there is evidence that Rembrandt may have been in Shakespeare's London: He drew the gates of the city in the early 1640s, and may have accompanied his close friend, the rabbi and leading Jewish intellectual in Europe, Menasseh ben Israel, who went to England to convince Oliver Cromwell to open the country to Jewish immigration.

Turn now to the key historical turning points in Rembrandt's life, to see how they were reflected in his art.

The Partnership With Uylenburgh

The 1630s were productive years for the young artist. In 1631, he was put in touch with the Amsterdam art dealer Hendrick van Uylenburgh, by the humanist networks who had guided his career up till then. That same year, Rembrandt moved into the home of Henrick and his wife Maria van Eyck, bringing with him two or three of his students. It was then that his career took off.

Between November 1631 and December 1635, he was the most highly sought portraitist in Amsterdam, painting as many as 50 portraits of the city's leading figures. In this same period, he executed "The Anatomy Lecture of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp" (1632), a group portrait of the top physicians and surgeons; and numerous biblical histories, including "Belshazzar's Feast" (1635). Among his sitters was prominent intellectual Johannes Wtenbogaert, who for half a century had been fighting to create a tolerant, humanist Christian faith. He was the author in 1610, of the "Remonstrance," which gave its name to the movement whose intent was to bring about reconciliation among the numerous Protestant sects.

Rembrandt's partnership with Uylenburgh brought him another kind of happiness as well: Henrick's cousin Saskia became Rembrandt's wife in 1634; she was the daughter of a burgomaster in Friesland, Romburtus Uylenburgh, who also served as attorney general of the republic. In the short time of their marriage—Saskia died in 1642—Rembrandt produced numerous images of his wife, including the 1636 etching reproduced here, "Self-Portrait with Saskia" (**Figure 4**). This small etching (4⅛ × 3⅝″) is an example, albeit in miniature, of an innovation by Rembrandt in marriage portraits, in which the wife was depicted participating in the activities of her husband. Here, a strong light falls on Saskia, whose gaze is directed ambiguously both at us, and at her young artist-husband. He, contrariwise, is half in shadow, as her light

FIGURE 4

"Self-Portrait with Saskia" (1636). Rembrandt presents his wife Saskia as his "better half"—she radiates light, while his face is shaded—and as his muse; once again, he is at work, etching.

illumines his "better side." One art historian has suggested that the portrait could be an illustration of the Dutch maxim, *Liefde baart kunst* (Love gives birth to art). Rembrandt portrays himself as looking up from a sketch, for which his wife/muse Saskia is the model.

Around this time, in 1635, Rembrandt produced one of his most powerful images, the etching of "Christ Driving the Moneychangers from the Temple" (**Figure 5**). By this time, virtually the entire class of wealthy Netherlanders was directly involved in the East Indies trade, or finance, or both. The message of this print is unambiguous: Jesus stands at the center of the composition, wielding a heavy rope, which he swings vigorously, as the usurers cower before him. The scene is derived from accounts in all four Gospels, as in Luke (19:46): "My house shall be called the House of Prayer; but ye have made it a Den of Thieves." There is a humorous aspect as well, almost slapstick, as one man is dragged away by a calf (a reference to the Golden Calf? But this one has a comical expression); another clings desperately to his pouch of money; a dog barks frantically at Jesus. In the background, the priests of the temple look on with expressions of consternation, disbelief, or wonder. While Rembrandt has "borrowed" the figure of Jesus from a woodcut of the same subject by Albrecht Dürer, he makes it completely his own, by changing the light source from a candle on the wall, to having a burst of light emanating from Christ's hand as he swings the rope.

In 1641, Rembrandt's son Titus was born (the couple's first three children, a boy, and two girls, died soon after birth); the following year, his beloved wife Saskia died, and Rembrandt was overcome with grief. Though he would paint one of his most celebrated works, the "Nightwatch" (its official title is "The Company of Frans Banning Cock Preparing To March Out") that year, after 1642, Rembrandt's fortunes took a sharp turn. His big commissions all but dried up, and over the coming decade, there were few portraits of leading citizens. The Anglo-Dutch oligarchy, it seems, had no use for Rembrandt.

1648: The End of the Thirty Years War

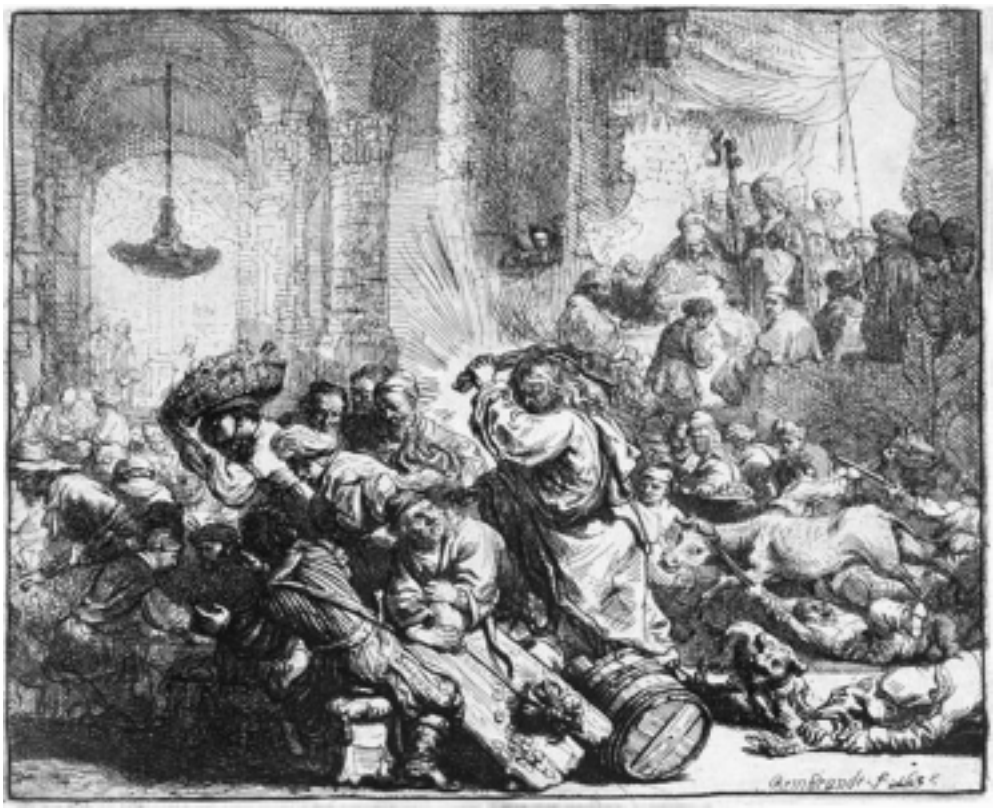
It is hardly possible to imagine the joy that must have swept over Europe at the signing of the Peace of Münster/Westphalia in October of 1648. The treaty stated:

> That there shall be on the one side and the other a perpetual Oblivion, Amnesty, or Pardon of all that has been committed since the beginning of these Troubles, in what place, or what manner soever the Hostilitys have been practis'd, in such a manner, that no body, under any pretext whatsoever, shall practice any Acts of Hostility, entertain any Enmity, or cause any Trouble to each other; neither as to Persons, Effects and Securitys, neither of themselves or by others, neither privately nor openly. . . .
>
> That they shall not act, or permit to be acted, any wrong or injury to any whatsoever; but that all that has pass'd on the one side, and the other, as well before as during the War, in Words, Writings, and Outrageous Actions, in Violences, Hostilitys, Damages and Expences, without any respect to Persons of Things, shall be entirely abolish'd in such a manner that all that might be demanded of, or pretended to, by each other on that behalf, *shall be bury'd in eternal Oblivion*[9] [emphasis added].

In a number of etchings and paintings from this period, Rembrandt gives visual form to the idea of compassion, or *agapē,* expressed in the Treaty of Westphalia. The most famous of these is his magnificent etching, "Christ Healing the Sick," better known as the "Hundred Guilder Print" (**Figure 6**) (known by this name because of the unusually high price it fetched). The work, done in etching, drypoint, and engraving, took several years to complete. The scene places Christ at the center of the composition; He is illuminated by a strong light from the left, outside the space of the

9. Treaty of Westphalia, *op cit.*

FIGURE 5



"Christ Driving the Moneychangers from the Temple" (1635). Rembrandt's etching is a less-than-subtle message to the Dutch merchants and moneylenders, who have become "a den of thieves," getting fat off the East Indies trade.

picture, which falls over the group to His right; but He also emanates a powerful light from within: By this light we can clearly "read" the expressions and thoughts on the faces of those around him, and in the motions of the supporting cast, those listening who come forward to hear him, and to be healed, both physically and spiritually. He is the "organizing principle" of the drama. The script Rembrandt has chosen for its dramatic potential, is taken from the Gospel of Matthew (19:1-30): "And great multitudes followed him; and he healed them there." From the right, a crowd enters through the city gate: They are the sick, the crippled, the aged, who beseech His help. At the left of the stage, the Pharisees, the religious fundamentalists, who demand to know Christ's "position" on "single issues," like divorce: "The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, 'Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?' " In front of the Pharisees, two mothers approach Christ, offering their children for His blessing, as Peter, at Christ's right hand, tries to hold the women back, but Christ reproaches Peter: "Then were there brought unto him little children, that he should put his hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, 'Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.' "

Seated between the two women, a youth is deep in thought; he is the rich young man, who came to Christ seeking eternal life. Jesus tell him: "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me." But when "the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions." Jesus tells his disciples, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of Heaven." Lo and behold! As we turn our eyes to the right-hand side of the stage, just inside the gate, there is the camel; the rich man is at the far left, with his back to the viewer; each of these is as far from Christ as can be, and still be on stage.

Rembrandt conveys Matthew's summation of this verse, "many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first," by presenting the poor and the sick with more precise definition, and greater substance, than the rich and powerful. In doing so, he gives us a rich visual metaphor for the idea of the common good, which imbues the Treaty of Westphalia.

The Bankruptcy

In 1656, Dutch East India Company shares plummeted on the Amsterdam Exchange and many investors were ruined.

FIGURE 6

"Christ Healing the Sick" (1648). This etching, is one of Rembrandt's most celebrated, also done the year of the Peace of Westphalia. The story is based on the Gospel of Matthew: "And great multitudes followed him; and he healed them there."

Among them was Rembrandt van Rijn, now 50, who was declared bankrupt and whose possessions were put up for sale. The process leading to Rembrandt's bankruptcy however, was not so simple; his finances unravelled over the decade of the 1650s, as powerful patrons abandoned him, and the vultures closed in. In January 1653, with the country at war with England, and finances tight, Rembrandt's creditors called in their loans. The details of all this are somewhat murky, although certain facts are known. In order to hold off his creditors, he borrowed additional funds, while a large portion of his debt was sold off to that day's version of hedge fund traders. Things continued to fall apart; two sales of his household goods took place by the late Summer of 1655. Finally, in November of 1657, Rembrandt was forced to sell off his house, and his entire art collection, a collection he had spent a lifetime gathering—dozens of Dürer and Mantegna prints; copies and engravings after the greatest works of art in Italy—those of Leonardo, Raphael, and others, as well as a quarter-century's production of his etched copper plates.

There was a decidedly political motivation behind the financial persecution of Rembrandt; the key moneylender, who finally called in the chips, was Gerbrand Ornia, one of the richest men in Amsterdam, and a relative of one of Rembrandt's earlier protectors, Cornelis Witsen. Witsen, who held the post of sheriff, was described in a chronicle of the time, as a drunkard and a crook, who stole from the public coffers. Ultimately, it was Witsen and Ornia who forced Rembrandt to sell his house for a mere 300 guilders. One explanation for all this, was that the two moneylenders were enemies of Rembrandt's patron and protector, the Remonstrant Willem Schrijver.

In defiance of his tormentors, Rembrandt continued to work throughout this period. Among his most powerful works are portraits of his common-law wife Hendrickje, and his son Titus—these portraits are among the most loving and sublime of all Rembrandt's output. Clearly, he found refuge with his family from his financial and political battles. A beautiful portrait of Titus from 1655, show his son, then about 14 years old, deep in thought, pen in hand, and papers before him, either for writing or drawing (Rembrandt had taught him to draw and paint), as a soft light falls on his face and on the sheaf of paper on the desk he leans on.

But Rembrandt also continued to wield his mighty weapons against his political enemies: In 1653, he painted "Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer" (**Figure 7**) the astonishing masterpiece, which demolishes the sophistry of Aristotle, who is, not surprisingly, the official philosopher of Dutch Calvinism. Here, we see Aristotle, his right arm extended, hand resting on the head of a bust of Homer. But irony of ironies: It is Aristotle who is blind—his eyes don't see—while Homer, who was sightless, "sees" with his mind, his head bathed in light. Perhaps Aristotle, who claimed that

FIGURE 7

Rembrandt's painting, "Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer" (1653), demonstrates his deep knowledge of history, literature, and philosophy: Aristotle only "knows" what he can learn through his senses, but the blind poet Homer, sees with his mind.

all knowledge is derived from the senses, thinks he can learn from Homer by placing his hand on the poet's head. Pity the poor philosopher, says the Rembrandt speaking to us from this portrait: All his fame, the heavy gold chain he wears, his splendid garments, will never bring him closer to the truth.

The Phoenix

By 1658, Rembrandt had begun to emerge from bankruptcy and to put his affairs in order once again. He had lost his home and his great art collection; and his mistress Hendrickje had been expelled from the Dutch Reformed Church for living in sin with the artist. His former patrons and friends had abandoned him. But Rembrandt was not defeated. That year he produced one of his most personal and innovative prints, "An Allegory: The Phoenix" (**Figure 8**). In this etching, Rembrandt takes the mythical story of the fabled bird that consumes itself, and then rises from its own ashes, restored to youth.

Although Rembrandt had depicted hundreds of images from the life and Passion of Christ, surprisingly, he produced only one Resurrection, and that, at an early age (1630s). Perhaps the "Phoenix" was Rembrandt's secular metaphor for his own "resurrection" from the humiliation and defeats he had suffered.

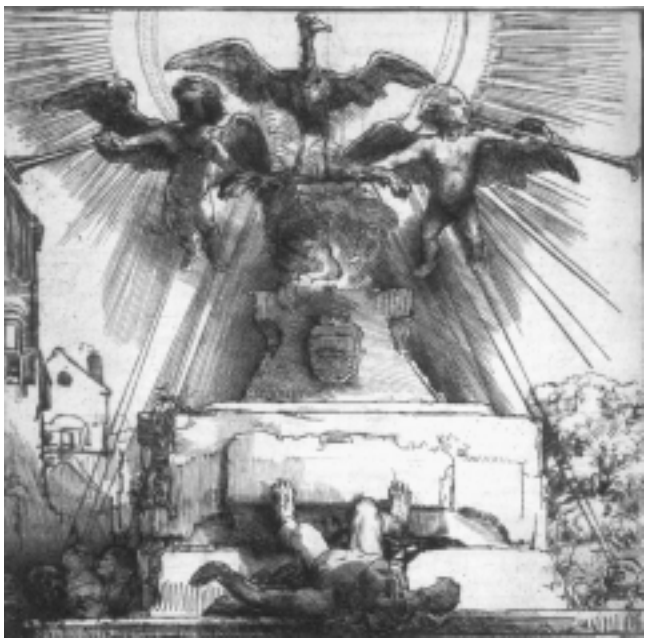
In Rembrandt's image, the Phoenix stands atop a huge pedestal, as two putti blare forth the news on their trumpets that he has risen; a huge Sun, whose rays penetrate the composition, rises behind him. A youth, whose dramatically foreshortened figure lies at the base of the pedestal, and whose head extends over the edge of the picture into our space, suggests nothing so much as a Classical Greek statue, now fallen.

But Rembrandt's Phoenix is not the splendid bird of myth; missing are the sharp beak, long talons, and luxuriant plumage. Instead, he is an "ugly duckling," whose ability to fly is by no means certain. Surely, this is Rembrandt himself, risen from the ashes of his hardships, ready to take on the world again. He is conscious of his immortality; he knows he will outlive his enemies.

Self-Portraits

No other artist known to us reproduced his own image so many times (50-60 paintings; dozens of drawings, engravings, and etchings) as did Rembrandt, over such an extended period of time; in fact, it was rare for an artist of Rembrandt's time to depict his own image at all. For example, neither of his famous contemporaries, Johannes Vermeer (1632-75) and Franz Hals (c. 1580-1666), produced a single self-portrait. Rembrandt has left us his autobiography in these critical

FIGURE 8



"An Allegory: The Phoenix" (1658). Rembrandt made this etching as he began to emerge from a long period of personal and financial tragedy. But he was undaunted. Like the legendary Phoenix, he rose from the ashes, and went on to produce his most sublime works over the next decade.

FIGURE 9

"Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul" (1661). Rembrandt clearly identified with Paul; like Paul, the artist lived not for the pleasures of this world, but to create something immortal and universal.

self-examinations.

In 1661, Rembrandt painted a "Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul" (**Figure 9**). That Rembrandt saw St. Paul as an "alter ego" or "soul brother" is shown by the fact that he executed a number of paintings and etchings of the saint, including one of Paul in prison. The universality of Paul's mission, to build a movement of Jesus-followers within the Roman Empire, no matter the threat to his personal safety, and ultimately, his martyrdom, resonated strongly with Rembrandt.

Unlike earlier portrayals of Paul, Rembrandt did not depict him as Saul, at the moment of his Damascus Road conversion, but later, during the period of his evangelization, in prison, and writing his Epistles.

In this work, a bright light illuminates the Apostle's features; the brightest light though shines on, and from, his mind. The only other bright spot is the book which he holds (this would most likely be the Greek-language Old Testament; the Gospels would not be written down for at least 20 years after Paul's ministry. Paul letters were the first writings of the Apostles). Paul/Rembrandt's expression is complex: In it, there is resignation, humility, even sadness, but most of all, a powerful sense of *compassion.* Only the deepest love for humanity, and the faith that gives him the courage to confront his immortality, can sustain him.

In a recent speech to the Solidarity and Progress party conference in Paris (*EIR,* Jan. 12, 2007), Helga Zepp-LaRouche discussed the importance of compassion, as defined by the great poets and philosophers of the German Classic: Schiller, Lessing, and Mendelssohn, in the development of a beautiful soul. The beautiful soul, she said, "is the happiest when other people become beautiful souls, when other people are creative, when other people accomplish all the things the beautiful soul wants to accomplish for him- or herself."

Could there be a better example of this idea than that immortal, beautiful soul, Rembrandt van Rijn?

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