

Gem of an exhibit in Minneapolis: Rembrandt's two paintings of Lucretia

by Nora Hamerman

On May 3, 1992, at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the curtain will ring down on one of the year's smallest and yet finest art exhibitions, which opened in Washington's National Gallery of Art last Sept. 22-Jan. 5, and then traveled to Minnesota. The show contains only two paintings, but they are two of Rembrandt van Rijn's late masterpieces, in which he interpreted a theme from Roman history, the story of Lucretia, in the form of portraits of his deceased second wife Hendrickje Stoffels, dressed in the "antique" garb of a Venetian dress of the previous century.

Most of the publicity around Rembrandt lately has centered around the revision of the catalogue by the Rembrandt Research Project, which has sought to divide what the Dutch artist painted himself, from the many works—among some of the most famous—painted by followers, pupils, even imitators and forgers. This is not an issue for the "Lucretias." No scholar has ever doubted the authenticity of these two monumental yet deeply intimate paintings, which were exhibited side by side for the very first time in the Washington and Minneapolis museums to which they respectively belong.

Like most Rembrandts, there is no trail of evidence by which these two can be traced back to the artist's studio. The first reference to the Washington painting is in a sale where it appeared in 1825. The Minneapolis painting did not come to light until the 1920s.

The earlier of the two, painted in 1664, one year after Hendrickje died, is the best-loved painting in the National Gallery of Art—the one most visitors go to see. Rembrandt depicts Lucretia at the moment of inner anguish before she stabs herself. The Minneapolis picture shows the heroine after the act has been completed, leaning against the bed as blood from her mortal wound stains her chemise. She holds a rope cord in her hand, perhaps to ring a bell to call in servants and family, or perhaps to pull the bedcurtains as if closing the drama of her life.

In both cases, Rembrandt reinterpreted the myth of a Roman heroine who sacrificed herself for her country's political freedom, as the image of a living woman "caught in the moral dilemma of choosing between life and honor," as the exhibition brochure puts it.

Rembrandt gave his two Lucretias the features of his second, common-law wife, Hendrickje Stoffels, as she appeared about a decade before her death in 1663. Hendrickje did not

marry Rembrandt, so that he could continue to enjoy the inheritance from his first wife, the wealthy Saskia van Uylenburgh, who had stipulated in her will that he would forfeit her property if he remarried. This was not a matter of greed on Rembrandt's part, but of his very survival, as an artist who refused to compromise his principles to follow fashion, and who needed the freedom to paint numerous works without a commission. The human race owes an incalculable debt to those family members and friends who made Rembrandt's artistic freedom possible—above all to Hendrickje, along with Titus van Rijn, Rembrandt and Saskia's son.

Thanks to Hendrickje's faithful self-sacrifice, in 1654 (at the age she is shown in the paintings), she endured public disgrace as an adulteress at the hands of the Calvinist establishment of Amsterdam, after she gave birth to Rembrandt's daughter Cornelia out of wedlock. By portraying his wife as Lucretia, the grieving Rembrandt exalted her to the level of a nation-builder. But he went even further, as becomes evident when one compares his "Lucretias" to the preexisting artistic tradition and to Rembrandt's other works of this period.

The story of Lucretia

The tragedy of Lucretia was recounted by the Roman historian Livy. She lived during the sixth century B.C. under the tyrant Tarquinius Superbus. While her husband Collatinus was away at battle, he boasted of her chastity and beauty to his fellow generals. The son of the king, Sextus Tarquinius, became inflamed with the desire to conquer Lucretia. He returned to the house behind Collatinus's back and was received as an honored guest. Later, he stole secretly to Lucretia's chamber, and threatened to kill her if she did not yield to him. When she resisted, he threatened to kill a slave and her both, and to say that he had discovered them in adultery. Lucretia submitted to being raped.

The next day Lucretia summoned her father and husband and told them that her body had been violated but not her heart, yet she was determined to take her own life so as not to set an example for unchaste women. Before they could stop her, she pulled a dagger and stabbed herself to death. The two men swore to avenge her death, and led the uprising that overthrew the Tarquin dynasty and established the Roman Republic.

Many artists of the Renaissance had depicted Lucretia's story, either as single-figure representations of the heroine



Left: Engraving after Raphael, *Death of Lucretia*, c. 1511. Right: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Lucretia*, 1664, oil on canvas, 47x39". The engraving depicts Lucretia as the virtuous pagan, who acts out of concern for public opinion. Although Rembrandt was influenced by such images, his Lucretia is given a Christian quality. Looking directly at her own hand with the dagger, she is "inner-directed" to her conscience, rather than "other-directed."



stabbing herself, often based on antique statuary; or in scenes of her rape. St. Augustine, in his book *The City of God*, in arguing against suicide, had stated that if Lucretia were truly innocent, had she been a Christian woman, she would not have had to commit suicide to defend her chastity. Augustine implied that perhaps Lucretia was not innocent, but his real point was to demonstrate the superiority of Christian moral law over even the best of Roman, pagan law. In Augustine's era of the fifth century A.D., when the Roman Empire was breaking down, many Christian women were subjected to rape. His teaching was that they need not have considered themselves defiled, because their personal conscience was innocent; above all, he set the Christian value of agapic love above the concern for reputation which motivated the Romans, even at their most virtuous.

Apparently influenced by the question which Augustine had raised about Lucretia's innocence, many Renaissance artists showed Lucretia as an alluring, even erotic beauty. Rembrandt takes a completely different approach. His Lucretia is a beautiful woman, but above all it is an inner beauty that she radiates. The exhibition brochure, written by curators Arthur Wheelock and George Keyes, stresses the closeness of the Lucretia image to other mythological and biblical paintings of

woman in this same period of Rembrandt's work, with specific associations with marriage, such as *The Jewish Bride* in Braunschweig, Germany or the great *Juno* at the Los Angeles County Museum. It is as a faithful wife, not as the object of Sextus Tarquinius's lust, that Rembrandt presents Lucretia.

Beyond this, Rembrandt's Lucretia appears to be transformed into a kind of Christian saint comparable to his great paintings of the Apostle Paul, for example. As she contemplates the dagger in the Washington painting of 1664, we may think of contemporary paintings in Roman Catholic countries of the *Mater Dolorosa*, the *Virgin of Sorrows*, who was often shown with a literal sword piercing her breast. But it is not so much the *Virgin Mary* to whom Rembrandt compares his Hendrickje-Lucretia, but rather, to Christ himself.

The resemblance to the crucified Christ is noted in the exhibition brochure by Wheelock, in writing of the Washington painting. He notes that Rembrandt fused the Augustinian Christian (critical) and pagan Roman (admiring) views of Lucretia. He writes that "as she stands with her arms raised in a gesture that echoes Christ's sacrifice on the cross, she looks down toward the weapon of her destruction with an expression of one whose decision to commit suicide must weigh issues never described by Livy. Rembrandt's Lucretia is not the as-



Left, Rembrandt, Lucretia, 1666, oil on canvas, 42x36" Right: Rembrandt, The Risen Christ, 1661, oil on canvas, 31x25. The wound in the side, the pallor of the face, and pose of the figure are strikingly alike. Before the original rectangle was cut down to the present oval, Christ's extended left arm may have held a staff or a cross with a banner attached. In the same years that Rembrandt portrayed his wife Hendrickje as a Christ-like "Lucretia," he painted his son Titus as "Christ at the Column."

sured tragic heroine who has determined her punishment and dies for honor, but one who hesitates at that crucial moment because of an awareness of the moral dilemma that she faces while she fulfills her destiny." He adds that neither the father nor the husband are included in the work, but that Lucretia's "vulnerability and the force of her charge are projected directly outward to a more universal, unseen set of witnesses"—ourselves.

The Minneapolis painting, executed in 1666, shows a moment in the story which no artist before (and perhaps none since) had dared to portray. Lucretia stands at the threshold of death, and "her face conveys a profound sadness that reaches into the depth of her very being." Instead of looking at the dagger as she had before, Lucretia's gaze is directed toward the cord that she pulls as her final act.

In both pictures, Rembrandt exploits details that might not even be consciously noticed at first to express the intimate drama. In the Washington picture, the bodice of Lucretia's luxurious dress has been unhooked, adding to the impression of vulnerability. In the Minnesota version, we note with shock that the blood of the wound has actually traveled from the site of the stabbing toward the center of the chemise. Between the two hands of Lucretia, the past act and the act of the immediate

future, we see her life ebbing away before our very eyes.

There is no precedent for such an image except one that comes to mind from Rembrandt's own brush: the image of the Risen Christ of a few years earlier, ca. 1661, in Munich's Alte Pinakotek, which was exhibited three years ago in Washington. The wound in the side of the Redeemer—to which he pointed as the evidence that he was indeed the Jesus of Nazareth who had been killed at Golgotha—is visible there even in the glorified body of the Risen Christ. Rembrandt's two Lucretias thus follow in the footsteps of the Son of God, first in his acceptance of the sacrifice of the cross, and then in the promise of the resurrection.

Rembrandt was preoccupied all his life, and especially in his final works, with the theme of human justice, so often flawed and tragic in its outcome, as compared to divine, universal justice. In the National Gallery of Art in Washington there are two other pictures which explicitly deal with this theme. One portrays the Old Testament story of the innocent Joseph being accused by Potiphar's wife of having tried to seduce her. The other shows the Ovidian fable of Baucis and Philemon, the virtuous old couple who are visited by Zeus and Mercury and spared the punishment that is visited upon their evil neighbors. In each of these cases, a tragic fate is changed

by divine intervention to a happy one.

What are the implications of Rembrandt's decision to not only "Christianize" the pagan theme of Lucretia, but to even go further and paint his beloved Hendrickje as a kind of emblematic figure of Christ? Lucretia's sacrifice saved her nation from tyranny; Christ's saved the human race from sin and death. Hendrickje merely saved Rembrandt. In these paintings, he comes to terms with the awesome responsibility of advocating the case of the whole human race through his art, the only way he could have been worthy of such a sacrifice.

One key advantage to the small *Lucretia* show is that the two paintings could be viewed in their original rich colors, because both have been cleaned of the dark varnish which still obscures many Rembrandts and thereby influences our common notion of his art. Thanks to modern conservation techniques, today we can see Rembrandt as he was never seen by the great Rembrandt scholars of the past, indeed as he has not been seen since his own lifetime.

In the 19th century, the Romantic belief in the "golden" tone of Rembrandt's pictures even caused restorers to cover them with a "toning varnish" and a brown glaze. But in his own lifetime, Rembrandt was considered a great colorist, and this is visible in the yellow, red, greenish, and white highlights applied to the sleeves in the Washington painting. In the Minneapolis *Lucretia* the lime-green color of her sleeve is astonishing, bringing out the deathlike pallor of her face all the more in contrast to the oranges and golds of her dress.

Arthur Wheelock, in describing the technique of the late Rembrandt to members of the Washington press last fall, pointed out that the changes in his approach to painting have a philosophical, not merely technical, content. He showed how the National Gallery's 1633 portrait of Saskia, Rembrandt's first wife, is painted with a fine, delicate technique where every nuance is deliberately brushed in by the artist. In contrast, in the late "Lucretias," Rembrandt relied heavily on the palette knife to suggest planes of color building up over the brown ground. This is even more accentuated in the second picture, dating from 1666. A single blob of white paint describes a highlight and, as Wheelock pointed out, this approach forces you, the viewer, to "complete the painting" which the artist has left unfinished, in your own eye.

This is one of the ways in which Rembrandt powerfully pulls the viewer into a dialogue with the image. "We don't hang pictures by other artists in the same room with Rembrandt," Wheelock added. "They just can't stand up to them," because Rembrandt's pictures place such demands on the viewer.

Italian masters in New York, Fort Worth

Two unique exhibitions, which feature rare works by major masters of the Italian Renaissance, will open in early May in U.S. cities. Although nearly two generations separate them, both artists were active when Columbus sailed west in 1492. Both the scientific mastery and religious depth of their works, are well befitting the quincentenary of the evangelization of the Americas.

An exhibition of some 130 paintings, drawings, and prints designed or carried out by **Andrea Mantegna** (ca. 1430-1506) will be mounted at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art from May 7 to July 12, 1992. Mantegna was one of the first north Italian artists—he worked chiefly in Padua and Mantua—to dominate the ideals and techniques of the Florentine Renaissance. Through his engravings and drawings, he became one of the most influential artists of the period.

Mantegna was so talented as a youth that at age 20 he was earning the praise of writers, and eventually received more poetic tributes than any other painter of his day. He grew up in Padua, a university city and home to numerous scholars. There he developed his striking use of perspective in dramatic views from below. In 1460 he entered the service of the Marquis Ludovico Gonzaga in Mantua. His artistic career lasted more than half a century.

The show *Andrea Mantegna* was organized jointly with the Royal Academy of Arts, London. It is the first monographic exhibition of his work in America. Besides numerous paintings, the exhibition will present a wide array of drawings by, after, or related to Mantegna and over 50 engraved prints. The New York show will have an extensive selection of his portraits.

On May 9, an exhibition of drawings by **Fra Bartolommeo** (Baccio della Porta, 1472-1517), will go on view at the Kimball Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas. He is the fourth painter of the Florentine High Renaissance after Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, and Michelangelo. This particular show is drawn from a collection of figure studies for paintings, recently removed from the bound albums where they were preserved for nearly 300 years.

A Dominican monk, Fra Bartolommeo painted almost exclusively devotional subjects, but imbued them with a glorious humanism. He not only rivals the three more famous Florentines in the beauty and skill of his figure drawings, but is unparalleled as a landscape draughtsman. The show first opened in Boston in January. It will stay in Fort Worth until Aug. 2. It travels to New York City's Pierpont Morgan Library, Sept. 11-Nov. 29, 1992.