
Art Review

Metropolitan Museum Deconstructs Rembrandt

by Bonnie James

The Age of Rembrandt

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Imagine you are attending a concert of works by Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, and you suddenly discover that, in this performance, the movements of the three pieces are all scrambled together. The third movement of the Bach precedes the first movement of the Beethoven, which is followed by the second movement of the Mozart, and so on. Each part is beautiful, but there is no unifying concept.

This is essentially what the Met has done in its current exhibition, "The Age of Rembrandt: Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art." The masterpieces presented here (20 Rembrandts, 5 Vermeers, 11 Halses, etc.) represent a treasure house of Western art from the high point of the Northern Renaissance. All 228 paintings are from the Met's own collection; here was an opportunity for the great New York museum to really strut its stuff. Unfortunately, under the baton of Met director Phillippe de Montebello, instead of a conceptual tour de force that might have been, we have a travesty, in which these great works are organized into groups by *donor*! In the first gallery, you will find "The 1871 Purchase," paintings donated by Met vice president of the time, William Blodgett, including "genre subjects, rustic groups, and landscapes," as described in the wall text, a hodgepodge with no unifying theme. This continues throughout. Each of the galleries presents, chronologically, the gifts of various donors, so one finds, in the 1889 Marquand collection, a painting in the style of Rembrandt, "Man with a Beard," and Caspar Netscher's "The Card Party," with no sense of their relationship, except that they were donated by the same wealthy benefactor.

What a flagrant offense to Rembrandt, whose great works celebrate the universality of mankind's goodness, not the preciousness of a collector whose criteria might be anything from his "personal taste" to what might be a "good investment." To show Rembrandt in the context of his predecessors, contemporaries, and followers, as the Met could have done, would have been a pedagogical triumph. It could have offered in-

sights into the influence that Rembrandt exerted on the younger Vermeer, especially in the study of light; or on his students, such as Govert Flinck, Ferdinand Bol, and Gerrit Dou, whose works are scattered about. By far, the greatest number of works are those of Rembrandt, and the Met boasts of its superb collection; indeed, rarely is one able to see all these masterpieces in a single showing. Yet for Rembrandt (1606-69), whose 400th birthday was celebrated all over the world last year, presenting his life's work, as well as those of his celebrated contemporaries such as Johannes Vermeer (1632-75) and Frans Hals (c. 1580-1666), according to the wealthy donor who collected, and then bequeathed them to the museum, would have been ridiculous. I can imagine Rembrandt laughing, perhaps ruefully, at the crass commercialism of it. After all, it was the Dutch forebears of our modern collectors and financiers who persecuted Rembrandt, and drove him into bankruptcy in the 1650s.

As the Met's news release on the exhibition explains: "Many of the paintings in this gallery were given to the Museum by leading financiers of the early twentieth century or were purchased with funds that were donated specifically to support acquisitions. The most familiar figure is the legendary banker, J. Pierpoint Morgan (1837-1913), who became the Museum's fourth president, in 1904, and transformed the institution by aggressively collecting curators [!] as well as hundreds of Egyptian, Greek, Roman, medieval, and later European works of art."

One might ask what these works of art meant to Morgan, the *ne plus ultra* of moneyed privilege, whose "gifts" to the great museums bought him both priceless public relations and huge tax deductions.

'Freedom of the Human Spirit'

Contrast the Met's approach, to that taken by the National Gallery of Art in its exhibition for Rembrandt's 400th birthday. Titled "Strokes of Genius: Rembrandt's Prints and Drawings" (Nov. 19, 2006-March 18, 2007),* the National Gallery's show, like the Met's, was drawn entirely from its own extensive collection, and though smaller, with 190 prints and drawings (no paintings), it was exceptionally well presented. It invited the visitor to follow Rembrandt's development as a graphic artist throughout his career; the works of art were organized by subjects, such as portraits, street scenes, landscapes, and biblical themes, each of which was organized chronologically. But, what most distinguished this particular show, was the presentation of multiple impressions of the same print, rarely, if ever, displayed together before, offering an opportunity to compare them, and to look into the master's mind as he "edited" his work.

While the National Gallery also got its start with an extensive collection from oligarchical benefactors, notably the an-

* See Bonnie James, "Rembrandt's 'Thirty Years War' vs. Anglo-Dutch Tyranny," *EIR*, Jan. 26, 2007, for a discussion of this exhibition.

glophile financier Andrew Mellon, it was given as a gift to the nation, by President Franklin Roosevelt. In 1926, FDR had denounced Mellon as “the master mind among the malefactors of great wealth.” Again, during the 1932 Presidential campaign, Roosevelt condemned the “financial Titans” such as Mellon, who denied that “the business of government was not to interfere but to assist in the development of industry. . . . The day of the great promoter or financial Titan, to whom we granted everything if he would only build or develop, is over.”

In 1936, Mellon went on trial for charges of tax evasion, relating to a scam involving phony donations of art to charity. The grand jury found that Mellon bought paintings, and hid them in the basement of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington. The paintings were then “donated” to the Andrew W. Mellon Charitable and Educational Trust, in return for substantial tax deductions. Mellon went to Roosevelt and offered to donate his paintings and some funds for an endowment to the United States, as the basis for the National Gallery of Art, in an appeal to FDR to rescue him from his legal difficulties. Roosevelt accepted Mellon’s offer. The President intended to establish a great museum for the American people, to inspire them as they prepared to confront the coming horrors of war.

FDR spoke at the dedication of the National Gallery of Art, on March 17, 1941, as the United States was gearing up for war, a war that was already devastating Europe, and which would soon draw the United States into its cauldron. He spoke about the universality of great art, which transcends a particular time and place, and speaks to all people, everywhere, through the ages:

“The people of this country know now, whatever they were taught or thought they knew before, that art is not something just to be owned, but something to be made: that it is the act of making and not the act of owning that is art. And knowing this they know also that art is not a treasure in the past or an importation from another land, but part of the present life of all the living and creating peoples—all who make and build; and, most of all, the young and vigorous peoples who have made and built our present wide country.

“It is for this reason that the people of America accept the inheritance of these ancient arts. Whatever these paintings may have been to men who looked at them generations back, today they are not only works of art. Today they are the symbols of the human spirit, symbols of the world the freedom of the human spirit has made—and, incidentally, a world against which armies now are raised and countries overrun and men imprisoned and their work destroyed.

“To accept, today, the work of German painters such as Holbein and Dürer, of Italians like Botticelli and Raphael, of



FIGURE 1
Rembrandt van Rijn, "Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer" (1653)

painters of the Low Countries like Van Dyck and Rembrandt, and of famous Frenchmen, famous Spaniards—to accept this work today for the people of this democratic Nation is to assert the belief of the people of this democratic Nation in a human spirit which now is everywhere endangered and which, in many countries where it first found form and meaning, has been rooted out and broken and destroyed.

“To accept this work today is to assert the purpose of the people of America that the freedom of the human spirit and human mind, which has produced the world’s great art and all its science shall not be utterly destroyed. . . .

“The dedication of this Gallery to a living past, and to a greater and more richly living future, is the measure of the earnestness of our intention that the freedom of the human spirit shall go on, too.”

The Met Exhibit

Despite its fallacy of composition, this show is still worth visiting, simply because it is a treat to view so many wonderful paintings together. What the Met might have done, is suggested in the following discussion of three of the works of art on view in this exhibition.

Rembrandt’s “Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer” of 1653 (Figure 1), is among his greatest paintings, and illu-



FIGURE 2
Rembrandt van Rijn, "Flora" (1654)

mines the artist's deep knowledge of the Classics. Here is Aristotle, philosopher of the senses, elaborately dressed, a heavy gold chain across his chest, which he fingers with his left hand, while "contemplating" the bust of Homer, the poet of the Iliad and the Odyssey, with his right. Homer, of course, is blind, and Rembrandt places his eyes in shadow, while a bright light shines on his forehead, suggesting his thinking "sense." Lacking a sense of sight, yet he seems to "look right through" Aristotle, to "see" him as he really is. But the brightest light in the painting falls on Aristotle's nose!—the sense of smell—and on his sumptuous garment, signifying his worldly success. In this simple composition, Rembrandt ridicules the folly of Aristotelian sensual knowledge versus Homeric intellectual beauty.

"Flora" (Figure 2), a portrait of Rembrandt's first wife Saskia, is a loving memorial to her, painted in 1654, twelve years after her death. He recalls her as the goddess of Spring; she has gathered flowers in her golden yellow apron, and offers them to an unseen recipient, from her outstretched right hand, where her gaze is directed. This painting, executed the year after the "Aristotle," is eerily reminiscent of it. Flora/Saskia is wearing the same blouse as Aristotle wears, with its elaborate, heavy folds, and she strikes a similar pose.

Both paintings are metaphors for the transience of the things of this world, and the immortality of the sacred personality, one who contributes something to future generations, as both Saskia, the beloved wife, and Homer, the beloved poet, have done, while poor Aristotle remains, through the centuries, forever blind to the truth.

There exist only 40 known paintings by Johannes Vermeer (1632-75), of which the Met owns five; they are all on view in this exhibit. In "A Young Woman with a Water Pitcher" (Figure 3), we find the same ironic juxtaposition of "sense certainty" versus cognition, in a similarly organized space, as those we have seen in the two Rembrandts. A young woman, surrounded by ordinary, yet beautifully rendered domestic objects, peers out of a window on the left side of the picture. What is the subject of this painting? It is none of objects which draw our eyes, but rather, the thoughts of the young woman, as she gazes outward, to an unseen vision beyond the stained-glass window. This "outwardness" is subtly reinforced by the large map on the wall behind her. But, then we notice, as with Rembrandt's Homer, that we cannot see her eyes, which are cast downward; and as with Homer, the light falls on her mind. Is she looking out the window, or inward to her thoughts? Vermeer doesn't say; this is one of the many ambiguities in the painting.



FIGURE 3
Johannes Vermeer, "A Young Woman With a Water Pitcher" (1664-65)