

# ART HUMANITIES: PRIMARY SOURCE READER

## Section 7: Rembrandt

### Art Humanities Primary Source Reading 29

#### *Constantijn Huygens*

##### EXCERPTS FROM THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF CONSTANTIJN HUYGENS, 1629-31

*Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687) was the Northern Baroque incarnation of the ideal Renaissance courtier described in Baldesarre Castiglione's treatise. In addition to his professional activities as a diplomat and personal vocation as a poet, Huygens was a talented musician and composer, well-versed in most fields of knowledge of his time, and a true connoisseur of, among other things, art. He served in this last capacity as artistic advisor to Frederik Hendrik, the Prince of Orange. This was probably Huygens' motive to seek out Rembrandt (1607-1669) and Jan Lievens (1607-1674) in their shared studio in Leiden in 1628, although he only committed his account to paper in his fragmentary autobiography, composed in 1629-31. Several paintings by Rembrandt and Lievens from 1628 are listed in the inventories of the prince's collection and these correspond closely to Huygens' characterizations of the two artists. Their subsequent works are less easy to distinguish due to their mutual influence, especially of Rembrandt on Lievens.*

*Huygens clearly betrays more personal affection for Lievens, yet he recognized Rembrandt as by far the more important artist. His allusions to antiquity and Aeneas (who brought Ilium to Italy) are routinely dismissed by commentators as *topoi*, or conventional topics, a gloss so common that it has itself become a *topos*. This is ironic, since Huygens explicitly directs his remarks against those who naively assert that there is nothing new under the sun, a point he repeatedly returns to throughout his autobiography, as he reminds us here. Elsewhere in his manuscript he cites further examples of the moderns and specifically the Dutch surpassing the ancients, such as the Dutch invention of glasses, prince Maurits' reforms of the army, the scientific studies of Francis Bacon, and Dutch landscape painting, and he praises the simplicity and practicality of the Dutch tongue. His remarks about the commoner fathers and mediocre teachers of the "noble pair of youths" likewise jibe with his general point about the selfinvention of the young Dutch nation in the face of aged antiquity. Far from empty rhetoric, then, Huygens' claim that Rembrandt had surpassed the art of antiquity and Italy is a self-conscious celebration of nascent Dutch culture and identity, which Rembrandt himself helps to found, as a modern Aeneas.*

*Huygens' one caveat concerning the two painters' reluctance to make an artistic pilgrimage to Italy is highly significant. Their ostensible response that the best Italian paintings in their time were found north of the Alps is borne out by examples such as Raphael's portrait of Baldesarre Castiglione, which Rembrandt viewed and copied at an auction in Amsterdam and then adapted in several works. Rembrandt and Lievens also already borrow from graphic reproductions of Italian art in their earliest paintings, a practice Rembrandt continued throughout his life, expanding his dialogue with the classical tradition and ultimately justifying in his late works even the over-generous praise Huygens bestowed upon him at the outset of his career.*

**Benjamin Binstock**

I have deliberately reserved for last a noble pair of youths from Leiden. Were I to say that they alone can vie with the greatest among the superior mortals mentioned earlier, I would still be underestimating the merits of these two; were I to say that they will soon surpass them, I would merely be expressing what their astonishing beginnings have led connoisseurs to expect.

Considering their parentage, there is no stronger argument against the belief that nobility resides in the blood. Some men pride themselves solely on this point, although I recall how cleverly they were refuted by that most brilliant of Italians, Traiano Boccalini, a modern author who writes with the greatest care and clarity. In a tale about an anatomical dissection of a nobleman's corpse, he relates how the doctors, after carefully examining the veins, unanimously declared that nobility did not dwell in the blood, since in this respect the man in no way differed from a commoner or peasant. As for my two youths, one was the son of a common embroiderer, the other a miller's son, although certainly not of the same grain. Who could help but marvel that two such prodigies of talent and skill should spring up from such rustic roots? Inquiring as to their boyhood teachers, I discover men who are barely known outside the common classes. Due to their parents' modest circumstances, the boys were compelled to take teacher's whose fees were low. Were these teachers to be confronted with their pupils today,

they would feel just as abashed as those who first instructed Vergil in poetry, Cicero in oratory, and Archimedes in mathematics. Let it however be said, with due respect for everyone's feelings and without detracting from anyone (for what is it to me?): these two owe nothing to their teachers but everything to their aptitude. Had they never received any tuition, but instead left to their own devices and suddenly been seized by the urge to paint, I am convinced that they would have risen to the same heights they have now attained. They are wrongly thought to have been led to this point by others.

The first, whom I called an embroiderer's son, is named Jan Lievens. The other, who is descended from a miller, Rembrandt. Both are still beardless and, going by their faces and bodies, more boys than men. It is beyond my capacities and the scope of this record to judge each individual according to his works activity. As suggested earlier in the case of Rubens, I wish these two would draw up an inventory of their oeuvres and a chart of their paintings. Such a modest record of a few facts would demonstrate, for the wonder and edification of all ages, the reasoning and judgment behind the design, composition, and elaboration of each of their works. I venture to make the following brief pronouncement about each of them: Rembrandt surpasses Lievens in his sure touch and in the liveliness of emotions. Conversely, Lievens is superior in invention and a certain grandeur of his daring themes and forms.

Due to his youthful spirit, Lievens breathes only that which is magnificent and lofty. He is not content with equalling the true scale of objects and figures in his paintings, but depicts them larger than life. By contrast, Rembrandt, wrapped up in his own art, loves to devote himself to a small painting and present an effect of concentration which one would seek in vain in the largest pieces of other artists. His painting of the repentant Judas returning to the high priest the silver-pieces which were the price of our innocent Lord illustrates the point I wish to make concerning all of his works. Compare this with all Italy, indeed, with everything beautiful and admirable that has been preserved from the earliest antiquity. The singular gesture of the despairing Judas-leaving aside the many fascinating figures in this one painting-that one furious Judas, howling, praying for mercy, but devoid of hope, all traces of hope erased from his countenance, his appearance frightening, his hair torn, his garment rent, his limbs twisted, his hands clenched bloodlessly tight, fallen prostrate on his knees on a blind impulse, his whole body contorted in wretched hideousness. Such I place against all the elegance that has been produced throughout the ages. This is what I would have those naive mortals know, who claim-and we have rebuked them for it elsewhere that nothing is said or done today has not already been expressed or achieved in antiquity. I maintain that it did not occur to Protogenes, Apelles or Parrhasius, nor could it occur to them were they return to earth that (I am amazed simply to report this) a youth, a Dutchman, a beardless miller, could bring together so much in one human figure and express what is universal. All honor to thee, my Rembrandt! To have carried Illium, indeed all Asia, to Italy is a lesser achievement than to have brought the laurels of Greece and Italy to Holland, the achievement of a Dutchman who has seldom ventured outside the walls of his native city [ . . . ]

I can scarcely tear myself away from discussing these outstanding youths, yet I can not help but censure them for the one fault which I have already noted in Lievens. They are securely contented with themselves and neither has hitherto found it important to spend a few months traveling through Italy. In such great talents there is naturally a touch of madness, which can destroy young spirits. If only someone could drive this folly from their young heads, he would truly contribute the sole element needed to perfect their art. Oh, if only they could be acquainted with Raphael and Michelangelo, how eagerly their eyes would devour the monuments of these prodigious souls. How quickly they would surpass them all, giving Italians due cause to come to their own Holland. If only these men knew that they were born to raise art to consummate heights! But I will not be silent

about the pretext with which they excuse their apathy. They claim to be in the bloom of their youth and wish to profit from it; they have no time to waste on foreign travel. Moreover, since these days the kings and princes north of the Alps avidly delight in and collect pictures, the best Italian paintings can be seen outside Italy. What is scattered around in that country and only to be tracked down with great inconvenience, can be found here en masse so that one can have his fill.

I do not wish to pass judgement on the validity of this excuse. I can however attest that I have never observed such diligence and application in men of any sort, pursuit, or age. Truly, they are "redeeming the time," and that is their sole occupation. More remarkably, they regard even the diversions of youth as a waste of time, as if they were already old men burdened with age and long past such follies. Such indefatigable persistence at difficult labor may quickly yield great progress, yet I have often wished that these outstanding youths would practice moderation and consider their constitutions, which a sedentary occupation has already rendered less vigorous and robust.

Excerpt from the manuscript *Autobiography of Constantijn Huygens*, (Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague), published in *Oud Holland*, 1891, translated by Benjamin Binstock.

## Art Humanities Primary Source Reading 30

### Rembrandt's Letters to Huygens

c.1639

*In 1631, near the end of their period working together in Leiden, Rembrandt and Lievens painted different versions of the Crucifixion after Rubens. This must have been an official competition staged by Huygens, since Rembrandt was subsequently awarded the commission for a series illustrating Christ's Passion for the prince's gallery. Lievens then left for England to seek his fortune as a court portraitist, probably following Huygens' advice and provided with references from him, whereas Rembrandt established himself in Amsterdam as a portrait painter for its bourgeoisie, while his vision as a history painter continued to develop and change course. He took nearly a decade to complete his Passion series, based directly and indirectly on examples by Rubens, although rendered in an entirely contrary style, of an extreme naturalism and that intense concentration which Huygens opposes to Lievens' penchant for the magnificent and lofty, emulating Rubens. Unfortunately, in this case Rembrandt did not achieve very impressive results on a medium-size scale, which would explain his long delay and the need for his letters to Huygens, the only letters we have from Rembrandt. In his letters Rembrandt awkwardly plays for time and attempts to ingratiate himself to his protector.*

*In his third extant letter, from 1639, discussing his still unfinished Entombment and Resurrection, Rembrandt invokes his artistic goal of achieving "the greatest and most natural movement," presumably meaning both internal (emotional) and external (physical) movement, a dichotomy corresponding to the respective paintings in question. This formula sounds like an attempt to combine what Huygens describe as Rembrandt's "sure touch and the liveliness of emotions" and Lievens' grandeur. Rembrandt did not accomplish this goal very well in his Passion series, yet he does effect a synthesis of rigor and boldness, or emotion and physicality, in other, very different history paintings from this period, such as his Blinding of Samson of 1636. This was presumably the "token" offered to Huygens which Rembrandt mentions in his first, third, and fifth letters, although Huygens appears to have repeatedly declined to accept the gift. The extravagant style and theme of Rembrandt's Blinding of Samson are in stark contrast to his Passion paintings, as if he wanted to overcome the limitations of the commission, and at the same time both to appease Huygens and to express aggression toward him, as in his ambivalent letters. His last letters are increasingly overt regarding payment, which was certainly not the courtly way to proceed, and likely not very effective. There is no record of further contact between Rembrandt and Huygens after this point.*

My lord,

My most gracious lord Huygens, [I] hope that your lordship will please tell his Excellency that I am hard at work on and expertly completing the three passion paintings which his Excellency himself has commissioned from me, an entombment and a resurrection and an Ascension of Christ. These are companion pieces to a raising and a descent of Christ on the Cross. Of the three earlier named pieces one is finished, the one with Christ's ascension to Heaven, and the other two are about half done. And so if his Excellency prefers to have this finished piece first or the three together, [I] beg my lord let me know that I may best serve the desires of his Prince Excellency.

And [I] also can not resist, because of my readiness to serve, from honoring my lord with my latest work trusting that this will be taken in the best way. Along with my greetings [I] commend all of yours to God in health.

My lord's ready and devoted servant

Rembrandt

[I] live beside the pensionary boereel nieuwe doelstraat

My lord,

After offering friendly greetings let me say I think it good that I follow directly to see how the piece fits in with the rest. As for the price of the piece, I have certainly earned 200 pounds with it but I will let myself be contented with whatever his excellence pays me. My lord if my lordship will not take my cheek amiss, I will not neglect to repay the favor.

Your Lordship's ready and devoted servant

Rembrandt

In the gallery of His exc. it will show best as there is a strong light there.

My lord,

Because of the great pleasure and devotion that I have put into the execution of the two pieces which his Highness has had me make, being the one where the dead body of Christ is laid in the grave and the other one where Christ rises up from the dead to the great shock of the guards. These same two pieces are now complete as well due to studious diligence so that I am now also inclined to deliver these in order to please his Highness since in these two the greatest and the most natural movement is observed which is also the reason that I have had them so long in my hands.

I therefore would request if my lord could please tell his Highness of this and if my lord could please have the two pieces first delivered to your house as happened before. I will wait first for a short note to this effect.

And since my lord will be bothered with this business for the second time in recognition a piece 10 feet long and 8 feet high will be included as well which will do honor to my lord in his house. I wish you all happiness and the blessing of salvation, Amen.

Your Lordship, my lord's r. and  
devoted servant Rembrandt

the 12 January 1639

My lord I live on the inner Amstel  
the house is called the "sugar bakery"

My lord

It is then with the permission of your lordship that I send these two pieces which I believe will be found sufficient that his Highness will now pay me no less than a thousand guilders for each. Yet if his Highness thinks them not worth that and will pay me less according to his own pleasure I rely on his Highness' knowledge and discretion. I will thankfully let myself be contented with that and remain along with my greetings his

ready and devoted servant

Rembrandt

What I have advanced for the frames  
and the crate is 44 guilders

My Lord

I have read your lordship's agreeable missive of the 14th with particular pleasure. [1] find there your lordship's good favor and disposition so that I remain with heart-felt devotion obliged to repay your lordship with service and friendship. Because of my inclination to do so I am sending the accompanying canvas against my lord's wishes hoping that this will not be taken amiss by you as it is the first token that I have presented my lord. The tax collector mr. wittenboogaert paid me a visit as I was busy packing these two pieces. He wanted to see one first. He said he could advance me the payments here from his office if it pleased his Highness. Thus I would request of you my lord that whatever his Highness grants me for the 2 pieces that I may receive this money here soon as it would

be particularly useful to me now. Awaiting your lordship's answer I wish your lordship and your family all happiness and salvation along with my greetings.

Your Lordship's r. and affectionate servant  
Rembrandt

In haste this 27 January 1639

My lord hang this piece in a strong light and such that one can stand far away so that it will sparkle at its best.

Honored Lord

I have complete trust that everything will go well and in particular regarding my compensation for these last 2 pieces trusting your lordship that if it had gone according to of your lordship's favor and what is right there would have been no objection to the agreed price. And as far as the pieces delivered earlier no more than 600 carolus guilders were paid for each. And if his Highness can not be moved to a higher price with good will although they are admittedly worth it, I can be satisfied with 600 c. guilders each, as long as my outlay for the 2 ebony frames and the crate, which is 44 guilders, can be included in the account. So I would kindly request of my lord that I may now soon receive my payment here in Amsterdam, trusting that due to the good favor shown me I will soon enjoy my monies, while I remain grateful for all such friendship. And with my heartfelt greetings to my lord and to all your lordship's nearest friends, all are commended to God in long-lasting health.

Your Lordship's r. and affectionate servant  
Rembrandt

My Lord,

My noble Lord it is with scruples that I inflict my letter upon you lordship in order to say that I complained to the collector Wttenbogaert concerning the delay of my payment, although the treasurer Volbergen denies this as the dues were claimed yearly. The collector Wttenbogaert repounded to this last Wednesday that Volbergen has claimed the same dues every half year up till now, so that more than 4000 carolus guilders have once again appeared at the same office. And as these are the true circumstances I beseech you my well-disposed Lord that my warrant might can be taken care of at once so that I might now at last receive my well-earned 1244 guilders. And I will always seek to repay this to your lordship with reverence, service and evidence of friendship. With this goes my heart-felt greetings and wishes God keep your lordship in good health and bless you

Your Lordship's r. and affectionate servant  
Rembrandt

I live on the inner Amstel in the sugar-bakery.

Letters from Rembrandt to Huygens translated by Benjamin Binstock from *Die Urkunden uber Rembrandt* by C. Hofstede de Groot (The Hague, 1906).

## Art Humanities Primary Source Reading 31

### **Samuel Van Hoogstraten, On The Nightwatch**

EXCERPT FROM *INLEYDING TOT DE HOOGE SCHOOLS DER SCHILDERKONST*, 1672.

*Samuel van Hoogstraten was Rembrandt's pupil at the time he painted The Nightwatch and when this was installed in the Kloveniersdoelen, the guildhall of the riflemen's militia of Amsterdam. Hoogstraten's subsequent testimony in his "Great School of the Art of Painting" of 1672 directly contradicts the assertion, made by all postwar commentators, that the supposed controversy surrounding The Nightwatch at the time of its reception is a "Romantic myth." Clearly, contemporary criticism did not simply involve dissatisfaction on the part of the individuals portrayed but more generally a conflict between Rembrandt's artistic aims on the one hand and the needs and ideals of the guild, the other artists involved, and the society at large on the other. Similar antagonisms are already at work in Rembrandt's Passion series for the Prince's gallery and his Blinding of Samson for Constantijn Huygens, and eventually culminate in the rejection of Rembrandt's Oath of the Batavians of 1661, commissioned for the new Town Hall of Amsterdam.*

It is not enough for a painter to place his portraits next to one another in a row, as one can see all too often here in Holland in the militia halls[ . . . ] Rembrandt has observed this rule very well in his piece for the militia hall in Amsterdam, although many feel too well, making more work of the large picture of his choice than the particular portions he was commissioned to execute. Nevertheless, the same work, no matter how much it deserves criticism, will outlast all its competitors, in my opinion, being so painterly in thought, so dashing in arrangement, and so powerful, that in the opinion of some, all the other pieces in the hall stand beside it like playing cards. Still, I would have preferred him to put more light into it.

Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst* (Amsterdam: 1672), p 176. Translated for the *Art Humanities Primary Source Reader* by Benjamin Binstock.

## Art Humanities Primary Source Reading 32

### **Jeremias de Dekker**

POEM IN PRAISE OF REMBRANDT, 1667

*In 1667, two years before Rembrandt's death, the poet Jeremias de Dekker composed a moving tribute to his friend in gratitude for the portrait Rembrandt had painted of him the previous year. De Dekker's association of Rembrandt's achievements with the Dutch nation as a whole and his allusion to Rembrandt surpassing Raphael and Michelangelo in particular literally echo Huygens' characterization of the young Rembrandt, almost four decades earlier, in 1628. Huygens and most other Dutch literary figures completely ignored Rembrandt in the last decade of his life, reserving their applause for the international classicism adopted by his students. Their reticence could have been motivated in part by envy, as de Dekker's poem suggests; his sincere homage is a precious historical document in helping to understand the complex relation between Rembrandt and his Dutch contemporaries.*

AN EXPRESSION OF GRATITUDE TO THE EXCELLENT AND WIDELY RENOWNED  
REMBRANDT VAN RIJN.

So great was the pride of the great Alexander in times past  
that no one was allowed to paint his portrait save Apelles;  
Apelles and no one else he asked to perform this task.  
His vanity would not permit a lesser brush to be involved.  
I feel no such proud spirit running through me, nor is my breast so swollen  
and yet it pleases me (I don't seek to deny it) and arouses my wonder,  
to see my being drawn across a flat panel, by the Apelles of our time:  
and this not to derive an income, but simply as a favor,  
out of a noble attraction to our muses, out of love of art.  
Oh if I could reward your art with art, in place of with gold,  
and portray you as masterfully in my paper verse, as you drew me on a piece  
of wood.

I would not describe your face, mister Rembrandt, but your able mind.  
And render your nimble actions for all eyes, despite envy, that angry beast.  
But to soar so high above my limits would pose a danger for me:  
such work demands a mind trained in the art of painting, a Van Mander or  
Vasari.

To chase some fame with your so famous name, through rhyme or verse  
is carrying water to the sea, lumber to the forest, and sand to the beach.  
Just as fine vineyards need no wreaths of ever-green ivy,  
Oh your fine brush needs ask no one's praise; it is renowned through itself.  
And has perhaps carried its master's name as far afield as free  
Netherlanders sail.

Its artistic eminence has flown over the summits of the alps and into  
famed  
Rome,  
and even makes Italy excitedly take notice along its Tiber banks.  
Thousands lower their banners for him there; his free brushstrokes can be  
compared  
with those of Raphael and Michelangelo, and even surpasses them.  
It would thus, Van Rijn, be an all-too-clear sign of foolish prattle  
to try to further the fame of your renowned brush through rhyme, pen or  
poem.



Yet I know no other way to show my gratitude, an all-too meager prize with  
which to reward your favor and your art.  
So, three times thanks for your gift and favor, and accept this short poem  
merely as a token of my eternal admiration of your art.

"An Expression of Gratitude to the Excellent and Widely Renowned Rembrandt van Rijn" by  
Jeremias de Dekker, from *Lof der Geldsucht ofte Vervolg der Mijmoeffeningen* (Amsterdam, 1667),  
translated by Benjamin Binstock.