

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reticence could have been motivated in part by envy, as de Dekker's poem suggests; his sincere homage is a precious historical document in helping to understand the complex relation between Rembrandt and his Dutch contemporaries.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.