

LEADERS & SUCCESS

Portrait Of A Passionate Artist

By MARY O'NEILL, FOR INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

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Crowding his workroom were exotic sabers, costumes, mounted animals, medals, oriental fabrics and artwork by Renaissance masters.

Navigating through these curios were a trail of visitors — apprentices, civic dignitaries, clients and those who hoped to become clients.

At the center of this flourishing studio stood the most sought-after painter in Europe's top art market.

It was 1633 in Amsterdam, and Rembrandt van Rijn was only 27.

In a city that boasted more painters than bakers, his front-runner status was no small accomplishment.

Holland — especially Amsterdam — was the Continent's technological and economic powerhouse in the 17th century. Its hard-won independence from Catholic, monarchist Spain bred national confidence and a new kind of patronage.

Instead of receiving a commission for a king's palace or a cardinal's altar, artists competed on the open market to gratify merchants, cobblers, tradesmen and butchers.

This new breed of buyer was besotted with art. One Dutch city had an average of 11 paintings per household. Images expressed Dutchmen's new-found prosperity, their strong ethics, their clout.

To stake out commercial territory, artists specialized, trying to distinguish themselves in the new categories of still life, landscape or genre — scenes from everyday life.

Personal Touch

Rembrandt's talent extended across all specialties — and across the centuries. His territory was human nature, not a market segment. That focus eclipses demographics; viewers of every generation are stirred by his insights.

"You feel like you've seen his figures and know them — not just their physical appearance, but how they feel, how they react," Arthur Wheelock, curator of northern baroque paintings at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., told IBD.

The most direct expression of social standing, and the most reliable income, was in

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portraiture. There, standing in that Amsterdam studio soon after landing from his hometown of Leiden, Rembrandt ruled.

Gary Schwartz, author of "First Impressions: Rembrandt" wrote: "In his first two years in Amsterdam, he painted 50 portraits that we know of. Considering the large number that have disappeared, it is not impossible that he painted as many as two (portraits) a week. ... He was the most spectacular success story in the Dutch art world."

After its unveiling in 1642, Rembrandt's 14-foot-wide group portrait of the city's citizen militia, which came to be known as "The Night Watch," became a major attraction in the art-filled capital.

The title is a misnomer, applied before years of dirty varnish was removed. The musketeers are actually on a sun-sparkled street .

Rembrandt rejected the typically posed, static lineup inside a room; he activated the whole company. The men surge forward, shadows and flashes of light emphasizing their vitality, each personality elevated by the dynamism. It may be the only painting in history to have inspired a symphony.

For his single-figure paintings, Rembrandt (1606-69) was no less revolutionary, but in the opposite direction. The sitters hold steady, watching, without being staged or wooden. The dynamism remains, but is laser-focused on subtle movements in the face and hands. He seemed to know that feelings are betrayed with the slightest flutter of a facial muscle.

With just-so brush strokes, Rembrandt could telegraph the most closely held emotions — a new mother's nervousness, a dowager's playfulness, a lover's hesitation.

Rembrandt painted much more than a person's physical likeness. He distilled a whole life, a past of thought and behavior that shape the face, into one image. Shadows pooled precisely under an eye, or one graze of color along the cheek, suggest a living demeanor.

Peter Sutton, the executive director of the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, Conn., and a scholar of Northern European art, told IBD: "His technique is incomparable. Whether it's thick impasto or attaching highlights to the iris of someone's eye, he is very descriptive and always surprising."

His facility — and intensity — at depicting emotional truth was far beyond the range of other artists, and far beyond the single category of portraiture. Wheelock said, "To be a great artist, one had to deal with abstract ideas, with the imagination, and Rembrandt's ambition was in that direction."

Rembrandt tackled the prestigious specialties of mythological and religious subjects, as well as the minor topics of landscape and genre — in painting and the graphic arts of etching, drawing and engraving.

His superiority in graphic arts cemented his reputation.

"Etchings were easier to transport and could help spread the fame of an artist in distant places," wrote Schwartz. "They were also much cheaper than paintings, so more people could afford them."

In the delicate process of working lines into metal through wax, Rembrandt was so expressive that his etchings took on the power of full-blown paintings — and fetched comparable prices. His "Christ Preaching," which includes finely wrinkled knuckles no more than an eighth of an inch wide, is known as the "Hundred Guilder Print," its market price. That price was 200 times the going rate.

"He was the most interesting print-maker of his time," said Sutton. "He made multiple impressions of his etchings and inked them differently, or put them on different paper. Collectors had to have an example of each state, which of course made more sales."

Through all these experiments, the emotional veracity remained constant. Whether he depicted a wealthy diplomat in Amsterdam, an old woman peddler or an apostle, the human predicament was always the nexus of his work. This made his religious paintings particularly meaningful for Dutch buyers. Schooled to absorb the Bible, they saw Rembrandt's sacred figures as vivid and immediate, not abstract.

"He is one of the great storytellers in art," wrote art historian Michael Kitson in "Rembrandt." "He extracted the utmost emotional significance from a narrative."

Painting Himself

Perhaps the most compelling narrative Rembrandt told was that of his own life. From his early days in Leiden until 1669, the last year of his life, he composed his own image again and again, etched, drawn and painted. Artists' self-portraits were in high demand in the 17th century, so these were kept on hand for prospective customers.

As Rembrandt pioneered to the end, his late period yielded some of his greatest accomplishments.

"The Jewish Bride," completed just two years before his death, depicts an Old Testament couple, hiding from the authorities, in a tender embrace. "We're meant to be part of that embrace, to be drawn in," Wheelock said.

Because every century can empathize with his figures, with their reaction to life's drama, Rembrandt continues to draw viewers. He perfectly expressed the Dutch Golden Age and lives far beyond it.

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