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A Discussion:
Rembrandt's Influence on the Evolution of the Printmaking Process Through His
Experimental Attitude Towards the Medium

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of Art and Design
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in Printmaking

by
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May 2004

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ABSTRACT

A Discussion:
Rembrandt's Influence on the Evolution of the Printmaking Process Through His
Experimental Attitude Towards the Medium

by
Bethany Ann Carter-Kneff

Rembrandt's influence on the medium of printmaking can only be explained through his methodology in the production of his images. Experimentation is the key word to describe his evolution in style as he mastered the skills necessary to achieve his desired result. This paper will focus on this experimental attitude towards the medium and the subsequent inspiration it gave to me and other artists. Also included is a technical and stylistic comparison of various etchings by Rembrandt and my six prints that serve as a visual illustration and personal interpretation of the artist's method.

My research consisted of the consultation of many texts that aided in my supportive argument and eventual conclusion that Rembrandt created his place in history as an avant-garde in printmaking through his willingness to experiment with various methods in the production of his images.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Original Rembrandt prints are some of the most sought after and valuable art objects in the world today. Although made famous by his exquisite portraits, Rembrandt discovered the art of etching early in his career but did not realize his full potential in the medium until his 30's. His earliest etching, The Circumcision, was probably executed first as an exercise but led to his desire to explore the potentialities that the medium could afford him (White 10).

The discussion of my own six prints, created specifically for this paper, will coincide with the conversation of the experimental style and technique that is Rembrandt's print oeuvre. My prints serve as an illustration and personal interpretation of the master's contemporary forethought and investigational attitude towards the medium.

In our desire to explore all-things Rembrandt, the controversy concerning the authenticity of the artists print oeuvre must be noted. Arthur Hind discusses the basis for our knowledge of such authentic works in a detailed discussion found in the second volume of his book, A Catalogue of Rembrandt's Etchings, published in 1967. Some of the first known references to Rembrandt's plates came from documents concerning his subjects, and then by an inventory taken almost a decade after his death of the stock of the dealer Clement de Jonghe that contained the titles of some 74 plates. Most notable is the catalogue of Gersaint, which is said to have been based upon the collection of Burgomaster Jan Six, Rembrandt's friend. Bartsch, one of the figures that have contributed to Gersaint's catalogue, admits 375 plates as authentic

and has become the standard in the numbering of Rembrandt's prints. Hind notes however that for all the evidence contemporary documents provide, little support is given for acceptance or exclusion (13). In consideration of these and other documents, Hind generally accepts around 303 plates as authentic and his guide with regards to chronological history and numbering will be followed throughout the entirety of this paper.

Every plate that has been attributed to Rembrandt has undergone rigorous study by scholars throughout the ages from his death in 1669 until present day. What creates this kind of continued fascination on the part of the viewer and why do his prints offer every generation something "new"? These questions can only be answered by the versatility of the artist's work (White 2). Rembrandt treated the medium from the first stage to the last stage as an experiment, one at which he was not afraid to fail. Many of his plates were reworked, scraped down until just thick enough to hold an etched line, and printed until barely an image remained. He explored the use of various papers on specific prints, used colored inks and even added color washes after the printing process. He used every part of a copper plate, cutting down large plates into unconventional shapes and even using small areas of a plate that once held an image to experiment or produce small studies of form. While most likely unknown to the artist at the time, these experimentations would become the subject of much scrutiny over the ages.

As generation's come and go, so do many of the criteria in which to study a particular work. Therefore, the principles by which we judge Rembrandt's work today are undoubtedly in contrast to that of an eighteenth century scholar. It should

be mentioned that Rembrandt's work appeals to not only the scholars who study the technicalities, but to the collector's as well. This has created enemies among colleagues and many heated discussions throughout the ages between scholars and hopeful collectors. As each generation studies the work of Rembrandt, it searches for themes that concern the artists of that particular time period. Rembrandt has given each generation something new and exciting to discover, which is a quality that very few artists display some three centuries after death (White 2).

Experimentation is the key word that would describe Rembrandt's method of printmaking. He strayed from convention and turned to his own investigation of the medium, thus creating his position as an avant-garde. Although considered a master by most all standards, Rembrandt was not without failure in certain instances. Some critics referred to him as "[. . .] a flawed genius, whose failing was his 'vulgarity' and lack of decorum" (Chilvers, Osborne, and Farr 416). These statements are most certainly a comment of concern on Rembrandt's subject matter, as he usually chose a washerwoman over the epitome of a Greek Venus as a model. He favored scenes from reality rather than an idealized version of life, which was a customary expectation by many in the seventeenth century. He followed in the footsteps of Hercules Seghers, a seventeenth century Dutch artist who most certainly influenced and encouraged his experimental nature. Among other influences lie Caravaggio, a fellow artist and controversial figure along with Adam Elsheimer, a German painter and etcher.

Rembrandt's technique allows the viewer a unique position in that we are able to witness his achievements and failures firsthand. He admits us to come along on his

journey through the etching process, and through the many versions of a single plate the viewer is able to follow his state of mind and the occasional joy or frustration with the production of his prints.

CHAPTER 2

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn was born to a Dutch miller and daughter of a baker in the city of Leiden on July 15, 1606. He attended a Latin school and was enrolled at the city's University for a few months but left around the year 1620 to study painting under the artist Jacob van Swanenburgh. He stayed with van Swanenburgh for approximately three years before spending six months with Pieter Lastman in Amsterdam circa 1624 (Hind 1). This proved to benefit his education for Lastman provided his basis of mythological and religious subjects, as well as his method of depiction. It is possible that Rembrandt studied under other masters but only briefly so, as he was working independently in Leiden by 1625. Almost always in Rembrandt's early career is he associated with Jan Lievens, a fellow native artist who is alleged to have shared studio space with him (Chilvers, Osborne, and Farr 414).

His first dated etching was that of his mother in 1628. Far from a professional portrait, it depicts Rembrandt's mother from the bust upward and is little more than a sketch with most of the detail around the face leaving the other parts largely to the imagination. This sketch, however, is a precursor to a large part of his print oeuvre and his subsequent stylistic evolution. He settled permanently in Amsterdam in 1631/32, where he painted his earliest known commissioned portrait of Nicolaes Ruts, a wealthy merchant. This proved to be the forefront of Rembrandt's paintings during these early years and also the busiest time in his professional life. He quickly established himself as the leading portraitist in Amsterdam and all but a handful of

paintings dated 1632/33 were portraits (Chilvers, Osborne, and Farr 414). He lived with an art dealer during this time, Hendrik van Ulenburch, and eventually married his cousin Saskia van Ulenburch. Their union was riddled with infant deaths, and only one child, his son Titus who would become one of his favorite models, survived longer than two months.

After Saskia's death in 1642, Rembrandt became romantically involved with a much younger woman who entered the household about 1645. Hendrickje Stoffels bore him two children, Cornelia in 1654, who consequently was the only child to outlive him. During this time Rembrandt began to explore other subject matters for his paintings that were less desirable to the paying public. Known for his excessive spending, this proved to work against him monetarily and he began to have financial difficulties that would plague him for the rest of his life. However, the stories that paint him as completely destitute seem to be a bit exaggerated, as he continued working successfully until the year he died (Chilvers, Osborne, and Farr 415).

Initial Interest

Rembrandt began experimenting with the process of etching in his early 20's and as mentioned previously, produced his first dated work of his mother in 1628. His initial interest in the medium seems to have been as an alternative or supplication to drawing as most of these early prints have a sketch-like quality to them. In addition to his painted self-portraits, he created many etched self-portraits over his lifetime, many using quite different techniques and facial expressions. Although Rembrandt chose to use copper plates in the vast majority of his print work, it has been suggested that some of his earliest prints were done on zinc. Zinc is a softer

metal than copper and less resistant to the acid, which may explain the deeply bitten lines and great deal of fowl biting on these early prints (White 11).

Rembrandt's interest in etching was furthered when he realized there were no hard and fast rules to follow. As with artists before him like Seghers and Elsheimer among others, his experimental tendencies began to take form as he discovered the endless possibilities of the medium.

Subject Matter

Rembrandt's choice of subject matter for his both his paintings and print work was somewhat unconventional at times and did not earn him praise with many critics. He chose reality over idealization, a characteristic that immediately connects him to the likes of Caravaggio, another contemporary of the seventeenth century. Rembrandt was undoubtedly influenced by him, borrowing his extreme use of chiaroscuro and incorporating it into his own images to create depth and drama.

Rembrandt, like many seventeenth century artists, used the people around him as models; family, friends, even himself. He has potentially the largest collection of self-portraits in his oeuvre, and they range from his early 20's until his last years of life. He painted or etched himself in many various positions with different costumes and facial expressions. Many of the etched portraits are less formal; studies even, of technique and expression; an experimentation of skill and knowledge of the medium. Along with these are many portraits of his wife, Saskia. She is often dressed in costume or disguise, acting a role or otherwise, but rarely is she depicted simply as herself. This fact changes her role from wife and mother to professional model, but she is not necessarily anonymous (Dickey 17).

As Rembrandt blended his gift of fine portraiture with etching, it must be mentioned that these depictions played a rather different role than that of his painted commissions. His etched portraits were always of a friend or relative and are seemingly of an informal nature, while his painted counterparts are absolutely the opposite. These portraits earned him a reputation in the early years and provided him a steady and comfortable income. There seems to be no evidence that Rembrandt was ever formally commissioned to etch a portrait for which he was unfamiliar with the sitter, but he was asked to produce such a print as part payment of the price of a home. This is an indication that if he had chosen to do so, Rembrandt would have been able to extend his success with painted portraiture over to the other medium (White 105).

One must only examine a portion of this artist's print collection to realize that the human face with all its emotions was the cornerstone of Rembrandt's art. Whether a portrait, Biblical, or genre scene the emotional focus of the work dwelled in the facial expressions of those depicted. Humanity quickly became the theme behind his art and Rembrandt, going straight to the source, explored all the different emotions of the heart and mind that inevitably tell their story willingly or otherwise. His early studies of the human face present themselves as just that, studies. Portraiture as definition indicates a clear study of a specific person and would not apply to the early prints of the artist and his mother. These prints would be considered an experimentation of the medium as the artist evolved to a much higher level of sophistication in his later works. However, although considered experiments these works do provide the viewer a starting point at which to consider his work.

These informal studies of the artist and his mother offer the critic a foundation that will enable us to observe the evolution of Rembrandt's style, technique, and skill with the medium.

While consuming a large part of his oeuvre, portraiture was not Rembrandt's only interest. Many of his prints were of the contrasting themes of religious and secular scenes. He reproduced his version of a number of famous stories of the Bible, including but not limited to the narratives of Lazarus, St. Thomas, St. Jerome, the entirety of Christ's life and experiences, among others. Unlike his portrait studies, Rembrandt drew on other artist's compositions for his representations of Biblical drama. One example would be his handling of The Holy Family circa 1632. While the painted counterpart displays the precision of a master, the etching is freely drawn with a realistic source of light suggested from the left side of the plate. The composition seems to recall a plate executed by Annibale Carracci of the same subject. In both works, St. Joseph is shown seated, studying a book with the Virgin attending to her child with outstretched legs. Although there are notable similarities between the two works, Rembrandt makes the subject his own; he dresses the figures in normal everyday clothing while placing them in common surroundings, in essence aiding the appeal of his art to the common man.

Rembrandt is well known for his independence and often times unconventional method of scene depiction and model choice. It is interesting that he would choose to draw on other artists' scenes only when it came time to illustrate a Biblical drama. Although he was able to create the scene in his distinct style without offense, it seems he took great care to guarantee this certainty. One could argue it

was an issue of personal faith and respect while another could say that it was simply a strategic move in terms of marketability as a conventional scene is more likely to turn a profit. Knowing Rembrandt's state of mind on the subject is virtually impossible as there is no known documented evidence to support either theory but one could infer from study that both possibilities hold ground. Rembrandt was a businessman, and art was his trade; he made his living and supported his family with the profit from the sale of his work, and it would be sensible that he would tailor some of his art to appeal to the general public so he could become successful both professionally and privately. That being said, it is obvious that financial success was never his initial motivation, as he remained controversial with many critics due to his personal artistic vision and unique style even after his death.

CHAPTER 3

CREATIVE INFLUENCES

Rembrandt began his experimentation with printmaking with the conventional notion that “[. . .] one should aspire to the precision of work done with the burin” (White 10). While his earliest prints reflect this traditional point of view, he quickly began to introduce new techniques into his work. He was able to draw on experiences from older artists as well as his colleagues of the day and what resulted was truly unique in form and style. Rembrandt’s direct influences discussed below, aided the evolution of his technique through their own successes and failures with the medium.

Hercules Seghers

Hercules Seghers was best known for his enigmatic landscape paintings of the early 17th century. Few details of his personal life are definitively known, and his chronology is difficult to reconstruct, as none of his paintings are dated. His experimentation with printmaking is what interested Rembrandt and he quickly began to understand the significant contribution Seghers had made to the medium through his curious methods of production.

Seghers led the way in the evolutionary process of the print in that he developed various methods new to his era that achieved unique results, many that had never been seen before. He was not satisfied with the traditional methods of printmaking and strived to push the medium to its limits; “[. . .] Hoogstraten said that he ‘printed paintings’ (Chilvers, Osborne, and Farr 456). He would print some of his creations onto colored paper or in some cases, added color washes to the already

finished print to create a different mood to draw in the viewer. Rembrandt used this technique on two impressions of the first state of The Flight into Egypt: A Night Piece circa 1651. After printing the plate onto white paper, he added a pale yellow wash to the dried print, creating a kind of glowing effect to instill a sense of mysterious solitude to the figures. His experimentation with color washes did not end with this print; The Bathers of roughly the same year was printed and then customized with a pale pink wash perhaps to add warmth to the otherwise generic scene. A few more examples lie in his greenish- grey washes of various landscapes printed in the latter years of activity, but Rembrandt realized that this combination did not add significance or much visual appeal for he was unwilling to explore the possibilities of using colored inks and instead chose his own method of printing in black and white (White 15).

Seghers also led the way in the invention of certain technical aspects of the process, such as a mezzotint-like ground that would provide a grey middle tone to the areas of the plate in which it was applied. He used drypoint on certain occasions and allowed for the possibility that the first state of a plate isn't the end but the beginning of the process. The plate could be etched, reworked, etched again, along with the use of drypoint until the desired effect had been achieved. These innovations in the process would benefit Rembrandt as his discovery of the process unfolded throughout his career (White 10).

Adam Elsheimer

Elsheimer was a well-known German landscape painter and novice printmaker when Rembrandt was just a child but his influence would later affect the

artist's compositional work. Like Seghers, Elsheimer's history is difficult to reconstruct, as there is much controversy as to the authenticity of his generally accepted works. Not many of his paintings are clearly dated but it is known that he traveled to Rome in 1600 where he came under the influence of Caravaggio's extreme use of chiaroscuro to create dramatic fervour in his paintings. Seemingly also influenced by Galileo he produced a small but memorable painting called The Flight into Egypt circa 1609, where his knowledge and study of the Milky Way was represented by his careful placement of the stars in the night sky (Frazier 217-218). This and other nocturnal scenes would earn him a reputation as an influential figure in 17th century landscape painting.

Rembrandt would use Elsheimer's night scenes as an inspiration and basis for his etchings of St. Jerome in a Dark Chamber and The Schoolmaster. His experimentation with night scenes provides the viewer a glimpse into Rembrandt's mindset during the production of these plates. His personal life was going through many changes during the early part of the 1640s. His mother, who served as a frequent model died in 1640, along with his wife in 1642. These events seem to effect the change of his work from formal portraiture to a more introspective creation, even increasing his interest in religious scenes (Chilvers, Osborne, and Farr 414).

Both scenes were produced with a very restricted amount of light, usually with just a beam illuminating the focus of the picture while leaving the rest to dark mystery. Perhaps his most famous night scene would be the etched version of The Rest on the Flight into Egypt executed in the year 1644. This subject would prove to be one of Rembrandt's favorites, as he would reproduce this scene many times during

his career. This particular etching displays the Holy Family resting under a tree with the only source of light beaming from the lantern above. Rembrandt reworked this plate three times before final approval and added details each time to define the space in a more coherent manner by using various techniques. The first state revealed a uniform brightness over the tree and figures from the lantern, so Rembrandt used his drypoint skills to create varying degrees of shadow throughout to increase the dramatic effect of the lantern light. In the third state he added the head of the donkey and more clearly defined the bushes in the background, all with drypoint (White 51).

Elsheimer clearly imparted in Rembrandt more inspiration compositionally than technically, with Elsheimer himself not becoming very skilled in the medium and having pupils transfer his painted images into etched ones. However, the connection between the two artists remains with Rembrandt capitalizing on the older artists experience and compositional style.

Caravaggio. The previous night scenes provide the viewer some illustrations of Rembrandt's experiments with the dramatic effect of extreme light and shadow, influenced by an Italian artist named Michelangelo de Merisi or Caravaggio. The most avant-garde movement in the Netherlands during the 1620s was called the Utrecht Caravaggists and Rembrandt explored this new type of visual intensity through his etchings (Bever, Schatborn, and Welzel 13). Caravaggio was a controversial figure in late 16th century art and only lived a decade into the 17th century, barely long enough to witness the official arrival of the Baroque period. By all accounts one could say that his work helped to usher in this new era, with his complete lack of generally accepted decorum and violent behavior. Rembrandt

would make full use of Caravaggio's famous "cellar light" in his etchings to create dramatic scenes that engage the viewer emotionally, typically to exhibit some sort of response.

Rembrandt's etching of The Raising of Lazarus in the year 1632 is a prime example of the Italian artist's influence. The scene is constructed with Christ standing in the middle, back turned to the viewer, with the now undead Lazarus rising out of the ground in front of him. There are figures to both sides, emotional expressions upon their faces at witnessing this miracle, with some garments and presumable personal belongings filling the space above Christ's head. The strong light is coming from the right side, illuminating Christ's face and outstretched arm, while bleaching out the face of Lazarus, separating him from the rest of the figures. The bright light illuminates the most important aspects of the composition, Christ and Lazarus, and shadows most of the others into the background. Rembrandt would continue to use this technique in other prints to indicate the main focus or figure of the work while also helping to invoke a dramatic, emotional effect on the viewer.

CHAPTER 4
STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

The evolution of Rembrandt's taste and skill with the medium is evident when one views his entire oeuvre in chronological order. The subsequent discussion will provide the reader a stylistic and technical comparison of various etchings by Rembrandt and my six etchings that serve as a visual illustration and personal interpretation of his experimental attitude towards the medium. My six prints are meant to be viewed in groups of three, with two groups making up the entire collection and will be discussed in that order.



Figure 1: Solitary, 2003, etching, 11x14"

The first print of my collection, titled Solitary (Figure 1), demonstrates the investigation of the process that the artist goes through before settling on the final version of the image. Like most all of Rembrandt's prints, I chose a subject that surrounds me in everyday life, the seemingly simple image of a leaf. Just as he learned through trial and error in his career, this image serves as a precursor to the learned skills demonstrated in the subsequent prints of the series.

Like most printmakers, Rembrandt's first step in the etching process was a preliminary drawing. Although some of his etchings have no known surviving drawings by which to compare, there are enough to make the assumption that a study was produced to aid him in the production process. These drawings were not what

one would consider “finished” by today’s standards. Rembrandt was of the opinion, like Seghers, that the drawing should only serve as a guide and that the finished product remain a mystery until the last stage of printing. I produced a preliminary drawing for this print and in keeping with Rembrandt’s method, only defined the very beginnings of the image to allow the process to define the finished product.

The finished print actually consists of two separate round plates that were cut from larger square shaped plates; the round shape was chosen to demonstrate the artist’s interest in unconventional plate forms and his habit of cutting down larger plates into smaller ones as shown in his landscape etching, Landscape with Trees, Farm-Buildings, and a Tower of 1650. This particular year brought an increased interest in the landscape for Rembrandt and he executed this print in line etch and drypoint. Having prior experience with the line etching process, I relegated its use for the second image that would later be layered over the first printed plate. I chose to add an additional, unfamiliar technique referred to as soft ground for the first printed image. This ground produces a fine detail of the object that is pressed into it, leaving a light image when printed on the paper. This method, however, can be quite fickle with its results and only by learned experience can the artist read the plate as it’s etched in order to glean an idea of the printed outcome. I used a grouping of dried leaves to create a varied, patterned background on which to set the focus of the second plate.

This second plate consists of a lone image of the leaf, executed in line etch along with the use of drypoint to create darker tonal areas, the same method used by Rembrandt in the shadow line above the trees in his landscape print mentioned above.

Unfamiliar with the chine colle process of printing an image onto one paper while essentially gluing it simultaneously to another, I experimented with printing the single version of the leaf onto vellum while attaching it to the patterned image printed on copperplate paper. This would prove futile as the pressure of the press would simply buckle the smooth vellum and distort the image. After much trial and error, I discovered that in order to print an etched image onto vellum I would have to add paste to the back side and run it through the press onto paper with more of a tooth than copperplate in order to catch the vellum without buckling it under the pressure. This required the separate printing of the two plates and the attachment of them after they both dried. I then added color with pencils to enhance the pictorial quality of the



Figure 2: Diversity, 2003, etching, 11x14"

image, similar to the color washes Rembrandt added as experiments to a few prints discussed in Chapter 3.

The second print, Diversity (Figure 2), and the third image, Closing (Figure 3), of the series demonstrates the lessons learned from the experience of producing the first plate. My skill evolved in the fact that rather than etching two

separate plates, I was now able to etch just one and still achieve the desired image. These plates were produced in much the same manner, taking the same steps in the same order so the following conversation will encompass the last two plates of the first group in the series.

The first stage of the process was transferring the preliminary drawing to the plate and etching the outline with a simple line etch. I chose to further complicate the image of the leaf in the second print, multiplying it and forcing the composition to conform to the round shape of the plate, much as Rembrandt conformed his composition to the arched shaped plate of The Raising of Lazarus of 1632.



Figure 3: Closing, 2003, etching, 11x14"

Figure 3 returns to the single image of the leaf while also requiring it to bend with the curves of the round shape. The soft ground that previously required its own vehicle is now incorporated into the single plate, etched in one acid emersion with asphaltum covering the irrelevant portions of the rest of the image. Again, in consideration of the continuity of the series, I chose to use the grouping of dried leaves as the soft ground background.

In both plates I used a relatively foreign technique called aquatint, a method that will produce tonal qualities in areas of the image. Although aquatint did not become popular with many printmakers in its beginning, its popularity has grown with modern artists. Rembrandt experimented with a process called sulphur tint, and I can only assume due to lack of literature on the specifics of the medium that it was a process similar to that of the modern day aquatint. He used this sulphur tint in his etching of The Angel Appearing to the Shepherds in the year 1634. The tint was used to create tonal areas in the night sky, framing and drawing the viewer's eye to the

angel, the focus of the work. I used aquatint also to create the tonal areas in the multiple renderings of the leaves in both plates, manipulating the outcome by scraping away some of the rough surface that holds the ink, thereby creating the various tonal intensities that create the curving shapes of the leaves.

These plates also experiment with printing on different papers but include the variation of ink color creating a unique effect when layered. Figure 2 has a separately printed inset on tissue paper that is a black ink rather than the previously used warm brown that when layered, creates an intense depth to the image. This method is also used on Figure 3, with the nails printed a second time onto tissue and attached to the main image, creating a variation in color while also emphasizing this detail. The experimentation with added color continues in these plates, the addition made after the printing and layering process finished drying.

The second group of my Illusion Series is three prints depicting the image of an artificial bird; the inspiration for this image came from a statue that I picked up somewhere and placed in my home, again, using objects from my surroundings. Just as the above group was meant to be viewed in order, these three also conform to those standards. When comparing the first group with these current prints, a skilled eye can discern the increased level of sophistication in terms of the tonal qualities created by the aquatint, and the development of skill with the scraper to create less rigid lines between these tones. The stages of each of these three plates were primarily concerned with creating just the right relationship between light and shadow just as in Rembrandt's version of the scene, The Flute-Player circa 1642. His four states of this scene developed mainly with additions or subtractions being evident in certain areas

where the artist deemed the association of light and shadow important enough to go back and rework it.

The first print of the group, Single Bird with Ring (Figure 4) was produced

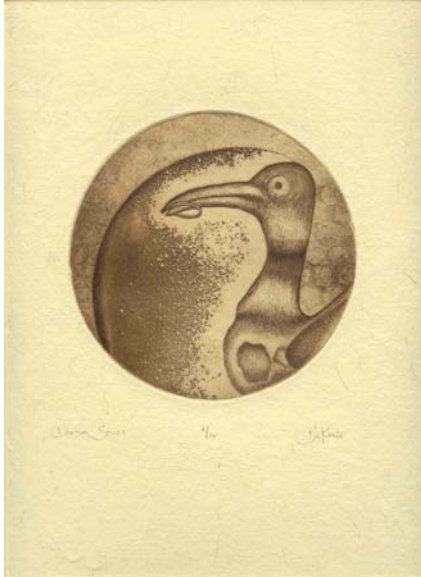


Figure 4: Single Bird with Ring, 2004, etching, 11x14"

from only one round plate, again cut from a larger square. After transferring the preliminary drawing and etching the initial outline, I also employed the use of aquatint to achieve the smooth variation of tonal qualities in the body of the bird. After scraping away the portions of the aquatint that were necessary to create the nice grey middle tones, I added drypoint to areas that needed a

darker shade to help create depth. The soft ground

etch proved to be somewhat difficult, however. To mimic the shape of the plate, I chose to use regular bubble wrap packing material to create an etch of a variety of small circles in the curving space behind the image of the bird. Unlike an organic material such as leaves that will essentially soak up some of the ground when pressed to leave the detail, plastic bubble wrap tended to leave only a slight impression. So this first etch, when compared to the subsequent prints of the group, was not as successful but still acceptable. The last stage of the print was to add the aquatint background. The variation in tone was achieved by the use of splattered hard ground to stop out portions of the plate that I did not want etched. The result was an unetched line surrounding the bird to maintain the focus of the work while bringing visual interest to the remaining portion of the plate. As mentioned previously,

Rembrandt employed a similar method on his prints called sulphur tint and its effects can be seen in another work, The Three Trees circa 1643. The view of the foreground below the trees seems to have a grainy texture, similar in appearance to the dotted effect in the background behind the image of the bird in my work. The initial curve of the line between the patterned soft ground and aquatinted background was not as accurate as desired, so I added in strokes of drypoint to create a more defined line while also evening out the previously crooked curve. The use of drypoint was frequent in Rembrandt's work, often times it was employed to create tone and definition as in the genre scene The Pancake Woman of 1635, and other times he would favor it above all other methods and almost produce the plate entirely from it as illustrated in his version of Christ's crucifixion, The Three Crosses circa 1653.

Rather than using copperplate paper once again, I experimented with an Indian paper that contained long silk fibers throughout. It is a customary process for printmakers to tear their paper into whatever size is required rather than cutting it, and so this paper left a rather rough edge when torn but I felt it added to the visual quality of the work and chose to keep it. Having never printed on this paper before, I treated it just as I would any other rough paper; I soaked it for 20 minutes, pressed it, and ran the print through the press. The image quality was maintained beautifully and the fibers added a fine texture that only seemed to complement the composition.

I created the plates for my last two prints, Staked (Figure 5) and Blind (Figure 6) simultaneously and so will discuss them as one. The personal evolution of skill that I experienced in the production of these works is evident in these last plates. I worked so much with these same processes on each of the other plates that the skills



Figure 5: Staked, 2004, etching, 11x14"

techniques.

I produced preliminary drawings for both plates to map out the composition and both underwent the initial line etch. I did, however, increase the amount of line etch in both of these plates. I previously employed this method solely for the outline

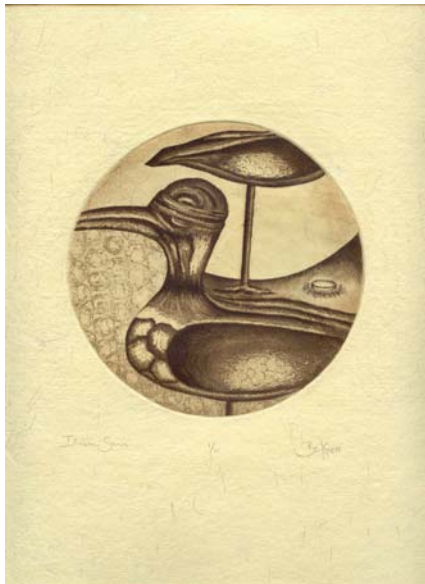


Figure 6: Blind, 2004, etching, 11x14"

of the image but discovered that by shading in the darkest areas of the figures on the first etch, it would decrease the amount of work I would have to do in drypoint to achieve the same result. Both of these prints contain the same bubble wrap pattern introduced in the first plate (Figure 4), although the third and final print (Figure 6) demonstrates the best representation of the etched design. Aquatint played a most important role in the design of these two images; the consideration of light and shadow is what defines

began to come naturally, and these plates were produced quickly and efficiently. Looking objectively at the entirety of Rembrandt's print collection, it is obvious that his first etchings were not nearly as skillfully executed as those in the middle to late parts of his working years and although my prints were created in a span of six months the viewer is still able to see a constant progression in proficiency with the various

of the image but discovered that by shading in the darkest areas of the figures on the first etch, it would decrease the amount of work I would have to do in drypoint to achieve the same result. Both of these prints contain the same bubble wrap pattern introduced in the first plate (Figure 4), although the third and final print (Figure 6) demonstrates the best representation of the etched design. Aquatint played a most important role in

the figures and their space in the composition. I etched the objects darker than intended and then went back and pulled out the middle tones with the scraper; this allowed a much less visible line between the tones, which is more appealing to the eye. I chose to print these images onto the same Indian paper as the first in the group because of the previous success but also to maintain the continuity and relationship of the prints.

The evolutionary process that the artist is forced to go through in printmaking is an unavoidable inevitability for all who explore the possibilities of the medium long enough. Unlike many forms of art, printmaking is defined by the process and the artist's skill and mastery of the various methods of the production of an image. The previous conversation seeks to connect the process of my personal creation of a printed image with that of Rembrandt's and verbally illustrate the evolution in skill that an artist goes through whether it be over six months or a lifetime. His free and experimental approach towards the production of a plate and his willingness to try new methods influenced me to do the same. My print work from start to finish is an example of an experiment that should not be judged by its success alone, but also for its willingness to fail.

CHAPTER 5

ARTISTIC INFLUENCE

Many artists have taken advantage of Rembrandt's unique style and the influence that it exerted throughout the seventeenth century and beyond. A few of these famous artists include Francisco de Goya y Lucientes and Edvard Munch. A brief description of each will follow along with the various ways that Rembrandt's work influenced their own attitudes and designs.

Francisco de Goya y Lucientes

Goya was a Spanish painter and printmaker in the late eighteenth century into the early nineteenth century with a distinct style that was said to resurrect Spanish art from "[. . .] the bland mode of provincialized rococo [. . .]". He was a renowned painter who at the height of his career was appointed as the First Court Painter in 1799 to Charles IV where he painted many of most important portrait commissions (Gudiol 10-48).

Goya's print work has in certain instances come to surpass the fame of his paintings, and his series of eighty etchings called The Caprices executed during the years of 1793 and 1796 depict many disturbing images of satire and everyday life, or at least Goya's interpretation of it. These plates were produced in a combination of etching and aquatint with the result being evenly flat shades throughout the composition with the light areas achieved by the use of the burnisher. His next series of prints called The Disasters of War are generally thought to have been produced somewhere between 1808-1820. All but fourteen of these eighty-two prints are a comment on the sufferings of people during war with the fourteen making a statement

about the political and social anxieties of the artist. These were also executed in line etch and aquatint, but the artist retouched many with drypoint (Gudiol 51-52).

A series completed by 1815 called the Tauromaquia, depicts around thirty-three plates of scenes of the art of bullfighting. Goya was said to have enjoyed the not yet professionalized sport that was still traditionally seen by nobles and not common people. Etching continued to be dominant in this series as with The Disasters of War. His fourth and final series called the Disparates has been considered a continuation of The Caprices (Gudiol 52-53).

Rembrandt's influence on Goya can be seen specifically in the use of chiaroscuro in the artist's prints, evident especially in the last series of etchings. Goya, like Rembrandt, chose to depict images from his surroundings and during his lifetime, Goya witnessed many terrible acts as clearly depicted in his Disasters of War series. The unique use of line etch and aquatint is what is the most distinguishable technical characteristic of his print work. Many areas were left to flat color, and the figures and clothing were modeled with harsh line and geometric shading aiding the feeling of terror on the part of the viewer as they witness first-hand the kidnapping of a woman by two hooded figures as seen in And so they kidnapped her!, No.8 of the Caprices series.

Edvard Munch

Edvard Munch was considered Norway's greatest artist and much of his art is devoted to the mental anguish he suffered most of his life. His mother died when he was very young and his father was almost uncontrollably pious, contributing to his neuroses that he expressed through his paintings and etchings. He is regarded along

with Van Gogh as one of the main sources and inspiration for Expressionist art (Chilvers, Osborne, and Farr 345-346).

Like Rembrandt, Munch painted many self-portraits and they were mostly brutally honest. His art was a personal expression of his mind and he was not afraid to turn that eye on his innermost being. His late self-portraits seem to concern his feelings of mortality and the aging process. He depicts himself in everyday, domestic surroundings, but his facial expressions tell the viewer that he is unhappy with his situation.

Munch's graphic works are a testament to Rembrandt's experimental attitudes towards his etchings. Munch discovered the process of printmaking and at first aimed to use it to reproduce the themes of his Frieze of Life series about the stages of love but quickly became fascinated with the medium. He was interested in combining techniques and soon became a master at almost all of them. He would eventually exert the most influence on the woodcut, with many of his best works produced in this method along with "[. . .] pioneering new ways to exploit wood's expressive possibilities" (Hodin 172). Munch produced no less than one hundred ninety-eight etched plates between the years of 1894 and 1926, and these images are the only section of the artist's graphic work to have a complete printed record. He worked in engraving, aquatint, dry point, and mezzotint, among other techniques and consistently combined them on one image to achieve the desired results. Following in the footsteps of Rembrandt he also experimented with various papers and color schemes, switching them around until the image coincided with the specific paper and ink color he desired (Hodin 169-174).

Rembrandt was responsible for influencing these and many artists through his painted and graphic print work. His experience helped other artists follow their own investigation of their work and experiment with various techniques to create unique and personal works of art.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Through his etchings, Rembrandt was able to freely explore and reveal his unique artistic vision to the world around him that would also frequently become his subject. Tradition was not a concept that would restrict this artist's need for innovation; the term avant-garde fits him perfectly as he, through his discoveries of the possibilities of the medium, would create prints that displayed a unique style and form that had never been seen in the history of printmaking.

Experimentation seemed to be his general attitude towards the production of his prints. He was able to draw on the experiences of older artists that would aid him in his discovery and fervent exploration of a medium that he would eventually learn to bend to his will. He was unwilling to confine himself to the results of the burin and quickly began to explore various methods that would provide him with the results that he was striving for. Few artists remain as popular as Rembrandt some three centuries after death and this could only be explained by the versatility of the artists work. He defied tradition and produced images that pleased himself and not necessarily the critics of his day, Delacroix even suggesting “[. . .] that one day Rembrandt would be rated higher than Raphael, a piece of blasphemy that will make every good academician's hair stand on end [. . .]” (Chilvers, Osborne, and Farr 416).

Rembrandt's subject matter was of great concern to his critics as he favored reality over idealization and refused to compromise this aspect in his print work. His attitude towards his prints was extremely personal; he oftentimes would use his family members as models and made loving portraits of his wife Saskia before her

death. It is thought that he never produced a print for profit; these were his personal artistic expressions. He produced images that ranged from genre scenes like Sleeping Puppy of 1640 to biblical images, formal portraiture, and landscapes. Perhaps the most significant of these images are his self-portraits that take up much space in his oeuvre. Rembrandt produced these portraits from the beginning of his career to the end, never using a single image as often as his own.

My own prints are an example of the individual interpretation of Rembrandt's experimental attitude and in their strictest sense serve as a visual illustration of the artist's method. My own positive experiences with the process of creating a printed image were encouraged by Rembrandt's attitude of working with the mistakes that will inevitably occur on a plate. I strived to keep his mindset that an artist can turn a negative into a positive when the determination to do so is present in the artist's mind. I followed no rules and kept to no standards but my own during the production of my plates and created images that were personal and pleasing to myself. I believe that Rembrandt produced his printed images not only for his advancement in skill but also for his personal satisfaction.

Rembrandt created his place in history through his general attitude towards his art. He was unwilling to adhere himself to the traditions of his day and become forgotten to the world that interested him so much. His influence would live on in the works of famous artists like Goya and Munch while inspiring countless others to follow their own personal ideals.

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