

Sarah Savage
Rembrandt as a Painter

Rembrandt was a Dutch painter who was born on July 15, 1606, in Leiden. Some of his earliest works that have survived over the past 400 years are his self portraits. Rembrandt has one of the largest collections of self portraits which consist of about 40 oil paintings, about 30 etchings and a handful of drawings. In total, he created around 80 self portraits, the reasons behind them is not one hundred percent known. What is known is that his earliest works, “appeared to be exercises in facial expression and chiaroscuro, and they may consequently have functioned as studies for his history paintings(West 174)”. His later works seem more autobiographical in feel because they could be viewed as a timeline of his emotional states.

Rembrandt’s *Self Portrait* in which he is leaning forward and he has a surprised look on his face gives the viewer a good sense of his techniques. He used a tool to scrape in the hair which exposes the reddish brown layer of paint underneath. It creates a new dimension to the hair that is falling over his forehead. For the background he used large brush strokes that give the painting movement as if he just turned around and wasn’t expecting to see what he saw. During the 17th century many painters would show their subjects with a neutral expression. The fact that Rembrandt played with a variety of expressions in his self portraits was very unusual for a time when most people associated portraits with power, wealth, and dignity. The term self portrait did not exist in Rembrandt’s day, his self portraits would have been called, “Rembrandts likeness done by himself(National Gallery 17)”.

His *Self Portrait with Plumed Beret*, is a good example of how Rembrandt used role play to suggest either where in society he wanted to be or where his career was

aimed. He wears a gold chain around his shoulders, an oriental silk scarf around his neck, and the jeweled beret with feather to top off his costume. His eyes seem to be close together and his face appears to be longer than previously seen. The term tronie(National Gallery 104) has been used to describe his earlier self portraits such as this one because they are more about the expression rather than the likeness of the person.

The Prodigal Son in the Tavern is also known as *Self Portrait with his wife Saskia*. The story of the Prodigal Son is found in the Gospel of Luke in the New Testament of the Bible. The story starts with a rebellious son leaving home to live a life of sin, and only when he has no other choice does he go home to his father. His father to his surprise is not angry at all for his son's sins and lack of responsibility, he is just glad that he is alive. The religious meaning of the piece could suggest that he used Saskia and himself to represent his relationship with religion. It could also mean that Rembrandt felt as though he was wasting money because during this time his popularity was growing as well as the number of commissioned portraits he did. The idea that this piece is a self portrait with his wife, could imply the differences between the two. She looks distant because her back is towards the viewer with only her head turned; while he appears lively.

An X radiograph of some of his paintings tells us that Rembrandt often reused his painting supports, maybe to save money or maybe because he didn't like where his starting image was going. For his *Self Portrait in a Cap*, the original image on the piece of wood panel was an unfinished portrait of a woman and it was rectangular in shape. He looks at the viewer with his head turned slightly and his head tilted up, his expression says that he is either worried or arrogant. His hand appears to be clutching the gold chain

that is around his shoulders as if he does it as a nervous habit.

In his *Self Portrait* that is oval shaped, only the head and white collar have been proven to be done by Rembrandt himself(National Gallery 168). The clothing, the long hair and the background don't seem to be his technique or that of his pupils according to experts. It is possible that the painting was started by him and finished by another artist at a later date. The concept that this painting was completed by someone else is a modernist idea referring to the rejection of traditional ideals of art. Before Modernism that concept didn't really exist, but it now has been questioned.

Rembrandt's *Self Portrait* with his arm resting on a ledge was done at the height of his success as a painter in 1640. An X radiograph of this image tells us that his right hand originally had fingers that extended onto the wooden surface next to his left arm. This was a medieval device used to create depth, and to give the hand a three dimensional quality that appeared to be coming off the page. The contrast between his dark cloak and the lighter background give the painting dimension and make him stand out. The black cloak that falls over his shoulder that is resting on the ledge, and his slight fist give him a look of confidence. Rembrandt's influences for this piece were most likely Albrecht Durer's self portrait that looks similar because of his arm on a balustrade(National



Gallery 173).

Rembrandt's small *Self Portrait* is painted on walnut wood which is very prone to

shrinking in climate change causing the board to crack in some places. The cracks have been touched up since Rembrandt's day and another wooden panel had been placed on the back for a more supportive surface. The painting looks as though it was cut smaller than it was originally because the edges of his hat miss the edge just barely. The red shirt that he is shown in was normally worn as an undergarment during this time. He looks at the viewer with questioning eyes and arched eye brow, and the following year he goes bankrupt and all of his possessions are sold. It is unknown if the undergarment was used in this self portrait because of his lack of possessions at the time or whether it was used to show how he has changed from the role playing and costume wearing artist.

His *Self Portrait with Beret and Turned Up Collar* is one of his most confrontational self portraits. His face is turned towards the viewer with his cheek hitting his collar. His eyes stare at you with intensity and wisdom. His nose is so pronounced that it looks as if it is coming out of the painting. Only his face is illuminated and the painting is cropped so that you feel as though you are right up next to him. His forehead has the right amount of highlight and glow to create wrinkles that look like you could feel them if you touched them. The attention to detail in this painting is so refined because there are no harsh lines from his brush. He used transparent layers of paint to create delicate highlights that seem all too life-like, which is a big difference from his earlier works that had an impasto worked onto it. This painting is a good example of how Rembrandt used chiaroscuro (West 164), a technique using extreme shadow and contrast.

In his *Self Portrait at the Easel*, he is wearing a white cap, (slide is cropped so you can't see the easel, palette, or the brushes in his hand) it is the first time that he shows himself being a painter with his tools when his identity is important. In *The*

Painter and his Easel his identity is in the background and the easel is up front. The easel that is somewhat hidden in this self portrait shows a wood panel set up but the painting itself is painted on canvas. His white cap during that time was a common item for men to wear around the house. The way in which he chooses to show himself in this self portrait might mean that he is at his best when he is at home in the studio or it could be another sign of how his bankruptcy has effected him. Throughout the years, Rembrandt's self portraits showed a change in him, "In Rembrandt's late works, realism relates to the spirit of inner meaning, not of surface details(Stokstad 769)." He started creating self portraits to role play and to study moods. His self portraits that were done around and after he became bankrupt show less costumes and more simple garments that were worn around the house. This seems to show how his priorities changed throughout his life.

When Rembrandt married Saskia van Ulenborch in 1634 he also started doing formal portraits for the wealthy in Amsterdam. At that time Amsterdam was thriving and growing into an important trading network. His *Portrait of a Lady* is one of Rembrandt's commissioned portraits. Her face looks off into the distance with a vague smile. Rembrandt shows off his amazing detail work in this piece and it is what makes each piece in his commissioned work different. The people that Rembrandt did the commissioned pieces for were, "Prudent, cheese-faced merchants of Amsterdam, but they bored him; their black clothes, then just come into fashion and stiff white linen offered no means of expressing in paint his sense of the richness of life(Clark 16)." For a large number of Rembrandt's commissioned portraits little is known about the context of the paintings.

In his *Portrait of a Seated Man*, the man's cheeks are rosy and detailed. For the facial hair he scraped off the top layer of paint to create an added dimension to his hair. The white collar pops out at you first and then you notice how detailed and realistic it appears. His hand gets your attention and calls you to come closer. The detail on the arm of the jacket is another good example of how he uses detail to create interest to the dull black fashion that was popular in Amsterdam at the time.

Rembrandt's portrait of *Susanna van Collen, Wife of Jan Pellicorne, With Her Daughter Eva Susanna* shows the mother giving her daughter a coin from her purse that is placed in her lap. The mother is sitting down in an armchair, you don't see her feet because they are hidden under her dress. There is what appears to be a wooden box on the floor that the mother's feet could be resting on. The daughter's dress does not cover her feet but it creates a dark shadow that hides her feet and gives her the appearance of floating above the ground.

The father and son of those are shown in Rembrandt's portrait of *Jan Pellicorne and His Son, Caspar*. The father is giving his son a bag of coins and it most likely refers to the boys inheritance and his responsibilities as he grows up. The father's eye's show worry in them. This painting and the last are viewed by experts as satires about what is important to Rembrandt's patrons.

An example of Rembrandt's religious paintings is *Man in Oriental Costume* also known as *King Uzziah Stricken with Leprosy*. The story of King Uzziah is that he was banished from a temple for burning incense at the altar because only the priests were aloud to light the incense. So while he was banished he contracted leprosy. The man's face is angry and tense. His hands are tightly held together with one as a fist held in the

other hand. His head wrap looks as though it could be silk and it gives him an elegant and old worldly feel.

His last portrait of his mother is titled *Rembrandt's Mother* and it was done during that last couple of months of her life. Some experts say that it is more meant to be a symbol of old age and that he just used his mother as a model. He rimmed her eyes delicately with a pinkish red that gives her a very tired face. Her mouth is slightly open and there are no visible teeth which adds to her age. The ruffled neck of her outfit gives her an even more wrinkled and aged appearance.

In *An Old Woman Reading*, her face is tilted down and she is intently reading a book. Her eyes are fixed and her mouth is slightly open, she looks deep in thought. Her eyebrows are slightly raised as though she is surprised at what she is reading. He highlighted her hands with strips of light color, giving them a skeletal look.

The piece known as *Mars* or *A Man in Armour* is thought to be representational of Mars the God of War or it could be Alexander the Great. It is a profile image, he has a shield, helmet and lance. The helmet is golden and highlighted, his face is slightly tilted down and his eyes are fixed on something we can't see. It was originally smaller but it later had pieces sewn on all four sides to make it bigger, by some other than Rembrandt.

His image of *Juno* could have been modeled by his housekeeper Hendrickje Stoffels, who also had a daughter with him named Cornelia. Juno was known as the Queen of the Gods or the goddess of wealth. The scepter and crown represent power and the peacock in the bottom right corner is the established bird of Juno standing for pride and arrogance.

His Portrait *Old Man* is a good example of how he used lines and scribbles. The

appearance is somewhat messy and gives the impression that it was done at a quick rate. He looks tense because of his hands gripping the chair's arms. He uses bold contrast by making the collar stark white and the dark almost solid black jacket. The contrast between his face and the background give a good example of the range of techniques that he used in his paintings.

Rembrandt created a large collection of self portraits, starting out with his study of expression and ending with deeper more insightful paintings. He was one of the first painters to use self portraits as an autobiography. His commissioned works are a good example of how he uses detail to give a little bit of detail to a largely boring market. The contrast between his self portraits and his commissioned works show that he loved rich fabrics, jewels and costumes. Rembrandt's style and approach changed a lot throughout his life and helped him become one of the greatest painters in European history.

Rembrandt

By: Sarah Savage

1. *Self Portrait*, oil on wood, 1629
2. *Self Portrait with Beret*, oil on wood, 1629
3. *The Prodigal Son in the Tavern*, oil on board, 1635
4. *Self Portrait in a Cap*, oil on wood, 1637
5. *Self Portrait*, round, oil on wood, 1639
6. *Self Portrait*, oil on canvas, 1640
7. *Small Self Portrait*, oil on walnut panel, 1655
8. *Self Portrait with Beret and Turned Up Collar*, oil, 1659
9. *Self Portrait*, oil on canvas, 1660
10. *Portrait of a Lady*, oil, 1632
11. *Portrait of a Seated Man*, oil on wood panel, 1633
12. *Susanna van Collen, Wife of Jan Pellicorne, and her daughter Eva Susanna*, oil on canvas, 1635
13. *Jan Pellicorne and his son, Caspar*, oil on canvas, 1635
14. *Man in Oriental Costume*, oil on wood, 1635
15. *Rembrandt's Mother*, oil on wood panel, 1639
16. *An Old Woman Reading*, oil on canvas, 1655
17. *Mars*, oil on canvas, 1655
18. *Juno*, oil on canvas, 1665
19. *Old Man*, oil on canvas, 1667

Chiaroscuro: the contrast between light and dark; Italian for clear dark.

Tronie: a painting that shows an exaggerated expression or a costume.

Annotated Bibliography Rembrandt

Clark, Kenneth, An Introduction to Rembrandt, 1978, Harper and Row Publishers. This book gives a detailed overview of Rembrandt and his art work. It discusses his life and the meaning behind some of his work.

Haak, Bob, Rembrandt, His Life, His Work, His Time, 1969, Harry Abrams, Inc. This book includes anything that you would want to know about his life and the art that he created. It discusses the history behind certain pieces of work as well as images for all of the work that it written about.

Guillaud, Jacqueline and Maurice, Rembrandt the Human Form and Spirit, 1986, Guillaud Editions. This book has a large number and variety of Rembrandts drawings, paintings, etchings, and his religious works. The two authors discuss his art and inform the reader of the technical aspects of his works and their interpretations of them.

National Gallery, London and Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, Rembrandt by Himself, 1999, National Gallery Publications Limited. This book includes a large collection of self portraits that Rembrandt did during his life. In this book it discusses the functions of his self portraits, his life and his pupils.

Smith, R. David, "Rembrandt's Early Double Portraits and the Dutch Conversation Piece", 1982, The Art Bulletin Vol. 64, No. 2. This article discusses one of Rembrandt's double portraits that he did as a commission in Amsterdam. It talks about the meaning and history behind the two pieces as well as there place in society.

Stokstad, Marilyn, Art History, 2005, Pearson Education. This book talks about the different types of art, the people who make it, and it gives a brief description about Rembrandt. The author tells you the basics on Rembrandts life and his career, such as who he was commissioned by and where he started.

Taylor, Michael, Rembrandt's Nose: of Flesh and Spirit in the Master's Portraits, 2007, Distributed Art Publishers. This book examines Rembrandt's play on facial expressions in his self portraits as well as some of his other works. It also discusses his techniques for applying paint and it includes black and white pictures of the paintings that the author talks about.

West, Shearer, Portraiture, 2004, Oxford University Press. This book looks at the different forms of portraiture in the Western World. It talks about the origins of it and how it got to be the way it is today.

