

*Ter gelegenheid van de opening
van de tentoonstelling 'Rembrandt 1669-1969'
kwam op 12 september 1969
des avonds om 8 uur in de David Röellzaal
een groot aantal genodigden bijeen.
Lord Clark hield daar de volgende toespraak.*

When Dr. Van Schendel did me the honour of inviting me to speak here today, I replied that I felt altogether unworthy of addressing a Dutch audience on this great occasion. I could imagine what an English audience would feel if on a Shakespeare centenary they were addressed in Dutch by a speaker from the Netherlands. However, Dr. Van Schendel persisted, and here I am; and I do see that there is a certain difference between the two situations. In his humanity and his sense of drama Shakespeare is as universal as Rembrandt; but almost half Shakespeare's power over us depends on his language, his unrivalled ear for a cadence of words, his rich and precise vocabulary and that fusion of sense and sounds which is the essence of poetry.

Whereas Rembrandt's language – if I may so describe the actual touch of his brush or pen – is as universal as his thought: in fact rather more so. I mean, that whereas Rembrandt's subjects are sometimes obscure – a good deal more obscure than used to be imagined – the way in which he found a graphic equivalent for his experiences would have been perfectly comprehensible in T'ang China or sixteenth century Japan. A Chinese connoisseur when asked what he admired in a drawing or piece of calligraphy, said if you cut one of the lines it would bleed! That could be said of Rembrandt more than of any other European artist. I would go so far as to say that the greatest Rembrandts are the most universal works of art ever produced, speaking directly for human beings without barriers of geography, creed, sect, or intellectual pretensions. Like Shakespeare, he is one of those inexhaustible quarries in which each

succeeding epoch can find materials for building its own spiritual structure. In consequence he has never been without admirers. Romantic historians used to describe with relish the misfortunes that befell him as a result of a change in fashion. Of course it is true that when new classicism becomes fashionable, he was passed over in favour of mediocrities, even by his earliest patron Constantyn Huygens and his most generous, Jan Six. But they moved in the best society, and in every age the leaders of fashion are fickle; they have to be to keep their places. But Rembrandt never lost the support of a number of serious people. At a time when his reputation was supposed to be in decline a collector could send all the way from Sicily to commission and obtain that sublime work which can once more be seen in Holland, after an absence of 40 years. In the very year of his financial collapse he was commissioned to paint for the Anatomy Theatre the enormous picture of Dr. Deyman's Demonstration, which, to judge by the surviving fragment, must have been one of his greatest works. The year after his final debacle he finished an even larger commission for the new Town Hall of Amsterdam. These two works, done at a time when Rembrandt was supposed to be discredited, were not only very large, but powerful, original and strange. The fact that they were commissioned by public bodies shows that Dutch connoisseurs in the 1660's were not lacking in courage and insight. And think of the people who sat to him for their portraits at a time when, by all accounts he demanded an unprecedented number of sittings. How did those busy practical men, the syn-

dics of the Clothmakers Guild, find the time: Because they knew it was worth while. However, as I have said, different epochs have admired different aspects of his art. The great French amateurs of the 18th century like Picart and Rigaud collected his drawings with passion, and owned hundreds of them. Indeed his drawings have never gone out of fashion. They are the most indisputable part of his whole oeuvre, and it is fitting that they should form the largest section of this centenary exhibition. The painters of the dix-huitième loved those happy pictures of the 1640's of which Fragonard made such enchanting copies. For the early nineteenth century he was above all the master of the *Night Watch*, where the synthesis of High Renaissance and Baroque ingredients and (may one say) a certain element of over-emphatic prosperity, is reminiscent of a nineteenth century public building. Then from 1870 to 1920, the age dominated by millionaire collectors and art dealers, he was thought of primarily a portrait painter. As late as 1927 in the Dutch exhibition at Burlington House, practically every Rembrandt exhibited was a portrait. Well, no one will deny the superb qualities of Rembrandt's portraits, but, they exhibit less than half of his greatness. They show his penetration into human character, his concentration and, of course, his matchless skill of hand and eye. But they do not show his imaginative power, his sense of drama or the deep thought with which he brooded on our human condition. He was not only a warm-hearted man; he was a man of great mind. This aspect of Rembrandt was generally overlooked in the nineteenth century, partly because of his face, or, to be more precise, because of his nose. It is not the nose of an intellectual. His eyes and forehead denote a profound intelligence – in fact they are remarkably like those of Einstein. And no one will doubt this intelligence who has studied Rembrandt's later etchings. An exhibition in the British Museum this spring showed ten or twelve impressions of his two greatest etchings: *Christ Presented to the People* and *the Three Crosses*; and to compare them was really an exhausting mental exercise, like reading Spinoza.

In the field of painting there has seldom been a better opportunity to appreciate Rembrandt's mental powers than is offered by the exhibition which we are inaugurating today. In bringing together so many of his great figure compositions the organisers have confirmed our conception of Rembrandt as a poetic dramatist. Even in the field of portraiture they have included one of the most dramatic of Rembrandt's early portrait groups – the *Boat Builder and his Wife* from Buckingham Palace. This is, if you like, a return to the first critics of Rembrandt who praised him above all for his liveliness of emotional expression but it has come about partly as a result of a new direction in art-historical scholarship. An earlier school of critics was concerned with questions of authenticity. Some of them still are; and of course it is an absorbing occupation. But in the end such questions can be answered by a single sentence: that Rembrandt was the most inspiring teacher that has ever lived, and since almost every talented Netherlandish painter of the time worked in his studio, he could raise their talents to the point of genius. Thus mediocrities could paint masterpieces.

In the last thirty years art-historians have changed from style-criticism to interpretation; and they have realised how many fundamental questions about Rembrandt have gone unanswered or even unasked. The subjects of his most famous pictures are often obscure, and sometimes completely baffling. Two of his most haunting works, the *Polish Rider* and the *Jewish Bride*, appear under what we may call titles of convenience, that tell us as little as the label on Giorgione's *Tempesta*. All we know is that the more thoroughly we consider their origins, the deeper becomes the confluence of images and associations that underlies them.

Of the complexity of Rembrandt's thought there is a moving example in the present exhibition, the picture from Cassel of Jacob blessing his grandsons. As so often with Rembrandt it is a subject that had almost disappeared from art since the middle ages, and to revive it implied a knowledge of the intricacies of mediaeval thought. Jacob, as a young man, had cheated Esau out of his blessing.

Not a story that appeals to our nations of moral rectitude; but this piece of chicanery had been twisted by theologians into an ante-type of the new dispensation of Christ. Then Jacob himself repeated the same pattern by blessing Joseph's younger son Ephraim instead of Manasseh, and once more Ephraim's acceptance of the blessing is taken as symbolic of mankind's acceptance of the Kingdom of Christ. But there is an emphatic allusion to the earlier blessing. Joseph's wife Asnath is not mentioned in the Bible, but is included because Rebecca had been instrumental in the blessing of Jacob. Do these seem ridiculous complications remote from our own historical approach. Well, the pictorial complexity of the central group demands a complicated explanation, and if we turn to Rembrandt's picture with these thoughts in mind, we are better able to understand why a domestic scene has been given such an air of ritual solemnity; and why for example, the figure of Ephraim so obviously recalls a Virgin annunciate, with crossed hands and halo. Rembrandt's gift of sanctifying the commonplace and humanising the sacred depended not only on sympathy and observation, but on a mind filled with knowledge of theological interpretation and religious symbolism.

In expressing his ideas Rembrandt always looked for the moment of maximum psychological shock and tension – the actual moment when Abraham drops his knife. It was Goethe (who understood Rembrandt well), Goethe the poet and dramatist who first pointed out what distinguished Leonardo da Vinci's *Cenacolo* from all the other Last Suppers of the *Quattrocento*: that it illustrates the moment when Christ says to his disciples, 'One of you will betray me'. A Rembrandtesque moment – in fact there is an actual Rembrandt of betrayal, the Denial of Peter, in this museum. The influence of the Last Supper on Rembrandt cannot be exaggerated. Leonardo's attempt to realise a moment of tension on a monumental scale seemed to him the summit of art. We know that Rembrandt had read Leonardo da Vinci's treatise on painting, and understood the theoretical basis of his great pictorial drama. We

also know that he made several drawings after Leonardo's Last Supper, some from an engraving some from good early copies. The whole conception of the Last Supper sunk deeply into his mind, and came out at moments when he felt that he must exert his full powers: for example in the Hundred Guilder Print, which contains figures taken direct from the Apostles in the *Cenacolo*. It happens that two of the greatest pictures in this exhibition show how profoundly Leonardo's fusion of drama and design had affected him. One of them is Samson's Wedding Feast, the finest of those compositions that can be conveniently labelled Baroque, and one that is a moving moment for many of us to see again. Visually it is unforgettable – those surging, billowing figures, almost out of control (for the feast had lasted seven days), culminating in the well-fed, white triangle of Samson's wife, the image of cunning passivity, waiting for the moment to betray her ridiculous husband. She is, I fear, strongly reminiscent of Saskia; Rembrandt himself, a turbaned fluteplayer, looks on with a curious mixture of pity and detachment.

Rembrandt's preoccupation, between 1635 and 1638, with the story of Samson is hard to explain unless it has some bearing on his personal life. Of course there was a typological pretext. As with Jacob, and with even less justification, this brutal thug was identified by mediaeval theologians as one of the prefigurations of Christ. But Rembrandt could read the book of Judges for himself. He knew that after the Philistines had guessed his riddle, thanks to the treachery of his wife, Samson would go down into Ascalon, slay thirty of their countrymen, and take their clothes in order to pay off his wager. Not a Christian act and whatever sect he belonged to, Rembrandt was a devoted Christian. No doubt the primitive drama of Samson has a powerful hold on the imagination. But it is remarkable that the other great poet who made Samson the hero of a drama, Milton, had been unhappily married.

Rembrandt never ceased to look for the moment of psychological tension. But as his character evoked he found it in expressed, in subtler and

less openly assertive forms. His subjects depict dramas of the mind or spirit. Instead of the Blinding of Samson he painted Bathseba reading King David's letter. An amazing evolution of human sympathy. In the end the expression of emotion requires practically no physical action at all. In the Jewish Bride and the Prodigal Son of the Hermitage the figures are absolutely still, and express their feelings by the position of their hands and the inclination of their heads.

I began by implying a correspondence between Rembrandt and Shakespeare. It is not a parallel that can be pressed very far. Rembrandt was a deeply religious man to whom moral problems were all important. Shakespeare was one of the few supremely great men without anything that can be called religious feeling, without stretching that term to infinity; and his views on the purpose of life show a total disillusion that would have appalled Rembrandt. And yet the word Shakespeare must return to our minds when we contemplate that magnificent fragment from the conspiracy of Claudius Civilis, which the National Gallery of Stockholm have so generously allowed to travel back to Amsterdam. Rembrandt, if I may be permitted a quotation, 'has evoked the kind of quasi mythical, heroicmagical past that is the setting of Macbeth, King Lear and Cymbeline, and this remoteness has allowed him to insert into an episode of primitive grandeur the life-giving roughage of the grotesque'. And he has used colour and the texture of paint with an expressive freedom that reminds one of Shakespeare's metaphors, those marvellous moments when the action is halted by a perfectly irrational outburst of poetry, which nevertheless seems to intensify our emotions. These heads are metaphors in paint.

Exhibitions are usually too big. The memorable Rembrandt exhibition held here in 1956 contained a hundred and one paintings. This one contains only twenty four. In this way we can give Rembrandt our full attention, instead of drifting round aimlessly or attempting fruitless stylistic compositions. They are chosen with such a true sense of Rembrandt's highest endowments, that

we feel as never before his place among the great poets, the great thinkers and the great painters of the seventeenth century.