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## **Painting Blindness and Obstructing Vision**

*Rembrandt and the Senses*

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## Sammendrag/ Norwegian Abstract

Denne avhandlingen tar for seg tre malerier av den nederlandske kunstneren Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), og analyserer dem med fokus på tre beslektede temaene blindhet, syn og berøring. Dette temavalget er basert på Rembrandts frekvente bruk av blindhet som motiv. Den teoretiske diskusjonen i avhandlingen er inspirert av Svetlana Alpers analyse i et kapittel fra hennes bok om Rembrandt «The Master's Touch» og av den franske filosofen Jacques Derridas bok «Memoirs of the Blind». Jeg bruker Derridas begrep *parergon* og *ruin* for å utforske hvordan vår opplevelse av maleriet blir berørt både av det vi ser og det vi ikke ser, av både det synlige og det usette. Verkene analyseres både i et historisk og et nåtidig lys, ved å utforske hva maleriene kommuniserte til seere da de ble malt, og hva de kommuniserer til moderne seere. I avhandlingen drøfter jeg ulike implikasjoner av konseptet blindhet, i tillegg til å diskutere framstillingen av sansene syn og berøring. På denne måten vil avhandlingen også rette søkelyset mot betydningen av berøring i vår opplevelse av maleri, en tilnærming knyttet til det som er blitt kalt 'the sensory turn'.

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# Contents

Abstract .....	1
Acknowledgements .....	2
Contents.....	3
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1. Scholarship, Theoretical Approach and Concepts.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<i>Scholarship</i> .....	8
<i>What is Blindness?</i> .....	10
<i>My Theoretical Approach</i> .....	12
<b>2. Touch: Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<i>Blinded by the Title</i> .....	19
<i>The Sense of Touch</i> .....	22
<i>Blind men in Seventeenth-Century Visual Culture</i> .....	23
<i>A Comparison of the Arts</i> .....	25
<i>Painting's Role in the Paragone</i> .....	26
<i>A sense of Tactility</i> .....	29
<i>Touch as Presence</i> .....	32
<i>The Touchable Painting</i> .....	33
<i>Contemplating the Blind</i> .....	35
<i>Seeing, Touching, Knowing</i> .....	43
<b>3. Painting The Blind: Tobias Healing His Father's Blindness.....</b>	<b>45</b>
<i>The Story of Tobit</i> .....	46
<i>Rembrandt's Painting of the Biblical Scene</i> .....	47
<i>Spiritual Blindness</i> .....	49
<i>The Temptations of Sight</i> .....	50
<i>Tobias as Surgeon</i> .....	53
<i>Letter on the Blind: Using Hands to See</i> .....	57
<i>Touch, Sight and Knowledge</i> .....	58
<i>Finger as Fovea</i> .....	59
<i>Tobias Healing his Father's Blindness as Analogy</i> .....	60

<i>The Hand of the Artist</i> .....	61
<i>A Painting of Painting</i> .....	63
<b>4. Blinding the Painting: Self-Portrait of 1628</b> .....	<b>65</b>
<i>Rembrandt and the Self-Portrait</i> .....	65
<i>The Self-Portrait of 1628: The Viewer's Experience</i> .....	67
<i>A Self-Portrait in the Seventeenth Century</i> .....	69
<i>The Tronie</i> .....	72
<i>A Double Self-Portrait</i> .....	73
<i>The Self-Portrait as a Study of a Ruin</i> .....	75
<i>Self-Portrait as Frame</i> .....	77
<i>Seeing what's Not There</i> .....	80
<i>Blindness as a Part of Seeing</i> .....	82
<i>Glimpsing and Glancing</i> .....	84
<i>Blindness, Memory and Idea</i> .....	87
<i>Drawing of the Blind</i> .....	90
<i>The Touch of the Artist</i> .....	92
<i>A Portrait of Blindness</i> .....	93
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>95</b>
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>98</b>

## **Introduction**

What if Blindness held the keys  
to both thought and vision?<sup>1</sup>

The seventeenth-century Dutch artist Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) depicted blindness in his work rather frequently. While depictions of the blind were not entirely rare in seventeenth-century art, they were not commonplace.<sup>2</sup> It is from this perspective that the amount of images depicting the blind in Rembrandt's oeuvre has caused art historians, theorists and even philosophers to speculate on this subject and conclude that blindness was actually more of a fascination for Rembrandt than a coincidental choice of subject matter.<sup>3</sup> The late art historian Julius Held, a specialist on Rembrandt, seems to confirm this when he says: "we can hardly escape the conclusion that physical blindness was of more than a common interest to the master".<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to reading what interest Rembrandt may have had in blindness, I see these frequent depictions of the blind as an invitation to discuss the themes of blindness, sight and touch through the artist's work. Presenting the theme of blindness in a work of art is revealing a contradiction; we are witnessing blindness through a medium which requires the use of sight. We are therefore offered a type of paradox, we are asked to experience two opposite concepts at the same time— blindness and sight. This contradiction is thought provoking. Further still, presented in a work of art, it seems to ask the viewer to contemplate what it really means to see, that is, what the activity of seeing entails, and in particular what it means to look at a painting, to experience it even. The complexity of both sight and its supposed opposite, blindness, are far from clear cut concepts. The theme of blindness encourages the viewer to consider its manifold meanings, in which literal physical blindness is just one interpretation. Further still the concept of blindness is intrinsically linked to sight and touch. Again, just like sight and blindness, the senses of touch and sight are often considered

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<sup>1</sup> James Elkins. *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 224.

<sup>2</sup> Moshe Barasch. *Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in Western Thought*. (London: Routledge, 2001), 137.

<sup>3</sup> See Svetlana Alpers *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and The Market*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 138-143, and Simon Schama *Rembrandt's Eyes*. (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2000), 421-428

<sup>4</sup> Held, Julius S. *Rembrandt Studies*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 139

oppositional. This thesis questions these paired yet often conflicting concepts, illustrated by a discussion of three paintings by Rembrandt.

My thesis takes inspiration from American art historian Svetlana Alpers' discussion on the same interrelated themes, blindness touch and sight, in her book *Rembrandt's Enterprise*. In this 1988 study, she sees these elements appear in the artist's subject matter in light of Rembrandt putting emphasis on the craft of a painter.<sup>5</sup> However, my argument differs from hers as I do not concentrate on blindness as subject matter alone. Instead I concentrate on our experience of the paintings and the discourse surrounding them as much as the iconography itself. This thesis aims to investigate oblique views, lack of clarity, fuzziness, shadows, rough paint work and blindness in some of Rembrandt's work and ask what that means in the context of painting.

Blindness is not a simple topic to discuss. And its opposite too, sight, is just as complex. In fact it appears as if the terms blindness and sight are loaded with meaning and often mean far more than a simple physical action. Further still it seems impossible to talk about sight without talking about the lack of it, blindness.

Another key element in my thesis is the sense of touch; blindness also insinuates touch: namely, touching to see. These three elements are all intrinsically linked to one another and it is with this idea that I approach three Rembrandt paintings.

I begin my thesis with a chapter which outlines some of the scholarship I have found useful during this project. Although it does not give an extensive overview of all the sources I refer to (which can be found in the bibliography), I highlight those sources I have used most and the reason why. The 'Scholarship' section also serves as an opportunity to introduce the main figures in my thesis and why I have found their particular scholarship useful. I continue this chapter by introducing the concept of blindness, explaining what is meant by the term and the implications the word carries with it. At the end of this chapter I round up the various theoretical approaches I have utilised throughout this thesis, giving examples where needed and explaining my stance in my discussion of Rembrandt.

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that Alpers also attributes the presence of the blind, and hands, which I discuss later in my thesis, to drawing our attention to the activity of perception. Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, 25-26

My discussion on blindness, sight and touch, takes three works by Rembrandt. I have selected these works because they all reflect a different type of blindness, seeing and touching. Only one of these paintings contains blindness as official subject matter. My main discussion is therefore divided into three chapters.

The chapter ‘Touch’ discusses the later painting *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer* of 1653, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art New York. I relate this work to the *paragone* debate, or the literary discourse on the comparison of the arts which began in Early Renaissance Italy. I look at how this discourse has evolved over time in light of blindness and the senses of sight and touch. I also discuss the other meanings touch may have in our experience of a painting.

Chapter three, ‘Painting the Blind’ takes literal blindness as subject matter in a painting from 1626— *Tobias Healing his Father’s Blindness*— a painting now in Stuttgart, Germany. This painting is used to explore the intermingling of spiritual and physical sight. I also touch on Diderot’s famous addition to the eighteenth- century Enlightenment discussion of *The Molyneux Question*, investigating the similarities between touch and sight in perception, and showing that often the similarities come so close that physical and metaphorical comparisons become blurred. I also explore in what ways the painting illustrates the experiences of perception of the world through both senses. Lastly I argue how this painting can illustrate French philosopher, Jacques Derrida’s claim that “a drawing of the *blind* is a drawing of the blind”.<sup>6</sup>

In the final chapter ‘Painting the Blind’ I take an early self-portrait, made around 1628, now in Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, to look at the ideas of Derrida on visual representation. Rembrandt represents himself in deep shadow, obscuring the spectator’s view. I ask what significance this has for the past and for today. I also explore how much of what we see comes from physical sight, and how much of the presence of the artist can still be seen in something considered as autonomous as a self-portrait. This last chapter also touches on how blindness becomes part of the process of creating a painting.

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*. trans by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).2



## 1. Scholarship, Theoretical Approach and Concepts

### *Scholarship*

My discussion on Rembrandt, blindness, touch, and vision has led me to read various sources both from the realms of humanities and sciences. Many of the science related texts I chose were specifically related to art. I have, naturally, also drawn on scholarship which concentrates only on Rembrandt's painting, of which there are many.

Throughout my thesis I refer to a handful of scholars who have written about Rembrandt: German art historian Julius S. Held (1905-2002), a Rembrandt and Dutch painting specialist who wrote in length about two of the paintings I discuss here: *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer* and Rembrandt's fascination with *The Book of Tobit*, both found in *Rembrandt Studies* (1991). I also look at two particular books by American art historian and critic Svetlana Alpers (1936), *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (1983) and *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and The Market* (1988). While the first book gives a good overview of the culture surrounding Rembrandt and his artistic production, the second book on Rembrandt tries to revise Alpers earlier opinion that Rembrandt does not seem to fit in with the main stream visual culture described in *The Art of Describing*. What is of particular use is the first chapter in *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, 'The Master's Touch'. In this chapter Alpers picks up on the themes I discuss here: blindness, sight, hands, and relates them to one another. However, for Alpers the themes of touch, found in Rembrandt's impasto style, and his focus on hands, all point to Rembrandt drawing attention to his craft and the artwork as an object for the market. Accordingly, the idea of 'the master's touch' is one in which Rembrandt appeals to a particular market because of his trademark style. I depart from this reading, instead taking the ideas of blindness and touch in order to ask what they can tell us about sight and our experience of artwork.

I also refer to Rembrandt specialists, including but not limited to, the leading expert of Rembrandt, Dutch art historian Ernst Van de Wetering (1938- ) who has written extensively on Rembrandt and is chair of the 'Rembrandt Research Project'.<sup>7</sup> Art historians and historians

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<sup>7</sup> . The 'Rembrandt Research Project' started in 1968 with the aim of attributing works to Rembrandt's hand within the vast amount of images that are known as 'Rembrandts' that contain many images by his followers. See [Rembrandtresearchproject.org](http://Rembrandtresearchproject.org)

Benjamin Binstock, H. Perry Chapman, Simon Schama and Gary Schwartz, are also used to give an overview of Rembrandt's work, technique and the society he lived in.

*Blindness: A History of a Mental Image in Western Thought* (2001) by Art historian Moshe Barasch's (1920-2004) is, as far as I am aware, the only book about the image of blindness in visual culture throughout history. His book provides an introduction to the concurrent uses, attitudes, and images of blindness in Western culture from antiquity onwards. In addition to his writings I also draw on works by American art historian and critic James Elkins (1955- ) who in his book *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (1996) writes about observations on the way we experience the world and its images visually. Here I draw particularly on his observations on seeing the face, the body and the final chapter of the book 'Blindness'. In addition I look briefly at work by a small group of scholars who deal with blindness, both as a physical disability and as a cultural concept. These include Georgina Kleege, Mark Paterson and Julia Miele Rodas.

Regarding the theme of sight, both physical and otherwise, I use ideas presented by cognitive psychologist Patrick Melcher and cognitive neuroscientist Davis Melcher's essay 'Pictorial Clues in Art and Visual Perception', (2011), historian Margaret M. Miles for her discussion concerning spiritual and physical sight, ophthalmologist Robert S. Jampel's writing about the history of eye surgery, and to a lesser degree, scientist and historian David Lindberg's (1935- ) history of vision, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (1976).

In relation to the sense of touch I refer adopt approaches suggested by scholars such as Jodi Cranston, Constance Classen, Geraldine A Johnson, Francesca Bacci, Mark Paterson, and Mark Smith, to name just a few, all of which draw on the theme of touch to bring to light an oblique view of the past, our experience of the world, and art being made and viewed now. Although books like *Art and the Senses* (2011), *Art History and the Senses* (2010) and *Empire of the Senses* (2005) aim to reflect on all the senses, or just one sense, such as *The Book of Touch* (2005) or *The Senses of Touch* (2007) I have chosen to look at just two senses.

I also take a philosophical stance to the above mentioned themes of blindness, touch and sight; I not only refer to the *Molyneaux Question*, discussed by seventeenth and eighteenth-century philosophers, the English John Locke (1632-1704) and the French Denis Diderot (1713-1784), but also to the more recent thought of French philosophers Jaqueline Lichtenstein (1947- ) who speculates on discourse surrounding the arts, and the famous

founder of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida. Finally, I use K. Malcom Richards' book *Derrida Unframed* (2008) to help me understand Derrida's ideas in relation to the visual arts.

### ***What is Blindness?***

What may be becoming clear now is that I draw on a handful of approaches to my subject rather than just one. Although I will go into more detail about the theoretical tools I use throughout this thesis in the section 'Theoretical Toolbox', I would like to explain my choice of such a varied methodology. One of the reasons for the diverse theoretical approaches is the nature of the subject of blindness itself which is far from one-dimensional

Derrida's text in *Memoirs of the Blind* allowed him to "select figures from the oldest traditions of the West, drawing upon Old Testament and Mythology",<sup>8</sup> showing not only how important the condition has been throughout history and literature, but also how complex blindness can be; blindness can be literal punishment, a state before spiritual enlightenment, it can also be a gift which enhances one's inner sight. This makes the theme of blindness not only an interesting concept to think with, but also a very complicated one.

The ambiguity of blindness stems from as far back as ancient Greece. In his discussion on the elusive Greek concept of *ate*, Moshe Barasch notes that this special figure is identified with blindness, at one point it is the daughter of Zeus, a goddess who causes blindness. This ancient concept lies neither in the realms of physical blindness or in the metaphorical sense, but rather somewhere in-between. What is more, Barasch relates that the term also means a number of other things at the same time, it "denotes mental blindness, infatuation, folly", but also "ruin, calamity, disaster". In ancient Greek texts, the notion of blindness is related to a number of different states.

Even today, the term blindness is no less abstruse. As Mark Paterson points out, to look up the word 'blindness' in the dictionary reveals just as rich and as overwhelming meaning:

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<sup>8</sup> M. Malcom Richards, *Derrida Unframed*. (London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2008), 88.

In a dictionary with thirteen entries under “blindness,” only one refers directly to the actual medical definition. The rest? A mixture of metaphors, including such negative effects as “blind fear” and “blind rage,” deployed as literary tropes. The remaining definitions display connotations that are “split between ignorance and concealment”, commonly involving *lack*. Blind ignorance (lacking knowledge), blind stupor (lacking awareness), blind prejudice (lacking a critical or questioning attitude), blind taste test (tasting without looking), blind presentation (lacking preparation or information): such negative connotations reveal a configuration of readerly empathy, where blindness as darkness is similarly understood as Lack (of light), as deprivation...<sup>9</sup>

In my thesis I explore these multi-meanings of blindness, as I believe that it is this abundance, and yet often, ambiguity in meaning which leads to a rich discussion. In my thesis I refer to Blindness as a literal physical disability and the medical procedures attempting to cure it. I also refer to blindness as a spiritual or moral mentality or blindness as a type of personal trial, a state before spiritual revelation or even a type of ignorance. But I also refer to being blind as a way of seeing. Blindness can, as Elkins suggested, simply entail looking away, ignoring information, or simply not noticing it. In this sense I explore how blindness is also a part of our interpretation and experience of art.

Imperative to my thesis is the varied connotations ‘blindness’ brings with it. Because talking about blindness is never just talking about blindness. It is also to talk about seeing and touching. As Julia Miele Rodas reminds us: “it is essential to remember that blindness is founded in seeing and visuality. Blind and sighted are acculturated into the same symbolic order, the same language, that depends heavily on sight-connoting signs to describe non-visual experience (you *see*?) and tropes of blindness/sightedness which are laden with moral value”.<sup>10</sup> As mentioned before, these two opposite concepts are dependent on each other, and this is also attended to in my discussion of Rembrandt’s paintings.

As I mentioned, to be blind naturally ensues the sense of touch. When sight is gone, touch becomes the primary sense of perception. In this case sometimes a blind man is used in his ‘value free context’ as Barasch described it. This means that in some cases the blind are used without any real metaphorical meaning or as a ‘blank figure’. In this case the blind man is used in order to remove the sense of sight and explore epistemological theories of the

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<sup>9</sup> Paterson, Mark. ““Looking on darkness, which the blind do see”: Blindness, Empathy, and Feeling Seeing.” *Mosaic: a journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature* 43, no. 3 (September 2013): 159-177. doi: 10.1353/mos.2013.0033, 162.

<sup>10</sup> Rodas, Julia Miele. “On Blindness.” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* (Liverpool University Press) 3, no. 2 (2009): 115-130, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jlc/summary/v003/3.2.rodas.html>, 116.

sighted. This can be seen in Descartes' illustration in *La Dioptrique* (1637), in which a blind man shows how sight works by feeling his way with sticks. It is also demonstrated in part through the literature surrounding the discussion of the comparison of the arts or *paragone*, and though the dialogue in Diderot's *Letter on the Blind*.

The multi-meanings of blindness mean that many sources come into play when unveiling the story behind their appearance. I therefore utilize writings which take, amongst other forms, a scientific approach, psychological findings, art historical discourse, spiritual discourse and philosophy, to name just a few. The more specific theoretical tools I implement through my discussion on Rembrandt are explained in the next section.

### ***My Theoretical Approach***

My argument concerning Rembrandt's paintings, blindness, sight and touch makes use of several different theoretical sources. The stance I take is part post-structural, part sensory theory and part iconography. With this eclectic approach I hope to show how the art works I discuss cannot be read as giving only one interpretation, but many. One of my aims is to show that each work I discuss leaves its original intention and as it becomes subject to various interpretations over time. This consequently changes the meaning of the art works too.

In part the perspective I take towards Rembrandt's work could be called deconstruction, a theoretical approach developed by French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). Deconstruction explores how knowledge and concepts are founded. Within this theory structures are exposed, and what we consider to have a deep truth or universal meaning, is in fact revealed as a cultural construction. In short, Derrida aimed to show that a multiple array of truths exist rather than one singular one. Rembrandt's work seems especially susceptible to this concept of deconstruction and being tied to what are considered universal structures and beliefs; firstly, his contemporary status as 'artistic genius' often overshadows any reading we have of his work. What may once have been considered a preliminary sketch or an experimental work is now raised to the status of 'masterpiece'. In addition, what are often for many years considered quintessential Rembrandts are revealed to be by the hands of students in his workshop. This happened in 1985 when the highly praised

*Man with the Golden Helmet* turned out to be by a student of Rembrandt rather than his own hand.<sup>11</sup> Discoveries of new art works and new analysis of old ones are constantly undermining what scholars consider authentic pieces, while at the same time, begging the question of authenticity and signature work really means. If the *Man with the Golden Helmet* was a masterpiece before the discovery, is it not also one after, even if not by Rembrandt himself? Indeed it questions the idea of what the very meaning of ‘authentic’ is in the first place.

Secondly, Rembrandt’s work seems to illustrate Derrida’s *parergon* because it is elusive; the artist’s use of unprecedented iconography is perhaps one of the attractions of his work<sup>12</sup> and yet both defies and creates interpretation. Indeed Alpers reminds us that Rembrandt has been described as both a Universalist and internationally vague.<sup>13</sup> These constantly rising new developments and interpretations act to illustrate the very questioning of the structures Derrida himself tried to unravel. Although I cannot lay claim to revealing all the underlying structures that Rembrandt’s work is founded on, I hope to unearth some structures and conditions surrounding the art works I discuss. My aim is to show how interpretations of the art works often ‘blind’ scholars or the viewer to finding other meanings; such is our trust in the art institution and its scholarship. I have therefore selected a handful of theoretical ‘tools’ in order to expose a few of the presumptions made about three of Rembrandt’s paintings.

My main theoretical tools are Derrida’s concepts of *parergon* and *ruin*. Both concepts are used in one of his later projects, an art exhibition Derrida was invited to curate which came to be known as *Memoirs of the blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (*Mémoires d’Aveugle: l’autoportrait et autres ruines*). This exhibition allowed Derrida to choose from the Louvre’s collection of drawings in order to make a discourse. The project marked the beginning of a series of exhibitions which invited outsiders to curate, known as *Parti Pris*, or ‘*Taking Sides*’. The exhibition ran from October 1990 to January 1991 and drew on images of self-portraits, the blind, tears and the eye. Derrida’s exhibition contained an accompanying text, and it is this text, published in English in 1993, that I use. *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins* discusses the intertwining of blindness and vision, typically taking

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<sup>11</sup> Alpers opens her book on Rembrandt with this story about the reattribution of the *Man With the Golden Helmet* and the current state of Rembrandt studies. See Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Binstock. “Rembrandt's Paint.” *Anthropology and Aesthetics* (The president and Fellows of Harvard College), no. 36, *Factura* (Autumn 1999): 138-165, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20167480>, 63

<sup>13</sup> Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, 7.

two binary concepts, in order to show that the two are inseparable. By choosing blindness as his theme, Derrida was also undermining the idea of art as a visual medium. It is here we could place the two concepts of *parergon* and *ruin*, for each entail both seeing and a type of blindness, or the unseen.

*Parergon* first appeared in another text of Derrida's which also dealt with art, *The Truth in Painting* (1978). The *parergon* is a term which derived from 'para', meaning 'along the side of, or side by side', it is something extra to what lies inside the main body, but is connected to it in some way. 'Ergon' is Greek for work (of art) and was a term taken by Derrida from Immanuel Kant. *Parergon* in one sense is a frame; it marks the limits between the artwork and all that remains outside of it. But it is also part of the work. In this sense *paragon* also shows the relation of the outside of the work to its inside. Derrida investigates this idea of frame, arguing that our experience and interpretation of a work of art never comes from just inside of the work alone and in doing so also criticises Kant's third critique. Rather, according to Derrida, we bring something of ourselves, the context, history and culture to looking at and interpreting art. As Malcom Richards describes, "Derrida's concept of the frame is supple, suggesting through its allusions relations to larger ideas within his thought regarding cultural and academic institutions."<sup>14</sup> It is in this sense that I use Derrida's *parergon* concept; by questioning titles and categorisation of Rembrandt's works I aim to reveal that these limit the work. But in doing so I want to explain how the very meaning of Rembrandt's work has come as much as from outside of the work as from what lies on the canvas. In the case of painting titles, well-established names for Rembrandt works are in fact subjective name calling and only one possible interpretation. My aim is to show that other interpretations are possible and just as valid as those we accept as universally true.

Malcom Richards goes on to describe the *parergon* in terms of another Derridean term— the *parasite*. A parasite must attach itself to another organism, the host, to survive, either by feeding from it or to reproduce in it, or both. This relationship to the host can be both beneficial and lethal, "a parasite, in any case, corrupts the ideal of the permanent independent body". The idea of the parasite illustrates Derrida's concept of deconstruction because it is a concept of 'both/and', rather than 'neither nor'.<sup>15</sup> With this idea in mind, I also aim to show how Rembrandt's work relies on the scholarship which surrounds it as it tries to

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<sup>14</sup> Malcom Richards, *Derrida Unframed*, 33.

<sup>15</sup> Malcom Richards *Derrida Unframed* , 30-31.

define what each painting represents and thus give it meaning and status. At the same time however, I try to reveal that this very scholarship relies on Rembrandt's work. This is because concepts said to have evolved in Rembrandt's art have gone on to define future categorisation, authentication and explanations of other works of art. This is an approach American art historian, Michael Ann Holly has also discussed in her book *Past Looking* (1996).<sup>16</sup> Her discussion acknowledges the mutual exchange that happens between art and viewer, revealing the reliance of both parties on each other. Indeed, just as with Holly's argument, what the *parergon* illustrates is that there is no real autonomous work of art.

Derrida's concept of the *ruin* can be said to be connected with *parergon*. The *ruin* describes how an object or concept from the past becomes a ruin throughout time from the moment of its initial conception, and therefore subject to gathering meaning as time goes by. In fact the very term deconstruction conjures the image of a ruin, falling apart and revealing its foundations.<sup>17</sup> And as the work of art decays and becomes further from its point of origin, it not only decays, but in its incompleteness, also allows space for projection. Derrida explains that the "ruin is, rather, this memory open like an eye, or like the hole in a bone socket that lets you see without showing you anything *at all*, anything *of the all*" (Derrida's italics).<sup>18</sup> In not seeing everything we bring our ideas, mental ones that is— projections. These projections are contemporary to the onlooker, who puts his opinions, dreams and hopes onto the ruin. The information we no longer know about the artist, the conception of a work or the culture it was made in, becomes available to project the viewer's interpretations onto. Just as with a ruin of the Pantheon, we imagine the grandeur in which it once stood, trying to project contemporary knowledge on it in order to understand it and reconstruct the whole of ancient Rome through it. But it has also become a place which is identified with a holiday in Rome, a tourist attraction, and a place to take pictures. Therefore the ruin is an incomplete idea or object from the past open to today's reading.

Derrida takes the self-portrait in *Memoirs of the Blind* as a particular illustration of his theme of *ruin*. Every image that is made seems to testify to the presence of the creator, but at the same time marks only the absence of him. In fact in Derrida's discussion in *Memoirs of the Blind*, even the original concept of a work is a ruin. This is because from the moment of

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Ann Holly. *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image*. (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Malcom Richards, *Derrida Unframed*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 69.



seeing, what is represented in art is a memory of that which once was— the experience of seeing directly. In transforming what we have seen into marks on paper the thing we want to show becomes further from its origin; representation is never the original but just a part of what we have seen or experienced — fragments that remain. Further still what we remember is always subject to time, a memory of a past experience of looking:

In the beginning there is ruin. Ruin is that which happens to the image from the moment of the first gaze. Ruin is the self-portrait, this face looked at in the face as the memory itself, what remains of returns as a specter from the moment one first looks at oneself and a figuration is eclipsed.<sup>19</sup>

Understood this way the self-portrait is the ultimate *ruin* for Derrida; the human represented is destined to decay as much as the painting, the impossibility of seeing and drawing oneself at the same time means that one must always rely on a fragmented memory of a visual experience that has happened in the past, no matter how recent.

*Ruin* seems a fitting concept with which to think about blindness and sight. If we consider once again Barasch's discussion on the term *ate*, we find that the idea of blindness and ruin were once related. Perhaps this is because both concepts are incomplete and rely on a mental image in order to complete an activity of perception. In this sense we can also say that to project a meaning onto something from the past is also fuelled with a type of blindness, as this activity does not pertain to what is seen but rather something that comes from outside the work of art and its original context. This activity is something which happens to Rembrandt's works often, as I hope to show.

In discussing blindness one cannot avoid the discussion of touch and sight. It is in this sense that I also draw on what has been termed the 'sensory turn', or sensory studies.<sup>20</sup> This approach entails a review of history, art history as well as experience and making of art in light of all the senses.<sup>21</sup> Most often when the senses other than sight are referred to, they are put into an anti-ocularcentric discourse, that is to say, opposing to what they consider to be the sense which has been the dominant sense throughout history—sight. What I hope to shed

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<sup>19</sup> Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 68.

<sup>20</sup> See Mark Paterson,, Martin Dodge, and Sara MacKian, "Introduction: Placing Touch Within Social Theory and Empirical Study." In *Touching Space, Placing Touch*, edited by Mark Paterson and Martin Dodge, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012), David Melcher and Francesca Bacci, "Editors' Introduction." In *Art and the Senses*, edited by Francesca Bacci and David Melcher, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011),. and David Howes "The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies." *sensorystudies.org*. V.1.0, August 2013, (accessed: 14 May, 2014, <http://www.sensorystudies.org/sensorial-investigations/the-expanding-field-of-sensory-studies/>) for examples.

<sup>21</sup> Howes "The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies."

some light on is that art history and discussion around sight and art, is and was rarely about seeing in the sense we might consider it.

Utilising Derrida's concepts of *ruin*, *parergon* and with the 'sensory turn' in mind, I view the artworks I discuss from both a historical and contemporary perspective. In viewing the paintings as historical objects I investigate why the picture was made, for whom, and how, as well as how they might have been seen to the viewer of the seventeenth-century. However in interpreting the artwork as a contemporary object, that is historical object as we experience today I take into account not only some of the information that has been accumulated since the painting's conception, but also how one experiences each painting today. In this sense each artwork has allowed me to go back and forth from the moment of its conception to present time, exploring the wide variety of information the artwork can give us now.

Lastly, by writing about the theme of blindness in Rembrandt's work, I am also subjecting myself and the reader to a type of blindness. As K. Malcom Richards reminds us "deconstruction reveals that there is no innocent eye".<sup>22</sup> In choosing the theme of blindness, sight and touch I am closing doors to the other possible readings the works hold. Further still in concentrating on Rembrandt's work only, and more particularly, the selected paintings and the scholarship surrounding them, I also turn a 'blind eye' to all the other work by Rembrandt as well as all the other artists who present blindness, touch, and sight as a theme in their work.

This idea of 'turning a blind eye' is illustrated with my first discussion of Rembrandt's *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer*. By exploring previous readings of the famous painting, I find where scholars have 'turned a blind eye' to elements of the painting, leading them to another conclusion about the painting than the one I will come to. Of course my conclusion illustrates the case once more, and in my exploration of blindness, sight and touch, I also choose to overlook all the other potential readings this ambiguous painting has to offer.

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<sup>22</sup> Malcom Richards, *Derrida Unframed*, 60.

## 2. Touch: Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer



Figure 1: *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer* (1665). Rembrandt.

*Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer* (figure 1) shows a man dressed in a large hat, loose white smock and dark over clothes. Draped over the figure's right shoulder is a golden chain, from which hangs a medallion.<sup>23</sup> On the figure's left hand he wears a gold ring, which, along

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<sup>23</sup> Although the figure on this medallion has been described as unidentifiable (see Margaret Deutsch Carroll, "Rembrandt's 'Aristotle': Exemplary Beholder." *Artibus et Historiae* (IRSA) 5, no. 10 (1984): 35-56.) 46. Art historian Julius Held has suggested it is a medallion of Alexander the Great (see Held, *Rembrandt Studies*, 1991, 30-31). Alexander the Great was a student of Aristotle and it is generally agreed that the man in this painting is Aristotle, although some exceptions on this matter exist, see for example Paul Crenshaw, *Rembrandt's Bankruptcy: The Artist, his Patrons, and the Art World in Seventeenth-Century Netherlands*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

with the golden chain catches the light. While his left hand is placed on his hip with the chain in-between his fingers, his right hand rests on a bust of Homer. These busts, together with a small mirror behind it in the shadows, are the only artefacts displayed on the table.<sup>24</sup> Aristotle and the bust of Homer share the centre focus of the painting and are both well-lit, contrasting to the dark background which is a type of drapery. This darkened drapery only gives us a glimpse of what lies behind it: a large pile of anonymous books, which we see through a small opening to the left of the composition.

The painting was a piece originally made for Sicilian nobleman Don Antonio Ruffo, an avid art admirer and collector. No documentation exists regarding the original commission of the piece and it is therefore commonly presumed that Rembrandt chose the subject of the painting as Ruffo probably specified no more than for Rembrandt to paint a philosopher.<sup>25</sup> The painting was completed in 1653 and is called for the first time an ‘Aristotle’ in a 1662 copy of the shipping documents from 1654 and is later recorded in a catalogue of Ruffo’s collection in 1678 as *Aristotele con la mano diritta sopra una testa*<sup>26</sup> (*Aristotle with his right hand over a head*). However, original documents and more recent discussion concerning the piece show the identity of the figure in this masterpiece has not always been ‘Aristotle’. Actually, the uncertainty of who the figure is and of the purpose of the painting seems to have been the attraction of this artwork.

### ***Blinded by the Title***

A concrete idea of what this painting actually represents has never been agreed on. Despite this, the painting goes by a title which suggests a decided subject. In this sense it could be said that this painting presents us with another type of ‘blindness’ in which its title stops us

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<sup>24</sup> Carroll, “Rembrandt’s Exemplary Beholder”, 40 : “Although Rembrandt’s Aristotle, too, is seen with traditional attributes of learning – the antique bust, books and a mirror on the table – this painting stands apart from previous representations of collectors and scholars, precisely by virtue of the primacy Rembrandt now gives to the sculpture as the philosopher’s attention.”

<sup>25</sup> See Held *Rembrandt Studies*, 26-27, 121: “Whatever thoughts went into the creation of the work, they were not shaped by the wishes or instructions of the Italian collector”. See also note 38. In “Rembrandt’s Artful Use of Statues and Casts: New Insights into his Studio Practices and Working Methods”, (Phd Diss: Temple University Libraries, 2008). The author also notes that “scholars agree that more likely, as was the case with his [Ruffo] commissions of Italian artists, Ruffo gave Rembrandt the freedom to choose his own subject”.

<sup>26</sup> Corrado Ricci in Held, *Rembrandt Studies*, 26. See also Theodore Rousseau, “*Aristotle contemplating the bust of Homer*”, in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Vol XX No. 5, 1962, 152.

from investigating further what other possibilities the painting can offer. In an attempt to give this picture iconographical interpretation and thus give it a name, we see how *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer* has perhaps become ‘victim’ to what Svetlana Alpers calls an *Italian bias*, because as she argues “northern images do not disguise meaning or hide it beneath the surface, but rather show that meaning by its very nature is lodged in what the eye can take in— however deceptive that might be”.<sup>27</sup> A closer look at the history of this painting shows that in fact art historians have struggled to give this work a title and truly define what it represents ever since its conception. In fact the title we know this painting by today, *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer*, was given as recently as 1936 by the Dutch art historian Abraham Bredius in his book *The Paintings of Rembrandt*.<sup>28</sup> Art historian Julius Held also found the subject and title of this painting problematic and spoke about his opposition to the current title in his book *Rembrandt Studies*. He saw the title as ‘ambiguous’, whilst “by seeming to formulate the theme of the picture precisely, it [the title] acts to block to further inquiries”.<sup>29</sup>

The history of the painting reveals that the subject has always been uncertain and early seventeenth-century documentation shows that even the buyer, Ruffo himself, was unsure of the subject of the painting. When the painting was first registered in the Ruffo collection, in September 1654, it is referred to as a “Half-length figure of a philosopher made in Amsterdam by the painter named Rembrandt (it seems to be an Aristotle or an Albertus Magnus)”, later on in 1657 another document describes it as a painting of Albertus Magnus.<sup>30</sup>

Albertus Magnus, or Saint Albert the Great, was both a philosopher and Dominican bishop who was best known as the teacher of Thomas Aquinas and as interpreter of Aristotelian philosophy.<sup>31</sup> In addition he was a key figure in establishing science as a study of nature through observation and the senses. Albertus Magnus also wrote about physiognomy and phrenology, or the appearance of the body and the feeling of the head to decipher the

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<sup>27</sup> Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth-Century*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983.) xxiv

<sup>28</sup> Held, *Rembrandt Studies* 1991, 18

<sup>29</sup> He believed that the object of Aristotle’s attention was not on the bust alone, but also on the golden chain he holds in his left hand. Therefore, for Held it was the object that Aristotle contemplated on, not the subject doing the contemplating, which posed limits. See Held, *Rembrandt Studies* 1991,18. However, this painting has also led others to question the word ‘contemplating’ and more recently, take up once more the activity of questioning the protagonist of Rembrandt’s piece, see for example Crenshaw. *Rembrandt's Bankruptcy*., 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Held, *Rembrandt Studies*, 26 see also Walter L. Strauss, and Marjon Van Der Meulen. *The Rembrandt Documents*. (New York: Abaris Books Inc, 1979), 320.

<sup>31</sup> Held, *Rembrandt Studies*, 26

character of the person.<sup>32</sup> Thus he would have been a philosopher who would have considered touch a valid source of knowledge. It is in this light that he plays a role in the early interpretation of Rembrandt's painting.

In 1660 correspondence between the Italian painter Guercino (1591-1666) and Ruffo, we find that the Italian painter is asked to paint a companion piece to Rembrandt's painting. No specific subject of Rembrandt's painting is mentioned however. Rather, it appears as if Guercino was asked to suggest one. Eventually, after seeing some drawings of Rembrandt's painting Guercino suggests the following: "As for the figure in half-length, as a counterpart to Rembrandt's, which in my opinion represents a Philosopher, I thought it quite fitting to transform it into a Cosmographer".<sup>33</sup> The cosmographer Guercino produced to compliment Rembrandt's piece survives today in the form of a drawing and shows a bearded man touching a globe with his hands and a measuring device, mirroring the touching of the head in Rembrandt's painting (figure 2). The philosopher in Rembrandt's piece was therefore identified as one who would have used touch to seek knowledge, probably referring to either a treatise on physiognomy then attributed to Aristotle, or Albertus Magnus' work<sup>34</sup> Guercino's cosmographer would have represented the macrocosm and knowledge obtained from the world beyond earth, whilst the philosopher would have represented the microcosm, knowledge obtained from the human head. Guercino's interpretation of a philosopher who attained understanding through the act of touch seemed to be perfectly acceptable reading for Ruffo.<sup>35</sup>



Figure 2: Drawing of *Cosmographer* (1660) Guercino.

<sup>32</sup> *Oxford Index*, 'Albert the Great'. 2014. accessed 22 May, 2014 <http://oxfordindex.oup.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095400113>.

<sup>33</sup> Strauss and Van Der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents*, 460.

<sup>34</sup> Held, *Rembrandt Studies*, 20-21 As Held notes, this treatise is no longer recognised as Aristotle's work. However, this may also be the reason for the suggestion of Albertus Magnus, who was also a key figure in explaining the works of Aristotle.

<sup>35</sup> The suggestion of physiognomist is put forward by Strauss and Van Der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents*, and this is held by all who discuss these documents.



## *The Sense of Touch*

Interestingly, it appears as if many of those who have since studied this painting without knowledge of any title have followed Guercino's line of thought and translated this gesture of the philosopher towards the bust as one of touch.<sup>36</sup> Julius Held, in trying to formulate an understanding to the precedence of the iconography 'a man touching a bust', goes through the many possibilities of the meaning of this gesture. In doing so he refers to multiple pictures which occur both before and after this one, concluding that "the placing of a hand on a sculptured head is clearly a pictorial *topos*"<sup>37</sup> Although a 'pictorial *topos*' the meaning of the actual gesture remains quite



Figure 3: *The Sense of Touch*. (1615-1616)  
Jusepe de Ribera

uncertain and Held then lists the many meanings that can be taken from the gesture, which range from ownership and intimacy to a show of interest in a master's work of the past. In paintings where the sitter rests his hand on a skull, the gesture of touch can show awareness of one's mortality. However, Held comes to no conclusions when it comes to this painting.

Nonetheless, Held goes on to hint in a footnote that there may be a more general theme to this painting— "the concept of the sense of touch".<sup>38</sup> His exhaustive discussion lasting four pages on the meaning of this gesture alone seems to prove his point. Just as Guercino did, Held suggests that a possible subject could be touch and refers to Spanish painter Jusepe de Ribera's *The Sense of Touch* to illustrate this possibility (figure 3).<sup>39</sup> As if to support Guercino and Held's hypothesis further, Svetlana Alpers also finds touch the key theme in this painting. She probes further the problem of this painting's title and the presumptions it leads to, reminding her reader that "we are so used to the title of *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer* that we tend to ignore the fact that Rembrandt makes the

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<sup>36</sup> For examples of this reading see Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*; Held, *Rembrandt Studies*, and Carroll, "Rembrandt's Exemplary Beholder".

<sup>37</sup> Held, *Rembrandt Studies*, 41

<sup>38</sup> Held, *Rembrandt Studies*, 40, fn 89.

<sup>39</sup> Held, *Rembrandt Studies*, 40, fn 89.

philosopher's relationship to that great writer he so admired a matter of touch".<sup>40</sup> The touch with a hand also aligns with a much easier identifiable pictorial topos. Despite touch not being located in one part of the body, the hand is one of the more traditional symbols for the sense of touch, dating back from medieval imagery.<sup>41</sup>

It appears that the search for the identity of the man and the decisive title identifying him as *Aristotle contemplating a Bust of Homer* has stopped us looking at what is actually in the painting. Art historian, Martha Gyllenhaal, points out in her recent paper on Rembrandt's work, that the interest in the identification of the figure in this painting "did not hold the fascination in Rembrandt's time that it does today, [as] Ruffo's attitude, that the painting depicts some sort of philosopher, indicates that the generic subject of melancholy genius, quite common in the seventeenth century, should suffice".<sup>42</sup> Whether 'melancholic genius', Aristotle or Magnus, one thing is certain touch is one of the main themes of this painting and this reading was satisfactory for Ruffo. It appears that in trying to name the picture, or specifically identify its characters, we seem to have missed one of the main themes altogether. The man in this picture, although perhaps not blind, certainly does not 'see', both Held and Alpers testify to this.<sup>43</sup> Instead we are presented with a man who 'contemplates' with his hands, while his eyes, instead of looking, are glazed over as if in deep thought. It seems apparent that whether intended or not, touch has a prominent role to play in this painting. In fact I too also connected Rembrandt's painting with Ribera's *Sense of Touch* because touch features so prominently in both paintings.

### ***Blind Men in Seventeenth-Century Visual Culture***

Jusepe de Ribera's *The Sense of Touch* (1615-16) seems to belong to a topos found in paintings and drawings executed in the seventeenth century (figure 3). Other examples can be seen in Ribera's *The Blind Sculptor* (1632), Luca Giordano's *The Blind Man*, a drawing from

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<sup>40</sup> Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, 25.

<sup>41</sup> Carl Nordenfolk. "The Five Senses in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art." In *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 48 (1985): 1-22, 4-6.

<sup>42</sup> Martha Gyllenhaal. "Rembrandt's Artful Use of Statues and Casts: New Insights into his Studio Practices and Working Methods", (Phd Diss: Temple University Libraries, 2008), 132.

<sup>43</sup> Held, *Rembrandt Studies*, 18. Held argues against previous scholars who have claimed that Aristotle looks at the bust in 'silent conversation'.



the school of Guercino and a now lost painting by Dutch artist Livio Mehus. Each depicts a blind man touching a bust, sometimes accompanied by a painting too.



Figure 4: The Blind Sculptor (1632).  
Jusepe de Ribera

They have been related to the ancient blind philosophers such as the sceptic Carneades from the school of Plato (214–129/8 B.C.E) and even portraits of Giovanni Gonnelli di Gambassi, a blind sculptor described in a biography by Baldinucci (figure 4).<sup>44</sup> Although most pictures have been understood as illustrating other subjects, art historian Peter Hecht believes that they illustrate the theme of *paragone*, and he notes that most works, which illustrate or respond to the debate rarely go by that title.

Hecht provides us with further examples such as Gian Girolamo Savoldo's *Portrait of Gaston de Foix*, Theodoor Rombout's *The Five Senses* or even Titian's *La Schiavona*.<sup>45</sup> For Hecht these paintings all respond to the *paragone*, the literary genre of the comparison of the arts, but go by misleading titles. If Rembrandt's *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer* displays touch as its subject, then it can be argued that this painting also makes an argument in the *paragone* and goes by a just as misleading title as the works mentioned above. I am not suggesting here that the philosopher in Rembrandt's painting here is blind, however, touch is indicated as a general theme in this painting, and therefore *Aristotle* could be placed in this group. This appears even more apparent when we take into account that in the seventeenth century the comparison of the senses and the comparison of the arts went hand in hand.<sup>46</sup>



Figure 5: The Blind Man of Gambassi.  
Livio Mehus

<sup>44</sup> Alfonso E. Sánchez Pérez and Nicola Spinosa, . *Jusepe de Ribera 1591-1652*. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 98 and, Delphine Fitz Derby "Ribera and the Blind Men." *The Art Bulletin* : College Art Association, 39, no. 3 (Sept 1957): 195-217, 200-201. See also *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* "Carneades", 4 Oct 2011) .

<sup>45</sup> Hecht, Peter. "The Paragone Debate: Ten Illustrations and a Comment." *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly For the History of Art*. Stichting voor Nederlandse Kunsthistorische Publicaties, 14, no. 2 (1984): 125-136) 127

## *A Comparison of the Arts*

What came to be known as the *paragone*, a comparison of the arts, began with Leonardo da Vinci's writings in the first part of the *Codex Vaticanus Urbinas 1270* (dating from around the middle of the sixteenth century). One reason this debate began was due to the campaign to raise art to a higher status amongst the more established liberal arts.<sup>47</sup> Leonardo's treatise argued for Painting's supremacy over the other arts: sculpture, music and poetry.<sup>48</sup> The debate dates from as early as the sixteenth century where we find comparison of the arts and discussion concerning which art was noblest. These ideas were spread further by Italian writer Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Libro del Cortegiano* or *Book of the Courtier* published later in 1528. This book repeated many of Leonardo's arguments for painting and disseminated the idea of rivalry between the arts. Italian writer and artist Giorgio Vasari also picked up on the comparison or rivalry between the arts in his *Lives*, and in his second edition, published in 1568, he tries to settle the rivalry between sculpture and painting by arguing that both are based on the concept of *disegno*.<sup>49</sup> The *paragone* continued in Italy well into the seventeenth century as illustrated by the previously mentioned sketch attributed to the school of Guercino (c.1591-1660). However the comparison of the arts meant also a comparison of the senses as Jodi Cranston explains, "the operations of the senses, especially sight, and their role in judgement receive considerable attention in Renaissance discussions on the arts" and according to her, Leonardo's treatise from the *Codex Latinus* "elaborates a comprehensive theory, derived in part from late medieval psychology, on the relationship of the five senses".<sup>50</sup> It is in this setting that we find the blind man representing what Moshe Barasch terms as the blind man in his "value-free" context. That is the blind man without any other meaning than someone whose vision is excluded.<sup>51</sup> Initially the blind man is used in an argument for sculpture as the art which can be appreciated by touch whilst painting is

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<sup>46</sup> Moshe Barasch. *Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in Western Thought*. London: Routledge, 2001, 139; Jodi Cranston. "The Touch of the Blind Man: The phenomenology of Vividness in Italian Renaissance Art." In *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey, 224-242. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 2003, 225 and Andrea Bolland. "Desidero and Diletto: Vision, Touch and the Poetics of Bernini's Apollo and Daphne." *The Art Bulletin* 82, no. 2, College Art Association (June 2000): 309-330, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3051379>, 309

<sup>47</sup> Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Blind Spot: An Essay on the Relations between Painting and Sculpture in the Modern Age*. Translated by Chris Miller. (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute), 2008,5.

<sup>48</sup> Hecht, "The Paragone Debate", 1984 and chapter 1 of Claire J. Farago's *Leonardo da Vinci's 'Paragone': A Critical Interpretation with a new edition and English translation of the text in the Codex Urbinas*. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992). *Paragone* is a term which came much later than Leonardo's writings.

<sup>49</sup> Farago, *Leonardo da Vinci's 'Paragone'*, 19-20.

<sup>50</sup> Cranston, "The Touch of the Blind Man", 225.

<sup>51</sup> Barasch, *Blindness*, 140.

reserved for sight only and we see this subject appear, not only in art, such as Jusepe de Ribera's painting and Luca Giordano's *The Philosopher Carneades*, but also in literature on the comparison of the arts such as in the writings of Italian architect Mazenta who claimed that Leonardo even staged such a comparison between sculpture and painting with the touch of a blind man.<sup>52</sup>

### *Painting's Role in Paragone*

However, one may ask why Leonardo, a man who argued for painting, would stage such a comparison when the blind man would only be able to recognise the art of sculpture. Indeed why are these paintings, which celebrate sculpture's tactility, even shown in the two-dimensional form of painting? And particularly for Rembrandt as a painter, why would he here make touch the theme of his painting when it is sight that is needed to appreciate it? Looking at a drawing from the school of Guercino, *Della Scoltura, si. Della Pittura, No*, we may understand why. Not only does this drawing serve to illustrate the type of paragone demonstration, but we can also perhaps understand the rhetoric surrounding it, explaining how a blind figure might serve a painter.



Figure 6: *Della Scoltura Si, Della Pittura No*. (Seventeenth century. School of Guercino.)

In Derrida's discussion of this picture he uses a quote of eighteenth-century artist and writer, Jonathon Richardson, to show to us how such a demonstration may have functioned in favour of painting:

But if the blind man's mute fingers indicate "yes" to sculpture and "no" to painting, speech is enough to invert things— and to convert them. Speech, which is to say rhetoric.

*It has been much disputed which is the most Excellent of the two Arts, Sculpture, or painting, and there is a story of its having been left to the determination of a Blind man, who gave it in*

<sup>52</sup> Geraldine A, Johnson, "The Art of Touch in Early Modern Italy." In *Art and the Senses*, ed. Francesca Bacci and David Melcher, 61-84. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 65.

*favour of the Latter, being told that what by Feeling seem'd to him to be flat, appear'd to the Eye as round as its competitor.*<sup>53</sup>

Therefore it is painting's ability to create the illusion of three-dimensional space which makes it the nobler art. The idea that it can emulate something without emulating its forms is in this sense the triumph of painting, and what these paintings and anecdotes concerning the blind prove. But to try and champion sculpture through the means of painting, its rival art does seem rather puerile. Peter Hecht also makes note of this irony of representing sculpture in painting for the painter. He points out that artists were well aware of the paradox. Whilst earlier artists such as Savoldo and Titian attempted to make a constructive argument to the comparison of the arts, he believes that later artists, such as Ribera "satirised a truly ludicrous "philosophical" stand point which had emerged from the learned discussions, namely that sculpture was reality and autonomous creation, while painting was mere imitation and deception. Even a blind man could recognise and enumerate the details of a statue through his sense of touch".<sup>54</sup> Despite this the paragone continued, although often sometimes in folly. It is perhaps in this sense that we can understand some of the work of Gerard Dou, a contemporary to and previous student of Rembrandt. He shows the abilities of painting to imitate the other arts, for example music in his *Violinist*, But the picture can of course never emulate the music of a musician In another picture he shows how painting can imitate sculpture by painting base relief in his paintings in order to contrast them with the 'actual' scene above. As Hecht points out, often the sculpted relief reflects what is happening in the 'real life' depiction, as for example in *A Young Woman emptying a Vessel at the Window* where water is being poured both in the relief and over the relief by the woman in the main scene, in order to show the arts that painting can allude to. In doing so artists like Dou illustrated Dutch writer Philips Angel's comments in *In Praise of the Art of Painting*, which argue that painting is "far more general" and "capable of imitating nature much more copiously" as opposed to sculpture.<sup>55</sup> Nether-the less, the emulating seems to be done in gest rather than serious argument. Perhaps it is here that we can position Rembrandt's painting, not only in the realm of the *paragone* debate, but also in the sense that painting is able to emulate the other arts, and perhaps even appeal to the other senses.

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<sup>53</sup> Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 43 with quote form Jonathon Richardson's "An Argument in Behalf of a Connoisseur" in *Two Discourses* of 1719.

<sup>54</sup> Hecht, "The Paragone Debate", 127.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Hecht. "Art Beats Nature, and Painting Does so Best of All: The Paragone Competition in Duquesnoy, Dou and Schalcken." *Similios: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* (Stichting voor Nederlandse Kunsthistorische Publicaties) 29, no. 3/4 (2002): 184-201, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3780934>, 194.

The *paragone* debate becomes exported to other parts of Europe and inevitably influences northern Europe too. As Peter Hecht's explains in his essay on the artists Duquesnoy, Dou and Schalken, "The idea of painting and sculpture competing would not have needed much of an introduction amongst seventeenth-century artists and connoisseurs. The relevant points of the so-called *paragone* debate were common ground in Italy as well as in Dou's Leiden, where Philips Angel spoke about them in these very years, and we find them in Ghent too".<sup>56</sup> Just as in Italy, the comparison of the arts also meant a comparison of the senses. And we find paintings like Theodoor Rombouts' *The Five Senses* take up the subject of different arts and the various senses needed to appreciate them with.

The *paragone* was very much alive in the Netherlands around the seventeenth-century, particularly around the time when Rembrandt produced this painting in 1654 and there is good reason to believe that Rembrandt may have been involved in such discussions. In fact other scholars have also connected the *Aristotle* painting to a *paragone* debate, showing that Dou was not alone in contributing to the argument for painting as the noblest art. Art historians Paul Crenshaw and Martha Gyllenhaal have related this painting, although for different reasons, to the comparison of the arts and the celebrations of the Guild of Saint Luke with poetry and sculpture held in 1653 and 1654 respectively. For Crenshaw, Aristotle presents an alliance between poetry and painting, showing the great painter Apelles rather than Aristotle. In his interpretation of the painting the great painter from antiquity relates to the great poet, Homer, showing poetry and painting's alliance. For Gyllenhaal Rembrandt's representation of Aristotle celebrates painting's ability to bring sculpture to life and therefore competes with sculpture. According to Gyllenhaal, Dou displays the abilities of paint to emulate the other arts, so too does Rembrandt in this painting. According to her analysis of the painting Rembrandt makes use of several pieces of sculpture and casts from his collection in order to render them as if human flesh, and therefore demonstrating the painter's ability to create life from lifeless forms.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Hecht, "Art Beats Nature, and Painting Does so Best of All", 194

<sup>57</sup> Martha Gyllenhaal. "Rembrandt's Artful Use of Statues and Casts": In particular chapter 4 'Rembrandt and Paragone'

## *A Sense of Tactility*

*Aristotle* could fall into this category of *paragone* paintings in which painting is, in an indirect way, championed as the most commendable art because of its ability to translate three-dimensional forms into two dimensions, thus creating an illusion, just as Gyllenhaal suggests, and as Dou demonstrates. In this case Rembrandt's painting would be making a case for touch, but in painting. In fact *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer* makes a stronger case for the sense of touch than at first appears. Apart from the gesture that the philosopher uses towards the bust we find other signs that touch is an important element to this painting.

Firstly, the *Aristotle* painting presents us with a mirror lying on the table behind the bust of Homer. In Dutch seventeenth-century painting highly reflective objects are often exploited for their ability to reflect what's around them in a strange and deformed manner. A contemporary and student to Rembrandt, Gerard Dou, provides us with an example: in his *Poulterer's Shop* (1670) a metal bucket in the foreground reflects the objects placed around it (figure 7). Dou does it again in *A Woman at her Toilette* (1667), in which the mirror is used to show what we otherwise wouldn't be able to see. Another Dutch painter contemporary to Rembrandt, David Bailly, uses the device in his *Still Life* (1651); there we see a tiny box used to reflect the sitter and the window behind him. For these artists the mirror is a perfect excuse to display both the painter and painting's abilities. Rembrandt, however, refuses



Figure 7: *Poulterer's Shop* (1670). Gerard Dou

to play this game. The mirror in this painting is a hand mirror, designed to be picked up and be handled. Further still, it reveals no reflection, rather it lays unused on the table in the shadows. The mirror is traditionally an attribute to the sense of sight dating from the middle ages, but here it is ignored.<sup>58</sup> Rembrandt appears to want us to see this element but by hiding it in the shadows he makes it clear that the mirror is not the main focus of the painting. It is as if he wants us to be aware of the sense of sight, perhaps to keep it in mind, when considering

<sup>58</sup> See Nordenfolk "The Five Senses in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art", 2 and Hecht, "The Paragone Debate", 132. Hecht notes that at this time the mirror is the second attribute of sight after spectacles.



the sense with touch, or perhaps he is even asking us to blur the distinction between the senses, or asking us to compare the two. Nether the less, what is clear is that the traditional sense of sight, considered as the noblest now takes subordinate place.

The painting also shows a pile of books and we see that the depiction of the books also makes for a similar comparison. The titles of these books are not for reading. They do in fact deny a clear idea of what they are or why they are piled at the back of the drapery. In seventeenth-century Northern painting, books are normally depicted in great detail. In Gerard Dou's painting of an *Old Woman Reading* (c.1631) we can almost read the text along with her (or at least the headings to each page). The indistinctive features of Rembrandt's books could be likened to another of Rembrandt's paintings *The Prophetess Hanna* of 1631. Alpers describes the book in the painting of *Anna*, saying: "Rembrandt intentionally leaves the text, which is unillustrated, illegible. Hard as we look, we cannot make out a word"<sup>59</sup>. We discover the same here; the depiction of the books denies us of the type of visual information we would normally expect of a book. Instead we are given an impression of the textures of the binding and the worn leafed through pages.

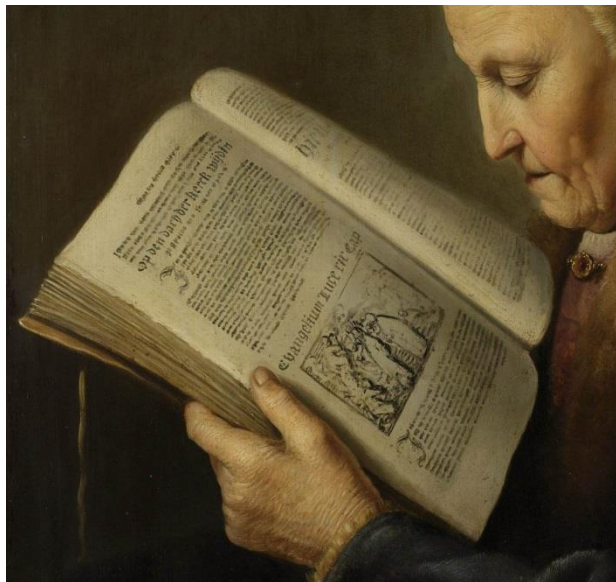


Figure 3a and 8b: *The Prophetess Hannah* (1631) Rembrandt and to the right a detail of *Old Woman Reading* (c.1631). Dou.

<sup>59</sup> Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, 1988, 24.

Books, as well as communicating through sight, have also held a rather tactile function, as Mark Smith explains: “books – have not always been wholly visual in nature. Books, from their inception, held a profoundly tactile quality. Books were, and are, held, carried, opened, thumbed, fingered and stroked”.<sup>60</sup> It appears as if *Prophetess Hanna* ‘reads’ the book with her hands rather than her eyes, and it is as if we are also required to do so in *Aristotle*. These books invite a tactile sense rather than just a visual one. Further still, recent studies which compare use of actual books with e-books show how the paper book’s physical presence as an object which can be both seen and felt is something which helps us to remember and even accrue knowledge.<sup>61</sup> Thus their tactility is just as imperative as their visual quality.

We should also note that the drapery behind the philosopher points to the same line of thinking when compared to other contemporary paintings. Again, a comparison to Gerard Dou’s work shows a distinct difference in usage. Where Dou often uses a drapery or a curtain pulled back to reveal a world as far as the eye can see (see for example *Woman at her Toilette* 1667 or his *Self-Portrait with Book and Pipe* c.1650), Rembrandt uses the drapery to cover the background and take away any opportunity of seeing further in the painting’s space. For Rembrandt the drapery functions as a possibility to obscure rather than expand our vision. We could in fact identify the drapery, or curtain, as a reference to a tradition in visual illusion, referring to the story found in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* in which two great artists, Zeuxis and Parrhasius, compete in order to find the best painter. Zeuxis paints grapes so real that are able to deceive the birds. However, Parrhasius is named the best painter when Zeuxis tries to pull back a curtain to reveal Parrhasius’ art work but instead finds the curtain is in fact a painted one.<sup>62</sup> Parrhasius is the greater artist for his ability to trick the eye of man rather than just the animals. Notably here, it is the sense of touch in this story which reveals the truth or illusion, showing this sense’s importance in revealing the true knowledge. If Rembrandt’s intention was to refer to this famous story then it puts Rembrandt’s piece in a very different light to his contemporaries who aimed to fool the eye as Parrhasius did.

Finally, the receiver of the gesture of touch should also be noted. All scholars agree that this is a cast of a bust of Homer, after a well-known type. Rembrandt in fact owned one as

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<sup>60</sup> Mark. M.Smith. *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 97.

<sup>61</sup> Szalavitz, Maia. “Do E-Books Make It Harder to Remember What You Just Read?” *Time*, 14 March 2012. accessed 7 May, 2014, <http://healthland.time.com/2012/03/14/do-e-books-impair-memory/>.

<sup>62</sup> Pliny. ‘Natural History book XXXV’ quoted in Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* trans. Jacks, Philip (New York : Modern Library, 2005) note 28.



part of his collection of curiosities and these props often featured in his paintings.<sup>63</sup> It is well known that Homer was not only the great poet but also “the most famous blind figure in antiquity”;<sup>64</sup> his blindness allows him to become the infamous bard who possesses inner visions and inspiration. In addition Homer’s blindness would of course entail touching to see. Further still he is represented here in sculpture, an art which not only appeals to the sense of touch as we have seen, but an art form recognised as one which cannot see, incapable of recreating ‘the gaze’ and therefore any interaction between the sitter and spectator. A typical sculpted head does indeed lack pupils and any colour in the eyes, often hollowed out or presented as plain white spheres.<sup>65</sup> In fact, according to the philosopher Jaqueline Lichtenstein, the eighteenth-century philosopher Denis Diderot believed that the sculptor had no choice than to leave the observer imagining the sitter blind.<sup>66</sup> With the ‘blind’ sculpture sitting in the forefront of this painting we can also imagine another layer to the *paragone* argument in which painting is the art which is able to return the gaze, stare back as it were. Whereas sculpture sits vacantly unable to exchange glances with its viewer.

In all of these elements we see that it is the texture of things and the activity of touching which is alluded to. And whilst Rembrandt focuses on the sense of touch here, we can only experience this painting through the sense of sight. Rather than follow the traditional argument of the *paragone* as does Dou, we find that Rembrandt’s painting refers to the texture of things rather than just the look of things. In fact it could be argued that it is painting’s ability to appeal to the sense of touch makes it a successful painted illusion.

### ***Touch as Presence***

In Jodi Cranston’s essay ‘The Touch of a Blind Man’ she notes that in the original *paragone* discussion of Leonardo da Vinci, “touch only enters Leonardo’s writings when the sense [touch] assists sight”<sup>67</sup> and this may be crucial in understanding Rembrandt’s painting. Cranston discusses how connotations of touch in Renaissance literature serve as metaphors of

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<sup>63</sup> Strauss and Van Der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents*, 365.

<sup>64</sup> Barasch, *Blindness*, 41

<sup>65</sup> Although ancient sculptures were often painted or had inlaid stones for eyes, this was not common knowledge in the seventeenth century.

<sup>66</sup> Lichtenstein, *The Blind Spot*, 86-92.

<sup>67</sup> Cranston, “The Touch of the Blind Man”, 226.

accessibility, presence, and visibility. It is in this sense that that “touch appears paired with sight as senses that ascertain presence and existence”.<sup>68</sup>

This idea of tactility in painting was particularly relevant for portraits which were able to evoke the presence of a person no longer present. Portraits therefore provoked a more intimate touch, enabling one to feel closer to a loved one. A story told by Leonardo da Vinci in his discussion on *paragone* does indeed note that painting has tactile qualities for this very reason, and therefore triumphs over poetry, which appeals only to the sense of hearing. In Leonardo Da Vinci’s story Mathias Corvinus, king of Hungary, receives both a poem and painting of his wife for his birthday, but prefers the painting, explaining:

This picture serves a greater sense than yours, which is for the blind. Give me something I can see and touch, and not only hear, and do not criticize my decision to tuck your work [the poem] under my arm, while I take up that of the painter in both hands to place it before my eyes, because my hands acted spontaneously in serving the nobler sense- and this is not hearing<sup>69</sup>

Although Da Vinci saw sight as the nobler sense, (actually claiming the blind man to be living as though dead for being unable to perceive beauty)<sup>70</sup> touch is used as a support this way of experiencing painting, claiming that it appeals to more than just the sense of sight. According to this anecdote painting has the ability to bring those who are absent present. The king responds to the painting by touching and looking, as if she were with him herself— Just as the philosopher relates to Homer. It could even be argued that this gesture of touch, the making present those who are absent is what the philosopher here does. In touching the bust he acts to remember it and bring its memory closer.

### ***The Touchable Painting***

In Leonardo da Vinci’s story, the man takes the painting under the arm and treats it not only as representation but also as an object available for touch. In Svetlana Alpers opinion Rembrandt’s work also appeals to a sense of touch because of the way he layers paint on the surface of the canvas, alluding to the feel of things through a texturized paint. However, she underlines that while Rembrandt’s painting appeals to touch “[he] does not expect us to

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<sup>68</sup> Cranston , “The Touch of the Blind Man”, 229.

<sup>69</sup> This anecdote is found in *Codex Urbinas; Leonardo on Painting* quoted Cranston , “The Touch of the Blind Man”, 226.

<sup>70</sup> Cranston , “The Touch of the Blind Man”, 226.

actually touch a painting, as Constable is reported to have wished”.<sup>71</sup> We could argue that with the current changing view on the senses Rembrandt could have well accepted an admirer’s want to touch his paintings. To be sure Alpers also names Rembrandt as a sculptor *manqué*,<sup>72</sup> that is a would-be sculptor, and so hinting to a more sculptural function of Rembrandt’s paint work. In this light the painting would invite a more intimate experience in which one could relate to the painter. Therefore this act of touch in the painting could also act as an invitation to touch the painting, perhaps to feel the impasto of Rembrandt’s work in order to come close to the artist and his highly praised technique. In her essay ‘Touch in the Museum’ Constance Classen’s shows that this type of action or wish cannot be ruled out in the seventeenth century. As Classen discusses in her essay, the touching of artefacts and art works was not so uncommon up until the eighteenth century and at times was even expected. This goes not only for three-dimensional works such as sculptures and artefacts but also painting:

That three-dimensional objects such as artefacts or sculptures would be subjected to the manual attentions of museum visitors, could perhaps be expected. One might assume, however, that paintings, at least, would be left untouched. Surely all one can do with a painting is look at it. While paintings may not have attracted great tactile interest, however, they did not altogether escape handling. In fact, many of the same factors that motivated people to touch other museum exhibits also came into play with paintings. Visitors might touch a painting to ascertain its texture, to confirm what looked so real was in fact, flat, or simply to exercise their right to touch. They might touch a painting out of desire for closeness with the subject matter or the artist.<sup>73</sup>

Alpers in fact gives us an example of a man tracing the impasto on Constable’s *Hay Wain* who “closed his eyes and passed his fingers over the picture in order, as he said, to trace the forms of the impasto touches of the painter”.<sup>74</sup> This may have happened much later than the seventeenth century, but there is no reason to believe that Rembrandt’s painting would not have caused the same reaction. The gesture of the philosopher, as well as the tactility of the paint actually invites the viewer to touch the painting, experiencing it, not only visually, but also with one’s own hands.

Indeed, later in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although the sense of sight was primarily used to experience art, and particularly painting, it seems undoubted that touch was also used, Classen explains: “What seventeenth- and eighteenth-century visitors to

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<sup>71</sup> Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, 22

<sup>72</sup> Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, , 32

<sup>73</sup> Constance Classen. “Touch in the Museum.” In *The Book of Touch*, by Constance Classen, 275-286.( Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2005), 279

<sup>74</sup> Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, 128 note 17

museums did was undoubtedly look. The point is that they didn't just look. In fact looking and touching would seem to have been closely interrelated: one complemented the other".<sup>75</sup> With Aristotle being part of the private collection of Antonio Ruffo we can assume that this painting would have been available to touch by both its owner and those who visited, perhaps touching its surface in order to discuss how painterly effects were created.

The touching of paintings, particularly those which depicted sacred subjects, is not uncommon throughout history. Just as Classen notes, people might touch or kiss a painting in order to "provide a vicarious contact with the divine".<sup>76</sup> W.J.T Mitchell discusses this tactile use of paintings and provides us with a Byzantine icon of Christ as an example. This picture has become half erased by devotees who follow the inscription from Psalm 77 "Give heed, O my people to my law; incline your ear to the words of my mouth"<sup>77</sup>. The use of the image follows John of Damascus' advice "to embrace [images] with the eyes, the lips and the heart".<sup>78</sup> Accordingly touch acts as Leonardo described – to bring the absent subject close. Rembrandt's painting also testifies to an absence, that is that of the painter. Surely art lovers would have also tried to recreate Rembrandt's presence with a gesture of touch towards on the canvas.

### ***Contemplating the Blind***

In appealing to the feel of things instead of the look of them Rembrandt may also be illustrating another quite different *paragone* argument. As Jacqueline Lichtenstein has shown, the *paragone* debate evolved throughout time and from place to place. Lichtenstein discusses how in late seventeenth century and eighteenth-century France the *paragone*, although continuing the same arguments of painting versus sculpture, sight versus touch, changed its purpose. In sixteenth-century Italy it was about raising the status of the artist, but later in France the focus changes, as Lichtenstein explains:

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<sup>75</sup> Classen, "Touch in the Museum", 280.

<sup>76</sup> Classen "Touch in the Museum", 279.

<sup>77</sup> The desecration of images and in particular here of a Byzantine icon of Christ ( in an illuminated manuscript of Psalms and New Testament(D.O. MS 3) from the Byzantine Collection at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington DC) is discussed by W. J. T. Mitchell in *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).42.

<sup>78</sup> John of Damascus quoted in Mitchell *What Do Images Want?*, 39.

There are many reasons for this divergence, first and foremost the fact that their motion of vision was necessarily somewhat different. The new physics, developments in optics, and the philosophical trends arising from Cartesian rationalism had transformed their approach to sight and the visible and to the representation of space and the subject. The impact of these epistemological developments was felt in the domain of art, where the role and place of the spectator for the first time became the object of philosophical reflection. The nature of debate on the relative merits of painting and sculpture was similarly transformed; the issues at stake were no longer the same.<sup>79</sup>

Whereas the Italian *paragone* debate throughout the Renaissance was used to show art and artist's worth as a new liberal art, France concentrates its discussion on the experience of the viewer. Their reason is new philosophical thought concerning perception. But one could well argue that *paragone* debates in seventeenth-century Netherlands also took the *paragone* for its own use. Rembrandt's painting comes at a time when Protestantism opposed the use of images. These ideas are illustrated in a poem by Constantijn Huygens who was a contemporary of Rembrandt's and an influential Dutchman. He was also a diplomat and later secretary to the first Stadholder of the new Dutch Republic. He was highly educated in classics and was a writer as well as an art lover. Although his most famous written work is now his autobiography, used as both a source of insight to life and art in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, he also wrote poetry, and one in particular has received some attention for its discussion on painting, poetry and the attitudes to blindness and sight in seventeenth century Dutch society.

The poem *Ooghen-Troost*, translated as *Comfort for the Eye*, although believed to be written around the 1630s, was published in 1647, just a few years before Rembrandt's *Aristotle* was made. This poem was originally written for Lucretia van Trello, a close friend of Huygens', who had begun to lose her eyesight. The poem took the form of *Consolatio*, a consolation poem, and within this genre a more specific sub-genre, *Consolatio Caecitatis*, a consolation poem which was intended to offer comfort to someone who had lost or was losing their sight. Although a poem of consolation, it also holds a satirical element which is aimed at those who are blind, or better put, those who can physically see but remain spiritually or morally blind. As Pieters and Gosseye explain in their analysis of the poem, "The *Ooghen-Troost* argues that we need to become blind for the spectral service of things that blind us, in order to gain the special insight that follows from our blindness for the misleading appearance of all things".<sup>80</sup> This poem therefore takes the form of an argument about the sense of sight

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<sup>79</sup> Lichtenstein, *The Blind Spot*, 4-5

<sup>80</sup> Jurgen Pieters and Lise Gosseye. "The Paradox of Paragone: Painters and Poets in Constatijn Huygens' *Ooghen-Troost*." In *Neophilologus* 92, no. 2 (2008): 177-192, doi 10.1007/s11061-007-9076-6,) 178.

both in the physical sense and inward sense. Huygens took his inspiration for this theme from the writings of Saint Augustine and Petrarch, both of whom argue that it is inner vision which leads to true knowledge. It also draws heavily from Saint Jerome's letter to the blind Catrutius, using it as a type of template and quoting in length passages in the margins which related to physical and spiritual sight. It is within this argument that we might place the theme of Rembrandt's *Aristotle*. His poem is very critical of sight, which at first may seem strange when we consider that Huygens was also an art lover.<sup>81</sup> This critical opinion of sight seems inconsistent. Of course Huygens condemning physical sight also contrasts greatly with Alpers description of a man who showed "unbounded confidence in the technologies that strengthened human sight [and] led him to value images and sights of all kinds as the basis for new knowledge".<sup>82</sup> However, this contradiction may not be as strange as first thought, as Schama explains:

It was not at all uncommon for Protestant humanists to combine the keenest interest in the explorations of the eye, and the pleasure of the optically surveyed natural and material world, with a chastening sense that this pleasurable inspection was, ultimately, of a lower order than the truths to be gained from inward contemplation.<sup>83</sup>

Thus we can read Huygens' outlook as one typical of his culture. He both enjoyed observing the world and all the pleasure that is provided on visual terms but this was only the beginning of a process of meditation towards more spiritual matters.

According to Pieters and Gosseye, Huygens' poem does not only function as a discussion on sight and the appearance of things, it also functions as a contribution to the *paragone* debate. In two separate passages Huygens deals with both painters and poets and the blindness their profession entails. In these passages Huygens criticises the painter for the esteem in which they hold their art, in which they see art as "the superior model upon which God drew for his creation of picturesque sights".<sup>84</sup> In the poem Huygens writes:

There, they say, now that's a quite picturesque view! I cannot but consider this sort of talk frivolous. What they say, I think, is that God makes artistic copies of our original work, and that he can pride himself on the masterful lines he has drawn, as if he has the same and steady hand we have. Nothing could be better at sea, in the air, and on earth. Go home with those creators and show them the most immobile face, the most indulgent patience, so that he can read through and through how God created your likeness. And when after a long time it is done, you're standing there on the panel, but in one word: it is wrong. They will have you a

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<sup>81</sup> Strauss and Van Der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents*, 68-72: He names Rembrandt, along with fellow Dutch painter Jan Lievens, a prodigy.

<sup>82</sup> Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, 23.

<sup>83</sup> Schama *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 424.

<sup>84</sup> Pieters and Gosseye, "The Paradox of Paragone", 184

‘something’, a blood relative, a brother, but it is not you standing there...See whether the people in their blindness could judge over God’s deeds and misdeeds.<sup>85</sup>

Here Huygens is referring to artists as blind because they create replicas of God’s work, but also, and more importantly, because their attitude to their work which they value so highly, causing them to appreciate God’s work as if it were a copy of their original. As an example he uses the portrait, which is incapable of capturing the physical lifelikeness of a real person. In seeing everything as if it were a copy of painting, artists remain blind to God’s work in favour of artifice.

Nevertheless Huygens criticises poetry too and a similar reason is used by Huygens to describe why poets might also be considered blind. Whereas artists are blinded by their palette, seeing the world as if it were a painting, the poet is accused of blindness when he favours the rhyme over message. This favouring of rhyme “has the uncalled for effect of luring away the reader’s or listener’s attention from the central message of the poem”.<sup>86</sup> Pieters and Gosseye point out that Huygens uses two parallel phrases to explain his accusation: Painter’s see only through the palette (“Sy sien maer door ‘tpalett’”), whereas poets see only through rhyme (“si sien maer door het rijm”).<sup>87</sup> In short, both arts are accused of blindness when favouring artifice over moral or spiritual message. In this sense the *paragone* takes a new form; No longer a discussion about which of the arts is the most worthy, Huygens takes a more ethical approach: the better art is that which encourages contemplation. As Pieters and Gosseye articulate, it seems that what Huygens was discussing was a case of “age old opposition between mind and matter”.<sup>88</sup> According to the essay, Huygens text shows that painters are never able to see beyond the artifice, as that is what their art is based on, whereas the poet has a chance to go beyond the message. However, although Huygens criticises painters, he is not criticising them all. Evidence of him liking certain painters can be seen through his other writings, particularly his autobiographies, which praise certain artists, such as Rembrandt. As Pieters and Gosseye explain, according to Huygens “Great paintings are paintings that allow themselves not simple to be seen, by the sole

Figure 9: *The Quack* (1652). Gerard Dou

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<sup>85</sup>Constantijn Huygens’ *Ooghen-Troost* as quoted and translated in Pieters and Gosseye, “The Paradox of Paragone”, 2008

<sup>86</sup> Pieters and Gosseye, “The Paradox of Paragone”, 186.

<sup>87</sup> My translation from Dutch to English .taken from Pieters and Gosseye, , “The Paradox of Paragone”.

<sup>88</sup> Pieters and Gosseye, , “The Paradox of Paragone”, 178.

means of the outer eye, but to be read in alliance with the inner eye. These are paintings, more to a truth that goes beyond the surface of what is visually immediately present”.<sup>89</sup>

Perhaps Huygens was instead referring to artists like Gerard Dou, who prided themselves on their deceptiveness and illusion as we see in his *The Quack* (figure 9) for example. Here the artist proudly stands behind the quack, a man who is known for his



deception, as if to compare himself to the fraudulent doctor. Dou displays the tools of his trade, as if to ask who the better illusionist is. According to Pieters and Gosseye, the reason Huygens favoured Rembrandt and Lievens, was because of their ability to “show us the inner man as well as the outer man, and that in doing so they address the viewer’s inner self and his inner eye”.<sup>90</sup>

If the philosopher in the painting is touching rather than looking then it could be argued that this philosopher is using his inner sight in order to gain knowledge. In showing the philosopher as touching instead of looking directly, Rembrandt insinuates a mode of thinking which doesn’t rely on the look of things. In addition if he contemplates the bust of Homer, by touch, rather than sight, then it could be said that he is contemplating Homer’s blindness. According to Barasch “Though his [Homer’s] eyes do not see, he is the bard endowed with that rare gift of an inner vision that reaches into the depths of a future that regular human beings cannot know”.<sup>91</sup> In addition Homer wrote about the blind; the stories of Tiresias and Oedipus tell as much a tale of moral blindness as they do physical. Perhaps more importantly Tiresias’ blindness, first a punishment, becomes a way in which he receives visions of other things. In short his blindness makes him a seer and prophet. Thus by contemplating Homer, the philosopher considers one of the most famous figures in the history of the blind, but in doing so also focuses on the advantage of this blindness: the loss of physical sight means to gain insights to far deeper truths. By emulating the condition Homer

<sup>89</sup> Pieters and Gosseye, , “The Paradox of Paragone”, 189.

<sup>90</sup> Pieters and Gosseye, , “The Paradox of Paragone”, 189.

<sup>91</sup> Barasch, *Blindness*, 41.



and Tiresias had, the philosopher in this painting is drawing our attention to the activity of inner sight, that is to say a certain type of *contemplation*, as suggested in the current title.

By representing the mirror without a reflection, and painting a curtain which hides what is behind it as Rembrandt does, he is pointing exactly to the problem with vision and the visual. It always presents an illusion, just as Zeuxis and Parrhasius proved in the painting competition. Further still, sight can be considered the greatest illusion, as we are often so unaware of it. We see an object but we recognize it as a three-dimensional one. Indeed the very obvious presence of the brush marks themselves in Rembrandt's paintings (*Self-Portrait* 1628 with its scraped in hair, or *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* and its painterly gestures to form a hand to give but two examples) draws our attention to what we are looking at is a painting or an illusion, no matter how real it may seem. Even Philips Angel in his *Praise of Painting* (1642) shows that although sight was still considered the noblest of senses it is also the one which is susceptible to deceit, and is therefore less trustworthy.<sup>92</sup> This view of sight and vision is vital if we are to understand how Rembrandt's painting might fit into the *paragone* in another sense.

In a footnote to line 83 of his poem, Huygens quotes a passage from another of Saint Jerome's letters of consolation concerning loss of sight, this time a letter to Abigaus, a blind presbyter in Spain. It reads:

You should not grieve that you are destitute of those bodily eyes which ants, flies and creeping things have as well as men; rather you should rejoice that you possess the eye of which it is said in the Songs of Songs, 'Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse; thou hast ravished my heart with one of this eyes.' This is the eye with which God is seen and to which Moses refers to when he says: 'I will now turn aside and see this great sight.' We even read of some philosophers of this world that they have plucked out their eyes in order to turn all thoughts upon the pure depths of the mind...<sup>93</sup>

Is Rembrandt not addressing the same subject in *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer*? In this painting we not only have a blind poet, but *the* poet. And further still, a poet who used his inner sight. As Pieters and Gosseye remind us Homer may have been blind but it didn't stop him from writing, rather "it made him a better writer".<sup>94</sup> We also have a philosopher contemplating Homer. He does this not through sight but by touch. The painting does not ask us to prioritise the visual; the mirror faces away from us, the books show no words, but rather

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<sup>92</sup> Philips Angel "Praise of Painting." *Similios: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* (Stitching voor Nederlandse Kunsthistorische Publicaties) 24, no. 2/3 (1996): 227-258 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3780840239>

<sup>93</sup> Saint Jerome quoted in Pieters and Gosseye, "The Paradox of Paragone", 183.

<sup>94</sup> Pieters and Gosseye, "The Paradox of Paragone", 191.

their function as a medium between reading and thought. Further still the curtain alludes to painting's part in visual deception. By showing the philosopher touching and not looking he shows the philosopher who 'plucked out his eye to see', he disregards the noblest sense of sight in order to come closer to something far more profound.



Figure 10: Study of a Frog, Dragonfly and Bird. Jacob de Gheyn.

Rembrandt's painting asks its viewer to consider seeing beyond physical sight. Homer's lack of sight enabled him to become the great poet, showing that the loss of physical sight can also be an advantage. Is this the reason why he was chosen for contemplation? In turn Rembrandt shows us a philosopher engaged in the kind of activity Huygens is asking of artists and poets, and even their audiences. Rather than appreciate painting and poetry for its artifice, it should be used in order to encourage contemplation and insight. In this sense it fills two criteria; that is, at first it provides descriptive function, and then through a process of contemplating on the image gives instruction and encourages thought.

It could be argued that a painting of nature demonstrated a very similar function. In contemplating an image of a landscape or insect one is allowed to read another message — contemplate nature and God's work, see something else other than the copy, see the miracle of creation. If this is the case for all Dutch art, as for example in the studies of nature by Jacques de Gheyn (figure 10) or the awe inspiring landscapes of Aelbert Cuyp (figure 11), then what we have is not simply describing the "world seen" or art which serves just a "descriptive function"<sup>95</sup> as Alpers claims, but one in which God can also be seen. It was after all Huygens that wrote about Drebbel's lens that "nothing can compel us to honour more fully the infinite wisdom and power of God the creator...and in the most minute and disdained of creatures meet with the same careful labour of the Great Architect, everywhere an equally indescribable majesty".<sup>96</sup> To be sure, Huygens is here talking about the sight of an object witnessed through a lens not an image. However, what he sees is first the object and this is then used in order to give thanks to God and praise his magnificence. It would therefore come as no surprise if Huygens also hoped to find the same message in his art too; it would seem the case from his *Ooghen-Troost* poem.

<sup>95</sup> Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, 7-9.

<sup>96</sup> Huygens quoted in Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, 7.



Figure 11: *River Landscape with Horseman and Peasants* (c.1658-60).  
Aelbert Cuyp

Perhaps it is in this sense we can understand Rembrandt's painting; it is asking us not to take the visual element of his painting for granted, but rather read his paintings in order to come nearer to a more universal truth and deeper understanding, whether that be philosophical, spiritual, or both. In demonstrating that this painting is not concerned with the visual, as we have seen with his use of the mirror, the drapery, the books and the gesture of touch, it offers a way to guide the observer towards Huygens' way of thinking. *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer* leads its spectator to a process of reading rather than just observation. In fact it does this in a particularly obvious way—through its subject matter. Through this we are asked to contemplate the painting just as the philosopher contemplates the bust of Homer. It shows that the greatest thinkers do not need vision for inspiration and revelation—it comes from inner sight and meditation. It could therefore be argued that Rembrandt's painting illustrates Huygens' argument in *Ooghen-Troost*, and further still a more rational take on the *paragone* discussion. If the work of a good painter or poet is a work which makes us think, as according to Huygens then Rembrandt's painting does just that. The *paragone* discourse thus shifts its focus from which art is best, to what makes good art—morals over artifice. As we have heard, ever since its conception, Rembrandt's piece has inspired discussion and thought; it performs its purpose rather well. But that is not all. Rembrandt's *Aristotle* is a painting which demonstrates this message— it has a double function. It is a painting that encourages the viewer to meditate on meditation, to think about thinking and contemplate contemplating, particularly when it comes to works of art. In this light it would fill Huygens' criteria for good art perfectly.

## ***Seeing, Touching, Knowing.***

If we interpret Rembrandt's picture as a demonstration of Huygens' argument in the *paragone*, then the gesture of touch is also not a chance gesture. The act of touching has often been paired with sight, both in describing vision and knowledge. And this idea of seeing and touching may not be as separate as first thought. As Alpers articulates "by appealing to the physical activity of touch he [Rembrandt] is able to suggest that seeing is also an activity: vision so the analogy proposed by his painting goes, is a kind of touch".<sup>97</sup> Alpers is referring to Rembrandt's use of thick paint and obvious brush marks that appeal to the sense of touch in an almost sculptural way, but I believe that the gesture of the philosopher, along with the previously discussed elements which surround him, can just as well provide us with a reminder that touch is part of seeing, and that it is this model which provides us with knowledge. Descartes may have regarded touch as an analogy for seeing, but the relationship between seeing and touching has not always been an analogy; the traditional concept of sight is based on touch. Extramission theory, a theory which advocated that the eye 'reaches out' with rays of light to touch its subject, goes back to the ancient theories of vision.<sup>98</sup> This belief was adopted by Plato and Euclid. While both the Atomists and Stoics saw vision as a type of touch. In fact this belief was held by some up until the seventeenth century.<sup>99</sup> However it was on this more idea of sight, as a form of touch, in which sight took on its status as the sense of knowledge and truth, as Miles explains:

For the classical people who originated the metaphor [sight with knowledge], sight was an accurate and fruitful metaphor for knowledge because they relied on the physics of vision, subscribed to by Plato and many others, that a ray of light, energised and projected by the mind toward an object, actually touches its object, there by connecting the viewer and object. By the vehicle of the visual ray, the object is not only "touched" but the viewer but also the object is "printed on the soul of the viewer". The ray theory of vision specifically insisted on connection and essential continuity of the viewer of the object in the act of vision itself.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, 22

<sup>98</sup> David C. Lindberg *Theories of Vision From Al-Kindi to Kepler.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976). See pages 3, 10 and 39.

<sup>99</sup> Charles G. Gross, "The Fire That Comes from the Eye." *The Neuroscientist* (Sage Publications) 58, no. 5 (1999): 58-64, doi: 10.1177/107385849900500108, 61.

<sup>100</sup> Miles, Margaret. "Vision: The Eye of the Body and the Eye of the Mind in Saint Augustine's "De Trinitate" and "Confessions"." *The Journal of Religion* (The University of Chicago Press) 63, no. 2 (April 1983): 125-142, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1202858>, 127.

In this light, is Rembrandt's philosopher not only demonstrating that to not see, or even to be blind, allows us to become closer to truth, but that he is so close to the truth he is touching it? Lichtenstein reminds us that words such as 'to grasp an idea' and 'Attain knowledge' (coming from the Latin 'tangere')<sup>101</sup> are formed on this ancient concept of sight which was based on this form of touch. Whilst 'forget' means to lose hold or grasp.<sup>102</sup> And it is this idea of seeing, touching understanding which underlines the activity of the philosopher, as Lichtenstein explains:

Since Plato the language of knowledge has borrowed from its most common metaphors from the lexis of vision. To know is to see: to see with a vision that goes beyond the visible, to see with the eyes not of the body, but he soul. But the "intuition", this intellectual vision metaphorically designating the process of true knowledge, it itself no more than a metaphor. And that metaphor conceals another, the metaphor of touch. Is understanding not always (first and foremost) a question of grasping? Is it not the philosopher's dream to come so close to the truth that he can seize it, to reduce the distance separating him from Being to the point where he can put out his hand and touch the concept of truth?...What one calls true knowledge is in fact analogous to touching. It is conceived on the model of vision but the vision that is its model is that of those born blind, which is to touch. Has it not been common place since antiquity to that one must be blind to philosophise well, close one's eyes in order not to be distracted in one's mediations<sup>103</sup>

The concept of knowledge and thus truth may be based on a mode of vision which related to touch but as we have seen, the concept of seeing was previously a type of touching. To see something was to touch it, and then to be touched back because that which one saw made an imprint on the memory—an impression. The explanation that Lichtenstein offers here regarding the roots of knowledge illustrate what the philosopher in Rembrandt's painting is doing. Although Saint Jerome talked about philosophers who went as far as to pluck out their eyes in order to see clearly, our philosopher does not go to such extremes, he looks away *as if* blind. It is in this sense that the philosopher contemplating of the bust of Homer is fitting. What would a blind man do with a painting of Homer? No, more compatible for our non-seeing philosopher is sculpture.<sup>104</sup> And what better way to contemplate him than with the sense of touch, which not only provides us with the truth as opposed to the deceptive sense of sight, but also touch, the sense which allows us to grasp the most profound and true knowledge.

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<sup>101</sup> Dictionary.com. 'attain', *Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition*. HarperCollins Publishers. Accessed 27, May, 2014, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/attain>

<sup>102</sup> Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies*. (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007), 59.

<sup>103</sup> Lichtenstein. *The Blind Spot*, 2008, 67.

<sup>104</sup> Lichtenstein suggests that sculpture is the perfect art for philosophers who need not see in order to think. In chapter two of her book she discusses the German Philosopher Herder's essay *Sculpture* (1778) which takes this stand point and argues that that sculpture represents truth because it does no deceive.



### 3. Painting the Blind: Tobias Healing His Father's Blindness

The composition of *Tobias Healing His Father's Blindness* (1626, now in Stuttgart) points us straight to the topic of the painting: that of the eye (figure 12). The unusual amount of depictions of the blind by Rembrandt has caught the attention of those studying his work, but



Figure 12: *Tobias Healing His Father's Blindness* (1626). Rembrandt.

there was one story which captured the artist's fascination for blindness over others, the apocryphal 'Book of Tobit'. Rembrandt turned again and again to this story, taking the theme of blindness to a more specific narrative. Historian, Gary Schwartz makes this evident in his statistics on the number of times Rembrandt depicted different biblical scenes. The story of Tobit was depicted 132 times by Rembrandt, more than any other biblical story, and is found

in drawings, etchings and paintings.<sup>105</sup> Rembrandt depicts various scenes from the story but significantly, it is this scene, *Tobias Healing His Father's Blindness*, which shows the culmination of the story and the episode in which vision is returned.<sup>106</sup>

### ***The Story of Tobit***

The story of Tobit takes place in the Assyrian capital of Ninevah where the Jews of Israel had been taken captive. Tobit was one of these Jews and being devoted to his faith followed the dietary requirements and burial rituals of the dead according to his beliefs. These actions were despite the threat of persecution and death from the king. It is at one of these secret burials that the old Tobit became blind. As he was sleeping outside the city wall a swallow's dropping falls into his eyes creating a white veil, and depriving him of his sight. Tobit, his wife Anna, and his son, Tobias, fall into poverty. Tobit prays to God and on hearing his prayers sends the archangel Raphael, disguised as a traveller, to accompany and protect his son on a journey to collect money for his father. The angel enables Tobias to find a wife on his journey and advises Tobias to gut a fish which attacks him at a river, and use its liver and gall, not only to rid his new wife of a curse, but also to reinstate his father's sight. Meanwhile the blind Tobit and his wife wait seemingly in vain for their son's return. When Tobias does return, Tobit goes to meet him but stumbles at the door. Tobit is then healed by his son Tobias, guided by the angel Raphael. This culminating scene describes Tobias' use of the fish gall to remove the 'white veil' and return his father's sight:

Then said Raphael, I know, Tobias, that thy father will open his eyes.  
Therefore anoint thou his eyes with the gall, and being pricked therewith, he shall rub, and the whiteness shall fall away, and he shall see thee.  
Then Anna ran forth, and fell upon the neck of her son, and said unto him, Seeing I have seen thee, my son, from henceforth I am content to die. And they wept both.  
Tobit also went forth toward the door, and stumbled: but his son ran unto him,

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<sup>105</sup> Gary Schwartz. *The Rembrandt Book*. (New York: Abrams, 2006), 361.

<sup>106</sup> This painting is signed Rembrandt and was placed in the original catalogue of the complete works of Rembrandt (catalogue number 502) by A. Bredius in *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the Paintings*. (London: Phaidon, 1969). It was also considered a Rembrandt by Held in *Rembrandt Studies*, 1991. See 128-129. However it is now considered to be by Rembrandt's workshop after analysis of the painting as part of the Rembrandt Research Project. The painting was described as "A moderately well preserved though incomplete painting from Rembrandt's circle, probably connected to a work from his hand" J. Bruyn et al. *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings III 1635-1642*. Translated by D. Cook-Radmore. Vol. 3. 5 vols. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers (springer), 1989.55. Whether a Rembrandt or not, my purpose here is to discuss the subject matter rather than ask what Rembrandt intended with it. A number of drawings by Rembrandt of the same scene do exist however, which I discuss later.

And took hold of his father: and he strake of the gall on his fathers' eyes, saying, Be of good hope, my father.  
And when his eyes began to smart, he rubbed them;  
And the whiteness pilled away from the corners of his eyes: and when he saw his son, he fell upon his neck<sup>107</sup>

The last moments from the story are when the archangel reveals his identity to Tobit and Tobias.

In Rembrandt's time the *Book of Tobit* was considered apocryphal by many Protestants; it lacked a Hebrew scripture and Calvin rejected it as part of the accepted biblical books. However, the book was accepted by Millenarians (who believe in a second coming of Christ and Utopia) as well as by Catholics who made the book canonical at the council of Trent in 1546.<sup>108</sup>

### ***Rembrandt's Painting of the Biblical Scene***

In Rembrandt's painting we find Tobias and his father, Tobit, in a dark interior, presumably the home of Tobit. Described as "cavernous"<sup>109</sup> by one art historian, the interior is worn and reflects the poverty Tobit is plunged into after becoming blind. The figures in the painting are presented to us at a distance; it seems as if we have to search, or fumble, through the dark interior to find what we should be looking at. In the centre of the composition Tobit sits in his chair holding his wife's hands, whilst his son, Tobias, guided by the angel Raphael to his right, carefully works on his father's eyes. Two figures are to the left of the central group, watching the miracle unfold. A window provides the only natural light source to the room and introduces a sharp contrast in tones, separating the central figures from the rest of the scene. Despite light being essential for Tobias' work, we find that the majority of the interior is concealed in darkness, except for a bleak fire behind Tobias. In front of Tobit and his wife, Anna, we find the spinning wheel, a reminder of Anna's need to work because of her husband's blindness. Next to Tobias there is a knife, most probably the knife Tobias used to gut the fish, and remove the gall and liver with which he will perform the miracle. There are

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<sup>107</sup> Bible, King James Version.: 'Tobit . 11' (Michagan Library Digital Collections), accessed 6 Jan, 2014.<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/k/kjv/kjv-idx?type=DIV1&byte=3729381>

<sup>108</sup> A more detailed description of the story, the various religious interpretations and Rembrandt's depiction of the various scenes can be found in Karen Perlove Shelley and Larry Silver's *Rembrandt's Faith: Church and Temple in the Dutch Golden Age*. (University Park.: Pennsylvania State University press, 2009), 147-159.

<sup>109</sup> Held, *Rembrandt Studies*, 128.



few well-lit aspects of this painting: the knife, the angel, Tobias' headdress and even the white of Tobit's eye which appears now at the centre of the composition.<sup>110</sup> These elements are perhaps slightly built up in textured paint showing how light would play on the surfaces of these objects. All of this is presented as an event seemingly witnessed through a dirty window. Almost the entire interior is presented in a rough or sketchy manner with only the small area described above depicted in light and with detail.

This painting contrasts greatly with another painting of the same year, *The Blinding of Samson* (figure 13). This picture again represents the blind, or should we say blinding. In *The Blinding of Samson* we are presented with a brutal loss of sight rather than the giving of sight.



Figure 13: *The Blinding of Samson* (1636). Rembrandt

This event is pushed up to the canvas's surface, literally in our faces and the contrast between light and dark is harsh. Without a doubt, the *Tobias* painting is a gentler, more pensive picture, it allows us to contemplate the actions that happen within it rather than incite us to turn away in horror, as in *The Blinding of Samson* (figure 13). The composition and atmosphere of this painting allow us, or even

require us, to spend time observing this scene and contemplate the episode of *Tobias Healing His Father's Blindness*. Despite this, both paintings share their 'cavernous' setting, as Held would describe it.

<sup>110</sup> This painting was originally a larger composition. Bredius makes a comparison with a copy of the original painting in which Tobit, Tobias and the angel all lie to the right of the painting. Even in this original composition the group remained the main focus of the painting, and the right side of the interior is in darkness. See A. Bredius, A. *Rembrandt*, catalogue no. 502

## *Spiritual Blindness*

There are many scholars who support the possibility that *Book of Tobit* was of specific religious interest to Rembrandt. According to Julius Held, Rembrandt “throughout his career was fascinated by those biblical stories in which God’s will was communicated to man”.<sup>111</sup> Historian Simon Schama also suggests that the subject refers to a type of religious blindness.<sup>112</sup> To be sure, *Tobias Healing His Father’s Blindness* is connected to a spiritual awakening and Moshe Barasch reminds us that in early modern Christianity the healing of the blind carried particular significance as the ultimate miracle, something only possible on earth if performed by a person who carried God’s sanction.<sup>113</sup> In the Old Testament blindness is promised to be cured when the Messiah returns and utopia is restored. We find Isaiah describing this future state when he says “And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity and out of darkness”.<sup>114</sup> It is this context that The Book of Tobit can be understood in— a type of prophecy of the coming of Christ. Jacques Derrida discusses this idea of revelation reminding us that “The son is the light”, and it is this that Tobias is thankful for, “Now I see my son Tobias!” Tobit exclaims when his sight is returned. It is in this sense that the story of Tobit hints to the coming of the son of God and the opportunity to finally see in the spiritual sense. As Derrida says, the angel Raphael shows “one coming to announce the other”.<sup>115</sup>

In addition we could interpret the painting’s composition in relation to the seeing of light in a spiritual sense. The miracle of the returning of sight would have perhaps been imagined in this way by those reading the Old Testament. Out of ‘obscurity’ and ‘darkness’, as Isaiah would have it, we also see the ‘light’ in a more literal sense: a well-lit and detailed depiction of a miracle in action. It could be argued that this picture puts us in the place of Tobit when “the whiteness pilled away from the corners of his eyes”.

The religious climate at the time could of course have influenced Rembrandt’s images and there is good reason to believe that the painter’s interest in blindness is due to spiritual interest. However, the painter’s religious beliefs remain uncertain as Perlove and Silver explain in their book *Rembrandt’s Faith* (2009). Rembrandt was baptised Calvinist by birth

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<sup>111</sup> Held, *Rembrandt Studies*, 312. A more detailed explanation to why Held believes that Rembrandt was interested in this story for religious reasons can also be found on pages 131-134.

<sup>112</sup> Schama, *Rembrandt’s Eyes*, 424

<sup>113</sup> Barasch, *Blindness*, 48 ;Shelley Karen and Perlove, *Rembrandt’s Faith*, 154.

<sup>114</sup> Isaiah in Barasch, *Blindness*, 48.

<sup>115</sup> Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 28.

but members of both sides of his family were Catholic, indeed the acceptance of the *Book of Tobit* as canonical by Catholics and Millenarians but rejected by the reformed church puts into question which belief system he followed.<sup>116</sup>

### ***The Temptation of Sight***

According to Alpers in *The Art of Describing* Rembrandt was a painter who “profoundly mistrusted the evidence of sight”.<sup>117</sup> Alpers argues that Rembrandt, in contrast to his Dutch contemporaries, neither produces an art that allows one to see better, nor presents sight as the sense of certainty or knowledge. According to Alpers, by not presenting scenes ‘clearly’, or ‘obfuscating’ with paint, as she puts it, Rembrandt “makes images that show us that it is the word (or the Word) rather than the world seen that conveys truth”.<sup>118</sup> In this sense Alpers is claiming that Rembrandt saw the sense of hearing as the most trustworthy. Through hearing biblical stories and communicating their meanings through pictures, Rembrandt puts emphasis on the story to communicate the message rather than the image. In accordance with this, Alpers mentions the frequent use of blindness in Rembrandt’s work, particularly the role of Homer, who appears in both *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer* (1653) and *Homer Dictating* (1663). Alpers believes that the authority that Rembrandt gives to those who lack sight (Julius Civilis and Homer) shows that it is the word, and the story which are emphasised in Rembrandt’s works. However, Alpers herself notes that this distrust in sight is a paradox.<sup>119</sup> In fact on the previous page of her discussion Alpers makes note of the painter’s “avid taste for finery”.<sup>120</sup> Alpers believes that Rembrandt’s attitude to this ‘finery’, the gold, jewels and rich materials changes as he gets older, instead of reproducing the qualities of it he begins to emphasise the material of his work: the paint. I would argue, however, that it seems rather absurd that such a successful painter, one who also seemed to take pleasure in the visual qualities of rich materials would really distrust sight. And if his technique of painting these

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<sup>116</sup>The various religious reasons for Rembrandt painting so many depictions of ‘The Book of Tobit’ are discussed in Shelley Karen and Perlove, *Rembrandt’s Faith*, 150-159.

<sup>117</sup> Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, 227.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 227

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. 225

rich objects changes, his love of them does not; they feature just as frequently in his later paintings, as his earlier works; Alpers says this herself.<sup>121</sup>

Putting this distrust in a more spiritual light, Schama believes that blindness prevails in Rembrandt's pictures in order to make reference to a distrust of sight, and what Saint Augustine called 'temptations of the eye'. Indeed the featuring of blindness in Rembrandt's work may well make reference to the Protestant emphasis on inner sight and the Word over the Catholic Counter-Reformation's use of the visual to reach the divine.<sup>122</sup> However, Saint Augustine's writings show that although we should be wary of sight, he does not entirely dismiss what is taken in by the physical eye. Rather, Augustine takes physical optics and worldly sight as his model for inner sight.<sup>123</sup> In short, it is one's attitude to what one sees that matters, as Margaret Miles explains in her essay on Saint Augustine's writings, "visible objects are not in themselves dangerous; it is the soul's investment of disproportionate amounts of attention to them that must be changed".<sup>124</sup> In addition one is encouraged to use one's physical sight in order to appreciate their creator. According to Augustine, as long as the eye is trained in faith, one can contemplate what one sees physically in light of God's good work. Thus physical vision is also a way to God.<sup>125</sup>

In fact Augustine makes an interpretation of *The Book of Tobit* in a passage on sight and its two forms in his *Confessions* illustrating the differences,

Finally, I must confess how I am tempted through the eye...The eyes delight in beautiful shapes of different sorts and bright and attractive colors. I would not have these things take possession of my soul. Let God possess it...For light, the queen of colors, pervades all that I see, wherever I am throughout the day, and by the ever changing pattern of its rays, it entices me (*blanditur mihi*) even when I am occupied with something else and take no special note of it. It wins so firm a hold on me that , if I am suddenly deprived of it, I long to have it back, and if I am left for long without it, I grow dispirited.

But the true Light is the Light that Tobit saw when, though his eyes were blind, he taught his son the path he should follow in life, and himself led the way, charity guiding his steps so he did not stray [...] This is the true Light.<sup>126</sup>

Augustine's interpretation of the story seems at first to underline the importance of the temptation of physical sight, as Schama suggests, but a closer look at Augustine's concept of vision reveals that this story illustrates Saint Augustine's concept of inner vision and the process of obtaining it. The above passage is concluded with the following:

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid. 255

<sup>122</sup> Shelley Karen and Perlove *Rembrandt's Faith*.

<sup>123</sup> Miles, "Vision", 198

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. 133

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. 139-141

<sup>126</sup> Augustine *Confessions* 10.34 as quoted in Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 118.

As for the corporal light of which I was speaking, it seasons the life of this age for those who blindly love it (*condit vitam saeculi caecis amatorbis*) with a tempting and dangerous sweetness. Yet those who have learned to praise you for this as well as for your other gifts, *O God, Maker of all things*, take it up (*adsumunt eam*) by singing you a hymn of praise, for they are not taken in by it (*non absumuntur ab ea*) in their sleep<sup>127</sup>

Interestingly this process was based on a concept of physical vision, the extramission theory as described in chapter one. As Miles explains, one of the reasons Augustine used physical vision as his model was to show the need for effort and initiative from the viewer. Where one had to train one's physical eye to see the brightest things, one must also train their spiritual sight, their faith, if you like, in order to glimpse the divine. Thus seeing in either of its forms takes practice, dedication and time, much like the dedication and time shown by Tobit awaiting his son. As Miles explains:

In physical vision, the visual ray must be focused and trained if it is to touch its object with precision; the parallel strengthening of the eye of the mind is the conscious cultivation of longing, the visual ray of the mind's eye. The vision of God will never be a passive or voyeuristic vision.<sup>128</sup>

Perhaps it is in this light that we can understand both the story of Tobit as a religious lesson as well as the composition of Rembrandt's painting. Firstly, Tobit shows both devotion and faith through hard times; he buries his people according to his faith despite being persecuted, and he waits patiently and in poverty for his son's return with money he is owed. It is after this test of faith that his sight is returned and he gets to see. In Rembrandt's painting the bright light that shines through the window and illuminates Raphael's wings, is not just physical, but also a divine light that gives us the possibility of seeing God. This is the strong light, the spiritual vision even, that he has worked so hard and longed for. If *The Book of Tobit* is a story of longing and devotion, then it fulfils Augustine's conviction precisely. As Miles explains, Augustine's work thematizes longing for something and she provides the following quote as typical of his work: "The whole life of the good Christian is a holy longing... That is our life, to be exercised by longing".<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Augustine *Confessions* 10.34 as quoted in Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 118.

<sup>128</sup> Miles, "Vision", 133.

<sup>129</sup> Augustine, *In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos* quoted in Miles, "Vision", 134.

But Saint Augustine’s likening of worldly and spiritual vision goes further than an

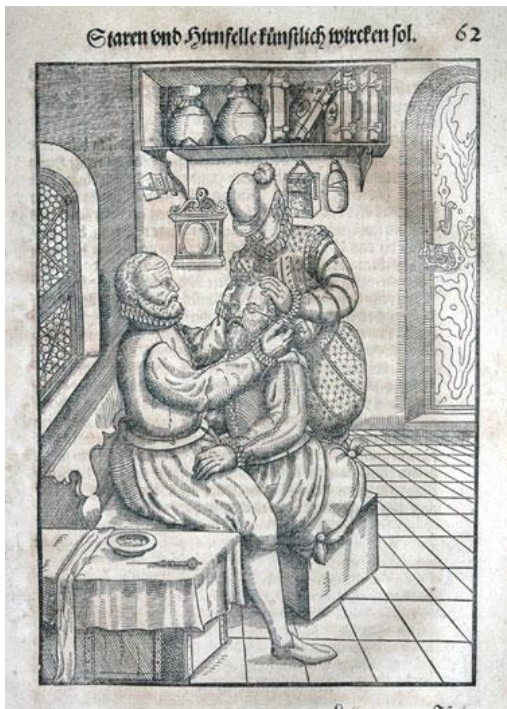


Figure 15: An illustration of cataract surgery from Georg Bartisch's *Ophthalmodouleia*. (1583)

analogy. In some places the idea of physical and spiritual vision are the same, that is, we will be able to see God with our bodily eyes. In his *De Civitate Dei* Augustine contemplates the idea of seeing God with bodily eyes in the resurrection, and as Miles writes, concludes that “the vision of God will “possibly and most probably” be with the eyes of the body. “With an “extraordinary power of sight,” Augustine says, the blessed will be able “to see the immaterial.””<sup>130</sup> In this sense Tobias Healing His

Father’s Blindness shows the closeness of these two versions of sight, the worldly and the spiritual. We are witnessing Tobit in the process of receiving his sight, seeing again, as the reward for his faith in his son’s return. In this sense the vision of the angel

### *Tobias as Surgeon*

This comparison between the physical and spiritual takes another avenue when we find that despite its spiritual theme, it also resembles a much more scientific, worldly, if you will, returning of sight. Despite Julius Held’s argument that Rembrandt’s use of the subject was due to spiritual interest, when it



Figure 14: *Tobias Heals His Father's Blindness*. Rembrandt.

<sup>130</sup> Miles, “Vision”, 141. With quote from Saint Augustine’s *De civitate Dei*

comes to this particular painting he also describes it as “a medical operation”.<sup>131</sup> Other observations of this painting have also taken a more medical tendency; a drawing of the same scene (figure 14) led the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida to say that it “calls to mind a properly surgical operation” and brings to our attention documentation from the Louvre describing the scene as “Surgeon bandaging a wounded man”.<sup>132</sup> In fact Held tells us that Dr Richard Greeff in his study ‘Rembrandts Darstellung der Tobiasheilung’ (1907) calls the picture a “medically perfect rendering of the removal of a cataract”.<sup>133</sup> In this light *Tobias Healing His Father’s Blindness*, appears to present not only a religious miracle but also a medical operation on the eyes. Although not entirely common practice in seventeenth-century medicine, cataract operations were being performed and had been since antiquity, with varying effects (figure 15). A procedure named ‘couching’, or pushing the cataract away from the visual area of the eye, was the dominant method of treating cataracts well into the mid-seventeenth century.<sup>134</sup> Indeed the results of the process may not have seemed any less miraculous despite being surgical, as R. S Jampel explains in *History of Modern Cataract Surgery* (1998), “Although the complication rate was estimated at over 50% there was no alternative treatment to couching. The immediate result was frequently dramatic and was interpreted as miraculous by the unsophisticated.”<sup>135</sup> With scientists like Kepler (1571-1630), discovering that the lens was the optical device rather than the illuminator or receptor, and the discovery that cataracts were actually opacification of the lens in 1656 by Rolfink (1599-1673),<sup>136</sup> this painting was painted on the brink of change concerning understanding of the eye and cataracts. Therefore, this painting may well have been proof of surgery far more ground breaking and miraculous than couching surgery.

In fact according to Greeff there is every chance that Rembrandt himself witnessed such an operation. Dr. Job Janzoon van Meekren, a specialist in eye surgery, was a close friend of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp whom Rembrandt had depicted in *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* of 1632 (figure 16).<sup>137</sup> This painting was commissioned by the Guild of Surgeons and carries a more formal feeling than the Tobit picture. Both however appear

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<sup>131</sup> Held, *Rembrandt Studies*, 128.

<sup>132</sup> Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 26.

<sup>133</sup> Held, *Rembrandt Studies*, 128.

<sup>134</sup> Robert S.Jampel, Robert S. “The Four Eras in the Evolouction of Cataract Surgery.” In *History of Modern Cataract Surgery*, edited by Marvin L. Kwitko and Charles D. Kelman, 17-33. (Amsterdam: Kugler Publications, 1998). 17-20

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. 20

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Held, *Rembrandt Studies*, 128.



staged, although not in the same way. Whereas *The Anatomy Lesson* presents the anatomy of an arm as a central element to a group portrait, Tobias presents eye surgery as an almost domestic scene with a spiritual element.



Figure 16: *The Anatomy lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (1632). Rembrandt

According to Pamela H. Smith the arenas of science and arts were still closely tied in early modern Europe, images providing evidence of scientific observation. The famous sixteenth-century anatomist, Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564) noted that “Illustrations greatly assist the understanding, for they place more clearly before the eyes what the text no matter how explicitly describes”.<sup>138</sup> Thus images were the preferred method of communicating ideas and findings, and were seen as evidence in themselves. This tradition was surely passed down to Dr Tulp’s teacher, who was in fact a student of Andreas Vesalius. In fact, Dr Nicolaes Tulp came to be known as “the Amsterdam Vesalius”.<sup>139</sup> In Svetlana Alpers book *The Art of Describing* she describes this tradition in seventeenth-century Dutch art; describing what one

<sup>138</sup> Andreas Vesalius quoted in Pamela H. Smith “Art, Science and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe.” *Isis* (The University of Chicago Press) 97, no. 1 (2006): 83-100. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/501102>, 86.

<sup>139</sup> Bredius, *Rembrandt*, 582, catalogue entry 403.



saw with pictures and visually recording the world and its particularities was the norm rather than the exception in this visual culture.

As Smith describes, making and knowing often went hand in hand, and “images became an important way of recording, collecting, cataloguing and witnessing the curious, the marvellous and the particular”.<sup>140</sup> With the removal of cataracts still in an experimental phase, and the understanding of the mechanics of the eye only just coming to light, we could argue that cataract surgery would have come under those categories. The domestic setting of the scene would also testify to Smith’s suggestion that there was a demand for lifelike representations of first-hand experience.<sup>141</sup> Rembrandt’s painting may well have represented something he witnessed.

Interestingly the emphasis on seeing with one’s own eyes and first-hand knowledge can be traced back as early as the work of Albertus Magnus who we have seen was the suggested protagonist of Rembrandt’s later work, *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer*. He said “nothing else shall I write beyond what I have seen with my own eyes”,<sup>142</sup> in order to show that what he described he had also experienced or observed in person, in this case with alchemy.

Perhaps then it is not so strange that this biblical scene is also a medical one. In fact Binstock notes that it was around this time, in Rembrandt’s early career, that he invents a new type of painting in which biblical stories are brought to life by the use of real people “exotic in their concrete particularity”,<sup>143</sup> and therefore adding to the evidence that this scene could well have been an operation Rembrandt himself witnessed and perhaps found inspiration in, as a miracle of new science, just like the miracle found in *The Book of Tobit*. Thus we find that this scene depicted by Rembrandt has been and can be interpreted in a way in which a modern medical procedure plays a much larger role in returning Tobit’s sight. In the same vein as *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer*, we see that the title of this painting restricts

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<sup>140</sup> Pamela H. Smith “Art, Science and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe.” *Isis* (The University of Chicago Press) 97, no. 1 (2006): 83-100. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/501102>, 89.

<sup>141</sup> P. H. Smith, “Art, Science and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe”, 90.

<sup>142</sup> Albertus Magnus *Libellus de alchimia*, trans. and ed. Virginia Heines (Berkeley/Los Angeles: Univ. California Press, 1958), p. 7 as quoted in P. H. Smith, “Art, Science and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe”, 90 f.n 10

<sup>143</sup> Benjamin Binstock. “Rembrandt's Paint.” *Anthropology and Aesthetics* (The president and Fellows of Harvard College), no. 36, Factura (Autumn 1999): 138-165, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20167480>, 160.

the multitude of meanings a painting may suggest and hinder what people are inclined to see in it: A painting entitled *Tobias Healing his Father's Blindness* is just as likely to be an illustration of a surgical attempt to return sight as a spiritual one and that the one reading does not necessarily exclude the other.

### ***Letter on the Blind: Using the Hands to See***

By following the idea that this painting represents a cataract operation as well as a miracle we are again pointed to the realm of touch and sight, and as Alpers suggests, perception. By



Figure 17: Illustration from *La Dioptrique* (1637)

showing the returning of sight, the removal of cataracts, this painting also recalls a discussion on these same subjects which took place a century later, what came to be known as the *Molyneux Question*. The *Molyneux Question* was a problem proposed by Irish lawyer William Molyneux in a letter to philosopher John Locke in 1693. In it he asked whether someone who had been born blind after gaining his sight through surgery would be able to recognise forms, such as a sphere and a cube, having only ever experienced them before through the sense of touch. Essentially this question centred on the relationship of sight and touch in our experience of the world, and whether sensory perception is a-modal (that our senses work separately) or cross-modal (that sensory information transfers from one sense to another, working together). This problem sparked philosophical debate and led philosopher and art critic Denis Diderot to write *Lettre sur les aveugles, à l'usage de ceux qui voient* of 1749, translated as *Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See*. Diderot's discussion, however, departed from the idea of cataract removal first suggested in the philosophical question and instead explores the psychology and experiences of a congenitally blind person.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Mark Paterson, "Seeing with the hands': Blindness, touch and the Enlightenment spatial image." *British Journal for Visual Impairment* (Sage) 24, no. 52 (April 2006): 52-59, doi: 10.1177/0264619606063399

## *Touch, Sight and Knowledge*

According to Martin Jay, Diderot added little to the argument concerning whether the blind could actually recognise forms after gaining sight; what was most noticeable was “his implicit challenge to the primacy of vision assumed by earlier students of the problem”.<sup>145</sup> Recalling again the comparison of the senses and the arts that prevailed from the fifteenth century, it could be said that this discussion continues the evaluation of the senses and challenges sight as the most important for experiencing the world. Diderot was consequently most concerned with the sense of touch which he claimed was as important for gaining knowledge as sight.<sup>146</sup> In Diderot’s *Letter on the Blind* he encounters a blind man from Puiseaux, to which he asks various questions regarding how he encounters the world. From this dialogue we come to understand how a blind man would ‘see’ the world through touch and how he considers sight. When asked if he would like to be given his sight, the blind man replies that he would rather improve his sense of touch than have sight. For him touch was a more reliable source of knowledge and provided a more reliable account of things:

I would sooner have long arms: they would tell me better what was happening on the moon than your eyes or telescopes...you would be serving me better by perfecting the organ that I have than supplying me with what I lack<sup>147</sup>

Not only does this show touch considered as a more trustworthy source of knowledge for the blind man, but also reinstates the analogy of sight and touch in Descartes *La Dioptrique* (figure 17). Actually for the blind man of Puiseaux, seeing is described as the perfect equivalent to touching; when asked what the eye is by Diderot, the blind man responds by describing it as something which touches:

An organ which is affected by the air in the same way that my hand is affected by a stick...the analogy so close that when I place my hand between your eyes and an object, you see my hand and not the object, and the same thing happens to me when I look for one object with my stick and find another instead

The blind man goes on to refer to the illustration in *La Dioptrique*:

[O]pen the *Dioptrique* of Descartes, and you will find there the phenomena of vision related to touch, and illustrations of men occupied with sticks. Neither Descartes nor those who have followed him have been able to get a clearer conception of vision<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Martin Jay. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). 100

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Diderot’s *Letter on the Blind* in Michael J. Morgan *Molyneaux’s Question: Vision Touch and the Philosophy of Perception*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 35.

The analogy for the blind man between touch and sight is so close that it seems to be the same thing. We have seen in the first chapter that touch and sight were indeed the same thing for the ancients and their belief in extramission—the idea that light left the eye to touch its subject. Indeed, it is this model Saint Augustine used for his explanation of spiritual vision.<sup>149</sup>

But for this blind man seeing and touching are the same, but rather differently from what the exponents of extramission had in mind. According to the blind man seeing is touching and the hand works just as the eye or even the head. His hands are the main sense preceptors of the world around him, and there is no question about what provides the most fulfilling experience of the world. But further still is the touch of the fingers that represent the most detailed form of perception and therefore it is they which are the seat of his soul, his head. Again the blind man uses Descartes' illustration as his model, showing that the analogy can be taken further than the hands alone: "Should a philosopher, blind and deaf from birth, construct a man in the image of Descartes', I make bold to assure you, Madame, that he will place the soul in the finger tips, for it is from there he receives all his sensations, all his knowledge".<sup>150</sup> The fingers' ability to take in most information, their sensitivity, leads them to be the most profound part of his being, and his connection with the world.

### *Finger as Fovea*

Just as the hand is aligned with the head and the eye for the blind, we also find that the fingers because of their ability to feel the most detail are aligned with the fovea, the part of the eye which takes in the most detail. This comparison makes Descartes' analogy between touch and sight more concrete. Mark Paterson explains,

Such equivalence of sight and touch extends even to the idea of the fovea, the rodless part of the eye that affords the most acute vision. It is recognised that the most accurate part of our touch perception comes from the hands and especially our finger tips, due to the concentration of our nerve endings. It is only natural to expect an analogy between the high definition optical discrepancy of the fovea, and the highly discriminatory tactile sensing of the hands and fingertips.<sup>151</sup>

This idea of the fovea as the fingertips and the most detailed part of vision can be compared with our feeling through space without sight, in that it provides us with a small, but very

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<sup>148</sup> Diderot's *Letter on the Blind* in Morgan, *Molyneux's Question*, 34

<sup>149</sup> Miles "Vision".

<sup>150</sup> Letter on the Blind quoted in Paterson, "Seeing with the hands", 56.

<sup>151</sup> Paterson, "Seeing with the hands", 56.

detailed, fragment of a space or object, with other information of the surrounding space reduced or removed. Psychologist Simon Ungar, explains the link thus: “in a sense haptic exploration is like foveation but without peripheral vision, in that the positions of objects not currently being attended to must be maintained in memory”.<sup>152</sup> This can be compared to the process of the eye which, unable to take in large amounts of details at one time must rely on the memory and a process of vision which unfolds over time in order to get an ‘overall’ view. As Di Paola, Enns and Riebe explain taking in a scene does not happen all at once, rather “viewing experience actually extends over time, including periods of fixation, in which eye position is almost stationary and visual information is taken in, interrupted saccades, rapid movements of the eye from one image to another, during which we are also effectively blind. This makes seeing a highly interactive process”.<sup>153</sup>

### ***Tobias Healing His Father’s Blindness as Analogy***

Perhaps this comparison of sight and touch is illustrated in *Tobias Healing His Father’s Blindness*. Looking at how the scene is represented in this painting we could make comparisons to this experience of seeing with the fovea, or perhaps even feeling with fingers, the most acute area of vision. A better understanding of how our eyes and process of vision works will help show in what ways seeing, and thus feeling can be seen in this painting,

At the centre of our gaze, the world appears in fine detail and colour, while the percept from the peripheral areas of our field of vision yields less precise information. Central vision is useful for tasks like reading and guiding complicated actions, while peripheral information gives a more general idea of the identity of an object and whether or not it is moving. Because visual acuity is best at the centre of the gaze (the fovea), most people look directly at objects of interest<sup>154</sup>

If we recall how the space in this painting is described by Julius Held as ‘cavernous’, that the darkened areas seem rough and sketchy, we could compare it to the eye’s peripheral vision, which gives more general or ‘rough’ information. In fact peripheral vision also limits the colours we see, just as with the more monotone aspects of the surrounding area to Tobias, his father and Raphael. In contrast we find our ‘object of interest’: Tobias healing his father.

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<sup>152</sup> Simon Ungar in Paterson, “Seeing with the hands”, 56.

<sup>153</sup> Steve Di Paola, James T Enns , and Caitlin Riebe. “Rembrandt’s Textural Agency: A Shared Perspective in Visual Art and Science.” *Leonardo* 43, no. 2 (April 2010): 145-151, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40661620>, 145.

<sup>154</sup> Cavangh, David Melcher and Patrick. “Pictorial Cues in Art and in Visual Perception.” In *Art and the Senses*, edited by Francesca Bacci and David Melcher, 351-394. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 364.

There we see the central areas of the painting represented with detail, and rendered in light, even with the widest spectrum of colours. We could argue that this is seen *as if* through the eye's fovea. Further still, represented in this detailed part of the painting are hands at work, fingers even, acting out the most detailed surgery. It could be argued that these fingers are seen as though we see through our fingers: with the most sensitive part of our eye we see the most sensitive part of the hand. The senses of sight and touch working at its most detailed capacity. Perhaps this painting not only gives us an understanding of how our vision would work if we saw with a non-moving eye, but also as if we perceived it with our fingers. As Derrida would have it "A draftsman cannot but be attentive to the finger and the eye, especially to anything that touches upon the eye, to anything that lays a finger on it in order to let it finally see or let it be seen"<sup>155</sup>. *Tobias Healing his Father's Blindness* presents not only a biblical episode, it refers to both the most acute tools of perception the human has: the eye and the finger. In doing so the painting visually illustrates the experience of the senses of sight and touch.

### ***The Hand and the Artist***

This gesture works the same way for the draftsman according to Derrida, who argues "The theme of the drawings of the blind is, before all else, the hand."<sup>156</sup> Derrida's argument in *Memoirs of the Blind* shows the connection between the hand, the head and depictions of the blind. He describes them as though they were intrinsically interlinked, as if the artist's work was exactly the same as that of Tobias who leans over his father. To be sure, as if to illustrate Derrida's point, the centre focus of the *Tobias* painting is not only the blind Tobit but the hands of his son Tobias. Actually Derrida, in his description of Rembrandt's sketch of the same scene, makes a connection between surgery and hands, as mentioned before both the focus of this painting:

This scene of hands, of maneuvering and manipulation, calls to mind a properly surgical operation, which I dare not, or not yet, call graphic. Tobias seems to be holding a stylus-like instrument, some sort of engraver or scalpel. In fact, when the drawing was sent from Versailles to the Louvre in 1803

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<sup>155</sup> Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 6

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.* 4

it bore the description: “Surgeon bandaging a wounded man, washed in bister on white paper? Rembrandt”...

In none of the representations of this healing does the fish gall appear. It is always a matter of manipulations, of operations of touching or making contact with hand that is either bare or armed.<sup>157</sup>

The translator’s footnote explains, “Derrida is himself indulging in a certain *jeu de mains* by playing on the hand [*main*] in *manipulations*, *manoeuvres*, and *manières*, as well as in the word “*chirurgie*” – surgery – which comes from the Greek *Kheir* (hand) and literally means the “work of the hands”.<sup>158</sup> Through the act of surgery, this painting makes direct reference to hands, and even more specifically the fingers which take up the meticulous work so close to the eye.

Looking again at Pamela H. Smith’s argument concerning the links between art and science in early modern Europe, we can see that this play on words is much more meaningful than at first appears. As Smith points out the arts or *ars* held different connotations at that time and were often associated with the broader meaning of practice and experience. When tied to the arts, or *ars*, the term referred to work with the hands.<sup>159</sup> Perhaps in this sense the work of a surgeon, whether an eye surgeon or the work of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp, would not have been so far removed from the craftsmanship involved in making the paintings which represent them. Alpers also gives one reason of the prominence of hands in Rembrandt’s painting as Rembrandt pointing out the craft and manual labour involved in the manual act and craft of painting. According to her “Rembrandt is concerned with the essential instrument of the painter” and this is not only because it is used to create paintings and used for creation, but also because Aristotle claimed that man had hands because he was the most intelligent animal; with hands he could use tools, and this in turn enabled man to create civilisation. In fact she argues that this may have be the very reason the painting of *Dr. Tulp* displays the particular moment in the anatomy lesson when the workings of the hand are demonstrated.<sup>160</sup>

According to Derrida, the surgery, the hands, and the blind in this drawing of *Tobit Healing His Father’s Blindness* all make reference to the act of drawing. Just as the eye is centre to the composition, so is the work of the hand. And this hand, we could argue, is not only the centre focus of *Tobias Healing his Father’s Blindness*, but is also *armed* as Derrida

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid. 26

<sup>158</sup> Ibid. 5. See translators note.

<sup>159</sup> Smith, P. H., “Art, Science, and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe”, 84.

<sup>160</sup> Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, 27.

suggests, perhaps not with a surgical tool or even with the gall of the fish, but rather with the “the reed pen, a favourite tool of Rembrandt’s later years”, as Julius Held describes it.<sup>161</sup> Indeed, the identification of the tool used here is difficult to decipher (figure 18). It could be said that by depicting Tobias with a tool, perhaps a painter’s tool rather than the gall of a fish, Rembrandt refers to his own work as a painter and draftsman. What makes something morph from a mark with the hand to a picture for the eye to see. In this sense the picture seems to represent the connection between touch and sight and making something visible. By drawing, or here painting, the touch of the painter is the touch which makes something seen and something visible. In this sense it is the idea of craftsmanship and handwork to make something visible which is the theme of the painting.



Figure 18: detail *Tobias Healing His Father's Blindness* (1626)

### ***A Painting of Painting***

And is it not entirely implausible that Rembrandt himself features in this biblical scene? After all, Rembrandt appearing in his own works was not unheard of and there were instances in which he was “unable to resist the urge to depict his own face”, as White et al. have put it.<sup>162</sup> Sometimes he uses himself as a model in his *tronies* and at other times he appears in the background of a history or biblical scene (see for example see *History Piece* of 1626, *The Stoning of Saint Stephen* of 1625, *The Raising of the Cross* of 1633 and his presence has even been suggested in *The Blinding of Samson* of the same year as the Tobit painting 1636, figures 26 and 27). This Tobit painting was made at a time when Rembrandt became prolific at representing himself as someone else, and with a moustache: *Self-portrait in Oriental Attire* (1632) in which he seems to sport the same turban (only without the feather), moustache and even clothing (figure 19). In his etching of *Self-Portrait with Saskia*, 1636

<sup>161</sup> Held. *Rembrandt Studies*. 125

<sup>162</sup> White, Christopher et al. *Rembrandt by Himself*. Edited by Christopher White and Quentin Buvelot. (London: National Gallery Publications Limited/ Yale University Press, 1999), 86-89 Although here I may be victim to what White et al. have called “the temptation of identifying every wide-nosed man with a moustache as the painter” 86-87



(figure 36), and *Self-Portrait with Bittern* (1639) made around the same time as Tobias, the dark features, the eyes and moustache draw comparisons between Rembrandt and those of Tobias hovering over his father. Indeed, if Rembrandt featured himself in so many of his early history works then is it not impossible that this could be also him, working on a self-portrait study, looking down at the paper, showing us an occasion when he works with his hands, drawing with the reed pen to make something visible. In this light this painting would be a more literal illustration of Derrida's claim that "Every time a draftsman lets himself be fascinated by the blind, every time he makes the blind a *theme* of his drawing, he projects, dreams, or hallucinates a figure of a draftsman...Or more precisely still, he begins to represent a drawing potency [*puissance*] at work, the very act of drawing".<sup>163</sup> In giving the blind man back his sight, Tobias works with his hands in order to show us what is possible with them: Hands that make us see, whether spiritual healer, surgeon, or artist.<sup>164</sup>



Figure 19: *Self-Portrait with Oriental Attire* (c.1632) Rembrandt

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<sup>163</sup> Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 2.

<sup>164</sup> Of course if this is a copy of another painting of Rembrandt then this also puts into question the status of what a self-portrait is. Can a self-portrait still be one when it is copied another artist? A case to point can be found in the next painting I discuss, which until 1959 a copy was believed to be the original.

#### 4. Blinding the Painting: Self-Portrait of 1628

*Drawings are a place to observe the exchange between seeing and blindness and to meditate on the ways that blindness threads its way through vision.*<sup>165</sup>

##### ***Rembrandt and the Self-Portrait***

**R**embrandt was drawn to particular subject matter. Just like the story of Tobit which was produced in copious amounts of images throughout his career, his own image, that is to say of Rembrandt himself, also interested the painter. The sheer amount of self-portraits produced throughout Rembrandt's career stands out when compared to his artist contemporaries. Although self-portraits were common in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, with artists normally producing one or two in their careers, the number of times Rembrandt depicted himself is noteworthy. With over forty painted self-portraits and thirty-one etchings, as well as a number of sketches, Rembrandt is an exception rather than the rule when it comes to an artist depicting himself. But the number of self-portraits alone is not the only thing that is special, as art historian Ernst van de Wetering explains,

This segment of his oeuvre [self-portraits] is unique in art history, not only in its scale and the length of time it spans, but also in its regularity. New self-portraits appeared almost annually, and sometimes several times a year. In addition, it is a category that encompasses some of his most impressive paintings and etchings.<sup>166</sup>

The self-portrait of 1628 now in Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, is the first known painted self-portrait by Rembrandt and is hailed as a masterpiece of outstanding influence.<sup>167</sup> But strangely, rather than this first painted self-portrait introducing a likeness or clear image of the artist, we are presented with a man whose face is hidden in deep shadows. As the first self-portrait of Rembrandt's oeuvre, and because it is so highly praised, one would have expected that this self-portrait would provide us with a good likeness of the painter and that

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<sup>165</sup> Elkins, *The Object Stares Back*, 235.

<sup>166</sup> Wetering, Ernst van de. "The Multiple Functions of Rembrandt's Self Portraits." In *Rembrandt by Himself*, ed. Christopher White and Quentin Buvelot. (London: National Gallery Publications/ Yale University Press, 1999), 10.

<sup>167</sup> This is something I discuss later. For the original sources of these opinions see Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, 1988, 39-40, and Binstock, "Rembrandt's Paint", 163. In addition this self-portrait can be found under the section of 'Masterpieces' on the Rijksmuseum website 'Rembrandt Van Harmensz van Rijn c. 1628':

<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/search?s=achronologic&p=7&ps=12&f.publish.apiCollection=XL100&imgonly=True&ii=1> accessed 05.05.2014

this self-portrait would provide us with a type of original with which we could compare the rest of Rembrandt's self-portraits.

In other paintings by Rembrandt in which the theme blindness is confronted, it takes the form of subject matter: blind beggars, philosophers or poets such as Homer, or those who choose to touch instead of see, medical operations and biblical stories where sight is spiritual as well as physical. In this painting though it is us the observer who suffers 'the worst tragedy that can befall man', as Julius Held described it, because Rembrandt's self-portrait is not there for the taking — heavy shadow looms over his face, almost rendering him into an silhouette. In our viewing process, our vision is obscured and we are in a sense blinded. If a portrait should provide us with a likeness of the sitter, this portrait prompts us to ask what a likeness really is. Rather than just deny its viewers a portrait of the famous Dutch painter, I would like to argue that this self-portrait suggests that a lack of sight is a part of our process of vision and experience of painting. In addition, this self-portrait makes us better acquainted with both the process of the artist producing a painting and of course a portrait of himself.

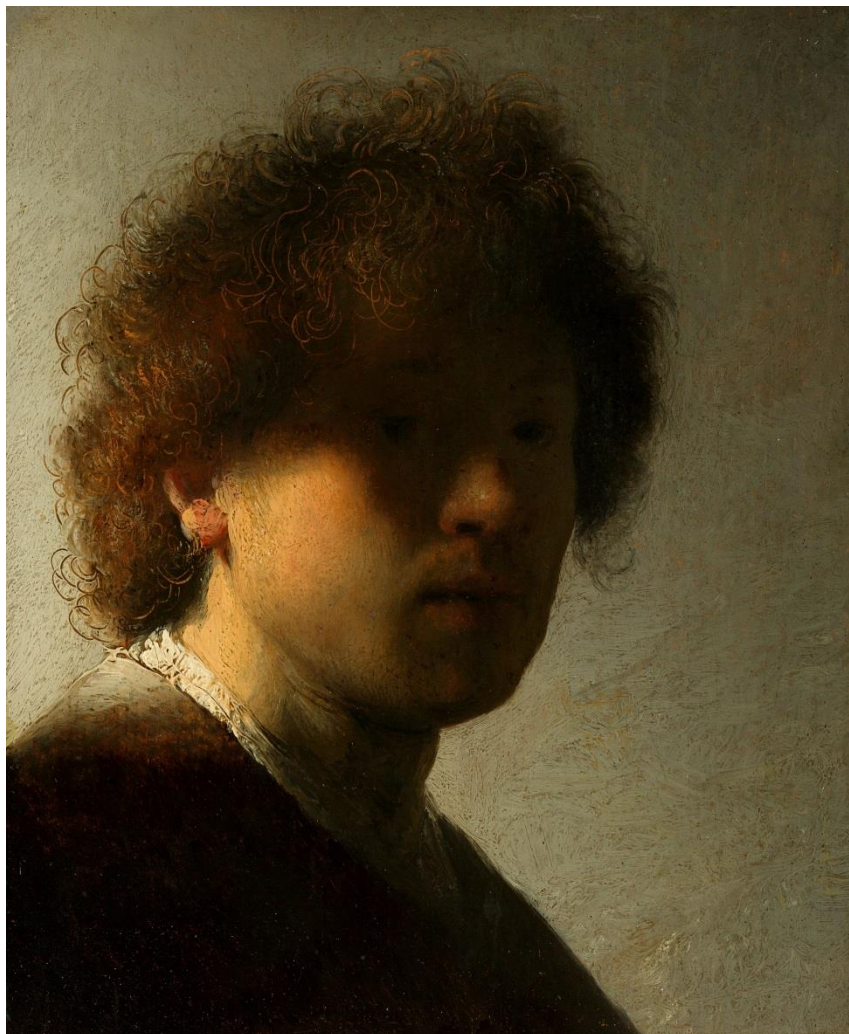


Figure 20: *Self-Portrait* (1628). Rembrandt

## *The Self-Portrait of 1628: The Viewer's Experience*

Viewing Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait* goes against what we normally encounter in front of an average self-portrait — a shadow is cast across the painter's face, removing all the details that allow us to recognise a person at first glance. We are told that these earlier self-portraits “pay scant attention to the conventional formalities of portraiture”<sup>168</sup> and this one in particular

seems to illustrate the case rather well since, as one art historian writes, in this portrait “the subject's features are hard to make out”.<sup>169</sup> In comparison to self-portraits and portraits made by some of Rembrandt's contemporaries (Anthony Van Dyck's *Self-portrait with a Sunflower* 1633 (figure 21), Gerard Dou *Self-Portraits* of 1665 (figure 22) to give just two examples contemporary to Rembrandt, we find Rembrandt's self-portrait appears to be more a study in the play of shadow



Figure 21: *Self Portrait With a Sunflower* (1633) Anthony Van Dyck

and light than a representation of the artist; the light source of this picture appears to be going straight over Rembrandt's right shoulder, capturing his cheek, ear and nose only by chance and illuminating more of what's behind him than his face. Art historian H. Perry Chapman felt that the most missed factors are the eyes and the mouth,<sup>170</sup> and certainly in missing the eyes— ‘the windows of the soul’— the spectator gets the idea that we lack something inherent to a portrait. To be sure the lack of eyes seemed to cause frustration in one of its previous owners too, who had the eyes painted over in order to make them more legible.<sup>171</sup> Only when we stare at the darkness long enough do we make out some beady eyes staring back at us, or Rembrandt at himself, as he would have done during the process of



Figure 4: *Self-Portrait with a Palette* (c.1665) Gerard Dou

<sup>168</sup> H. Perry Chapman. *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Identity*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 10.

<sup>169</sup> White et al. *Rembrandt by Himself*, 95.

<sup>170</sup> Perry Chapman, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits*, 23.

<sup>171</sup> Binstock, “Rembrandt's Paint”, 1999, 163. Binstock mentions the retouched state of the painting when found in 1959 in this article. Perry Chapman also expresses a frustration in the lack of eyes and mouth in this portrait saying that the ‘crucial elements are inaccessible’ see page 23 in Perry Chapman *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits*.



observing himself in the mirror. In any case the painter certainly demands us to put some effort in finding a face in the shadows. Three small elements, the earlobe, the cheek and the tip of the nose, are all that is highlighted of the face and give little away as to the identity of the sitter. Rembrandt also gives us some strands of hair— paint scraped away to show the play of light on single curly hairs—giving us a feel for its texture but denying us a full picture of where it begins or ends in relation to his face.

While his other self-portraits around this time clearly display facial features or sometimes even costumes (see figures 23 and 24) indicating the type of person they are meant to portray, this self-portrait seems to present an unclear or unprecedented character.<sup>172</sup> In fact the identity of the sitter in this self-portrait has even been described as ‘arbitrary’ and ‘irrelevant’,<sup>173</sup> seemingly cancelling out the very point of a self-portrait. As the Rijksmuseum catalogue entry aptly describes, it takes us a while to realise that Rembrandt is in fact staring back at us.<sup>174</sup> We could even argue that the reason we recognise Rembrandt in this painting, is not so much due to his likeness but rather due to his fame and our familiarity with his face through all the other self-portraits that came after this one.<sup>175</sup> Interestingly, according to Benjamin Binstock, this self-portrait of Rembrandt reinvents the whole genre. Thus, despite its less than traditional form, and indeed probably because of it, this self-portrait creates a new type of painting and has been referred to by Svetlana Alpers as a “tour de force”, whilst Benjamin

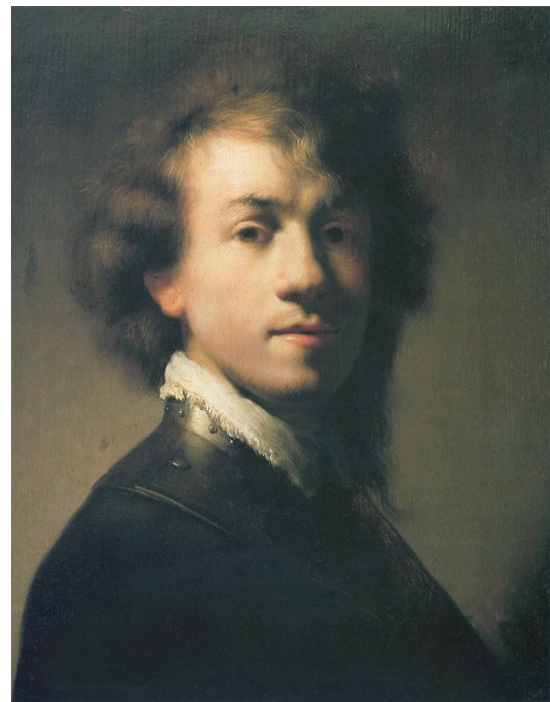


Figure 23: *Rembrandt with Gorget* (1629) Rembrandt

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<sup>172</sup> White, et al. *Rembrandt by Himself*, 96.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. 95.

<sup>174</sup> Rijksmuseum.nl

<sup>175</sup> As Mariët Westermann notes at the very beginning of her book on Rembrandt “Few faces from the pre-photographic age are as familiar as Rembrandt’s... This face and its expressions were already famous in the eighteenth century when many artists... borrowed them for their self-portraits” Westermann, Mariët. *Rembrandt*. (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000), 4.

Binstock goes as far to call it “a world transforming achievement”.<sup>176</sup>



Figure 24: *Self-Portrait as Young Man* (1630).  
Rembrandt

### *A Self-Portrait in the Seventeenth Century*

As tempting as it is to translate a self-portrait as an autobiographical artefact, testifying to the artist's mood or revealing something about his personality, especially in a portrait which shows the sitter in darkness, we should remember that the self-portrait has not always been interpreted as it would be today. As Ernst van de Wetering clarifies “it is extremely unlikely that Rembrandt made his self-portraits as a personal form of self-analysis”.<sup>177</sup> Without a doubt, the notion of self-portrait as we understand it today did not exist in the seventeenth century but is a concept created in the nineteenth century and is thus related to a more recent idea of self-portraiture as reflecting on one's own individuality and existence. Binstock explains the problem further, “Rembrandt's personality informs every aspect of his work. His works however, should not be approached as autobiographical, personal confessions, or records of his person, because he ultimately remains invisible behind his paint, even when he

<sup>176</sup> See both Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, 39-40 and Binstock, “Rembrandt's Paint”, 163.

<sup>177</sup> Van de Wetering “The Multiple Functions of Rembrandt's Self-Portraits”, 10.

portrays himself as a young man”.<sup>178</sup> Nevertheless we find this romantic notion of the self-portrait has led observers of this painting to interpret the heavy shadow over Rembrandt’s eyes as a sign of self-reflection or as a type of psychological state.<sup>179</sup> Knowing that this reading of Rembrandt’s 1628 self-portrait is most likely far from what Rembrandt would have intended it is perhaps better to look at how Ernst Van de Wetering describes the concept of the self-portrait in the seventeenth century as a painting of the artist *by himself*.<sup>180</sup> That is a portrait of the artist which just happens to be by the sitter — no psychological meaning intended.

This concept of a portrait of the painter *by himself* is explained in Van de Wetering’s essay ‘The Multiple Functions of Rembrandt’s Self-Portraits’ in which the art historian brings to our attention that “the word ‘self-portrait’ did not exist in Rembrandt’s time”, rather “a self-portrait was (with variations) indicated as ‘a portrait of the painter (for instance Rembrandt) done by himself’”.<sup>181</sup> In this light, very often the very fact that the painter had painted himself was not significant. Most often the use of one’s self as a model or as a painter was a matter of convenience rather than a choice with significance. Van de Wetering notes that most often a self-portrait of Rembrandt would have in the seventeenth century been referred to as ‘Rembrandt’s likeness done by himself’. Thus for a collector wanting a portrait of a famous or preferred artist, it would have been enough to accept a portrait of him, no matter who it was by.

However, self-portraits were not only used to represent the artist for a collector. In Rembrandt’s day the self-portrait held many



Figure 25: *Self-Portrait* (1650 ). Nicolas Poussin.

<sup>178</sup> Binstock, “Rembrandt’s Paint”, 156.

<sup>179</sup> Perry Chapman, *Rembrandt’s Self-Portraits*, 22-24. It is likely that Rembrandt owned at least a mirror. We know that in the years before his bankruptcy in 1656 he owned a ‘mirror with an ebony frame’ as well as ‘a large mirror’ as they appeared in the inventory of his things. (see Strauss and Van Der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents*, 1979, 355 and 361. Although we do not know the quality of the mirrors, we can presume that this was not the cause of the unclear image of the painter since other portraits of this time show a clear image.

<sup>180</sup> This rejection of the dark shadow over the eyes as a sign of emotional or psychological depth is refuted by both van de Wetering in “The Multiple Functions of Rembrandt’s Self-Portraits”, and in Binstock’s “Rembrandt’s Paint”.

<sup>181</sup> Ernst Van de Wetering. *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings IV: The Self-Portraits*. Vol. 4. (Amsterdam: Springer, 2005), 89.

other functions too. They could be exercises in depicting facial expressions and therefore studies, or a way of capturing or remembering famous artists of the time for art collectors and connoisseurs to display and discuss. In this sense they were sometimes considered a way to capture both a likeness of the artist as well as his typical subject matter or style, therefore performing a double function within the one painting.<sup>182</sup> In fact, in Rembrandt's case a self-portrait may have performed this last purpose by displaying both Rembrandt the painter with what he was most famous for, his visible brush stroke and the illusionism it created. Other examples of this 'dual' purpose of the self-portrait could also be the artist featuring himself in his own work of art, something typical to his oeuvre, such as Gerard Dou's *The Quack* (figure 9) in which the painter appears in the scene from a window holding his palate, or in French painter Nicolas Poussin's *Self-Portrait* of 1650 (figure 25) in which some of his works appear behind him. In his early works, Rembrandt is also known to appear several times in his own works, but in contrast to Dou, as a character or performer rather than as himself, the artist. Rembrandt features in a number of his early works (figures 26, 27), *The stoning of Stephen* (1625), *David before Saul with the Head of Goliath* (1627), and *History Piece* (1626) to name but a few examples. In fact this last example bears particular resemblance to the way Rembrandt depicted himself in this self-portrait, with the scraped paint to present curly hair. In this sense, although a self-portrait, Rembrandt also uses himself as a type of 'extra' in the



scene.

Figure 26: *History Painting* (1626) Rembrandt. Rembrandt appears in the opening between the columns in the background.

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<sup>182</sup> This is suggested by Wetering who argues that the self-portrait was both a way to show the artist's face as well as the "autograph specimen of the reason for that fame", in this case "an exceptional painting technique". Van de Wetering, "The Multiple Functions of Rembrandt's Self-Portraits", 29-31.





Figure 27: Detail from *Stoning of Saint Stephen*. Rembrandt appears just above Stephen's head.

## *The Tronie*

The purpose of this particular self-portrait and its lack of the sitter's likeness appears to be resolved when we find that perhaps this painting was not intended as a self-portrait at all, but a *tronie*.<sup>183</sup> A *tronie* is a type of painting invented by Rembrandt himself and is something between a portrait and a historical figure.<sup>184</sup> *Tronies* often displayed a particular facial expression or showed the sitter wearing some exotic costume such as a turban, decorative hats or rich jewellery and it appears that this type of painting was intended to hint to some sort of narrative. The categorisation of this portrait as *tronie* rather than strict self-portrait may be due to the fact that it does not seem to quite fulfil what we would consider a self-portrait; there is a lack of the sitter, so to speak.

Despite what may seem a suitable explanation for the purpose of this strange self-portrait, categorising this painting as a *tronie* does not provide such a simple solution. If it was Rembrandt who invented the genre of *tronie*, then it was also Rembrandt who defined what it was. In this case the 1628 self-portrait should provide us with a model on which to

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<sup>183</sup> White, et al. *Rembrandt by Himself*, 95.

<sup>184</sup> B. P. J. Broos, et al. 'Rembrandt van Rijn.' *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online* (Oxford University Press), n.d.. accessed 25 May, 2014, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T071362>. See also White, et al., *Rembrandt by Himself*.

base the genre of *tronie*. But the definition and the reality of the painting do not seem to match, as we have seen.

Naturally, the portrait could be considered a *tronie* for its lack of likeness to its sitter, but on the other hand we can question whether this painting would fit into the genre of *tronie* either. Firstly, there is no historical feel, no costume, or fancy jewellery, indeed it seems to remind us of the later self-portraits where Rembrandt represents himself in his painting clothes. Secondly, there isn't a particular facial expression either, or at least from what we can see, as White et al. note, "it is not immediately apparent what kind of person this beardless youth is intended to portray".<sup>185</sup> Lastly, *tronie* is literally translated from the Dutch as 'phiz', relating to physiognomy or sometimes even literally 'face'; in this painting we barely have one. Here, Rembrandt's attempt to capture himself instead shies away from both ideas of a clear cut self-portrait and *tronie*. At the same time, in presenting himself as both self-portrait and *tronie*, it is neither; he appears to present us with another type of painting altogether, one which defies categorisation. As Benjamin Binstock writes, "Rembrandt's Amsterdam panel (self-portrait 1628) is not yet a self-portrait, or rather redefines the terms by which the self-portrait is subsequently understood".<sup>186</sup> But is this newly defined self-portrait a *tronie*, or is it a new genre altogether? And the matter is complicated further because as Van de Wetering informs us "it is difficult to draw the line demarcating the *tronie*-like self-portrait".<sup>187</sup>

### ***A Double Self-Portrait***

**R**eviewing what Van de Wetering says about the understanding of the self-portrait in the seventeenth century, that is a portrait of the artist *by himself*, we see that this painting comes much closer to the idea of a self-portrait than it first appears. As Alpers claims, Rembrandt highlights the self-portrait as a painting *of himself* and *by himself*, in which the painter calls attention not only to himself as a face, with his presence on the canvas, but also his presence through his use of paint. She explains that "in self-portraiture, his [Rembrandt's] performance

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<sup>185</sup> White, et al. *Rembrandt by Himself* 96.

<sup>186</sup> Binstock, "Rembrandt's Paint", 162.

<sup>187</sup> Van de Wetering, "The Multiple Functions of Rembrandt's Self-Portraits", 37, n. 67.

of the artist as model is matched by the performance of his brush”.<sup>188</sup> Very often Rembrandt’s self-portraits are, in a sense, the ultimate definition of a self-portrait, particularly as Rembrandt had such a remarkable painting style. Alpers goes on to argue that the Rembrandt identified with himself in painting both as person painted (the self-portrait, the man represented on the canvas) and as a person painting (the notable brush-marks which sweep over and scratch into the canvas).<sup>189</sup> As noted, the artist represented along with his technique is something that would have been common in Rembrandt’s time. For art lovers, the technique could even be prized as much as the content of the painting itself. Wetering explains this attitude with a quote from the Italian art admirer Luigi Lanzi who discusses the purpose of the self-portraits in the Medici gallery a century later, “every portrait in the two rooms is a self-portrait of the painter, so in each painting one has a depiction of the artist and at the same time a particular example of his style”.<sup>190</sup> Perhaps when painting this self-portrait Rembrandt was already aware that his painting technique would be his signature and the very definition of himself? As Alpers argues of this painting, “Already in this early self-portrayal, Rembrandt’s calling attention to the paint is intuitively linked to his calling attention to himself”.<sup>191</sup> As we have seen, by showing himself as a silhouette, this painting becomes more elusive, lying somewhere between a self-portrait and a *tronie*, or neither place, defying categorisation. However in doing so, the painting carries an intangible quality which allows the spectator to focus on how the painting was created rather than just who appears in it. In fact Alpers says that this self-portrait of 1628 is a “splendid case in point” when it comes to Rembrandt’s display of both himself as model and himself through technique.<sup>192</sup> Perhaps we could take Alpers point further still and argue that by presenting us clearly with his technique, rather than a clear likeness of himself, we are given both a self-portrait (the artist’s technique) and yet the lack of one in any conventional terms (the likeness of the artist) — a type of double self-portrait where the focus is on the activity of the painter rather than the subject himself.

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<sup>188</sup> Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, 39-40.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.* 117-118.

<sup>190</sup> Luigi Lanzi quoted in Van de Wetering, “The Multiple Functions of Rembrandt’s Self-Portraits”, 30.

<sup>191</sup> Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, 40.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.* 39-40.

## *The Self-Portrait as a Study of a Ruin*

By remaining in the shadows Rembrandt gives us an opportunity to contemplate other areas of this painting that go beyond portraiture defined as a likeness of its sitter or even as a *tronie* in which the sitter represents someone else altogether. Perhaps by understanding the sitter as ‘arbitrary’ as White et al. suggested we can understand the painting in a different context. If this portrait represents Rembrandt ‘by himself’ it is a Rembrandt who perhaps wanted to remain anonymous, or at least wasn’t concerned with a clear picture of who he was. In some literature concerning this 1628 self-portrait, it is also referred to as a ‘study’,<sup>193</sup> and in some cases as an experiment.<sup>194</sup> That is to say either a type of preparatory drawing by the artist for another painting, or an exercise to practice a technique, play with composition or lighting. In fact, various scholars have explained this unique picture as an exploration in the use of Chiaroscuro.<sup>195</sup> In this sense, this self-portrait was never intended for public display, but rather as a tool, or reference to be used by the artist in another work.

It could then be said that Rembrandt’s *Self-Portrait*, or now *Self-Portrait Study*, has in fact been subject to a change in meaning throughout time. As Van de Wetering suggests the concept of self-portrait itself has evolved over time. What we see in a self-portrait today is not necessarily what was seen in it when it was conceived. A portrait painted by the artist, particularly in this case, with its deep shadow, may evoke in today’s observer a romantic notion of the artist contemplating himself, however, as Van de Wetering explained this reading was unlikely to be intended on the part of the artist, and probably even on part of the seventeenth-century patron or buyer. If this painting was intended as a study, then it is now far from the context it was intended for. This is demonstrated with Alpers and Binstock’s comments which held the self-portrait in such high esteem. In this sense the painting has become subject to history and has moved away from its initial function indicated by the title of *study*, *self-portrait*, or even *tronie*. As time has gone by and perhaps even because of the discovery of the painting rather recently in 1959, the picture, once intended as a study, has gained importance as the self-portrait which changed the whole genre of self-portraits.<sup>196</sup> In this sense the 1628 *Self-Portrait* illustrates Derrida’s concept of *ruin* rather well.

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<sup>193</sup> Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, 37; (Binstock, “Rembrandt’s Paint”).

<sup>194</sup> Rijksmuseum.nl, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl> and White, et al. *Rembrandt by Himself*, 95.

<sup>195</sup> White, et al. *Rembrandt by Himself*, 95,

<sup>196</sup> Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*; Binstock, “Rembrandt’s Paint”.

Firstly, both the sitter, Rembrandt, and his representation on a canvas are subject to decay; both represent a ruin of the past in thus more literal sense, something once whole but now lost or fragmented. Further still, the reason for the conception of the work is now lost; as we have seen, no one is really sure what this painting's function actually was. As a result, what remains is a *ruin*, or a relic from the past which is incomplete. Thus we no longer have the artist, his intention or the canvas in perfect tact (if we recall the painting has also been subject to re-painting over the eyes and then restoration to remove the new paint). This missing information has then been created by us the viewer (and quite literally when we take into account the over-painting of the eyes) — through documents, stories and imagination we reconstruct what is missing from this self-portrait, speculating if it is a *tronie*, *study*, *self-portrait*, a copy or a masterpiece.

Taking this self-portrait as a study, rather than finished piece, we find that it is subject to Derrida's concept of *ruin* further. If meant as a study then this painting was probably intended to be copied onto another canvas, into another scene. Accordingly, would the new self-portrait still be a self-portrait? In short can a copy of a self-portrait by the same artist still be a self-portrait? In fact a similar question arises when we consider that this painting was once only known from a copy (now in Kassel) perhaps by a Rembrandt's student Govert Flinck (1615-1660, see figure 28);<sup>197</sup> which was in turn, before the discovery of this painting in 1959, considered the original. Now 'demoted' to the title of *Portrait of Rembrandt* it was long considered a self-portrait, the first of the whole of Rembrandt's oeuvre in fact. Despite White et al. remarking that the copy is a "virtually identical depiction",<sup>198</sup> the Kassel copy now lives in the shadow of the original. What was once described as "an autograph work by Rembrandt"<sup>199</sup> is now reduced to work whose painter uses 'near-mechanical brushwork' and was 'less adept'<sup>200</sup> in painting in Rembrandt's style than, of course, Rembrandt himself was. We could argue that this copy has now been deconstructed, in part, to its original ruin form.



Figure 28: Copy of Self-Portrait. Govert Flinck (?)

<sup>197</sup> Binstock, "Rembrandt's Paint", 163.

<sup>198</sup> White, et al, *Rembrandt by Himself*.

<sup>199</sup> Bredius, *Rembrandt*, 547. catalogue no.1

<sup>200</sup> White, et al. *Rembrandt by Himself*, 96.

Yet the reason for this copying of self-portraits, which happened rather frequently in the later years of Rembrandt's career, appears to have been to meet the demand for those very same self-portraits that we saw Van de Wetering discuss above—the painting of the artist *by himself*.<sup>201</sup> Thus the 1628 *Self-Portrait* is a ruin standing as a monumental piece of work, yet somehow incomplete; firstly, the idea that this was perhaps first meant as a study, for private use but now takes pride of place in Rijksmuseum, takes the canvas out of its original context. It could even be said that we have now put a portrait Rembrandt may have been unsure of, because of the lack of clarity and extreme shading, into the limelight of great art historical importance.<sup>202</sup> In addition, the painting, having been rediscovered so recently, now contains a layer of fascination; it now holds the position of a recently discovered treasure, and contains all the excitement that entails. Lastly, in the emergence of this self-portrait, what was originally considered the original, is now of second importance. It threw scholars who thought that the Kassel piece was the original almost into denial.<sup>203</sup> We could say that their reconstructed ruins started to crumble as they were asked to consider another painting as the original masterpiece. But what if the Rijksmuseum *Self-portrait* of 1628 also turns out to be a copy closer to another different lost original? Can we ever be sure we are looking at the original, particular with Rembrandt?

### *Self-Portrait as Frame*

As I hope I have shown, this painting, just like the two other Rembrandt paintings I have discussed in the previous chapters, holds a title poses problems. The title of Self-portrait brings with it a certain assumptions, whilst 'blinding us' to the other possibilities this painting potentially has. But whether *tronie*, *study* or *self-portrait*, this painting will always have some sort of title, even if the painting goes by the title *Untitled*. Furthermore, all of these titles entail some sort of meaning. As *tronie*, we look for a facial expression or a costume, or explain the reasoning for dark shadow. As *study* we read the painting as a preliminary work, a

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<sup>201</sup> Binstock, "Rembrandt's Paint", 163.

<sup>202</sup> Rijksmuseum refer to Rembrandt as both experimental and inexperienced in their description of the self-portrait, which would also suggest that this painting was not intended as a finished piece for display.. [www.Rijksmuseum.nl](http://www.Rijksmuseum.nl). n.d.

<sup>203</sup> Bredius, *Rembrandt*. Catalogue number 1.

rough sketch perhaps not intended for use in its present form. *Self-portrait* also brings with it expectations, whether that be a self-portrait as an expression of self, some psychological state, or as a commodity to meet the demand for a particular market, as Van de Wetering and Alpers describe. And in another way too, the title ‘self-portrait’ carries other assumptions about the way the painting was made. In *Memoirs of the Blind* Derrida uses the concept of the self-portrait to illustrate the painting’s reliance on its title— without this written knowledge we are often missing essential information which defines the work itself. As we have seen, our interpretations of the same picture change depending on the title we give it. In particular with *self-portrait*, the title precipitates essential information; not only who is in the painting, but also who painted it. As Derrida explains, in this activity where sight is important — viewing art — we are relying here on information that comes from outside the painting, and all the assumptions that go with that title. Here Derrida argues his case,

Yet in all the cases of the self-portrait, only the nonvisible referent in the picture, only an extrinsic clue, will allow identification. For the identification will always remain indirect. One will always be able to disassociate the “signatory” from the “subject” of the self-portrait. Whether it be a question of the identity of the object drawn by the draftsman or of the draftsman who is himself drawn, be he the author of the drawing or not, the identification remains *probable*, that is uncertain, withdrawn from any internal reading, an object of inference and not of perception...This is why the status of the self-portrait of the self-portraitist will always retain a hypothetical character. It always depends on the juridical effect of the title, on this verbal event that does not belong to the inside of the work but only to its parergonal border.<sup>204</sup>

In other words, to know that the painting is a self-portrait, one must rely on information outside the painting, never from the viewing of the art work alone. Rembrandt, by not showing who he is, illustrates this reliance on the title rather nicely—by hiding in the shadows, Rembrandt almost forces us to rely on the title. And by relying on the title, we rely on all the assumptions that go with it. In doing so we rely not on perception but something outside of directly looking, whether that be our knowledge, our



Figure 29: Pieter Bruegel in his studio

cultural presumptions, or the exhibition label. A short explanation by author of *Downcast Eyes*, Martin Jay, summarizes Derrida’s concept, “Self-portraits are, moreover, of special

<sup>204</sup> Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 64-65.



interest because they inevitably entail the intervention of writing, for the visual image alone cannot convey the information that the portrait is by the artist himself.”<sup>205</sup> Thus a reliance on vision alone, that is of the visual art work, acts to ‘blind’ us to what the picture claims to represent. We are put in a position where solely looking, in a physical sense, removes a possibility of knowing what it represents, rather we must rely something from outside the picture, the *parergon*, as Derrida would call it, because no matter how hard we look, the notion of self-portrait cannot be conceived from looking at the painting alone. Derrida provides us with some examples that highlight this problem. A drawing by Pieter Bruegel in his studio (figure 29) could perhaps be considered a self-portrait at first glance; drawn in the style of , artist is in the centre of the composition, in his studio at his easel, with the tools of the artist at hand, in the process of creating. On the contrary, as Derrida informs us, this is just a hypothesis. We presume (in the case without a title) that if someone is depicted in front of their canvas or with paper and pen, that this is a self-portrait. And on the contrary, if we see the title of self-portrait, we look for these objects and actions. In fact the drawing by Bruegel may well be by a student of Bruegel, who on further inspection we see on the floor carefully observing his master at work. In a discussion surrounding a self-portrait by Henri Fantin-Latour (figure 30) , Derrida clarifies the problem further

It’s just that one must know [*savoir*], and so *one just has to see (it) [voir ça]*— i.e., that the performative fiction that engages the spectator in the signature of the work is given to be seen only *through* the blindness that it produces as its truth...Even if one were sure that Fantin-Latour were drawing himself drawing, one would never know, *observing the work alone*, whether he were showing himself drawing *himself* or *something else*— or even himself *as something else, as other [sic]*.<sup>206</sup>

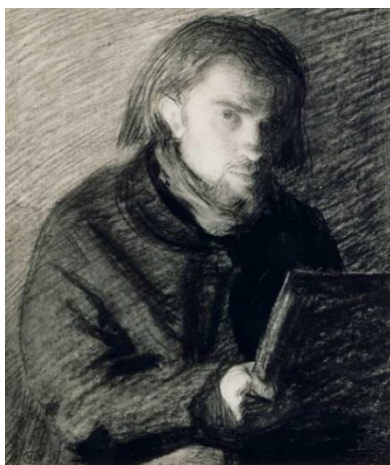


Figure 30: *Self-Portrait*. Henri Fantin-Latour

As if to illustrate Derrida’s point, in self-portraits such as Rembrandt’s *Self-Portrait in Oriental Attire* (figure 19) or *The Painter in his Studio* (c.1629) there is no indication that the painter paints himself, except from the information we receive from outside the painting (figure 33). In this first painting, the artist makes no indication he is a painter, and his hands are busy with other things: his hand rests on a stick whilst his other poses on his hip. The second picture shows the artist with his easel and in painter’s clothes, but he is nowhere near the canvas. How do we know that these are

<sup>205</sup> Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 522

<sup>206</sup> Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 65 (Derrida’s Italics).



self-portraits and not made by skilled students of Rembrandt? And our 1628 self-portrait too, poses similar problems because we cannot see his hands. If he painting himself in the shadows, or was it someone else? And with deep shadow over the face, we can even ask if it is actually Rembrandt we are looking at.

In choosing the title *Self-Portrait* for this painting we are also making a choice to ‘turn a blind eye’ to the possibilities described above. That is to see one thing is to ignore another. Taking into consideration the idea that Rembrandt’s 1628 self-portrait could also be considered a *tronie* or *study* underlines this uncertainty. Is it Rembrandt we are looking at, or is it someone as someone else? As we have heard from the exhibition Catalogue *Rembrandt by Himself* (1999) the identification of the person is “irrelevant” and “arbitrary”,<sup>207</sup> thus dismissing the idea that even if it is a self-portrait it bears no importance, the idea of portrait should suffice. Rembrandt’s lack of presence here seems to confirm the catalogue’s description quite literally. But if we remove the self-portrait title with an absence of a title, the identity could be anyone we like. Indeed the lack of identity opens up new possibilities. The absence of clear visual information in this self-portrait highlights how our experience of art work is always a process of relying as much on the information we find outside it as outside of it.

### ***Seeing What Is Not There***

**B**y removing the traditional conventions of self-portraiture or portraiture in general, Rembrandt’s *self-portrait* appears to be more concerned with *how* we see rather than *who* we see. Conventional subject matter seems to melt away and what we are left with are painted gestures and a mere glimpse of a man. The title and contextual information are not the only sources we bring to this painting

Observing this silhouette of a man we do however get more than just shadow and light. Despite the visual obstacles, we feel we see Rembrandt’s face, even if we have to take some time looking. As Rijksmuseum describes: “It takes us a while to realise that the artist is

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<sup>207</sup> White, et al. *Rembrandt by Himself*, 95

gazing intently out at us”,<sup>208</sup> but none the less we find his eyes. So in a painting such as this, where are we getting our visual information from? We know we are looking at a head, a face even, but information is missing and the features we long to look at in an encounter with a person are obscured by shadow. In *The Object Stares Back* James Elkins discusses our process of vision and our tendency to seek out complete figures, even when something remains unfinished or obstructed. That is to say, that even when something is unfinished, incomplete, or when something obstructs our vision, we still imagine it whole. For example if a tree obscures a building we still imagine the building as a whole, we complete it with a neurological process called ‘subjective contour completion’. Further still Elkins argues that this phenomenon lies on a deeper level, and that we have a natural “desire for wholeness over dissection and form over shapelessness”.<sup>209</sup> Indeed, this instinct to complete what we see and make it whole means that we bring something to this self-portrait. Where lines are blurred we complete them automatically, and where details are missing we fill them in.

This process of making the fragmented whole goes even further with faces in particular. We find that we actually need little specific information, such as lips and eyes, to identify a face. Rather, it is enough to get some idea with patches of light and dark, such as we have in this painting. By producing the right patterns in tonal patches the brain will recognise that what it is looking at is a face. As Melcher and Cavanagh explain “people are surprisingly adept at seeing faces or animals in random patterns like clouds”, and they go on to clarify this process further:

This ability appears to be largely automatic, since it requires little or no focused attention and occurs even for stimuli viewed out of the corner of the eye. Rapid categorisation (a person’s ability to identify whether an animal is in a picture or not) seems to work particularly well with animals and people. Moreover a number of studies have shown that a face in particular can be detected quickly: our brain appears hardwired to process faces even when we don’t see them clearly or even consciously. In sum, the visual system *wants* to see faces and animals.<sup>210</sup>

Therefore it seems that we are naturally programmed to find faces and people, even when they are not obvious or directly in front of us. Some small gestures, suggestive lines and patches of light and dark can all lead to this natural phenomenon known as *pareidolia*.<sup>211</sup> In this light, Rembrandt’s self-portrait need not give us much information and this painting appears to play on this curiosity in the process of vision. In doing so we perhaps answer the question of why the painting is ‘a tour de force’ despite the lack of ‘portraiture’. Standing

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<sup>208</sup> Rijksmuseum.nl

<sup>209</sup> Elkins, *The Object Stares Back*, 125.

<sup>210</sup> Cavanagh “Pictorial Clues in Art and in Visual Perception”, 365.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.* 365.

before this portrait we see single hairs lit up to become a head of curly masses and suggestive dark patches hint to the eyes, the direction of the look and even the colour and the whites of them. We even feel as if he is watching us watching him. Binstock describes this experience of the painting, suggesting that Rembrandt was aware of this mental process:

In attempting to record his own likeness, Rembrandt is aware of the inadequacy of the image fully to capture its object, or of “something more than meets the eye,” quite literally, because we cannot make out his eyes or his thoughts. Building on fundamental principles of Dutch portraiture, Rembrandt invented a means of representing a lack (or excess) in the face, onto which we project our relation to his figures.<sup>212</sup>

Whether the artist intended this effect or not is arguable. What is sure is that this lack of detail works rather well. In bringing something to the painting ourselves, we perhaps get the same satisfaction of finding faces and animals in the clouds. This process triggers us to complete the portrait ourselves, filling in information where it is lacking. Further still in projecting our own image on to this portrait, the painting demonstrates another aspect of Derrida’s idea of *parergon*— not everything comes from within the work. In this case, however, instead of bringing historical or institutional data to the painting, we bring a more instinctive type of information to our viewing experience. In seeing little, we project our own visual information onto this canvas.

### ***Blindness as a Part of Seeing***

In his essay on blindness Elkins argues that each act of seeing mingles seeing with not seeing. He claims “Blindness is the precondition and constant companion of vision. It cannot be fully seen, but it must always be present wherever there is seeing”.<sup>213</sup> According to him this blindness is found in various ways we look, or don’t look; sometimes we will look away, sometimes we will ignore or not register what we see. This can be conscious or unconscious. For Elkins this ‘blindness’ is inherent for the way we experience images and his book *The Object Stares Back* underlines this play of selective viewing, moments of not looking or looking for something in particular “so that vision can become less a way of gathering information than avoiding it”.<sup>214</sup> Just as I described in the introduction, in discussing the

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<sup>212</sup> Binstock, “Rembrandt’s Paint”, 164.

<sup>213</sup> Elkins, *The Object Stares Back*, 226.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.* 201

themes of blindness, sight and touch, I choose not to see other aspects of Rembrandt's work. Elkins notion of blindness in taking in information underlines what I would argue is inherent to any act of observation, not just art. It is impossible to see everything at the same time. However Elkins discussion highlights what I have been describing; in looking at the self-portrait we choose what we bring to it from its parergonal borders. The very interpretations I have described are reliant on a type of blindness. Both titles, and the ideas they suggest, as well as *pareidolia*, are ways of obtaining visual information, which do not come directly from the painting or our perception. Here the experience of looking at and interpreting a painting comes from not-seeing, as much as seeing.

In our physical sight too blindness is also prevalent. This concept of blindness is not just about choosing what we see and do not see. Also in the actual process of seeing we are blinded or have our physical vision obscured. The natural blind spot, known as *scotoma*, for example, is a place in our eye lacking in receptors due to the optic nerve, and therefore presents a fairly large area of blindness within normal vision. Our everyday vision does not notice these gaps in seeing however, but either fills them in with memory or ignores them.<sup>215</sup> Thus our brain tricks us into thinking we see 'everything' by covering up this deficiency. There is also peripheral vision, which, it has been noted, gives us less visual information than the central part of the eye, the fovea.<sup>216</sup> However the vision we see out of the corner of our eye, rather than 'head on', can also provide us with much information. As Melcher and Cavanagh explain, "It is clear that we are able to understand a great deal about the world even out of the corner of our eye or in a dimly lit room where the 'fine detail' pathway is of little use".<sup>217</sup> As we have seen from their explanation above about 'rapid visual categorisation' and 'pareidolia', we need little visual information to see faces and people. To be sure, just seeing out of the corner on one's eye or catching a glimpse of someone in our peripheral vision can make an impression and allow us to recognise something. The visual information we receive from the peripheral areas of the eye is also known as coarse information and Cavanagh and Melcher have noted that this coarse information plays the predominant role.<sup>218</sup> Our peripheral vision, not only gives us a great deal of information about the world but also gives us a very

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<sup>215</sup> Richard Gregory and Patrick Cavanagh. "The Blind Spot." *Scholarpedia* 6, no. 10 (2011), Revision #123334, accessed 25 May, 2014

<sup>216</sup> See both Cavanagh, "Pictorial Clues in Art and in Visual Perception", 364, Steve Di Paola. "The Trace and The Gaze: Textural Agency in Rembradt's Late Portraiture from a Vision Science Perspective." *EVA*. London, 2008. 68-79, accessed: 17 Feb, 2014 <http://ivizlab.sfu.ca/papers/eva2008.pdf>, Elkins, *The Object Stares Back*, 72, and Di Paola, Enns and Riebe "Rembradt's Textural Agency", 145.

<sup>217</sup> Cavanagh, "Pictorial Clues in Art and in Visual Perception", 364.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.* 364-365

good idea of the identity of objects and if they are moving or not.<sup>219</sup> Rembrandt's depiction of himself could be related to this way we experience objects in our peripheral vision. That is to say in partial blindness and with coarse information.

### *Glimpsing and Glancing*

If, as we have heard from Elkins and Melcher and Cavanagh, blindness is as much a part of our vision as seeing is, then this self-portrait seems to embrace this 'flaw'. If indeed 'flaw' is what we can call it. As discussed above, this painting captures one of those moments when we are blind or do not see well; Rembrandt represented himself here as if just *glancing* at himself in the mirror and in glancing at himself, he (or now we) got a glimpse of him. In this painting Rembrandt is not sitting down posing as in some other of his self-portraits (for example *Self-portrait* of 1640. figure 31), rather it is as if we had a chance meeting with him in the hallway, in which we got a glimpse of the artist but our eyes couldn't adjust to the light in time to recognise him. We see Rembrandt but he might leave at any moment. Elkins names the ideas of the glimpse and glance as two of the phenomena which make up most of our visual experience. For him they represent opposite ends of the object subject spectrum. The glance is a quick look at something, or to see something obliquely. It is in a way a type of blindness in which we look quickly without taking in much detail, much like we have heard from peripheral or coarse vision. A glimpse, on the other hand, is the object showing itself quickly. Both glimpsing and glancing are fleeting actions and neither take much time to show themselves or be shown, or as Elkins puts it: "in both cases, we see only for a moment".<sup>220</sup> Elaborating on the idea of the glance, he tells us that "glancing is a strategy



Figure 31: *Self-Portrait* (1640).  
Rembrandt

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<sup>219</sup> Cavanagh "Pictorial Clues in Art and in Visual Perception", 364, Renée van de. Vall, "Touching the Face: The Ethics of Visuality Between Levinas and a Rembrandt Self-Portrait." In *Compelling Visuality: The Work of Art in and Out of History*, edited by Robert Farago and Claire J Zwijnenberg, 93-111. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 105.

<sup>220</sup> Elkins, *The Object Stares Back*, 206-209.

in the arsenal of blindness, a way of skipping over the surface of the world and taking in almost nothing”.<sup>221</sup> It could be said that this is what Rembrandt has presented us with here: A glance of the great painter’s face. Indeed if the painting was intended as a study, then a detailed depiction of himself was perhaps not the aim of this painting. Now out of context and exhibited on a gallery wall, the glimpse of Rembrandt is subject to full view.

It is this experience that philosopher Renée Van de Vall describes in her essay ‘Touching the Face’. What prompted her to write the essay is a comment from a colleague at an exhibition of Rembrandt self-portraits during which he complains about his eye sight. Here she describes the reasons for his problematic eye sight: “there was [in the portraits] a fuzziness in the faces, a lack of sharpness, a lack of outline, which he found hard to look at”.<sup>222</sup> This can also be said of this 1628 painting, just as I have described with the process of peripheral vision and coarse information. Although Van de Vall describes a later painting, the *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* of c.1665 (figure 32), she argues that these features (fuzziness, lack of outline and sharpness) are not limited to one example of Rembrandt’s work. She claims that “they are consistent and reoccurring elements of Rembrandt’s style”.<sup>223</sup> Whereas features which play havoc with one’s vision might be considered a negative aspect in figurative painting, for Van de Vall this ‘fuzziness’ is in fact the strength of Rembrandt’s paintings.



Figure 32: *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* (c.1665). Rembrandt

It is worth noting that the self-portrait we are discussing here not only obscures our clarity of vision with deep shadow, but has also been described as having something fuzzy about it. Binstock comments that Rembrandt represents himself with “peach fuzz on his lip”,<sup>224</sup> and I would argue, the whole head has a soft, peachy, look about it. The face looks soft to the touch and the features look rounded rather than properly delineated. In turn ‘fuzziness’ is created not by shadow or highlighting, but rather through Rembrandt’s painting technique— loose and fleeting. In fact according to DiPaola, Riebe and Enns in their essay on Rembrandt’s painting technique, “coarse brushwork corresponds to low-spatial-frequency

<sup>221</sup> Elkins, *The Object Stares Back*, 207.

<sup>222</sup> Vall, “Touch the Face”, 2003 93

<sup>223</sup> Ibid. 95.

<sup>224</sup> Binstock, “Rembrandt’s Paint”, 162.

information”,<sup>225</sup> that is coarse information taken from peripheral vision corresponds to the loose and fluid brushmark. According to Van de Vall it is this manner of painting which gives Rembrandt’s pieces their fuzziness, as she describes here: “Rembrandt’s looseness of manner allows for the suggestion of an expansive mobility that contributes more to the lifelikeness of the portrait than to a precise outlining of facial forms would have done”.<sup>226</sup> Contrasting with other contemporaries of Rembrandt such as Dou and Bailly who hide their brush marks in favour of illusion, Rembrandt leaves the way the paint is worked open to display. Thus, the lack of clarity in the portrait is a way of making it more alive and creates an illusion too, albeit a different one from his contemporaries. Van de Vall refers to the experience of Rembrandt’s *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* as imposing in presence, where Rembrandt’s figure seems to “grow out of its frame”.<sup>227</sup> It could be said that Rembrandt’s *Self-Portrait* of 1628 does something similar. It presents us with a more lifelike image than a clear view of Rembrandt: that is a glimpse or glance. We feel he moves to or from us, as if we had caught a glimpse of him, in the margins of our vision. At the same time this feeling of seeing someone in our peripheral vision, that is obliquely, causes us to turn our eye and attention to the object we see in order to see it better.<sup>228</sup> If Rembrandt’s painting technique and ‘fuzziness’ represent our peripheral vision and coarse visual information, then it is no wonder that we feel that we have caught a glimpse of Rembrandt from the corner of our eye as if he were about to leave the canvas, after all it is this type of vision which provides us with such information, movement and identity.<sup>229</sup> Van de Vall’s conclusion is that “Rembrandt’s faces seem to be so alive because his way of painting them in many respects articulates our way of seeing them”.<sup>230</sup> With regards to this early self-portrait, I would agree; Rembrandt presents himself on the edges of vision, as if caught by a glance, a fleeting moment or a chance meeting. In fact this visual encounter with a person seems far more realistic than the static poses of the same artist in some of his other self-portraits, such as *Self-portrait in Oriental Attire* for example (figure 19). In showing us one way we might see a face, he reveals to us how we see, that is ‘one of the strategies in the arsenal of blindness’.

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<sup>225</sup> Di Paola, Enns and Riebe, “Rembrandt’s Textural Agency”, 145.

<sup>226</sup> Vall “touching the Face”, 97.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid. 93.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.106.

<sup>229</sup> See Cavanagh, “Pictorial Clues in Art and Visual Perception”, 364 and Vall “Touching the Face”, 105.

<sup>230</sup> Vall “Touching the Face”, 95-95.

## *Blindness, Memory and Idea*

If we liken Rembrandt's self-portrait to this particular form of blindness, glancing or glimpsing, then this painting also represents something argued by Jacques Derrida in *Memoirs of the Blind*. According to Derrida the draftsman experiences a temporary blindness when creating an image because as one makes a mark on the paper one takes his eye away from the subject. In the brief moments when the artist looks away from himself towards the paper or when the artist blinks, he experiences a momentary blindness, no matter how short. As Richards notes in his book on Derrida, these examples may seem "a trivial limit case", but they serve to show that the artist must then rely on memory to create what he has seen. For Derrida, "vision becomes intimately related to memory and memory becomes an integral force in defining who we are as subjects. If vision is not just about what we see but what we imagine we see, memory is not just about what happened, but how we remember what happened".<sup>231</sup> Thus every mark on the canvas is at once distance from the original and is much more subjective than perhaps first thought. But for the artist who represents himself in a self-portrait, as Rembrandt does, this process is even more accentuated— an artist cannot look at himself in the mirror and the paper or canvas at the same time. The activity of glimpsing and glancing at oneself becomes ever more fleeting as the eyes battle with the impossibility of seeing oneself and drawing simultaneously. Derrida describes this moment of blindness and the impossibility of really capturing one's own image as an *augenblick* without duration, playing on the German word for 'moment' or 'instant' which also incorporates the word for 'eye'. Here Derrida describes this moment of impossibility:

As soon as the draftsman considers himself, fascinated, fixed on the image, yet disappearing before his own eyes into the abyss, the movement by which he tries to recapture himself is already, in its very present act, an act of memory.<sup>232</sup>

The lack of detail in Rembrandt's portrait illustrates Derrida's point and seems to embody the idea of trying to capture oneself but being blinded in the process. And Derrida's argument goes further, whereas the self-portrait entails this literal incapability of seeing and depicting simultaneously, Derrida is using this for an example for all artistic activity. The memory is used in all creative activity, we remember what we have seen, and keep it in our mind as an image ready to put on paper. This may be a small amount of time, just the seconds it takes to

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<sup>231</sup> Malcom Richards, *Derrida Unframed*, 96.

<sup>232</sup> Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 68.



go from subject to canvas, but it may also be much longer, in which an artist creates an idea from various things he has seen and experienced.

Memory is therefore at the centre of the creation of painting, but does not pertain to the physical act of seeing. Rather it is a type of blindness, and form of inner vision. Derrida quotes Charles Baudelaire who goes to extreme and denotes all good art as that which comes from memory:

He draws from memory and not from model... [A]ll good and true draftsmen draw from the image printed on their brains, and not from nature. To the objection that there are admirable sketches of the latter type by Raphael, Watteau, and many others, I would reply that these are notes—very scrupulous notes, to be sure, but mere notes none the less. When a true artist has come to the point of the final execution of his work, the model would be more of an embarrassment than a help to him.<sup>233</sup>

It could be argued that what Baudelaire really talks about is not memory but *idea*. The concept of idea originates from ancient Greece meaning the outward look of something, but from the Renaissance onwards gained the meaning of an image conceived in the mind of the artist, in short something formed in the imagination or with inner sight.<sup>234</sup>

In Rembrandt's time to draw or paint from *idea* was a particularly praiseworthy process and according to Van de Wetering the process of working from idea is something illustrated in another self-portrait Rembrandt made a year later in 1629, *The Painter in his Studio* (figure 33). In this painting Rembrandt stands far away from his canvas, staring into space and seemingly contemplating an idea before putting it to canvas. In *Rembrandt: The Painter at work*, Van de Wetering retells an anecdote about a painting contest of around 1630 which featured in Hoogstraten's treatise on painting from 1678. Van de Wetering argues that the painting contest is something Rembrandt himself may have witnessed but more importantly it may "contain an important clue as to Rembrandt's own way of conceiving a composition".<sup>235</sup>

In this anecdote three painters paint in front of an audience of art lovers and connoisseurs in order to find the most accomplished artist. Each painter is described as having his own particular way of working. The first sets to paint straight away, painting confidently

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<sup>233</sup> Baudelaire, Charles 'Mnemonic Art' in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* quoted in Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 47.

<sup>234</sup> Oxford Art online, "Idea", <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.pva.uib.no/subscriber/article/opr/t118/e1263?q=idea&search=quick&pos=1&start=1#firsthit> (accessed 05.05.2014)

<sup>235</sup> Van de Wetering, *Rembrandt: The Painter at Work*, 82.

all the forms which appeared at once to be finished. The second artist works in an entirely different way, first covering the canvas with paint and then finding forms, as if by intuition on the canvas. At first the third painter seems a disappointment; he starts slowly and seems to be



Figure 33: *The Painter in his Studio* (c.1629). Rembrandt

wasting time, however we are told that “the reason for this was that he was first forming in his imagination the whole conception of his work; he was first making the painting in his mind before he put his brush into the paint”.<sup>236</sup> In turn this painter produced the most accomplished piece and won the competition.

Van de Wetering regards this anecdote as illustrating the themes of skill, something discussed by Hoogstraten just before this anecdote. Within the theme of

skill, three technical approaches are described, apparently each one illustrating the method of each of the painters in the competition. The three technical approaches are named accordingly: *Usus* (related to use and practice), *Fortuna* (luck or chance) and *Idea* (first idea, imagination or thought, in Rembrandt’s day).<sup>237</sup> In *The Painter in His Studio* the strange stark interior and the position of the artist, not sitting painting but standing at a distance from his canvas strikes Van de Wetering as peculiar. Artists normally sat at their easels and as a self-portrait the artist should have been closer to his work. But these strange features allows Van de Wetering to suggest that this self-portrait is actually a statement of art-theoretical position. That is, they show that Rembrandt was an artist who followed the *idea* approach to painting, “first making the painting in his mind before he put his brush into the paint” as described in the anecdote. In relying on *idea* and memory the artist is selective in what appears in his work. Thus what we see in a painting by Rembrandt and even a self-portrait is never the full picture of him, if that would ever be possible, but a series of subjective images chosen from the memory of the artist. If *idea* was Rembrandt’s technical approach to painting then *The Self-Portrait* we are discussing here would also illustrate this point; by using memory and *idea*, it is Rembrandt’s inner vision which created this image, not the direct physical act of

<sup>236</sup> Samuel van Hoogstraten’s *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkunst* (1678) quoted in Van de Wetering, *Rembrandt: The Painter at Work*, 84.

<sup>237</sup> Van de Wetering, *Rembrandt: The Painter at Work*, 86.

seeing. Further still, this would have been his intention rather than an accidental coincidence as Derrida suggested with his example of the self-portrait. It is in this light, where artist uses idea, that Derrida conjures up an image of the artist as blind seer or soothsayer—a man who must give up physical sight in order to use inner vision.<sup>238</sup>

### *Drawing of the Blind*

According to Derrida then, “a drawing of the *blind* is a drawing *of* the blind. Double Genitive”<sup>239</sup>, this is because to draw a blind person is to illustrate the process of drawing. Whether through the process of trying to look at oneself in the mirror, or in using inner vision, that is idea, the artist in the process of creating is blind. And just as the blind man must reach out to touch in order to find his way, so must the artist, but not with a stick, with his brush. Without being able to see one must rely on the hands. In turn in both cases, with



Figure 34: *Self-Portrait at the Easel*  
(c.1771) Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin

the self-portrait, and depictions of the blind, our attention is drawn to the hands. Examples of self-portraits, both recent and old show how the hands become an integral part of the portrait: Otto Dix’s *Self-portrait with easel*, Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin’s *Self-Portrait at the Easel* (figure 34), Sofonisba Anguissola’s *Self-portrait* (figure 35), or even Rembrandt’s own *Self-Portrait with Saskia* (figure 36). This idea of the self-portrait entailing the prominence of hands is also demonstrated in my discussion of Rembrandt’s *Tobias Healing His Father’s Blindness*. Derrida compares this action of reaching out, using and trusting in the hands to ‘feel the way’ to writing in the dark, as he does one night after a dream:

What happens when one writes without seeing? A hand of the blind ventures forth alone or disconnected, in a poorly delimited space; it feels its way, it gropes, it caresses as much as it inscribes, trusting in the memory of signs and supplementing sight. It is as if a lidless eye had opened up at the tip of the fingers, as if one eye too many had just grown right next to the nail, a single eye, the eye of a cyclops or a one-eyed man. The eye guides the tracing or outline

<sup>238</sup> Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 2 and 20,

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

[tracè][sic]; it is a miner's lamp at the point of writing, a curious and vigilant substitute, the prosthesis of a seer who is himself invisible...It coordinates the possibilities of seeing, touching and moving.<sup>240</sup>

Here Derrida describes another moment when our vision is removed and we act as if blinded, feeling our way in the dark. Whether Rembrandt uses his inner vision, or looks at himself in



Figure 35: *Self-portrait* (1556) Sofonisba Anguissola

the mirror rather than at the canvas, we are also witnessing this process of drawing blindly. Either way by depicting himself in a self-portrait, we are faced with this 'double genitive' as Derrida refers to it. We have a drawing *of* the blind *by* the blind—this self-portrait shows the moment of creative activity, an activity we have seen which relies heavily on what cannot be seen, through momentary blindness and the use of inner vision. It is in this sense, representing himself in the process of not seeing, the blind becomes both subject and creator of the image.

As a consequence this is also a painting in which Rembrandt must rely on touch, not sight, to create his own image. As Derrida describes aptly in his example of writing in the dark; blindness means to use the hand to feel the way and act as the eye does. The artist must trust the hand to delineate that which comes from memory and idea, the invisible. If this is true then in this self-portrait we should also have an image of the hands. Of course we cannot see what Rembrandt is doing with his hands in this painting, but we do have the very presence of them in the painting— the brush marks and scraping.



Figure 36: Etching, *Self-Portrait with Saskia* (1636). Rembrandt

<sup>240</sup> Ibid. 3-4.

## *The Touch of the Artist*

In making his marks visible in this painting Rembrandt not only gives his self-portrait a double purpose as discussed earlier, but also shows the process of creating an image — turning inner sight into physical vision. According to Elkins the creation process is an experience in which the artist is faced with a type of blindness. It is the overcoming of this blindness and the winning of this battle which creates beautiful pictures. Here Elkins explains,

A drawing also begins in blindness, with a pure white sheet. At the moment when the artist sets pencil to paper there is nothing to see, and the first mark is made in isolation and framed by emptiness. As the pencil travels along the page, it always moves into blindness, leaving behind a narrow path of vision...A drawing is an expression of a dialogue with blindness, and the most beautiful drawings are beautiful because they show it is sometimes possible to win that battle and produce a form out of nothing.<sup>241</sup>

Echoing Derrida's idea that the artist approaches the canvas blind, what Elkins describes here is the very moment the artist approaches the canvas in order to make something seen on a blank canvas without guidelines. Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait* addresses here a type of challenge to the artist, the challenge of blindness in producing form from nothing, that is using the blank canvas and paint to produce an image. Impasto on the wall which seems to be rendered in plaster, the thickly applied paint of his white collar and the scraping out of the single hairs leave traces of this 'battle'. Further still, it could be argued, that these are the parts of the painting which are most pleasing. Those marks are the sign that Rembrandt 'won the battle to produce form out of nothing'.

Indeed like Derrida, Elkins is in agreement that all drawing has something to do with blindness and thus the hand, and touch:

Making a drawing is a wonderful way to experience the varieties of blindness. Because it depends on touch, all picture making is in some degree blind. There is the light contact of the pencil on paper, the wet friction of the rush against the canvas, the hard push of the engraving needle cutting into copper. When an artist is concentrating, trying to feel the exact pressure of the lead and even the texture of the paper as the pencil skips across its surface, then vision is occluded.<sup>242</sup>

And Elkins concludes that "drawing is strongly tactile, both in the way it is made and the way it is seen".<sup>243</sup> Indeed, although the process of drawing may not be completely blind in a physical sense, the senses of sight and touch seem to rely on each other. In her chapter 'The

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<sup>241</sup> Elkins, *The Object Stares Back*, 233

<sup>242</sup> Ibid. 226.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid. 226.

Master's Touch' Svetlana Alpers argues that the texture of the paint in Rembrandt's work is the artist highlighting his craftsmanship and therefore the signature of the artist as a way of appealing to the art market, much as we have seen with the idea of the 'double' self-portrait.<sup>244</sup> But it is possible that this textural element in Rembrandt is just about following the hand of the artist. Here touch appeals to sight. We should remember that in this painting we can see more of the painter's marks than of the painter himself. This lack of sitter so to speak, or blindness to the subject, leads us to follow Rembrandt's process, perhaps even identifying with his other blindness, that is of the impossibility of looking at himself and the canvas simultaneously as Derrida describes. Moreover, this space allows us to project our own ideas onto Rembrandt's self-portrait. In leaving these marks readily available to us the viewer we can follow this process, complete it even. If it is we who complete the face of Rembrandt subconsciously, as we do with *pareidolia*, then is it not us that complete these marks, and essentially the painting? In this sense not only do we see Rembrandt's face blinded by shadows, or a glance, but we also join him in the artist's process which, as we have heard, is also to face blindness. In this light can the self-portrait still be considered one, when it is us who 'creates' the portrait?

### ***A Portrait of Blindness***

**F**inally I would like to turn again to what Binstock says about Rembrandt's awareness of "the inadequacy of the image fully to capture its object, or of "something more than meets the eye" ". If we dismiss the idea that the self-portrait is something which should show a likeness of the artist, Rembrandt's painting opens up the possibility for exploring how we see, or perhaps better put, how we don't see—sight with all its blindness. Despite the lack of portrait and the 'blindness' we encounter, it is clear that we will never fail to find a face in this painting, albeit our version of Rembrandt. This is because as spectators we always bring something of ourselves to what we see; whether that is knowledge of a title, the context of the painting, an opinion of what self-portraiture is, or even our ability to find an image where there is not one. Further to Binstock's claim that the painting represents something more than meets the eye, we have seen that the process of painting the picture itself also relies on

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<sup>244</sup> See the section *Double Self-Portrait* above

moments of blindness, or not seeing. It could therefore be said that what we see is far from related to any type of physical visual experience. What would perhaps be considered the quintessential example of self-portraiture, the *Self-Portrait* of 1628, is shown to be the opposite: a work of art which entails anything *but* self-portraiture. Even if this painter is painting himself, Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait* of 1628 demonstrates that the process of seeing is far from a process of physical sight. This is as valid for the painter as for the viewer who comes with his knowledge and his expectations, and his natural instincts, such as *pareidolia*. In addition the painter paints from idea and memory rather than strict observation. As Binstock said "Rembrandt invented a means of representing a lack (or excess) in the face, onto which we project our relation to his figures."<sup>245</sup>

Turning to the beginning of this discussion, Van de Wetering's explanation of the self-portrait in the seventeenth century as a painting of the artist *by himself* is turned on its head; to the eyes of the spectator it is no longer a portrait of the artist and no longer solely by himself. This transforms the questionable idea of this painting as a *self-portrait* to a *Portrait of Rembrandt by us the observer*. In blinding the painting, or at least the self-portrait, we are invited not only to create our own image of Rembrandt but also to involve ourselves in the process of doing so, showing that the self-portrait is always *by oneself*, even if that portrait is of the blind.

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<sup>245</sup> Binstock, "Rembrandt's Paint", 164.



## Conclusion

One of the reasons that the presence of blindness in a work of art is intriguing is that vision is, and was, often thought of as the most important of all senses. This was because of its ability to provide us with knowledge and even the truth.<sup>246</sup> As Anthony Synnott notes, Plato considered sight as the “foundation of philosophy, and hence the sense that leads to God and Truth”<sup>247</sup> and later on Descartes opens his *La Dioptrique* (1637) with the statement that sight was “the noblest and most universal of the senses”.<sup>248</sup> Following this line of thought, Julius Held believed that Rembrandt was representing “the worst tragedy that can befall man” when he produced images of the blind again and again.<sup>249</sup> However, an interest in blindness also suggests an ‘anti-ocularcentric’ discourse.<sup>250</sup> This means a type of revolt or reaction against sight as the dominant sense in our understanding of the world. However, throughout history the sense of sight as the noblest has not gone uncontested. In fact sight was also subject to suspicion later in Plato’s writings because of the “reliability of the two eyes for normal sense perception”<sup>251</sup> and we have seen that more recently too, those who praised the visual, such as Constantijn Huygens in the seventeenth century also opposed some aspects of sight. Thus sight as the dominant sense is more of a point of view, a kind of blindness to the way the other senses and other types of sight have also been used throughout history.

It may at first appear as if a lack of sight denies us knowledge of the world, but on closer inspection it seems that blindness can provide us with knowledge too. In fact, it appears that the condition of blindness provoked similar curiosity for those of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries too; for while images of the blind were uncommon, a fascination for them manifested itself, particularly in the philosophical thought of Descartes, Locke,

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<sup>246</sup> See also David Summers. *The Judgement of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). for a discussion of this, 32-39.

<sup>247</sup> Anthony, Synnott. “Puzzling over the senses: From Plato to Marx.” In *The Varieties of Senory Experience: a Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, edited by David Howes. Toronto: Universoty of Toronto Press, 1991, 63.

<sup>248</sup> Descartes quoted in Lichtenstein, *The Blind Spot*, 3.

<sup>249</sup> Held, *Rembrandt Studies*, 140.

<sup>250</sup> I borrow this term from Martin Jay and his discussions in Jay, *Downcast Eyes* and Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity” In *Vision and Visuality*, edited by Hal Foster, 3-23.( Bay Press, 1988).

<sup>251</sup> Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 26-27



Berkeley and Diderot, as we have seen.<sup>252</sup> Indeed just like them, the blind figure has allowed us to muse on the importance of the sense of touch, particularly in vision and painting.<sup>253</sup>

What has been clear throughout this thesis is that blindness can reveal something rather than hide it. What I hope my discussion has shown is that oblique views, lack of clarity, fuzziness, shadows, rough paint work and blindness are not and were not necessarily always considered negative features. On the contrary, they can be advantageous. As we have seen, both in seventeenth-century culture and today, the lack of a clear visual reference allows one to use the imagination, ponder deeper thoughts and come closer to spiritual awakening. But also, these elements, of obscured sight, blindness and fuzziness etc. show that vision is not the clear cut sense it may seem and that every mode of seeing contains a type of blindness, and even pertains to touch, something which seems unlikely in an art source which normally relies on the visual alone. In fact it appears that touch plays a key part in our vision. As we have seen, touch also played a large part in experiencing painting too, as it does for the creating of art. As W. J. T. Mitchell has remarked “For art historians today, the safest conclusion would be that the notion of a purely visual work of art was a temporary anomaly, a deviation from the much more durable tradition of mixed and hybrid media”<sup>254</sup> because as he later acknowledges “Natural vision itself is a braiding and nesting of the optical and tactile”.<sup>255</sup> I hope that my thesis has highlighted at least a couple of ways this might be possible.

At the end of my discussion in ‘Theoretical approach’, I justify my discourse throughout this thesis by explaining how I, like those who have discussed Rembrandt’s works before me, ‘turn a blind eye’. In choosing themes, an artist and a handful of his works, I do not see what others might consider important works, arguments or themes. Yet, on reflection, it seems that this process is part of any interpretation. A piece of art work communicates to each onlooker of different epochs in different ways. It could be argued in some ways that

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<sup>252</sup> Alice Crawford Berghof. ““Nearest the tangible earth”: Rembrandt, Samuel van Hoogstraten, George Berkeley, and the optics of touch’.” In *Renaissance Theories of Vision*, edited by John Shannon Hendrix and Charles. H. Carmani. (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 199

<sup>253</sup> I refer in particular to the discussions on these philosophers from the following studies, Lichtenstein, *The Blind Spot*, Morgan, *Moyneaux’s Question*, Paterson, “Seeing with the hands”, and Berghof “Nearest the Tangible Earth”.

<sup>254</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell. “There Are No Visual Media.” *Journal of Visual Culture* (Sage Publications) no. 4, no. (2005): 257-266, doi: 10.1177/1470412905054673, 260

<sup>255</sup> Ibid. 259

‘turning a blind eye’ is in fact an essential as well as fruitful technique in art theory and history. Can one even make a discussion of a work of art taking *everything* into account? Indeed can we even *see* all those possibilities when in front of the work? Rather we choose what we find most interesting (and sometimes it chooses us). In my case it was blindness, sight and touch.

In many ways my whole discussion on blindness, touch and sight has been about other people’s ‘blindnesses’ too; what scholars have or have not chosen to look at or discuss, represents this type of not seeing which in turn influences the viewer. As I explained at the beginning of my thesis, Rembrandt’s work is prolific with images of the blind— the theme was there all along, asking to be explored, a *ruin* to be built on. In doing so Rembrandt’s paintings have demonstrated that there is blindness everywhere. Yet, it is not the negative physical disability one presumes at the first mention of the word, as Julius Held saw it. Instead, blindness provides insight into the varieties of sight, the importance of touch, and reveals what is brought to a painting when we stand in front of it. With these perspectives in mind, one might ask if blindness really is the ‘worst tragedy that can befall man’, or at least the art viewer.

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