Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century

Last week Professor Burke lectured on the Baroque art of Catholic Europe in the seventeenth century, including 17th century Flemish baroque. Today we shall turn our attention to Dutch art in the 17th century. During the greater part of the sixteenth century the Netherlands remained under the domination of Catholic Spain. But the majority of the people of the northern provinces of the Netherlands embraced the protestant faith. In 1579 the seven provinces lying north of the Rhine, Scheldt, formed the Union of Atreuct, and in 1581 these limited provinces declared their independence from Spain at the Hague in 1581. This independence was made possible by the growing commercial wealth of such cities as Haarlem, Leider, Amsterdam and Rooterdam, based upon a virtual monopoly of the carrying trade in the North Sea and Baltic Seas. The Protestant merchants of Holland were for the most part devout and hard working. The southern baroque style was associated in their minds with the Catholic faith, luxury, authoritarian rule, and what they understood to be the idolatrous worship of images. Evidence of the baroque style will certainly be found, as we shall see, in Dutch 17th century art, but it is a baroque that has become more restrained under the comparatively ascetic morality of Calvinism and the patronage of a burgher class more modest and homely than the luxury of the catholic princes of Europe.

The reformed religion had a direct effect upon the nature of the art produced. Holland produced no such great baroque palaces favoured in the south, s Professor Burke indicated in a sequence of slides last week. Dutch churches were simple and spare of ornamentation dwelling houses were in brick. And even town halls like those at Amsterdam and Haarlem,* the most lavish of Dutch civic buildings were austere by comparison with those of Flemish cities such as Antwerp,* Bruges and Brussels. The severe proscription of images in Protestant churches meant that Holland had no places for such lavish altar pieces at, for example, that which Rubens painted for the Antwerp Cathedral (cf Last Judgement).* Similarly there was no market for the sculptural decoration of churches such as Bernini supplied to St Peters and the churches of Rome.* Nevertheless the art of painting flourished in certain specialised fields. (1) portraiture, not surprisingly in the first republic of Europe, John Calvin and other Protestant theologians did not proscribe the painting of one’s own image. Indeed Calvinism with its emphasis upon the importance of direct communication with God, and individualism in social affairs helped to promote the art of portraiture which Renaissance had given birth to as an independent art. (2) Group portraiture, of those committees, guilds and governing boards so prominent in the life of Dutch cities. (3) paintings of contemporary Dutch life. These range from Terborch* who painted the refined life and manners of the upper middle classes (The Letter*), through such painters as Mesu (Lady at a Virginal(?)) and De Hooch, to the more anecdotal and often satirical renderings of Jan Steen. (4) Landscapes and seascapes. In these fields as we shall see the Dutch artists made remarkable advances in the development of the
naturalistic landscape. (5) Still-life, many Dutch painters, such as De Heen (still life*) painted little else. Indeed Dutch artists tened to specialise, to concentrate upon a particular genre.

Italy was, of course, the art centre of the world during the 16th century, and both Dutch and Flemish artists traveled to Italy. Thus there existed in Holland toward the end of the 16th century painters following Italian mannerist and baroque styles known as Dutch Italianists. The Catholic city of Utrecht became an important centre in Holland for the Dutch Mannersit and baroque style. One of the foundes of the Utrecht school was Abraham Bloemaert. His Feast of the Gods* of 1638 seeks, not altogether successfully, to recreate the sensuous and lagurous world of Giorgione and Titian. The figures adopt the gestures of the grand manner, but the composition is stilted and artificial, the work of a provincial attempting to rival the Venitians. Compare it, for example, with Titians Bacchus and Ariadne*. Gerar Hothorst, a pupil of Bloemaert, studied in Rome from 1610 to 1622. Here he came strongly under the influence of Caravaggio’s painting. With its emphasis upon realism and the heightening of dramatic effects by the use of artificial light. Compare Caravaggia’s Virgin and Child* (Madonna of the Romey?*) with Hothorst’s Christ before Caiaphas*.

Honthorst’s realism may be seen in his Nativity, in which the Holy Family is divested of the trappings of the grand manner, and the shepherds are presented as rustic yokels. Now through such arists as Bloemaert and Honthorst, Caravaggia’s realism and Chiaroscuo come to exercise a lasting influence upon 17th century Dutch art. The other important artist to influence the Dutch Italianists was Adam Elshiemer, a German artist and landscape painter who spent most of his life in Rom. He is one of the founders of oth the ideal and the picturesque landscape. He made use of classical ruins, such as he must have seen along Rome’s Appian way. Figures are usually introduced into Elshiemer’s landscapes. Chiaroscuro is used to create dramatic effects and poetic moods. Elshiemer’s Flight in Egypt makes use of baroque recession.*

His paintings are of the greatest importance in the history of landscape. They influenced Claude Lorraine, Rubens, and Rembrandt. The Amsterdam painter, Pieter Lastman, studied in Rome under Elsheimer and was also strongly influenced by Caravaggio. How Lastman absorbed the Roman Baroque may be seen in his Joseph and his Brethren*, and the influence of Elsheimer is to be seen in his Mercury and Argus*. Lastman returned to Amererdam in 1607 and became a successful painter and teacher. In 1623, Rembreandt, then aged 17, became one of his pupils.

The popularity of Caravaggio among the Dutch painters in Rome is evidence perhaps of their native Dutch interest in realism. The Dutch preference for realism, rather than the grand manner of either the mannerist or baroque painters, first frees itself from Italian influences in the work of Frans Hals. Hals was born in Antwerp, whence his parents had fled following the terrible Spanish siege and sack of Antwerp in 1576.
After independence had been achieved in 1581, the family returned to Haarla where Hals lived and painted for the rest of his life.

In the work of Hals, the dark and rather theatrical realism of the Dutch Caravaggeschi takes on a more homely and personal character. He painted many corporate portraits of companies of Archers and Musketeers raised during the war against Spain. Hals enlivened his surface and texture of his paintings by fluent and revealing brushwork. His skilful brushwork, which broke up the coloured surfaces into intricate facets of modulated tones, made it possible for him to capture a fleeting gesture or expression. During the nineteenth cenury his work exercised a considerable influence upon the impressionists [show a corporate portrait; Regen...? of the Poor Ch...? in the field].* Take his Self Portrait* and compare it with the courtly mask and aristocratic bearing of one of Bronzino’s sitters (Eleanor of Toldeo)*. Or take his Bohemian Girl (Lute Player), in which a momentary and yet characteristc expression is caught with great skill.

Note the influence of the Dutch Caravaggeschi, of Dutch Baroque, of Adam Elsheimer and the native realism of Frans Hals may all be found in the growth of Rembrandt’s personal style. He was born at Leydon in 1606, the son of a miller, and spent a year at Leydon University before turning to painting, raining first with an obscure painter called Swanenburgh, and then with Lastman, whose work I have mentioned already. Probably through Lastman, Rembrandt came into contact with the work of Caravaggio and Elsheimer and early baroque tradition.

Rembrandt’s early work which he completed between 1626 and 1631n his birthplace, Leyden, is usually referred to has his Leyden period. The Melbourne gallery Two Philosophers, dated to 1628, belongs to this period. The influence of Caravaggio is obvious, the drawing is still close and the painting precise like that of his master, Lastman. And these early paintings, like those of Elsheimer and Lsatman are small in size. Nevertheless, Rembrandt is already seeking monumental effects within a small compass. Already there is a deep interest in the painting of textures, fabrics, walls, old paper, metal, and the effects of light on tecture in interest in old age, and a certain tenderness of characterization that is present not only in the paintings o heads, but also in the rendering of hands.* The philosopher theme is occurs again and again in Rembrandt’s work. Rembrandt lived at a time when modern western philosophy was in its infancy in Holland. Descartes lived for thirty years of Rembrandt’s life from 1629-1659(???) in Holland. Spinosa as a young man lived in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam quite close to Rembrandt. There is no evidence that Rembrandt ever met either philosopher, but it was an age of great intellectual vitality—a vitality which is reflected in the highly individualistic character of Rembrandt’s art. Here, in our next slide, is Rembrandt’s Philosopher* of 1630 in the London National Gallery. It is a small painting on a panel only 21 x 18, but again monumental effect is achieved in a
small compass. Light breaking through a window at left was a traditional motif in Netherlandish painting since Van Eyck.* But Rembrandt’s strong lights and heavy shadows, though conforming to the conventions of naturalism, have a new kind of poetic intensity. The practice of painting a blaze of golden light behind a dark head is a characteristic Rembrandt device. The Supper of Emmaus* painted about the same time (c. 1629), also makes use of it. The figure of Christ, hiding the candle is outlined with radiance. So Rembrandt sought to invest the naturalistic conventions of his paintings with a divine significance. His portrayal of light, we might say, is ambiguous, at once candle-light, and divine radiance. Notice the magnificent repetition of the servant in the background, and the servant of god in the foreground.

The rising of Lazarus of 1630 makes use of the pale greenish lemon yellows and red browns of the Supper at Emmaus. The composition is highly dramatic. Note the contrasted expression, delighted wonder, awe, fear and curiosity, and above, the commanding figure of Christ. And Lazarus coming forth from the tomb with the reluctance of an ageing university lecturer rising in mid-winter for a nine-o’clock tutorial. We have already noticed Rembrandt’s early fascination for studies of old men and women. The Utrecht painters had made a feature of such studies of old age. During his Leyden period Rembrandt made many drawings and engravings and paintings of men and women bent and furrowed with age. Here is an etching of an Old Beggar Woman with a Gourd* in the Melbourne Gallery. Notice even etching the emphasis upon light and deep shadow. Even his line, we might say, is painterly. But he transformed these studies of old people into prophets, visionaries, and seers. Thus we have his Jeremiah Lamenting over Jerusalem of 1630 amid the glowing ruins of the temple. Note the use of the column to emphasise vertical line and the arch already used in the Lazarus and the fascination with the rendering of the play of light upon metal and velvet brocades a for him. The detail of the head reveals the amazing virtuosity of Rembrandt’s technique at this time—he was only 25. But already he is able to scumble glazes of reds over luminous yellows and browns and worry the texture until they yield an astoundingly vivid image of light. Here the light is so intense that it seems to radiate from the Prophet, but there is no contravention of natural law, as there would be in say a painting by a baroque master, or Tintoretto’s Last Supper. In the following year, 1631, the year in which his Leydon period came to a close, he painted his mother as the prophetess Anna.* She figured frequently in his early work. And here we might note that there is a strongly autobiographical character in Rembrandt’s work. Portraits of his mother and father, of his wife, Saskia, and of Hendricke Stoffels, the young servant girl with whom he lived later in life, of his son Titus, and above all of himself, form a considerable part of his oeuvre. This personal or autobiographical quality marks Rembrandt out as a kind of forerunner of the romantic artists of the nineteenth century. In many other ways, too, as we call see, he foreshadows the romantic movement.
In 1631 Rembrandt moved from Leydon and settled in Amsterdam. He now began to paint larger pictures and the influence of the grand manner of the Italians begins to make its presence felt. Rembrandt’s early Amsterdam period, from 1631-1642, might be called his baroque period. It was for him a happy and prosperous time. He took lodgeings with a painter and art dealer Hendrick van Uylenburch, and in 1634 married van Uylenburch’s cousin, Saskia, an orphan girl of a notable patrician family. Rembrandt soon began to prosper both as a painter and teacher, and fulfilled numerous portrait commissions. He became something of a collector of antiques: jewellery, rich fabrics, prints, sculptures and so on—and bought himself a large house.

The early Amsterdam period opens with his large group portrait the Anatomy Lesson of Professor Tulp* of 1632. These large corporate portraits were an expression of the democratic spirit of Holland. Each face was to be given almost equal attention and primience. Rembrandt has done this while also building the portrait into an effective pyramidal composition. He has also sought to give the portrait a dramatic unity by portraying the rapt interest with which the lass receive their tutor’s words. Rembrandt possessed great insight into character and it would be interesting to know whether the young man at the back, with the vague and abstracted look, found it necessary to repeat his year.

The Blinding of Samson, painted in 1636, reveals the strongly baroque flavour of his work at this time. Here is that emphasis on the diagonal and violent movement characteristic of baroque. The composition is based upon an inverted triangle. Physical violence is however not a feature characteristic of Rembrandt’s art as a whole, nor is violent movement. Here, however, the art of Caravaggio and of Rubens, whose work he knew well enough, overrides his native preferences. The baroque is also apparent in his portraits at this time Saskia as Flora*, for example, painted in 1635, in its posing, its sense of amplitude, and delight in luxurious apparel, is one of the most baroque of all his portraits. His love of exotic magnificence, at this time, may be seen in his Portrait of an Oriental.* He made several portraits of Orientals during the 1630s, and the interest in exotic types and exotic costumes is another interest he shares with the romantics of the 19th century. The portraits of this time often possess an air of opulence, as in this portrait of a young girl of 1639, here it is the lace, velvet and jewelry in which Rembrandt reveals the virtuosity of his technique. His own portraits of the time, as this self-portrait of 1640 have the same air of contentment and well-being. In 1640 he was a prosperous young artist of 34 years, receiving many commissions, whose work was widely known not only in Holland but extensively abroad. A year later, 1641, he received his most famous commission: a portrait group of the Civic Guard of Amsterdam. Although called the Night Watch the painting represents the Guard under their Captain, Frans Banning Cocq, as they issue forth from the city gate of Amsterdam into full sunlight with their two officers in front. Rembrandt here abandoned the democratic spirit of group portraiture and gave his painting the quality rather of an historical painting or battle piece. The painting has
been cut down on the left somewhat. It of course has many baroque characteristics: the crowded groups of figures, movement and action, diagonal recession. Nevertheless it is not purely baroque by any means. For there is a sense of arrested action, much use of verticals and horizontals, and a strong movement across the picture plane as in a classical frieze, all of which reveals the pictures leanings toward classicism.

Shortly before this, about 1638, Rembrandt began to paint his first landscapes. Here is his Landscape with a Stone Bridge of 1638. His landscapes are essentially poetic landscapes in which massive effects of light and shadow are deliberately used to evoke a coherent mood. Here is the glowing effect of late evening light following upon a passing storm. Or he will paint the dramatic effects of a storm itself. Such landscapes derived much from Adam Elsheimer* and at times recall Rembrandt’s younger Neapolitan contemporary Salvator Rosa. Such landscapes—wild, stormy, with old bridges and ruins—are precisely what the 18th and 19th centuries understood as Romantic.

While Rembrandt was painting the Night Watch, his wife Saskia died, after having given birth to their son Titus a few months before. He appears to have introduced Saskia as a young child among the soldiery. And in 1643, two years after her death, he painted her again from memory. The shock of her death cobined with the displeasure with which the Civic Guard received the Night Watch, appears to have altered the direction Rembrandt’s art was taking. It became more persona; and more introspective. He refused commissions that did not please him, and there was a decline at this time in the people he painted outside his own personal circle. It is likely too that Rembrandt’s religious beliefs were either deeply effected or changing. It may be that for a time he became a Mennonite, a protestant sect whose history went back to the Anabaptists and Moravian Brethren of the 16th century. They preached a simple pious life, forbade the carrying of arms and believed only in adult baptism. Van Uylenburgh the art dealer with whom Rembrandt first lodged when he came to Amsterdam was a Mennonite, and there he met his wife. But Rembrandt’s children were al baptized in the official Dutch Reformed (i.e. Calvinist Church). However the Italian art hisotian Baldinucci writing in 1786(?), states on good authority that Rembrandt at this period, the early 1640s, was a Mennonite. At this time, Rembrandt painted the portrait of a very well known Mennonite preacher Anslo three times over two years. At this time too his financial difficulties began, and the early 1640s were a period of great personal stress.

The change that took place in his art may best be seen in his elf-portraits. Compare his Self-Portrait of 1640, (aged 34) with his self portrait of 1645 (aged 39). There is surely here not merely a man older by 5 years but a withdrawal, a passivity that was not there before. Contrast the 1645 portrait with one Rubens painted of himself in 1640 the last year of his life. The eyelids are perhaps a little heavy with years of good
living but there is still an arrogant twinkle in the eyes themselves—though he was suffering badly from gut at the time and death was only a few months away.

The new calmness which comes into Rembrandt’s work at this time may be seen in his Three Trees of 1643*. The restful quality of the landscape is now far more like the classicism of Claude than the wildness of Salvator Rosa. A new calmness and depth also invests his religious compositions such as his Holy family with angels of 1645.* The setting is now thoroughly domestic with Joseph doing some night work in the corner and Mary rocking the cradle by the fire. In such a domestic setting the angels seem somewhat incongruous, but the foremost one was painted with his infant son Titus as model. The psychological change of attitude was accompanied by great breadth and freedom of handling. In his later work he seems at times to be deliberately choosing subjects repulsive, commonplace, or mundane in themselves and transforming them by the virtuosity of his painting technique. His famous paintings of flayed oxen, for example.* Or consider his novel approach to the painting of the nude in his magnificent Bathsheba painting of 1654, painted from his young mistress Hendrickje Stoffels who kept house for him after the death of his wife. Rembrandt’s conception of the nude is entirely unclassical, and it is strangely devoid of carnality, as though he were painting his own mother rather than his mistress. In the same year he painted his Woman Bathing, now in the National Gallery, London, from the same model.

It belongs to the greatest period of his art. The paint is handled with remarkable simplicity and breadth, the tonal values establish the forms with superb clarity. Again we meet a bizarre, almost banal subject, being transformed by the radiant beauty of the painting itself. This new awareness of the distinction between the subject matter and the technique, which as become so important in modern art, seems to be more clearly established in Rembrandt’s work than in any of the 17th century masters. In this again he foreshadows the romantics. He might well have said, as John Constable many years later did say ‘I never saw an ugly thing in my life.’

I want to conclude this account of Rembrandt’s work with a few of his later portraits taken in chronological order.

The Self Portrait of 1659 in the National Gallery, Washington.
The Self Portrait of 1660 in the National Gallery, London.
A young Monk, possibly his son Titus, 1660.
The Portrait of Margeretha Trip in the National Gallery, London, 1661.
A detail of the head.
The Self Portrait in the National Gallery of Victoria of 1660 which provides us with an example of the breadth and economy of his painting during his last years.
In one sense, Rembrandt’s art represents the culmination of Renaissance humanism for no artist before him, and perhaps none after, observed people so closely or developed a technical command of his medium so capable of expressing the inner life of the mind and feelings. But in another sense his art is a retreat from humanism, at least a retreat from that self-confident humanism which placed man at the centre of his universe and made him the measure of all things. For Rembrandt, man is a pathetic creature not a noble one, and whatever dignity he does attain he attains through suffering. Although he is a baroque artist his pathos and humility is the direct antithesis surely of the strident self-confidence of southern baroque.

I want to conclude with a brief comment on the work of Jan Vermeer of Delft and Jacob Ruysdael. Vermeer combines the Dutch enjoyment of the real with a superb capacity for the abstract organization of pictorial space.
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