

Artists that I Admire: Guts and the effrontery to stay True to Their Values.

Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-1669) was a Dutch painter who is considered a central figure in the Dutch Golden Age. Rembrandt is renowned for his outstanding ability to render the human figure and its emotions. He also was unusually gifted as an artist; the way in which he handled his pen or chalk, the brush betrays a great sensitivity and spontaneity, and the resulting works convey a sense of freedom and creativity. Rembrandt thought about and experimented with purely pictorial matters—the possibilities of composition; the role of tone and color in the creation of pictorial space, light, shadow, and reflection; and how to vary the properties of his paint to obtain specific effects—with sharp intelligence and originality.

However, critics of his work saw in some of his painting, his etchings, biblical works, well done as they were, suffered from “ugly realism”. They showed the human face and form of regular folks; his self-portraits displayed his rather non-handsome face, complete with blemishes. They weren’t Renaissance heroes, just Dutch burgers, soldiers, merchants from his time. He was an admirer of Caravaggio’s realism, and worked to enhance such realism in his works.

His artistic style changed as he matured, and his late works (considered at the time “lesser and not worth much”) take his talent into modern times!

Making it to Amsterdam from Leiden!

- ❖ His parents were middle-class, owners of a grain mill in Leiden, today a suburb of Amsterdam... They were well educated for the times, and did not hold more growing extremist religious beliefs (unlike the Dutch Reform Church and Puritans whose righteousness created deep-seating divisions in the society, both in the Netherlands and the British Isles [and in the New Worlds’ virgin colonies]).
- ❖ Rembrandt went the Leiden Latin School, yet decided to go into graphic arts in his second year.
- ❖ He apprenticed with several others in Leiden and his initial works brought the attention of members of the Dutch Art Guild in Amsterdam. He was told to travel to Italy to study the Renaissance Italian Masters (Titian, Michelangelo, etc.), yet he rejected the suggestion. His intent was to – in time – make it to Amsterdam and “become a successful portrait painter”.

- ❖ Rembrandt knew his life would expand in Amsterdam, and he traveled frequently from Leiden to Amsterdam and apprenticed in an art studio there, selling portraits to wealthy merchants and zealous Puritans in the city. He was making money, yet needed the credentials of the Art Guild there to be able to fully “make it” in the city,
- ❖ **The Artist in His Studio:** Painted by Rembrandt and submitted from his studio in Leiden to the Dutch Guild in Amsterdam, it was seen by some members of the Guild as uncanny, and an affront. What was he thinking? How could they admit an aspiring young whippersnapper of the artist with such a submission? Why, all they could see was the back of an easel! And where is the expected beauty found in past heroic Italian Masters? And the room has nothing of interest. In fact, it was a messy, miserable studio, complete with creaky wooden floorboards. And, according to Simon Schama, he had dared to sign it, “Rembrandt”! Only the great Italian Masters were allowed to write their first name on a portrait. That was against the rules of the Guild. Yet, this was his entry portrait of himself into the overly polite, hyper-religious Dutch Guild.
- ❖ **They rejected it,** (as I believe he knew they would; which tells us a lot about what he thought of them!). He persisted in doing portraits of merchants in Amsterdam, and as his fame grew, in spite of the Guild, they stumbly admitted him to their membership. After all, he was doing well in their market-based economy, so they relented.

And that is the guts, the arrogance and certainly of this youthful artist. His fight to succeed didn’t end with making into The Guild. His life continued to battle against conformity, all the way to his eventual death at 63, reduced to living in a one room boarding house in Amsterdam.

As an addendum: note how Terry’s points are met with this youthful submission. The portrait is technically well done, provocative and brings *surprise* to the audience. This effort is not formulaic, but brings freshness to the 17th century audience. It is also a challenge for the audience. It was one hell of a way to enter into striving city and the riches of these times, but he made it on his own terms.

Some Early Works of Rembrandt in Amsterdam: He was The Consummate Portrait Painter in the times of Growing Prosperity for the Dutch Merchant Class











