



The Abduction of Europa, Rembrandt

The Abduction of Europa

Rembrandt Harmensz.

Van Rijn

Dutch, 1632

Oil on panel

24 1/2 x 30 5/16 in.

95.PB.7

In *Metamorphoses*, the ancient Roman poet Ovid told a story about the god Jupiter, who disguised himself as a white bull in order to seduce the princess Europa away from her companions and carry her across the sea to the island of Crete.

During his long career Rembrandt rarely painted mythological subjects. Here he conveys a narrative story through dramatic gesture and visual effects. Bewildered, Europa grasps the bull's horn, digs her fingers into his neck, and turns back to look at her companions on the water's edge. One young woman falls to the ground and raises her arms in alarm, dropping the flower garland intended for the bull's neck into her lap, while her friend clasps her hands in consternation and watches helplessly. The carriage driver above rises to his feet and stares at the departing princess in horror. In the background, a city shrouded in mist extends along the horizon, perhaps serving as an allusion to the ancient city of Tyre as well as to contemporary Amsterdam.



The dark thicket of trees to the right contrasts with the pink and blue regions of the sea and sky. Sunlight breaks through the clouds and reflects off the water, but the sky behind the trees is dark and foreboding. A master of visual effects, Rembrandt took pleasure in describing the varied textures of luxurious costumes and glittering gold highlights on the carriage and dresses.

About the Artist

Rembrandt Harmensz. Van Rijn (Dutch, 1606–1669)

Born to a miller and a baker's daughter, Rembrandt van Rijn was made, it was said, of "a different flour." Despite his ambitions, he never visited Italy, which was customarily expected of artists at this time. After studying locally, he apprenticed with Pieter Lastman in Amsterdam. Lastman imparted to Rembrandt his taste for religious and allegorical subjects. But the more profound aspect of Rembrandt's art, the compassion and sympathy for humanity, was

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Rembrandt's own, present in his sharp, early Baroque style and in his later pictorial symphonies of texture, gesture, and quiet drama.

Returning to Leyden around 1624, Rembrandt worked independently and collaborated with Jan Lievensz. He painted varied subjects, including many self-portraits. Around 1631, he moved to Amsterdam, becoming its leading painter and a wealthy man. He began using canvas rather than panel, experimented with paints of different fluidities, and explored etching.

His wife's death in 1642 roughly coincided with the introduction of Anthony van Dyck's more ostentatious style, which suited public taste more than Rembrandt's introspection. Refusing to adapt his style to prevailing fashion, Rembrandt went bankrupt and moved to a poor section of town in 1656 with his mistress Hendrickje Stoffels and his only living child, Titus. Having survived both Hendrickje and Titus, Rembrandt died poor and alone. His pupils included Gerrit Dou, Aert de Gelder, Govaert Flinck, and Nicolaes Maes.

Questions for Teaching

What is happening in this scene? (There is a group of figures on land watching with fright as a woman is carried into the water on the back of a white bull.)

How does the artist draw our attention to the main characters in this story? (The main characters are the woman on the bull and the people on the land. Our attention is drawn to those points because they are the brightest areas of the painting, and are located in the foreground.)

Based on the expressions of the characters, what do you think might be taking place?

What can you say about the people in the painting, based on the way they are dressed? (The women are all beautifully dressed, with lots of gold on their clothing. This shows that they are wealthy. The woman being carried away on the bull is Europa, a princess of the city of Tyre, in ancient Phoenicia.)

Read the excerpt from Ovid's tale of the abduction of Europa, available in the lesson plan (http://www.getty.edu/education/for_teachers/curricula/mythology/downloads/worksheet3_01.rtf) . How does Ovid's version from A.D. 1 compare to Rembrandt's version painted in 1632? What do you find is similar to the story, and what do you find is different?