

The Abduction of Europa

Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn
Dutch, 1632
Oil on panel
24 1/2 x 30 5/16 in.
95.PB.7



Background Information

In the *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 distant land that would bear her name.

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 sumptuous costumes and glittering gold highlights on the carriage and dresses.

About the Artist

Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn
b. 1606 Leiden, The Netherlands, d. 1669 Amsterdam, The Netherlands
painter; draftsman; printmaker
Dutch

The ninth child of well-to-do millers, Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn was born in Leiden on July 15, 1606. In 1620, after two years at Leiden University, Rembrandt became the pupil of Jacob van Swanenburgh. He subsequently moved to Amsterdam to apprentice with the leading history painter in the Netherlands, Pieter Lastman, absorbing his colorful palette and eloquent narrative

The Abduction of Europa, Rembrandt Harmensz. Van Rijn

approach. After six months, Rembrandt returned to Leiden and established his own studio. During the late 1620s, he enjoyed a friendly rivalry with the painter Jan Lievens, with whom he shared an ambition to become a leading painter of history subjects, and perhaps also a studio. Gerrit Dou was among his early students.

Moving permanently to Amsterdam in late 1631, Rembrandt established his studio in the art dealer Hendrick van Uylenburgh's premises. Their joint business venture capitalized on the growing market for portraits and history paintings by Dutch artists. Rembrandt immediately became the most prominent painter of portraits, introducing greater subtlety, presence and animation to the genre, as well as innovative group portraits. Many students came to the van Uylenburgh "academy" to be trained in Rembrandt's manner of painting, including Jacob Backer, Govaert Flinck and Ferdinand Bol. In 1634 Rembrandt married van Uylenburgh's niece, Saskia van Uylenburgh.

Rembrandt's success in the 1630s was reflected in his purchase of a grand house on the Sint-Antonisbreestraat in 1639, which also served as his studio for work and the training of students. Rembrandt successfully controlled the availability of his own etched and engraved works, actively working to create market demand for them. In 1642, Saskia, in ill health following the birth and death of three children, died, leaving Rembrandt with their sole issue, a son called Titus. By the late 1640s, declining portrait commissions and disastrous speculative investments created financial strain on the artist. Following the bitter end to his relationship with Titus's nurse, Geertje Dircks, Hendrickje Stoffels entered Rembrandt's household in 1647 and became his lifelong companion.

Returning to powerful religious subjects in his later years, Rembrandt created works of great psychological complexity and monumentality. It was also a period fraught with personal difficulties, including insolvency and the sale of his house and collections in a series of auctions in 1657 and 1658. Rembrandt took up residence in a far smaller house on the Rozengracht in the Jordaan area of Amsterdam, an area that was home to many artists. In order to protect his earnings, Rembrandt became the employee of a company run by Hendrickje and Titus instituted to sell his drawings, prints and paintings.

Rembrandt remained famous, although his vigorous, broad brushwork and glowing palette was at variance with the prevailing taste in the Netherlands for a smooth, elegant, courtly manner of painting. He continued to receive commissions for history subjects, private portraits, and important public works from local patrons and art dealers, as well as from collectors abroad. Due in part to the protection provided by Hendrickje and Titus's business, little is known about Rembrandt's studio in his late years. One student, Aert de Gelder, is recorded working with him in 1661 and there may well have been others. Among Rembrandt's very last works were self-portraits, painted with vigor and expressiveness, in which the artist alertly fixes his gaze on the viewer. Rembrandt died on October 4, 1669, and was buried in Amsterdam's Westerkerk next to Titus and Hendrickje.

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Questions for Teaching

Describe the figures. What do you think they are doing?

Describe the setting where you think this is taking place.

What do you think is happening in this painting? What visual evidence leads you to your response?

Artists often juxtapose light and dark colors to highlight people or places in a painting. Which areas are highlighted in this work? Why do you think the artist chose to highlight these sections?

Which areas of the painting are in shadows? Why do you think the artist chose to place these sections in shadows?

What symbolic references allude to placing someone or something “in shadows” or “in darkness”?