

# Rembrandt *Late Religious Portraits*

**Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn**  
**Dutch, 1606–1669**  
Painter, Draftsman, Etcher

Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn was born in Leiden, Holland, the youngest son of a miller and the daughter of a baker. Although his mother was Catholic, Rembrandt was raised in the Reformed Church. After attending the Leiden Latin School for seven years, Rembrandt enrolled in Leiden University in 1620, perhaps with the intention of studying theology. However, at about age 16, as his biographer Orlers later noted, he was "by nature...moved toward the art of painting and drawing," and began his artistic training with the Leiden history and landscape painter Jacob Isaacs. van Swanenburgh (1571-1638). Rembrandt moved to Amsterdam in 1624, and became an apprentice to the renowned history painter Pieter Lastman (1583-1633) for six months. During this time, he absorbed the descriptive theatricality, brilliant palette, and the eloquent narrative character that distinguished Lastman's work. He also befriended the precocious young painter, Jan Lievens (1609-1674).

Upon returning to Leiden, Rembrandt established himself as an independent master. The fine brushwork of these early paintings, along with the evocation of precious metals and rich textiles, was immediately influential and established the Leiden school of "fine painters." Rembrandt was praised for his ability to convey feeling through gesture and expression and through dramatic contrasts of light and shade. The fertile climate of exchange and rivalry with Lievens, reflected in a group of expressive heads and shared subjects, marked the period 1628-31.

Soon after, Rembrandt began spending more time in Amsterdam, lodging with the dealer Hendrick van Uylenburgh. He enjoyed tremendous success as a portraitist and history painter. His ability to depict not only the material qualities of costume but also the complex inner states of his sitters satisfied the tastes of wealthy burghers in the thriving commercial center of the Netherlands. Rembrandt's biblical and classical history works from the 1630s are among the most dynamic and insightful of his career.

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Paintings such as *The Abduction of Europa* (1632; J. Paul Getty Museum) and *Daniel and Cyrus before the Idol Bel* (1633; J. Paul Getty Museum) are from this period. Many students came to learn Rembrandt's distinctive and sought-after manner of painting at his academy on van Uylenburgh's premises.

In 1634, Rembrandt married Van Uylenburgh's niece Saskia, daughter of a wealthy and prominent Frisian family. Of their four children, only Titus, born in 1641, survived infancy. In 1638, at the height of his fame, Rembrandt purchased the fine, large house on the Breestraat, borrowing heavily and assuming a large debt.

The 1640s marked a new era for the artist characterized by turbulent personal events, which affected his productivity. When Saskia died in 1642, Geertje Dircks entered the household as a nurse for Titus and became Rembrandt's mistress. They became embroiled in several contentious lawsuits, and Geertje was relegated to a workhouse. Rembrandt then entered into a lifelong relationship with Hendrickje Stoffels. They never married due to stipulations of Saskia's will and Hendrickje was publicly shamed in 1654 when she became pregnant and was censored by the Dutch Reformed church. Their daughter Cornelia was born that year. Following the meteoric success of the previous decade, marked by the production of large, dramatic works, the 1640s found Rembrandt turning inward to explore the intimate psychological qualities of biblical subjects. Stylistically, his palette became warmer and more restricted, his brushwork broader. He continued to train students, many of whom went on to establish successful careers.

In 1656, with a substantial proportion of his mortgage outstanding, Rembrandt was forced to declare bankruptcy, with both the house and its contents, including his art collection, put up for auction. Rembrandt moved to more modest quarters in the Jordaan, an area of Amsterdam in which many artists lived. A business partnership formed by Titus and Hendrickje afforded Rembrandt protection from his creditors.

At the end of his career, Rembrandt's broad manner of painting was outside the tastes of Amsterdam's elite, who favored brighter, more elegant forms influenced by Flemish and French court tastes. He remained, however, in demand as a portraitist and received a number of commissions, including a group portrait of the governors of

Amsterdam Drapers guild. Between 1655 and 1665, Rembrandt painted a number of life-size half-length religious figures that are among the most powerful and mysterious works of his career. Whether painted speculatively or for unknown patrons, they epitomize his remarkable ability to convey complex interiority and display a great range of assured technique.

Even though his financial situation remained difficult due to outstanding debts, his self-portraits from about 1660 give no indication of hardship or ruin. The last years of Rembrandt's life were spent in poverty. Hendrickje died during the plague of 1663, while Titus perished in a subsequent epidemic in 1668. Rembrandt died October 4, 1669 and was buried in a rented grave in the Westerkerk.

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