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A DISQUIETING PRESENCE:

THE VIRGIN MARY

IN REMBRANDT’S ‘PROTESTANT’ ART

Mary Christine Barker

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Art History

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A DISQUIETING PRESENCE:
THE VIRGIN MARY
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VOLUME ONE
Abstract

The identification of Rembrandt as a ‘Protestant’ artist has, since the middle of the nineteenth century, defined and directed analytical perspective of his biblical works. In the initial stages of Rembrandt’s reinvention as representative of the Protestant culture of his age, religion was not important in terms of the art produced; it was an indication of political identity. A recognition of the importance of Rembrandt’s religious beliefs to his biblical works led later art historians to define these works in terms of a Protestant identity. Rembrandt was a ‘Protestant’; he was ipso facto a Protestant artist. To substantiate this claim, academic research has sought to identify those particular characteristics which are thought to be Protestant and which can be readily identified in Rembrandt’s work.

There is a substantial body of work within Rembrandt’s biblical oeuvre which challenges that paradigm. These are works which show the Virgin Mary, a figure largely marginalised in Protestant belief. These are generally acknowledged as ‘Catholic’ or ‘made for a Catholic audience’, but they are analysed either as eccentricities or as Catholic subjects which Rembrandt has manipulated to allow for a Protestant understanding. No attempt has been made to place these works within the Catholic tradition to which they belong.

This thesis hopes to redress the balance by examining a largely un-researched body of Rembrandt’s Marian work. The first section surveys the notion of ‘Protestant’ art and those writers who claim to recognise such a phenomenon in Rembrandt’s work. It examines the place of the Virgin Mary in Post-Reformation Protestant ideology and reviews Rembrandt’s history within a spectrum of religious beliefs. Finally it takes an overview of the presence of the Virgin Mary in Rembrandt’s oeuvre, seeking possible inspiration and explanation from the events in his daily life. The second section analyses six representative works in order to show that these Marian subjects are not religious works manipulated to a Protestant understanding but are artworks that show, both overtly and covertly, that Rembrandt was aware of and actively acknowledged the place of the Virgin Mary, both in the Catholic visual tradition and in the contemporary Catholic theology of his age.
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The end of a journey is simply a new beginning.
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Figure 280. Rembrandt, *Holy Family with Curtain* (oil on canvas, 46.5 x 69 cm) 1646, Staatliche Museen, Kassel. Image source: Web Gallery of Art, http://www.wga.hu/index1.html

Figure 281. Caravaggio, *Death of the Virgin* (oil on canvas, 369 x 245 cm) 1606, Louvre, Paris. Image source: Louvre, http://www.louvre.fr/lv/oeuvres/detail_notice.jsp?CONTENT%3C%3Ecnt_id=10134198673225132&CURRENT_LLV_NOTICE%3C%3Ecnt_id=10134198673225132&FOLDER%3C%3Efolder_id=9852723696500816&baseIndex=88&bmLocale=en


Figure 286. Virgin with Cat and Snake (detail showing central axis).


Figure 289. Rembrandt, *Holy Family with St. Anne*, 1640 (detail).

Figure 290. Rembrandt, *Virgin with Cat and Snake* (detail of dove).

